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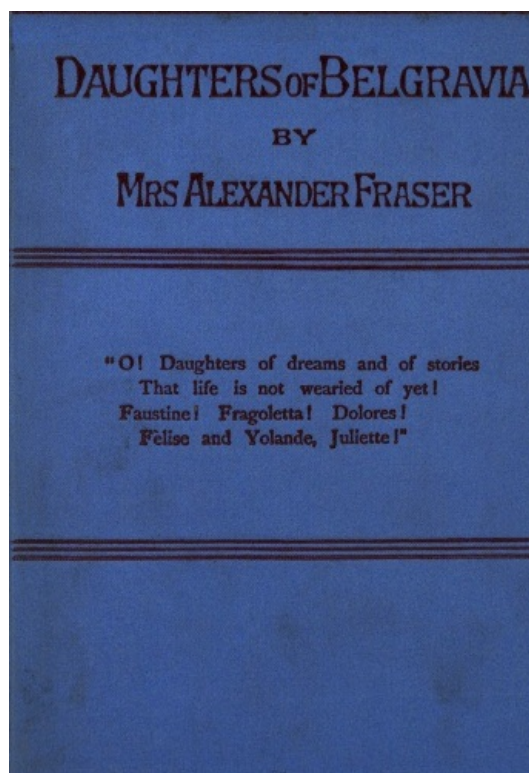
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DAUGHTERS OF BELGRAVIA.

## 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.

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That life is not wearied of yet!  
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Fèlise and Yolande, Juliette!”

*IN THREE VOLUMES.*

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## DAUGHTERS OF BELGRAVIA.

### CHAPTER I.

#### "ARE YOU GOING TO MARRY ZAI?"

"If I could but know after all,  
I might cease to hunger and ache,  
Though your heart were ever so small,  
If it were not a stone or a snake."

It is the truth that Gabrielle is desperately in love with Lord Delaval, and it is equally true that, thrusting all maidenly reserve to the four winds, she does not hesitate to let him know it.

Last night—will she ever forget it? She was sitting in the twilight, shaded from view by the amber hangings of the music room. For an hour she had been singing the passionate French and Italian songs in which she could pour out her soul freely, but she had tired of it since he was not by for audience. So dashing her music aside she pulled a chair into the embrasure of the bay window, and with her chin resting on her hand, was soon lost in a waking dream, of which he, of course, was central figure.

How long she sat there she never knew. Anyway, the purple twilight had merged into grey gloom, through which myriads of twinkling stars peered down at her flushed cheeks and passionate black eyes, when suddenly a voice startled her, a voice whose accents bore such genuine feeling in them, that for a moment it seemed unfamiliar to her ears.

And this is what it said—while Gabrielle listened with beating heart and bated breath, rent with jealousy and rage.

"Tell me! when is my probation to end? Have you no mercy for me?"

"What for?" and Zai's tone, in comparison with his, was strangely hard and cold.

"What for? Don't you know that I want to claim you before all the world? Don't you know that I am longing to take my darling in my arms and swear on her sweet lips how I love her?"

Whether Zai answered this phantasy tenderly or no, Gabrielle never knew, for the two passed the open door and were out of hearing.

*The two!*

Her faithless lover and her step-sister!

Gabrielle flew upstairs noiselessly, and reaching her own room, locked the door.

She was alone now—alone—thank God! alone! Here there were no mocking eyes to note her horrible folly, to laugh at her awful, awful anguish, here she could grind her white teeth in impotent rage, or grovel on the floor in humiliation and a futile passion. She flung off the pretty dress she had put on for dinner to please his eyes, a delicious *mélange* of white lace and vivid scarlet, the colour that suited best her soft creamy skin and coal-black hair, and matched the hue of her perfect lips, and she thrust impatiently aside the glittering bracelets and rings with which she loved to deck her rounded arms and tapering fingers.

What were these baubles worth now, that she had lost the jewel of Lord Delaval's heart?

*Vanitas Vanitatum!*

Sackcloth and ashes are the garments she should wear, poor, passionate, reckless creature, a victim to a worldling's fickleness. And Gabrielle, the cynical, the votary of Balzac and Georges Sand, the unbeliever in true feeling, wept bitterly over the wreck that had been made of her life "for one man's pleasure only."

Her strictly worldly surroundings forbade her from giving way to an honest violent grief that would serve for sluice-gates to her heart. And she smothered back the sobs that broke from her with a rapidity of passion that she couldn't restrain.

Poor soul, that a sojourn in Belgravia had starved, it could find no balm in Gilead, no physician, now that the one human creature she had placed on a pedestal to worship had tumbled down ignominiously, to her

thinking the veriest lump of clay. And she writhed as she remembered that not only by words and looks, but even by kisses on her red lips, he had betrayed her.

She positively wailed out her misery and her wrath in a low deep wail, weird enough to be a cry from one of Dante's lost souls. Yet—

"Is it worth a tear? is it worth an hour?  
To think of things that are well outworn,  
Of fruitless husk and fugitive flower,  
The dreams foregone, and the deed forborne?"

HAD she not lived long enough in her twenty-six years to know that man and fickleness are synonymous terms, and to be avoided?

Apparently not—for even while she groans and moans over his shortcomings, a mighty love fills her for the man whom she adores with a wild, unreasoning, selfish passion, and whose happiness she would immolate unscrupulously, if it pleased her to have it so. It must be owned that Lord Delaval is both a flirt and a butterfly, and that he has played fast and loose with mostly all the pretty women he has come across.

Flirting comes to him as to the manner born; it lurks in his ultramarine eyes, in the corners of his mouth, in his voice, in his manners, and in his actions, and he thinks nothing of it.

Some women regret his love, some resign themselves to his fickle ways, but Gabrielle Beranger is not of the common herd. She is a law unto herself in all things. She can love well (in her fashion) and she can hate well, with her great black gleaming orbs, her white passion-tossed features, her tumultuous, unscrupulous spirit. She regrets now, bitterly, but she does not dream of growing resigned.

*"Tout vient a celui qui sait attendre,"* she mutters to herself.

Lord Delaval has laid a burthen on her which she cannot bear. She has but one stimulus left in life, but one object. It is to appeal to him—to his honour—to his love. If she fails—but she does not dream of failing.

One thing, she will separate the man she loves, and the man who has loved her, after the fashion of some men's love, from her step-sister. If not now, she will some day, even if Zai marries him.

To her the words—"Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder," are but idle prattle. A mere formula of the Church, a creed which her blind unbelief in all good things makes her mock at and fling aside like the voice of the wind.

Gabrielle is one part Belgravian and three parts French, and has the faults of both. Honour and loyalty are dead letters to such women. Strong and practical of nature, animal in instinct and passion, savage and cruel in greed of love, is it likely that women possessing such qualifications can wage war and be beaten?

Cunning, craftiness, deceit and falsity, ranged against truth, innocence, purity and simple mindedness, form a very uneven contest, my readers.

And, in spite of the pleasant doctrine that goodness rears its head over badness, it is a fact that human creatures of the Gabrielle Beranger type have often a better time of it in this world than their purer sisterhood.

Gabrielle is not going to leave Lord Delaval in ignorance of her sufferings, for she is not of the nature of a violet, or likely to let concealment like a worm, &c., &c.

"Are you going to marry Zai?" she asks abruptly. She has come face to face with him—accidentally on purpose—in a walk that is out of sight of the windows at Sandilands.

Lord Delaval, Greek almost in indolence and love of rest and luxury, has one habit to which most of our golden youth are not given—a habit of rising early and going out early.

So that Gabrielle has him all to herself this bright sunny morning, while the Beranger family are still enjoying their slumbers.

For an instant, surprise—and it must be confessed irritation at meeting her—keeps him silent, so she repeats—

"Are you going to marry Zai?"

He looks at her—to say that he quails would be perhaps going too far—but he is unmistakably nervous. There is more moral cowardice in men than in women as a rule.

She stands like an image of Nemesis, right in the centre of the path—immovable—a trifle formidable, her tall figure pulled well up to its fullest height, her features rigid and white as a sheet, and only her big black eyes burning with quite a hungry ferocious look as they rest on the handsome blond face of the man who has made love to her.

How remarkably sorry he is for it now! But there is no denying it; he has certainly made love to her, under the cover of some incomprehensible doctrine all about "affinities," in which he believes no whit himself; he has beguiled her affections, or rather her passions, by the sweet words that are as sweet now as when Adam whispered them to his Eve in Paradise; he has beguiled her by soft treacherous kisses, in which the beak of the cruel vulture is hid beneath the tender touch of the dove, until this woman has paid him back by an enduring but terrible love that is not only a nuisance but may be worse.

Why Lord Delaval has made love to her, really not caring for her, is not difficult to tell. He adores beauty, and Gabrielle has plenty of it; her other attraction to him has been her intense contrast to the other women of the London world, with whom his flirtations have been as numerous as stars in a southern sky.

With her big black gipsy eyes, her demonstrative manner, her *bizarre* words and ways, and with the very vehemence and intensity of the passion that has repelled him even while it attracted him, his erratic fancy has been caught, but never enchained. He rather dislikes her now; and, after this, what breath can fill and re-inspire a dead fancy?

"Lord Delaval, is it true that you are going to marry Zai?" she asks for the third time, in a quiet hushed voice, that yet teems with a keen concentrated scorn that she means to cut like a whipcord, and from which he recoils angrily, for he is a thorough Epicurean in his liking for pleasantness, and a mental tussle disturbs

his equanimity.

"It is quite true!" he says, rather haughtily, but when he sees her turn whiter than before, and her mouth quiver with pain, he relents. "I should have told you before, but Zai wished it kept quiet!"

"She did, did she? She knew she has acted a treacherous, deceitful part. Good Heavens! what are you marrying her for?"

"Because I love her!" he answers coolly, "and because she loves me!"

"Loves you—you! Why all London knows of her love for Carlton Conway!"

He shrinks a little from this, and the colour mounts hotly to his face, but soon recedes again, leaving him quite pallid.

"All London knows a good deal that does not exist!"

"*Il n'y a pas de fumée sans feu,*" she says sneeringly.

"Zai is too good, too pure, to deceive any man," he answers quietly, but the remark about Carl rankles in his mind. "You don't understand your sister, Miss Beranger, or you would not depreciate your own judgment of human nature by believing her capable of deceit, or falsity, or evil of any kind! If all women were like her the world would be a paradise!"

"Fools' paradise!" she cries contemptuously. "I certainly never gave *you* credit for being hoodwinked by a few babyish ways and innocent smiles! a man of *your* mind!" she goes on frankly—a frankness which is the very essence of consummate flattery—but he is not to be taken in.

"Thanks for the pretty compliment! it would turn my head if I was younger, coming from such fresh scarlet lips," he replies with a Jesuitical smile; "but I am getting quite old, and as hard as adamant; not even *your* approbation can make my mind rise to the height of folly which would discover flaws in angels or paint a lily black."

"I really think you have begun to hate me!" she says passionately, with tears welling up in her eyes; "Have you?"

He looks at her for a moment steadily. He has thought her face, in spite of its beauty, false, wicked, and meretricious. He sees it now lovely in its creamy tints, its superb eyes, its chiselled features, and its waves of dusky hair, and withal a soft and tender expression leavening the whole.

"No!" he answers slowly. "I don't hate you at all. It depends on yourself, Gabrielle, if I hate you later!"

She marks at once the relenting in his features, and, like the busy bee, improves the shining hour.

"You'll *never* hate me, for pity's sake!" she cries, and flinging herself down on the path she wreathes her arms round his knees, while her fierce black eyes, with a good deal of the tiger-cat in their depths, seem to devour greedily his handsome face. "Delaval! who will love you as I do? who will hunger and thirst for your every word and look like me? Oh if you were ever so poor and humble, but still yourself, I would slave for you, *die* for you! only—only—I could not bear that any other woman should cling to you like this!" and with a sudden spring she throws herself on his breast, panting, breathless, quivering from head to foot. "Delaval, you have pretended to love me. You have kissed me, and you have made me love *you*, till I am mad with misery, till I lose sight of all that women hold dear—pride—reserve—delicacy! For mercy's sake don't give me up, and place an insuperable bar between us two!"

But he coolly puts her aside—not roughly, but very determinedly.

"So!" she says, standing tall and erect before him. "So! words are of no avail. Love is a theme you have heard so often that its name has an empty sound! You are an honourable man, Lord Delaval! Your conscience can never prick you. For you have never acted basely, cruelly, to anyone in your life!" she cries, with a sneer.

He feels quite an aversion to her as he answers: "Men may be dishonourable towards women, perhaps. But rely upon it, it is the woman's fault if they are so! Men may act cruelly, basely, but I'll be sworn baseness and cruelty have been forced from them in order to check a woman's undisciplined feelings, in order to recall a woman to the decorum which belongs to her sex! I think, Miss Beranger, since I am not honoured by your good opinion, my best move will be to say 'Good-bye!' "

She feels that she has played her game wretchedly. The man is a vain man; and instead of reaching his heart through fair means, she has lost her temper, wounded his *amour propre*, and placed a further barrier betwixt them. Once more she is down on her knees, her clasped hands lifted, her face quivering with emotion. Gabrielle is a born actress; but now her acting is supremely good, for there is a deal of genuine feeling in it.

"Delaval! Forgive! forgive! I was mad to speak as I did! Oh I could kill myself for it! Say you forgive me, Delaval!"

But he stands motionless and impassive still.

"You won't? Have you grown utterly hard and cold and strange then to me? Have you no mercy, no pity, no compunction? Can you face me like a stock or a stone, and trample on my heart like this? Don't you know that you gave me the right to love you—by your kisses, by the specious words that have fallen from your lips? And I believed in them! I believed that some day I should be your wife! Oh Delaval! if I have showed an undisciplined mind, a want of decorum, it is your fault. You are a man, I but a poor weak loving woman. You are the stronger, I but the weaker vessel. It is you who should have saved me from myself. It is you who should have placed a dam against the sluice-gates of a love that is going to wreck my whole life! Delaval, dearest, say, have you *never* cared for me? Has it all been untrue, a hideous delusion, a chimera of my own brain?—a device of the Devil to lull me in a slumber of Paradise only to awake to a full sense of his tortures? Oh, if I could die! If I could die! For I have nothing to live for now—nothing! I *shall* die; for I could not live and see another come between my Heaven and me! I could curse her!"

Lord Delaval winces a little at this. Curses are hard words to come near the soft little tender girl he is going to marry, and whose words to him are as shy as the light of a star.

But, just for once, he is taken rather aback. Shoals of women have loved him, and reproached him, but never like this. It is the first time he has evoked such a fierce tornado, and for a moment it staggers him. Then he becomes conscious of a feeling of thankfulness that this woman, beautiful and adoring, is not going to be his *wife*!

"I can do nothing but regret!" he says gently. "My faith is pledged to your sister, and—and—forgive me if I say that I do not wish to recall it! It is kinder to you, and kinder to myself, to speak openly!"

After this, nothing can be said, she feels.

She rises slowly from her knees, and stands a little apart. After all, she is not bad, she is not lost to shame; and it dyes her cheek crimson, while her lids droop over the fire in her eyes, and her mouth trembles—as much perhaps with wrath as sorrow.

What man can look utterly unmoved on such a spectacle as this?

"I feel so much for you," he says quite softly, "but Fate has decreed our paths to divide, and who can act against Fate? My faith, as I said, is pledged to Zai; but there is no reason that you and I, Gabrielle, should be foes. I shall always care for you, always take an interest in you, always be glad to be a *brother* to you!"

"A *brother*!" she mutters. "I am no hypocrite! I could never feel like a sister towards you, and I will not pretend it! But we'll part in peace! Only—only—!"

She flings her arms round him, and lifts up wild wet eyes, their fire and wrath all quenched in the passion that floods her whole being, "Say that you *have* loved me, if you do not love me now!"

It takes not only a perfect man, but a strong one, to reject a pleading woman, especially if her prayer is for Love, and the lips with which she utters it are fresh and tempting; and Lord Delaval is an imperfect man, assuredly.

So he stoops; and while her flushed stormy face lies against his breast, he kisses her, but only on the cheek, with the comfortable conviction that he has preserved his loyalty to Zai intact by avoiding Gabrielle's lips. Most men now a-days are so addicted to splitting hairs!

"Good-bye!" she whispers, "I cannot stay here and see you and her together!"

She says it so tragically, that he half smiles. He has always thought her an excellent actress, but now she excels herself.

"Nonsense, Gabrielle!" he answers carelessly. "For God's sake don't make a scandal whatever you do! If we *have* made love—how many men and women do the same—without one or the other bringing the house down about their ears. You are not the only girl! I have kissed and vowed all sorts of things to, but no one else has made me repent my folly as you have done. Come, kiss me—a kiss of peace—and forget that a kiss of love has ever been exchanged between us. We must all bow to the inevitable, and you cannot expect to be exempt."

"But the inevitable in this case does not come from the hand of Providence, but from the hand of the man who ought to be the last to hurt me!" she says, passionately. "I *will* kiss you—ay, kiss you a dozen times; but, Delaval, they will be the kisses that one gives to the man one loves best, and upon whom one will never look again!"

She kisses him as she speaks—kisses him on his brow, and eyes, and lips, wildly, fiercely; then she almost pushes him from her.

"Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" he answers quietly, "since you will have it so; and when we meet again——"

"We shall *never* meet again!" she says, abruptly.

"What folly!" he exclaims, impatiently. "I hope we never shall, until you have regained your senses, and don't act like a mad woman."

"If I am a mad woman, you are the man who has made me so!" she retorts, impetuously.

"God forgive you for it, for I cannot!" and turning on her heel, she is soon out of view.

He shrugs his shoulders, and forgetting all about her, saunters back to the house whistling an opera bouffe air.

But though the opera bouffe air runs in his head, in his mind there is an unpleasant conviction that Gabrielle will make a scandal of some sort.

"These hot-headed, hot-hearted women are the very devil," he mutters angrily to himself; "and I should not be surprised if she goes and peaches to old Beranger and her Ladyship—but no matter—a coronet, and a good-looking fellow like myself, to say nothing of the tin my dear miserly old dad hoarded up, are proof against any back-biters, and I'll marry Zai yet, dear little thing. I do believe she is beginning to love me!"

But even with this comforting reflection, he gives a little start at luncheon when he sees one chair empty, and hears Trixy whisper to her sister, "Gabrielle is so queer to-day, queerer than usual. I really think she's going off her head."

Later on, at dinner, come Miss Beranger's excuses.

"Gabrielle is not very well, and cannot come down," Lady Beranger remarks indifferently, going on with her *potage à la Reine*, and Lord Delaval makes a tolerable meal—drinks a little more than usual, but not too much (wine bibbing is not one of his faults), laughs and talks a little nervously, and even is slightly *distract*, while Zai sings in her fresh sweet soprano a bit of Swinburne, set to pathetic music—

"If I could but know after all,  
I might cease to hunger and ache,  
Though your heart were ever so small,  
If it were not a stone or a snake."

He seems to look past her dainty chesnut-crowned head, as he listens to these words, at Gabrielle—Gabrielle, with her wild wet eyes, her white passion-tossed features, her clinging arms and bitter reproach.

All night long, through his sleep, they come back to him, and will not be thrust away.

Once more, at breakfast, the empty chair faces him, and in spite of himself he says to his hostess, "I hope Miss Beranger is better to-day?"

"Yes! I think so," Lady Beranger answers; "at any rate, well enough to travel. Gabrielle went off by the

early train to Southampton, I believe, didn't she, Trixy?"

"I think so, mamma; at least, Fanchette told me. She has gone, but she never said good-bye."

"Ah! just like her," Lady Beranger observes, carelessly. "Gabrielle is so queer, so *bizarre*, you know." And she takes another help of *fillet de sole*, and gives no further thought to her stepdaughter.

"Will you come out on the lawn, the morning is perfect?" Lord Delaval says to Zai, when they make a move from the table, and she, who has determined to love him and obey him, turns up a fair sweet face, and smiling, runs away for her hat.

He looks after her slender figure with visible admiration in his eyes. Zai is his beau ideal, *pro tem.* of womankind.

"Don't be long away," he calls, softly; and he longs to have her with him, where, sending the *convenances au diable*, he can gaze his fill on her beauty, and kiss her to his heart's content.

"A letter for you! my lord."

He starts and stammers as he asks:

"For me?"

And, as he takes the sealed missive in his hand, a sort of foreboding makes him pale and shrink from opening it.

He even forgets to wait for Zai, but walks out of the house, and down towards the far end of the grounds, before he breaks the seal.

"When you read this, Delaval, I shall be dead. 'What folly!' I hear you say. But folly or not, it is the truth. Oh, Delaval, I wonder I did not die yesterday! when you killed me with your hard words and looks. I cannot, I say, live and know that the love and caresses that are all the world to me are given to another woman. I have no home, no friends, no money. What then is left to me but death! Good-bye! my love! my love! My last prayer will be that some day you will say to yourself, 'She loved me best of all.' Good-bye!"

"GABRIELLE."

When he has read it all, his first thought is, "What a very unpleasant state of affairs."

He cannot show the letter to his future wife or her people. He cannot give a hint that Gabrielle may have committed the atrocious folly of putting an end to herself. True, the uncertainty of her fate does not conduce to his comfort or his equanimity of mind, but it is not to be thought of that he should cut his own throat by showing her letter.

"Here goes!" he says, at last, with a sigh of relief, as the torn fragments of Gabrielle's last words scatter to the four winds, and he turns with a tender smile to meet his betrothed, who comes slowly and sadly, as it seems to him, up the garden walk.

"I thought you were never coming, darling," he whispers in his softest voice, while his ultramarine eyes look into her own longingly, yearningly.

But Zai's grey eyes do not respond, and her face is very grave as she falters:

"Gabrielle! oh, how shall I tell you Gabrielle—?"

"Yes," he questions feverishly, staring at her in his bewilderment.

"*Poor Gabrielle is dead!*"

"Dead?"

"Yes! We thought she had gone to Southampton, but she hasn't—for—oh! *what* could have made her do it?" she cries, looking up with piteous eyes into his white face. "She has drowned herself in the river! *What* could have made her do such a terrible thing?"

"God knows!" he says.

It is quite true what Zai has told him.

Close to the brink of the Urling river that runs through the Sandilands estate they have found Gabrielle's hat. How well they know it, the dainty hat with its pompon of vivid scarlet and black!

For five days they drag the river without success, but on the sixth day a human form is brought and laid on the silvery bed of sand.

A woman's form, tall and slender like Gabrielle's, yet so unlike, for it is terrible to look upon. The light summer dress she wore is tattered and draggled and discoloured beyond recognition, and the face,—but none who have known her can look twice on the fearful lineaments that the water have so cruelly caressed and changed.

Not even her own father can believe that this awful thing lying at his feet can be all that is left of his beautiful daughter, Gabrielle Beranger.

\* \* \* \* \*

Again Lady Beranger has to mourn like her fellow "quality" in "deep kilts"—procured on credit—but this time she has a certain satisfaction in it, which she salves down her conscience with by saying:

"Gabrielle was such a queer girl that she *must* have come to an out-of-the-way end. She was so fast, so *bizarre*, so dreadfully indifferent to the *bienséances* and the *convenances*, you know, and, dear Marchioness, is it not far better to have drowned herself than to have gone to the bad?"

The Marchioness, who has had a *jeunesse orangeuse* herself, shakes her dyed curls solemnly and virtuously.

"Very true, dear Lady Beranger. Once a girl has got the bit between her teeth, she is *sure* to ride to the Devil, and poor dear Gabrielle always struck me as the sort that go the fastest. Well! well! we must console ourselves by the hope that the best thing possible has happened to her. And how long are the weddings put off for?"

"Till November. This is not the first time Gabrielle has inconvenienced me, but I suppose we *must* delay

the marriages for two months, or people will talk. All these sort of things entail so much expense too; no sooner has one gone into half-mourning for my dear lost Baby, but there's the deep black for Gabrielle again. It really seems to me that she only thought of herself, and did not care a bit for the annoyance and inconvenience she caused to others!"

## CHAPTER II.

CARLTON CONWAY.

"But love so lightly plighted,  
Our love with torch unlighted,  
Paused near us unaffrighted,  
Who found and left him free.  
None seeing us cloven in sunder,  
Will weep, or laugh, or wonder,  
Light love stands clear of thunder,  
And safe from winds at sea."

NOVEMBER has set in with its yellow fogs and gloom, and the Berangers are back in Belgrave Square, for the dual weddings come off in another ten days, and the *trousseau* requires her ladyship's taste and personal supervision in the finishing touches.

Trixy, whose nature is made up of frivolity and bagatelles, and to whom the colour of a dress or the shape of a bonnet are solemn subjects for reflection and consideration, is an enthusiastic shopper, but not so Zai.

It is seldom that she can call up courage enough to wade through Elise's and Worth's establishments, to devote her whole and sole attention to the important point as to whether her chemisette shall be edged with Valenciennes or Honiton.

Zai is studiously learning to care for the man she is going to marry in a few days, and this subject engrosses her to the expulsion of all extraneous matter.

Down on her knees beside her little white curtained bed she prays that the gift of "loving" Lord Delaval may be given her. Downstairs, while he sits beside her, the same prayer goes on in her heart, for, born and bred in Belgravia, Zai is the best little thing that ever tried to do her duty towards God and man.

This much has been vouchsafed her, that Carlton Conway, who has been the stumbling block in her path to reaching the goal she desires, has never turned up on the scene to open by his presence the old wound, which Zai firmly believes now is closed for always.

Once she has heard him mentioned at an afternoon tea, but it was only to the effect that his marriage with Miss Meredyth was put off for a while.

Zai has never forgotten, never will forget perhaps, the days when Carl was all in all to her. She lived an enchanted life during the time, for all the love her girl's heart knew swept into one great channel and poured itself out at his feet. Paradise had opened for her out of the dull monotony of Belgravian life and moments—golden with the light of romance—had shone on her with a radiance like unto no other radiance of time. And she certainly had not stayed then to count the cost of the bitter desolation that followed.

After all Eve herself would hardly have surrendered the memory of Eden for all the joys to be found on earth, and she must have dreamed of it full many a time and waked to weep such tears of unavailing regret as have watered this sad planet of ours most plenteously.

The London world outside is full of fog and gloom, with a few feeble gas lamps struggling through it, but inside the drawing-room in Belgrave Square with its firelight and luxury is conducive enough to "dreaming."

So Zai gives herself up to this delicious pastime, and, strangely enough, Carl does not appear as central figure. Possibly her earnest prayers for oblivion of him and his falsity have been answered; anyway it is a blond face with deep blue eyes and hair that shines up like gold under the sunbeams, that her mind's eye sees, while her broad white lids are closed.

"Dreaming, my sweet! Is it of me?"

Some one bends over her. Some one's hand drops softly on her shoulder, and when she looks up, some one's handsome face is very close to her own. Suddenly—Zai blushed furiously afterwards when she thought of it—she slips her arm round his neck and draws down his head till his lips rest upon her own.

It is the first voluntary caress she has given him.

To say that Lord Delaval is amazed, bewildered, enchanted, all in the same moment, would be to say very little indeed. A great joy and wonder take possession of him, and for a second he is almost an unresponsive party, but in the next instant he has her in his arms, close against his heart, and to indemnify himself for loss of time, he rains down kisses on her charming face from brow to chin.

Kisses that come so fast—so fast, so eagerly, so fiercely even, that Zai stands almost stunned with all that her first demonstration of love for him has called down on her.

Then he sits down on the sofa beside her and, putting his arm round her, draws her near him.

He had felt that kiss she gave him go through him like an electric shock that sent the blood rushing through his veins, and made his pulses throb hard.

Scores of women had offered him kisses before, and he had accepted them or rejected them according to his mood, but this kiss, that the girl he is going to marry had volunteered of her own accord, seemed quite different to the rest. Then a sudden thought came like a stab.

"Zai," he asks gravely, "are you sure—*quite* sure—that you are acting according to your feelings in marrying me?"

She looks up at him in surprise. His face is quite pale, but his eyes seem to burn strangely.



"Quite sure," she answers quietly, convinced in her own mind that she *is* sure—perfectly sure of the fact.

"Darling Zai! You have never given me a chance before to tell you how I love you—love you with all my heart! to tell you that I will strain every nerve to make you care for me as I care for you! But there is one thing you must confess to me. Loving you as I do I shall be a very lenient judge, my child. Do you love me enough to be true to me always?"

She knows she does not love him as she had loved Carl. That had been a mad phantom, possessing her heart and her brain. But she knows if she marries this man she will make him a good and true wife.

She is *sure* that, in deed and word, and even thought, she will be loyal and faithful to him always.

The fitful pink colour comes and goes on her cheek, the big grey eyes droop as they have a habit of doing, but a smile—a little ghost of a smile, hovers round her pretty red lips.

"I love you, and I shall be true to you always!" she says, and Lord Delaval, cynical as he is—sceptical of all things, *feels* that her words are genuine, and he starts and his face grows radiant.

"Zai!" he cries breathlessly.

And bending, he puts his hand under the rounded chin and lifts up the little drooping face towards him. Zai's eyes are still downcast, but he manages to read their language pretty well, and he sees the lips part in something between a quiver and a laugh.

"Is it so—say?" he whispers passionately, throwing his arms round her and gathering her close until her face rests against his. "Zai, for God's sake, is it so? Don't—*don't* take away my new-born hope, but tell me that you really love me and only me!"

"I love only you."

And when she says this Zai feels that her prayers are answered, and the old love for Carlton Conway is conquered.

"Look at me, my darling child!"

She looks up, and in the soft grey eyes he reads honesty and truth, and on the impulse of the moment he stoops, and his lips cling feverishly, almost fiercely, to hers.

Zai starts away from him then, and for a second she seems scared, white, trembling.

His wild, fierce kiss has sent the blood back from her cheek to her heart, that throbs with a pain that makes her faint and sick. Then the pretty pink colour creeps slowly back, and of the passionate caress that has lingered on her mouth there is born a new feeling for her betrothed husband.

"Zai, you hated me once, I believe," he says reproachfully. "I wonder why?"

"Never mind, since I love you now," she replies.

"You hated me when you cared for Conway, Zai!"

He looks at her keenly as he deals what she thinks a random shot, but which is really a premeditated speech, for ever since Gabrielle's words, Lord Delaval has been jealous for the very first time in his life.

Never before has he felt the pangs of the green-eyed monster. It may be because he has never before perhaps felt a true and pure love.

Zai laughs, but the laugh is a little forced.

"You see, Delaval, if you did not care about me you would not be jealous! The past belongs to me, you know, but the future is yours—won't that content you?" she asks softly. "Shall I promise that it is only you that I shall love for the rest of my life?"

"Suppose you couldn't keep your promise, Zai. Suppose an old influence was too strong for you—what then?"

"An old influence! No one could have any influence over me now but you, Delaval!"

"Will you swear that you will stick to me through thick and thin? Will you swear that no other man shall come between us ever?"

She does not answer.

A feeling a little rebellious creeps up in her heart. It is hard—so hard—to be doubted like this, when she has so bravely cast from her all sentiment for her old lover—when she is "really and earnestly caring" for this man.

"You can't answer for yourself, Zai!" he exclaims angrily. "Or perhaps you *won't* answer?"

Still she does not say a word, but hides her face against his arm.

So he moves away from her and faces her, his arms crossed over his chest, and speaks slowly and deliberately:

"Zai, when you know that a man is hungering and thirsting for a word of reassurance—when you *must* feel that it kills me to be in uncertainty of your *real* feeling you keep that word locked up in your bosom—you put a seal on your lips—you are thinking what a happier fate would have been yours as Conway's wife."

The suddenness of these last words sends a thrill through her, and involuntarily she starts.

"Delaval, Mr. Conway is probably a married man by this time, and I really think you forget that I am just going to be *your* wife."

"Will you always remember you are my wife?" he asks.

"I am not likely ever to let the fact escape my notice," she answers gravely. "Mr. Conway is nothing to me but an acquaintance; as far as *love* is concerned, he and I are as far removed from one another as if he or I were *dead*."

"Bah!" he says roughly, "don't think all that goody-goody sentiment is a safeguard for errant fancies. Morality now-a-days is at a very low ebb, and marital obligations go a precious little way against inclination—certainly where *men* are concerned. On your honour, Zai, if Conway was free and could marry you, would you still have me?"

"On my honour I would have you and no one else—if I *may*?" she asks with a deprecatory smile.

Whereupon he catches her once more in his arms.

"Now," he says, "while I hold you like this—heart to heart, hand in hand, and lip to lip—come, Zai! give me your lips—there!—I will put your love to a test! Zai, Zai!—for God's sake—don't you fail me now!"

"I shall never fail you," she answers in a low voice.

"Not if I tell you that——"

He pauses. He really dreads to see her start and shrink away from him perhaps—he dreads to see the sweet lovelight in her grey eyes fade into coldness or hardness—he dreads to lose the delicious guerdon of these soft, delicious lips.

"Not if you tell me *anything*."

"Zai, Conway *is* a free man. His marriage with Miss Meredyth is broken off entirely. Her people found out something about Flora Fitzallan, of the Bagatelle Theatre. I know for a fact that he will never be allowed to marry her. Well?"

"I think," she says, and putting her arms around his neck she lifts up a pair of sweet, soft eyes, "I think that it is a very bad thing for Mr. Conway to have lost a rich wife, and that his misfortune is my gain, for *now* you will believe that——"

"That what?" he asks eagerly.

"That who he marries is no concern of mine so long as I——"

"Well?"

"Marry—*you!*" she says, and as she clings to this man who is to be her husband, she thanks God that she can go down on her knees beside him and swear to love, honour, and obey him so long as they both shall live.

"My darling! my own, own darling!" he whispers, in his most melodious voice, and his voice can be not only melodious but *séduisante* when he likes. "Listen, Zai. I have never been a good man; but I swear that the day of our marriage I'll commence a new life. You will never regret that you have taken me, Zai. So help me Heaven!"

The recording angel carried up this oath, but the other angels blotted it out with tears.

### CHAPTER III.

#### ANTEROS.

"Shall we not laugh, shall we not weep?  
Not we, though this be as it is;  
For love awake or love asleep  
Ends in a laugh, a dream, a kiss!"

TWELVE months wedded, Lady Delaval yet leads a charmed life. Her cup of bliss overflows, and under its influence her lovely face is tenfold lovelier, with the sunshine of her soul illuminating it.

She has made her curtsy to the Queen on her marriage, and her train, her coiffure, and her beauty have been the talk of town. She looks so good and pure too, with no fast proclivities, and to the satiated eyes of town men these things have vast attraction.

Lord Delaval has shunned all his old haunts, turned the cold shoulder to his numerous loves, avoided even looking at the professional and other beauties, and evinced an utter devotion to one woman—his wife—a fact which has amazed Society, amongst whom his fickleness has been a by-word hitherto.

Prophecies as to the duration of such strange and praiseworthy conduct are rife.

Will he stick to it?

The "No's" preponderate considerably over the "Yes's," but time will reveal which of the gossips are the best judges of human nature.

When the season is over, they come down to Delaval Court—a magnificent place in Hampshire—and here among the beautiful sylvan shades, Zai discovers that she has really fallen over head and ears in love with her handsome husband, but with a graver, even tenderer, sentiment than mere being "in love." She is grown so fragile that she looks as if a breath of wind would blow her away, but her heart beats stronger than ever with two feelings—love for the man she has married, and love for the child which is to perfect her life; and Lord Delaval, about whom is a deal of indolent sybaritical self-indulgence, has his "mystic" summer too.

He really finds it quite delicious to talk of the future as he lies stretched at full length on the cool green velvety sward at his wife's feet, in the twilight and the starlight, with the subtle fragrance of a myriad flowers pervading their senses, and the Channel sweeping before them like a great phantom sea.

Somehow the stars seem to shine with a holier, tenderer radiance; the roses sigh out greater sweetness; the waters murmur more gladly to him than they have ever done before in his life.

True, that in these charmed moments he talks principally of town topics; and she scarcely comprehends the gist of the gossip. Belgravian born and bred as she is, she has never in fact really comprehended the world of London well, but she likes to hear her husband tell about it, simply because it is the world in which *he* has lived so much.

But somehow, to Zai, the theatres, the balls, Hurlingham, the fashionable resorts, the feverish dissipation among which she passed nineteen years seem distant and even myths now. She cares nothing for town, save the Park, and even that cannot vie, in her eyes, with the delightful green shades and sunlit bits that Delaval Court owns.

She does not feel the least interested in the new professional beauties or the American stars that crop up, to make themselves nine days' wonders at the risk of a life-long reputation. Zai has, in fact, a foolish horror of women being held up to public view and subjected to public admiration and criticism. Her notions

are a little obsolete, perhaps, for neither Lord nor Lady Beranger are good, simple folk, and have plenty of the "go-ahead" sentiments of their fellow aristocrats, and their daughters have certainly not been brought up as quietly and carefully as they might have been.

But, after all, Zai's goodness and purity to a certain extent is a disadvantage to her.

Men of the Lord Delaval type are not likely to be long attracted by rustic wax-work when passionate, demonstrative human nature comes in their way to appeal to their feelings or senses, and even in these palmy days, Lord Delaval, when he finds his wife uninterested in the talk that his lips are mostly accustomed to utter, feels rather injured and inclined to be silent or sullen. But he is quite enough enamoured of her still, not to seek for other audiences, at any rate, just yet. So the summer flies quickly by, and autumn is waning, and Zai, as she opens her sweet grey eyes on a dull November morning, remembers that to-day is the anniversary of her marriage, and thanks God for the happiness He has granted her. But the autumnal days are dark and dreary, and the presence of outsiders, which would have seemed a terrible nuisance to Lord Delaval a few weeks ago, would now be a blessing. He feels as if he would gladly welcome anybody, whose advent would put a little spice, a little zest into his daily routine. It is easier for an Ethiopian to change his skin and a leopard his spots than for a worldling to alter his nature.

Lord Delaval does not acknowledge to himself even, with that utter self-delusion that comes so easily to most men—that there was something in poor Gabrielle's feverish passion that appealed to him, gratified him, soothed him. He does not guess himself how deliciously sweet to his heart are the voice of flattery and the yield of worship. There are men and *men*.

To some, the self-abnegatory passion of women is no doubt distasteful, even repellent. To others—to those of Lord Delaval's temperament especially—it is a poisonous incense—intoxicating, subtle, pleasant, and nearly always irresistible.

Meanwhile, Zai has no wish ungratified, no desire unsatisfied. To her the world contains but one man, and this is—her husband. Now and then she remembers the existence of Carlton Conway, but only with wonder filling her that she ever could have exalted him into a creature to adore, when he is so different—personally, mentally, in every way—to Delaval. She is flung, as it were, on her husband entirely for all the pleasure, enjoyment, and amusement of life. Gabrielle is drowned; Baby is dead; her father and mother, left to themselves, live in the London world and for the London world. There is no one, then, of her people, save Trixy, from whom she can hear of the old life, the old haunts, the old faces, and Trixy, with her grand house in Park Lane, her dresses, her jewels, her millions, is strangely silent. "She has no time, amid the pomps and vanities, to think of me, I suppose," Zai says, after a couple of months have elapsed since Trixy's last hurried scrawl. "Did you hear of her, Delaval, yesterday in town?"

"Yes!" he answers rather gravely. Lax as he is in morals himself, he objects utterly to his wife's ears being sullied with scandal. After all, though Zai's innocence rather palls on him, he would not have it otherwise for all the world. But he has heard so much of Trixy from Percy Rayne that he feels it his bounden duty to do his best to keep the mire off the family he has married into.

"You did not tell me you had heard about her," Zai says, rather reproachfully, "perhaps you even saw her!"

"No, I didn't, my darling; but I am going to see her! and that to-morrow. Your sister is a giddy, frivolous little woman, and poor old Stubbs hasn't much influence over her, I am afraid."

"Why, what has Trixy been doing, Delaval?" Zai asks hastily, lifting up a pair of anxious grey eyes, that are so pretty that he draws their owner down on his knee and kisses her.

"Never mind what she has been doing, my own! I'm not going to tell you all the naughty things women do, or you will be following their bad example!"

"Delaval!"

Zai flings her arm round her husband's neck, and kisses him in return. Like Cæsar's wife, she renders unto Cæsar all that is his due—with interest.

"Well?"

"You don't really believe I would ever do anything wrong, do you?" she whispers.

"I believe you are an angel!" he says truthfully, "and that is why I won't let anything of the earth—earthy, come near you!"

But Zai, angel though she may be, has some of Eve's curiosity in her.

"I know Trixy did not like Mr. Stubbs when she married him. But she always said she did not want love or affection so long as she had a fine house and lots of diamonds," she says, after a moment, and he reads in her face a longing to hear more.

"Fishing!" he laughs. "No use, little one, to fish in shallow water, you know! I'm *not* going to tell you anything about Trixy's shortcomings now, and I hope I shall not have anything to tell you later. Never mind about Trixy, darling. Think about your husband. Will you miss him? I shall be away three or four days, I am afraid, for I have a lot of business to do. I have been living in Dreamland here so long that I have neglected everything—but you!"

"Going to London for three or four days, Delaval?" she asks, with positive tears in her eyes. "Oh! I am so sorry."

"Nonsense, Zai. We can't always be tied together, or we *may* get tired of one another, you know!" he replies, with a careless smile. The little change to Town is quite an event to him, and he would not give it up for the world.

"Tired of one another?" she says, with a little quiver of her lip. "You may be tired of me, but I shall *never* be tired of you—*never*, so long as I live!"

And he believes her. For loads of women have never tired of him, although he has treated them cruelly, and flung them aside, like old gloves or withered flowers.

"My little darling!" he murmurs, quite softly, pleased at her open adoration of his irresistible self, "I shall never be tired of you, as far as I can see. But you must not tax me too much. Men love variety, you know! This

Darby and Joan sort of life is very delightful, my pet, but *ne quid nimis*—translated in English, “Too much of a good thing is as bad as nothing!” We must not let our happiness pall on us, Zai!”

She turns away her head, and answers not a word. What can she say? If he could see her face, it might bring him to a knowledge of the true and enduring love he has inspired in the soft, loving, girlish heart. But he doesn’t trouble to see it. Perhaps he thinks it is best to ignore reproach or pathos, rather than let them prove hindrances to his pleasure and amusement.

And Zai neither asks him to curtail his visit to London, nor to speak differently to her. For his indifferent words have cut her to the heart. And for the first time since her marriage, directly his back is turned, she sheds a perfect torrent of tears, and during his absence wanders like a little ghost about the big house, with white cheeks, and great pitiful eyes, and a load on her spirits that she cannot shake off.

Meanwhile, Lord Delaval, driving from Waterloo to his club, espies, standing at a shop, a brougham he knows; and stopping his hansom, walks up to it just as its occupant is getting in.

She is a lovely, golden-haired woman, but he scarcely recognises her. For all the old delicious pink colour has left her cheeks, and she looks wan and haggard, and years older than she did two months ago.

“How do you do, Trixy?” he says, startling her evidently, for she drops a tiny parcel on the pavement. “I wanted to see you. In fact, I came up to Town on purpose.”

“On purpose to see *me*, Delaval! What for?” she asks nervously. “I can’t stay now to talk, anyhow. Piccadilly isn’t exactly the place for a confab, you know. Especially as everyone doesn’t know you’re my handsome brother-in-law!”

“And you are so very particular as to what people think—eh, Trixy?” he asks, drily.

“Of *course*, I wish to adhere to the *convenances*!” she answers, rather sullenly.

“Well, we won’t talk now. When may I call and see you?”

She hesitates, evidently. It may be that her time is not her own. Then suddenly she changes her mind.

“Come with me now, Delaval! I am sure you were only going for a prowl down Regent Street, and I am rather curious to hear what you want to talk about—come in.”

He puts a foot on the step, then pauses.

“But how about the *convenances*? Everyone doesn’t know that I am not one of your lovers!”

“Bother the *convenances*,” she cries, impatiently, “and everyone knows I have *no* lovers.”

He enters the brougham, and a few in the crowd, who know the lovely golden-haired woman by sight as one of the London belles, begin to chatter about her. Different versions and interpretations of the matter fly from lip to lip, the favourite rendition being a modified version of “Auld Robin Gray.”

“She married old Peter Stubbs, the millionaire, against her will, you know,” Bevan, a man in the Coldstreams, tells a pretty coquettish little woman who stands beside him on the steps of the Burlington Arcade. “She was over head and ears in love with Conway, the actor.”

“I know Carlton Conway,” little Mrs. De Clifford answers. “I met him last night at Flora Fitzallan’s supper. He was quite the host there. Flora has loved him slavishly for years, and though he spends all her money, he tyrannises over her awfully. I suppose that wonderfully handsome fellow is another lover of Mrs. Stubbs’,” she adds, with a lingering look at Delaval’s undeniable beauty.

“It happens to be her brother-in-law, Lord Delaval, *this* time,” the man replies, in the tone that flings away a woman’s reputation in the twinkling of an eye.

“And is Lady Delaval alive?” Mrs. De Clifford asks carelessly, but with a mind to find out if Lord Delaval’s agreeability equals his good looks.

Bevan, who has rather a weakness for his companion, awakens at once to a suspicious condition.

“Very much alive, I hope! Lady Delaval is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, and her husband adores her,” he says, with *malice prepense*.

Meanwhile the brougham, “dark green, *very* dark green, and by Peters,” as Trixy had ordained, has disgorged its occupants at a house which is as exquisite within as it is big and stately without, and even Lord Delaval, who is habituated to luxury, is struck forcibly by the judicious manner in which the ethereal inspiration of poets and painters, Trixy Stubbs, has so ably contrived to feather her nest.

“I am inclined to believe, after all, Trixy, that you made a very wise choice,” he remarks, a little sardonically, as he follows her into a dim, flower-scented, rose-hung, mirror-embellished room, which the Honourable Mrs. Stubbs calls her boudoir, and is told to sit down in a chair that might tempt an anchorite into a fondness for luxury and repose. “Love sometimes flies out of the window, my dear Trixy; but statues, and mirrors, and French furniture are not disturbed by any such freaks of passion. One’s heart might be in a fair way to break, but such a delicious chair as this would be a comfort all the same.”

“I am not so sure of that,” says Trixy, in her “Mary Anderson” voice, full of pathos and tragedy, as she flings her dainty bonnet of pale blue velvet, with its high silver aigrette, on the marquetricie floor, and sinks into a corresponding chair, with a wealth of bright amber hair crowning her like the halo of a saint.

“Sometimes I should not care if it *did* all fly through the window,” she goes on, moodily. “Sometimes, Delaval, I cannot help thinking I have paid a little too dear for—for everything.”

“What do you mean?” he asks, bluntly. “Did you not choose to marry Stubbs? That being the case, what right have you to complain because your bargain may not be exactly to your taste? If you had not married of your own free will, of course no one could have forced you into it.”

“My own free will!” repeats Trixy, scornfully, curving down the corners of her red lips. “I wonder when a man—a man like you—ever comprehends that a woman’s free will, from her very cradle to her grave, means just nothing. No right to complain, haven’t I? Well, I am not complaining. My husband is kind and good to me, better and kinder by far than I deserve; but none the less I suffer more than you would believe I do, if I were fool enough to tell you everything.”

Tears rise up in her lovely blue eyes—hot, angry, scorching tears, but she chokes them back.

Life is beginning to teach even this little spoiled butterfly some self-control, and that wisdom which is

learned only through sad experience. Lord Delaval, susceptible always, is touched even by the beauty and evident unhappiness of his sister-in-law. He leans forward, takes gently the white hand that has dashed away the rebellious tear drops.

"Don't be vexed, Trixy, if I spoke a little roughly just now," he says, in his pleasantest accents. "You used to like me years ago when you were a child, and although you have out-grown the fondness, I am sure you know that I like you awfully, if it is only for Zai's sake."

"Delaval, I want you to answer me a question—on your honour, you know. Does Zai love you?"

"Love me? My dear Trixy, your question makes me answer rather conceitedly, perhaps; but on my honour I don't believe any woman loves her husband better than my wife loves me."

"Thank God for that!" she exclaims passionately.

He stares at her in surprise. Trixy is not of a devout nature, and it seems to him a little strange also that she should trouble herself earnestly about a sister with whom she has nothing in common, or apparently much affection for. There must be an *arrière pensée* in her ejaculation.

"Why should you be so thankful that Zai cares for me?" he asks, carelessly, amazed to see her colour come and go swiftly, and the hand he still holds tremble in his.

But Trixy drags away her fingers and shrinks back into the furthest corner of her fauteuil.

"Oh! I don't know!" she says, nervously. "I just wanted to hear if she was happy and loved you only."

"Loved me *only*! Why, who *should* she love else?" he demands, gravely.

"No one, of course. You always make me nervous, Delaval, when you turn inquisitor. As a child I hated your questioning propensities."

"Yes; but you know you always found I was to be trusted; so tell me your troubles now. It will be a relief to you, and let us see—two heads, being better than one—if we cannot find a remedy for them."

"Don't bother me, Delaval, I cannot."

"You mean that you cannot speak of your troubles?"

"Yes! I mean just that. I can't talk of them, at least to *you*."

"It would be better to talk of them to me, Trixy, than to Lady Smiles. She is a chattering, double-faced woman."

"Lady Smiles! Why, what has she been saying? What *dare* she say of me?" Trixy asks feverishly, lifting up a flushed face.

"Only letting out a few foolish confidences. You see Lady Smiles may possibly fancy the same man as you may do; and women are horribly spiteful to one another when a man comes between them!"

"I don't understand what you mean?" she stammers, growing quite white; "and as for my troubles, you must not think that I have any complaint to make against Mr. Stubbs," she goes on with curious eagerness: "He is really devoted to me, anticipating my wants, lavishing costly things on me, caring for me ten times more than I merit, as I cannot help thinking when I recollect that I married him, hating and despising him!"

"But you care a little for him now, don't you?"

"Yes, I care for him a little more now," she replies very doubtfully. "It is true that I ought to care for him, for he is kindness itself, but——"

Here the blue eyes fill with large tears again, and Lord Delaval frowns as he realises that Lady Smiles—Trixy's bosom friend and *confidante*—has not been untruthful in her insinuations. Percy Rayne is one of her admirers, and it is to him, as a connection of the Berangers, that she has confided her fears that Trixy is a *leetle* imprudent in her conduct.

"Trixy! I know you once had a foolish fancy for—for——" he hesitates at the name, he hates it so! struggles with himself, and at last wrenches the words out and almost flings them at her. "For—Carlton Conway! but it is of course impossible that you can still waste a thought or feeling on such an unmitigated scoundrel, a fellow who plays fast and loose with every woman he comes across—a hypocrite, a scoundrel!"

But Trixy springs up from her chair and faces him; two scarlet spots burn in her cheeks, her eyes blaze, and she looks like a beautiful virago.

"How *dare* you speak of my friend like this, Lord Delaval! I forbid you to do it; I forbid you to say behind Mr. Conway's back what you would not *presume* to do before him! *Presume*, I say it again, for though he is an actor and you are an Earl, there is more to be respected in his little finger than in your whole body! He would not lower himself to abuse a man, just because that man had been loved better than himself!"

"What do you mean?" Lord Delaval demands sternly. He is standing too now, with anger in his eyes, and wounded vanity in his breast.

"I mean that your spite towards Mr. Conway only emanates from the knowledge that your wife loved him as she will never care for any other man in her life!" Trixy says defiantly, though her blue eyes quail a little as they meet his. "And you may tell her from me, that the sooner she forgets him the better, for he does not care for her—*that*," and she snaps her finger scornfully.

"He cares for *you*, no doubt!" Lord Delaval answers quietly, though his whole frame trembles with outraged pride and mortification. "But mark my words, his love will drag you down to the lowest depths, and——" he pauses, lays a hand on her shoulder, and speaks slowly and deliberately; "when he has got hold of the money poor old Stubbs was fool enough to settle on you, my dear Trixy, he will fling you to the devil!"

And without another word he leaves the room.

But Trixy's words have raised up a feeling in his heart about his wife which cannot fail to build up a wall of reserve and suspicion.

It is in the dusk of the evening when he returns after two days' absence, but the firelight is bright enough to show him the gladness in Zai's face as he enters the room. Lavater himself could not find any guile in it, but jealousy and suspicion know no reason.

"My darling! my darling!" she cries, throwing herself into his arms, and holding up her sweet lips for his

kiss, but he puts her aside quietly, and, amazed at his manner, she stands a little apart.

"What are you doing in the dark here?" he asks, in a cold, cutting voice. "Dreaming of the old days?"

"I don't understand what ails you!" she falters. "I was sitting here, wondering when you would come back, for it has been so dull, so miserable without you! but now you *have* come back, you are so strange, Delaval!"

"Light those candles," he orders abruptly.

She goes up to the mantel-piece and obeys him.

The tapers shine down full on her chesnut hair, her pure sweet face, her pathetic grey eyes.

"Now I can see you," he says curtly, inwardly moved by her exceeding fairness, but outwardly cold and stern. "Well, why don't you ask for news of Trixy?"

"I forgot about her," she answers gently. "I was thinking about you."

"About *me!* as if you ever gave me a thought!" he sneers. "I hate to be fooled."

"Fooled!" she repeats. "Oh! Delaval, what have I done to make you say such things?"

"Done! why you have married me, loving that scoundrel Conway!" he blurts furiously. "Nice thing it is for a man to know every day and night of his life that his wife is eating her heart out for a fellow like that!"

She has slid down on the floor by this time, and looks up at him with a blanched, scared face, and piteous eyes.

It seems to her that in this moment the love she has learned to look upon as her dearest, *dearest* possession is gone out of her grasp.

Delaval *must* hate her, or he could not glare at her like this, he could not say such awful, *awful* things.

"Well?" he asks, "have you nothing to answer in self-defence? How dared you come to an honest man's home with infidelity in your heart, lies on your lips. Don't you know that you are a wicked——"

"For God's sake Delaval! For God's sake! don't say such things to me!" she interrupts hastily. "If you believe me to be so false—so bad—send me away from you, but I cannot live with you and learn that I have lost your love!"

"Poor little woman!" he says, half relenting; "we cannot control our affections, so why should I blame you after all?"

"Won't you believe me if I swear, Delaval?"

"I thought you never took an oath," he says harshly.

"I do not like to swear, but I will now, *now* that all I hold most precious on earth is in the balance!" she sobs through her tears.

"Swear then! Say 'I love you and you only, so help me God!'"

"I love you, Delaval, and only you, so help me God!" she says solemnly. "Oh! you believe me now, don't you?"

He looks at her. As has been said before in the olden days Phryne's face and form moved her judges to mercy—so this fair face and form move him to belief.

It is not possible that deceit can lurk behind her candid brow, her limpid eyes!

"Come to me, little one!"

In a moment she is in his arms, her white face pillowed on his breast, her lips smiling. "Ah! you believe me, Delaval, or you would not take me in your arms! you know I love you—darling—my own, own darling!—love you with *all* my heart. I never, never think of any one else."

"Not even of—Conway?"

But she does not shrink or blush at the name.

"I do—sometimes," she whispers, "but only to wonder how I could ever have cared about him at all."

Truth is stamped on every feature of her face. Truth shines in her glance. He would be more the man if he could resist this evidence.

So, though he will not humiliate himself to his wife by acknowledging himself in the wrong, he gathers her closer to him and kisses her with the ardour of their honeymoon days.

And she is content, she wants no more than this.

"You have not asked about Trixy?" he says presently; "and I have something to tell you that will grieve you, my pet."

But she is nestling in his clasp, and it seems to her that nothing can grieve her very much *now*.

"Is Trixy ill?"

"No!"

"Is she—but no—Delaval! it can't be that Trixy is—dead!" she cries.

"Dead to *you*—Zai—but not really dead, unfortunately for herself. Trixy left her husband yesterday and has gone away,"—he hesitates.

"Where?"

"With—*Carlton Conway!*"

Gone away with Carlton Conway!

For a second Zai looks at her husband as if she was stunned, and does not even realise the fact that he is watching her face with a keen searching glance.

"Poor Trixy!" she says at last, but beyond an expression of pity on her mobile features, Lord Delaval fails to discover any regret. Still he remarks perversely, "*Lucky* Trixy! you mean!"

"Oh! Delaval! isn't it terrible!" Zai says, as if his last words had fallen unheard. "Trixy *must* awake some day to the consciousness of her conduct to her husband. He isn't loveable or lovely of course, but he was awfully kind to her, you know. What will become of her, for I am afraid Mr. Conway is not a good man, and

unless she had money, he wouldn't care to be tied to her, I think!"

"She *has* money, old Stubbs settled £40,000 on her, and so long as it lasts Conway will stick to her like a leech, you may be sure; but when it's gone, then Trixy will be sent to the devil!"

"But he'll marry her of course, directly the divorce is given! I hope and pray he will! for after all she has given up for him, it will be dreadful for Trixy to find out what he is! Papa can *make* him marry her, can't he, Delaval!"

"No one can *make* him marry her—except his conscience—but I doubt his having one. I say Zai, don't you feel a little sorry that he has gone over to your sister? Women hate defection in men you know!"

"I *am* sorry for Trixy! I don't understand what you mean by women hating defection in men, but if you think that it matters to me who Mr. Conway runs away with, you are quite wrong! I would rather it was anyone though but my sister, for of course I wish her to be happy."

"Which Mr. Conway's noble presence ought to make her."

"Which it won't make her. If I thought you would not call me spiteful—Delaval—I would tell you what I think!"

"Tell away—child."

"Well, mamma said he was a cad, and though I don't quite know the exact meaning of the word, I am afraid he is something of the sort!"

## CHAPTER IV.

### LA BLONDE AUX YEUX NOIR.

"Your lithe hands draw me—your face burns through me,  
I am swift to follow you, keen to see,  
But love lacks might to redeem or undo me,  
As I have been—I shall surely be."

So, while all London talks of Trixy's elopement with Carlton Conway, Lord Delaval carries his wife off to Paris, and, in sumptuous apartments at the Bristol, little Lord Vernon makes his appearance on the arena of life.

Zai adores her first-born to absurd adoration, but she has not the very faintest idea how to take care of him, or the smallest conception what to do with him.

She loves to hear, as well as to know, that God has given her a living child, and little Vernon does not disappoint her, for he screams away the first weeks with a pertinacity which is fortunately rather rare.

He seems to have not only the germ of a lachrymose disposition, but is in actual fright at the new world in which he finds himself.

According to the tenets of ideality and poetry, he ought to be like his father, a large, fair, serene-eyed boy, born out of mystic hours and moonlight dreaming. In reality he is the antipodes of serene, and is acutely organised. He is tiny, and timid, and tearful too, but Zai, after the fashion of most young mothers, considers him a cherub, a lump of perfection.

Whether he screams or whether he crows, she fancies they are warblings of the angelic choir, but notwithstanding half the time she does not know what to do for him. Long before she can manage to hold him tight in her slender arms, without letting him drop on the floor, her big, wistful grey eyes follow the obese proportions of the French nurse from hour to hour to learn what she does to keep "Baby" quiet. And when at last nature overpowers her prudence and she rashly insists on taking charge of him herself, her fear lest he should come to grief gives him a feeling of insecurity which makes him scream louder than ever.

Nevertheless mother and child make such a charming Madonna-like picture that Lord Delaval, who has always gone in for lust of the eye, likes to look upon it. Nothing, in fact, can exceed his devotion for the first six weeks of paternal experience. He may have been fickle and unstable, but he now spends his whole time with his wife, his strong arms carry her about, he reads to her, and gazes on her with eyes through which the passionate fervour of the honeymoon shines out.

Never has Zai had him so completely to herself. Never has he been so gentle, so unselfish, so loving. And no matter what happens, she has this period to look back upon with unmarred sensations of content. Maybe if wrong or trouble come to her, these hours will be green oases in life's desert, landmarks in memory, which will soften resentment into regret. But when a couple of months have gone by, Paris has begun her season, and it is at Zai's own solicitation that her husband begins to go and look about him a little.

"You'll get quite ill, darling, unless you have a little distraction," she says, tenderly, as her white hand, smaller and thinner than ever, plays with his fair hair. "And you need not mind leaving me, for I shan't be dull now I've got Baby." Yes, she has got Baby to keep her company and to take up all her attention, and he is not at all loth for a little distraction, especially as she urges it.

The next evening, sauntering down the Boulevard des Italiens, he runs against old London pals, men of the same rank, and something of the same calibre as himself, Shropshire and Silverlake, men who have formed *mésalliances*, and whose morals are not too strict for a "spree."

"Hallo, Delaval, come over on French leave?" Shropshire asks. "There are a lot of pretty women at the theatres now. Silverlake and I are off to the Alcazar presently, and you might as well join us." He hesitates—the Alcazar—it does not sound so respectable as the Folies Dramatiques, or the Opera Lyrique. Delaval has a dim sense that music-halls in London are not quite the thing for newly married men, but he salves his conscience by the thought that in Paris these kind of places are on a more respectable footing.

So after an excellent dinner at Bignon's, washed down by Röederer, the trio stroll to the Alcazar.

"It's a long time since I've been at a place like this," Delaval says, "but I suppose I must try and do some

of the Parisian things, unless I want to be taken for a regular savage."

"Things are rather changed since you were here, eh," Silverlake asks.

"Well, yes. It's incredible how a year or so changes all the people and places in Paris. I have scarcely seen one of the faces that used to be familiar in the Bois two winters ago."

"Paris isn't as bad as London for change," Silverlake remarks. "In town there's a lot of cads who suddenly appear—no one knows whence—make a great flare up with carriages, horses, opera boxes, powdered footmen, and as suddenly disappear, goodness knows where, and sink into utter oblivion. Cads who speculate, you know, make fortunes by some species of swindling, and then lose them again."

"People who are not cads manage to get through their money pretty well," drawls Shropshire.

At which Delaval laughs.

"Does it hit home, Silverlake?"

"Well, it's a consolation he and I are in the same coach!"

And then the three men enter a box, the next but one to the stage.

The Alcazar is crowded to suffocation, there is no moving in the body of the house, where they sit at the little tables smoking and drinking, and as Delaval looks round, he says—

"What on earth do the people flock here for like this?"

"For Marguerite Ange. Her singing has made this place an unheard of success, you know."

"Marguerite Ange! I haven't even heard of her!"

"Don't say so, my dear fellow, unless you want to argue yourself unknown! Hi!"

This last ejaculation is to a pretty coquettish little Marchande des Fleurs, and Shropshire invests in a bouquet of Parma violets, as big as his own head.

"What a monster posy, who's that for?" asks Delaval. "I pity its recipient, it will almost crush her I should think."

"It's for Mademoiselle Ange, of course," Silverlake joins in, searching in his pocket for a five-franc piece to buy a bunch of camellias, but without success, "everyone throws the Ange a bouquet, it's *la mode*."

"Wonder she isn't like the fellow, you remember? the Roman fellow, who was smothered by a shower of cloaks," Delaval says, with a feeble reminiscence of some old story learnt long ago in his cramming days. "Eh, what?" Silverlake asks, "No! don't know any Roman fellows, know plenty of Jews, I am sorry to say."

"There's an awful Jew fellow in that stage-box opposite," whispers Shropshire, "fingers blazing with diamonds, and all that sort of thing. He's after the Ange, comes here every night and ogles her. I wouldn't touch him for all the world."

"I shouldn't mind touching his shekels of gold. I——"

But Silverlake stops short, for just at this moment the shouts and thunder of applause, the cries and calls for "Marguerite" grow terrific, and Delaval, raising his glass, curiously eyes a woman advancing slowly towards the footlights. It is Marguerite Ange, the woman who has turned the heads of all Paris.

She is beautiful, this Marguerite Ange, this singer at the Alcazar, this child of the people, beautiful with a regal beauty any queen might envy.

The patrician carriage of her grand head, the pride of her bearing, her slow and stately step, the very swirl of her skirt as she sweeps forward, all strike Delaval, who gazes at her with a momentary astonishment that is not altogether born of her loveliness. "Is she an empress in disguise," he wonders; but at the second glance, he takes in the whole splendid physique, the flesh and blood magnificence of Mademoiselle Ange, and decides that she is of the earth, earthy, that there is no semi-divine light in the slumbrous eyes over which droop heavy white lids, no purity about the make of the warm full blooded lips, no unflinchingly refinement about her face and figure; but there is rare perfection of form, and tropical brilliance of colouring about her, and her vivid pink and white tints, her rich masses of golden hair form a strange and almost *bizarre* contrast to her immense eyes, black as midnight skies, and of a velvety softness.

Delaval remarks the peculiarity just as an inflammable French officer near him remarks with enormous enthusiasm:

*"Elle est belle à faire peur, cette blonde aux yeux noir!"*

Strangely enough, the more Delaval looks at her the more he is reminded of someone he has seen. To a certain extent her face appears really quite familiar to him—but only to a certain extent—beyond this he is quite in a fog, and searches vainly in the caverns of memory for an elucidation of the mystery.

Mademoiselle Ange stands for a moment or two perfectly motionless, with her eyes fixed on the ground, while the clapping of hands and yelling applause goes on, and the bright light falls full on a face of marvellous, almost weird beauty, on perfectly moulded round white limbs, revealed rather than hidden by clouds of diaphanous drapery, on a shapely arm supporting a much ornamented guitar—which by the way she does not use).

Then amidst a hush, in which the fall of a pin could be heard, she begins her song in a deep rich contralto.

There is none of the noise, or clap-trap, or glitter of the Alcazar about her or her vocalisation.

She sings her two first verses, without the quiver of a long black lash, or the falter of a note, poetically, dreamily, entrancingly. Then she pauses a second, stretches out one arm tragically towards the audience, and commences the last verse in a soft, low, thrilling voice that appeals to the roughest man there, while her huge black eyes seem to burn and scintillate, firing the manly bosoms under broadcloth and blouse with irrepressible ardour.



“Je vis le lendemain non plus au bord de l’onde  
Mais assise au chemin la jeune fille blonde!  
Je vis qu’ils étaient deux—A! deux âmes sont joyeuse!  
Comme il était heureux! Comme elle était heureuse!  
Et moi, dans mon bonheur—de les voir si content  
Je me mis a pleurer! Comme on pleure à vingt ans!  
Et moi! dans mon bonheur—de les voir si content  
Je me mis a pleurer! Comme on pleure à vingt ans!”

LORD DELAVAL—*fanatico per la musica*—listens enthralled as the last sweet, sad, soft notes die away on his ear.

Once more shouts of “Marguerite *la Blonde aux yeux noir!*” fill the house with deafening roar, and coming closer to the footlights with a beaming smile on her scarlet lips, for the first time her eyes fall on the box where Delaval sits leaning forward.

Her glance rests an instant upon him. She utters a sharp cry, her face through its rouge turns ghastly white, and Marguerite Ange drops senseless on the floor.

In a moment, however, the curtain falling, hides her from view.

“What ails her?” cries Shropshire, as much concerned as if he had not his Countess—for whom he has gone through a good deal—demanding his allegiance and fidelity.

“It’s the infernal excitement of all the noise that’s done her up,” Silverlake says. “Isn’t she more like a witch than a woman? She’d take the heart out of a man whether he would or no!”

But Delaval answers nothing. His face is very pale, and there is a queer dazed look in his eyes which is foreign to them, and a shiver passes over his whole frame as the manager comes forward, announcing that Mademoiselle Ange having recovered her indisposition, will sing again.

After a few minutes she comes forward and sings a short but passionate love song, in which her voice falters, and tears glitter in her magnificent eyes.

The cheers and cries from the motley audience would have gladdened the ears of the greatest Diva that ever lived. And they bring triumph to the heart of this woman, a mighty triumph that gleams from her glance as she fixes one long look on Delaval’s face when she makes her final curtsey and retires.

“What sort of a woman is this Marguerite Ange?” Lord Delaval asks carelessly, though he is conscious that his heart throbs a little faster than usual as he awaits the answer. “She’s not over particular, is she?”

“Particular,” laughs Shropshire, “did you ever know an Alcazar songstress particular? You might as well expect prudery from Rose Stanley at the Holborn, or from little Kitty Mortimer at the Pavilion. Do you imagine her salary at the Alcazar pays for her charming *au premier* in the Rue Tronchet, her carriage and *haute ecole* cattle, the jewels and laces and velvets that are the very soul and essence of the beautiful Marguerite. Sapristi! You must have forgotten the world and its ways.”

“And the parable of the lamb and the wolves,” Silverlake adds. “I defy any woman making head against the current of lovers that Marguerite has.”

“I might have known it! They are all alike, these women,” Delaval mutters savagely through his set teeth.

“Understand, I don’t mean to hint a word against her morals, in fact, the Ange is extra proper. She always goes about with the most hideous of duennas. But she’s the very devil with men—twists them round her fingers—fools them to any extent—cleans them out and then throws them overboard. Young Valentin de Brissac blew his brains out about her last week, and not very long ago Jules de Grammont Charleville, a capital fellow, and one of the Faubourg St. Germain Charleville’s, went to the bad—took to drinking like a madman—tried to shoot her, and has got five years for it. The Ange is as hard as granite, as calculating as a Jew, and as vain as—well—I really can’t find anything to compare with her vanity.”

“Where did you say she lived, Shropshire?”

Shropshire looks at him and elevates his eyebrows, while Silverlake bursts out laughing.

This is the model Benedict all London has talked about!

“I thought you’d soon tire of domestic bliss and look out for pastures new,” Shropshire says. “Well—well—Marguerite won’t have anything to say to me, so I won’t be a dog in the manger, but wish you success. She lives at Number 17 Rue de Tronchet, just close to the Madelaine, you know.”

“Thanks.”

And Delaval, leaving his companions, saunters towards the Champs Elysées instead of going home.

It is a lovely night. There is no moon, but myriads of stars cluster overhead, and somehow the quiet and the stillness of midnight are pleasant to him. He has quite made up his mind to see Marguerite Ange again.

It is not because he has fallen in love with her, far from it. The feeling she has inspired in him has at present, at any rate, no particle of love in it, but something draws him on to seeing her—to speaking to her—to saving her from a path that *must* lead to perdition.

And he smiles almost bitterly at such a feeling possessing him about a singing woman at the Alcazar!

By and by, when the air has cooled his hot temples a little, and the oppressive sort of spell this evening has brought him disperses somewhat, he goes back to the hotel and enters the room where Zai lies fast asleep. How pretty she looks to his feverish eyes! The purity and sweetness of her face come like a glimpse of blue sky after a storm. She is happy, too, for her red lips part in a smile as she clasps her child close to her heart.

Lord Delaval stoops down and kisses her so softly that she never stirs. He is a worshipper of female beauty, and here before him—within his grasp—lies as fair a woman as ever was made to please the eyes of man. His wife—his own! a legitimate object for love and passion and admiration.

But men’s hearts are perverse things.

Noiselessly as he entered he steals away again to the adjoining room, and without undressing, flings

himself into an armchair.

Here the break of dawn finds him—still sleepless, but lost in a waking dream of "*La Blonde aux yeux noir*."



## CHAPTER V.

### DRIFTING.

"A year divides us—love from love,  
Though you love now, though I loved then,  
The gulf is straight, but deep enough,  
Who shall recross—who among men  
Shall cross again?"

"You came in very late last night, darling," Zai says, a little reproachfully, as she sits *en peignoir*—but a *peignoir* daintily got up, with Valenciennes and pink ribbons, and looks divinely fair at the head of the breakfast-table.

"There was a carriage accident on the Boulevard, and I helped the occupants to get out," he answers.

It is the first falsehood he has uttered to his wife, and in spite of him a tinge of red sweeps across his fair skin, to hide which he buries his face in his coffee-cup.

"Were the occupants *ladies*?" Zai asks, with a sensation of incipient jealousy.

She has learned to think this husband of hers so superbly handsome and irresistible that she believes all other women must consider him so likewise.

"Yes, ladies—*old* ladies, going home from some concert. They were terribly frightened, poor old girls," he says, coolly.

"And how did you amuse yourself, darling?—and did you talk to anyone?"

"Why, you've grown into the Grand Inquisitor, my pet! I went to the theatre and I talked to Shropshire and Silverlake."

"*Those* men!" she says with a little *moue*. "They are dreadfully fast, are they not, Delaval?"

"So so!"

"Were Lady Shropshire and Lady Silverlake there?"

"Oh, no!—the husbands are doing Paris *en garçon*."

"How very horrid!" she decides. "You wouldn't care to go about *en garçon*, would you, my own?"

"*Certainly* not," he answers fervently.

But he has made up his mind to go out *en garçon* all the same.

"And how's baby?" he inquires unctuously, in the hope of turning the subject.

"He's very well. I am sure he has grown half-an-inch in the last few days, and I really think he tried to say 'pa—pa' this morning, Delaval!"

"Did he really! Dear little chap!"

"Yes! and Madame Le Blanc tells me that she has been a monthly-nurse for thirty years, and that its the first time she has ever heard a child of two months-and-a-half pronounce so plainly!"

"Why the little chap must be the infant prodigy! Pity he's so beastly red!"

"*Red*, Delaval! Why he's exactly like Dresden China!" she replies, with intense mortification.

He gives a forced laugh. Then he pushes his plate away, with the devilled kidneys untouched, for he has no appetite. And leaning back in his chair, looks at his wife.

And he comes to the conclusion that he ought to be thoroughly ashamed of himself.

There she is, facing him. Could any creature of mortal mould be sweeter, lovelier, purer, more adorable?

*And yet!*

These are two little words that carry more meaning in them than all the long, grandiose phrases in the Queen's English. These two little words, indefinite as they seem, show exactly what a man's mind is when it oscillates 'twixt right and wrong. Zai is undeniably charming, but she is not—*la Blonde aux yeux noir*!

She lacks the power to inflame the heart of the million. Her soft, dove-like eyes, cannot burn into men's brains and souls like the dangerous but glorious black ones of Marguerite Ange!

"What piece did you see last night, Delaval?"

It is a poser. For one moment Lord Delaval, with the impatience and dislike of being catechised, which is natural to him, has a mind to speak the truth, and tell his wife that this morning he is not up to small talk. But he thinks better of it, and is equal to the occasion.

"A piece called *La Tentation*, darling! A thing in which there was a lot of love-making and smiling and bowing, and a woman, supposed to be an angel—but probably she is a devil," he adds, almost *sotto voce*.

"Was she pretty?"

"Tol lol! You can't tell what an actress is like on the stage, you know!"

"I hope you won't find out what she is like off the stage!" Zai says earnestly. "Actresses are such bad, dangerous women, sometimes!"

"And how about *actors*?"

The shot goes home, for she flinches and flushes a little, and he is rather sorry he has said this. It was snobbish, perhaps! But when a man wishes to stop his wife's mouth, he must do it the best way he can. Zai will not pursue the subject of Theatres and Thespians after his cut, he thinks. But he is wrong. She flushed more from a wounded feeling at his manner and tone than from the reference to her old lover, for whom she has the most profound indifference now.

"Have you heard anything about Trixy, Delaval?" she asks, in a low, humble voice. She is very much ashamed of this sister of hers, and scarcely likes mentioning her name before the man she not only loves but honours.

"Yes. Stubbs has got a divorce. Poor old chap! It appears that he was awfully cut up; had a fit, and nearly died. He wanted her to go back to him, and promised never to breathe a word of recrimination; but when he found she wouldn't, he got a divorce, and gave that scoundrel Conway a bill at six months for ten thousand pounds provided he married her! Of course, the money was too much for the fellow; so the marriage will come off by-and-by."

"And where is Trixy now?"

"Living at Hammersmith; dining at Richmond and the Orleans with all the fast men; dressing to the nine, and making herself the talk of town. She has quite forgotten the word more familiar to her youth than her Bible—*convenances*; but what can be expected? If a girl is innately bad, no power on earth can keep her straight."

"But Trixy was not innately bad," Zai murmurs, deprecatingly. "She married a man she could not love, and then—she yielded to—"

"The fascinations of Mr. Conway! Joy go with her! Men are not fair judges of their own sex, but if I was a woman, I should prefer old Stubbs to a dozen Conways!"

"And so should I—*now*," Zai confesses meekly. "What a pity women have not the gift of *clair-voyance*!"

"Thank God, they haven't!" he says to himself, as he rises, and walking up to the mirror on the mantel, looks at himself. "I wonder what Mademoiselle Ange saw in me to make her faint? It could not have been my *ugliness*!" he thinks, as the glass reflects back his handsome face—a face which he *knows* to be handsome and irresistible to most women.

Then he turns away carelessly—for he is not a vain man—and going up to his wife kisses her on her forehead.

But Zai is not satisfied with this.

"Won't you kiss me properly, darling?" she says, holding up her fresh, red lips.

And her darling kisses her "properly," though all the while he is wronging her in his heart, on the principle that sins of *omission* are as bad as sins of *commission*!



## CHAPTER VI.

### IN THE MESHES.

"Take hands and part with laughter,  
Touch lips and part with tears,  
Once more, and no more after,  
Whatever comes with years.  
We twain shall not remeasure  
The ways that left us twain,  
Nor crush the lees of pleasure  
From sanguine grapes of pain."

LORD DELAVAL has never let a desire of his remain ungratified in his life, so now, haunted by the beauty of a woman for the space of twenty-four hours, he resolves to make her acquaintance.

"Her sort are not very particular about the *convenances*," he says to himself as he approaches *Numéro 17 Rue de Tronchet*, but it must be confessed that his courage does not rear its crest much aloft as he rings the bell, and hears from the *concierge* that "Mademoiselle Ange *est chez elle*."

Still, though his mind is perturbed, his pulses throb, and there is a mingling of expectation and trepidation in his breast, if his *real* feelings were finely analysed, it would be found that Mademoiselle's beauty repels even while it attracts him to the point of looking on it closer.

Possibly the daylight may dissipate his delusion, he thinks. And he is conscious of a sort of half-hope, half-regret, that it may be so.

The apartment, into which he is ushered by Mademoiselle's own smart *soubrette*, disappoints him at once.

The decorations are florid and over-done. The big mirrors gleam too brightly on the sea-green of the walls, the vivid scarlet of the ottomans, the chairs, the velvet cushions, the too heavily perfumed atmosphere, the curious medley of *objets d'art*, individually costly, but making a strange and heterogeneous whole, all seem to his fastidious eyes as redolent of the Alcazar.

The sunbeams that fall through the rose-tinted blinds are studiously toned down to a pale mystic light, fit for the languor of magnificent, heavy-lidded eyes—a Marie Antoinette fan with a jewelled handle, a flacon of *esprit des millefleurs*, a tiny handkerchief with a Chantilly border, a volume of De Musset's poems, lie together, and *bric-à-brac*, rococo, ormolu, and Sèvres are heaped everywhere in picturesque confusion. If

Mademoiselle Ange has ever desired to be grand, she has gained her desire.

While he waits, he wonders if the woman is really content, and whether these things are worth possessing at the price she has to pay for them.

"Gratified vanity goes a precious long way, so I suppose she is happy and satisfied," he thinks with a sneer, and a sort of savage sensation in his heart, that he has not found her in a barely furnished room, devoid of luxury, and indicative of high moral worth.

It certainly is not marvellous that *La Blonde aux Yeux Noir* has created a regular furore in Paris.

As the heavy red velvet portières are pushed aside, and she comes into the room, the sneer dies right away from his mouth, and he confesses that this woman is a thing to wonder at.

If she had struck him as beautiful in her diaphanous robes, in her semi-nudity, with manacles of gold on her neck and arms, fit for an Eastern Satrap's love, she strikes him as ten times more attractive in her day attire.

She wears a deep wine-coloured satin, covered with a profusion of lace; the bodice is cut square and the sleeves are open and hanging. Her throat and slender wrists gleam like the purest alabaster under the delicious rose-tinted light, and wine-coloured bands, studded with small but rare brilliants, go round them. Her hair, perfectly golden, falls in light bright curls above her dark straight brows, and is knotted carelessly, but artistically, in thick glossy coils at the back of her well-shaped head.

She is thoroughly well got up, she has made the most of herself in every particular, and yet she has the art of letting her magnificence seem part and parcel of herself, as if it belonged to her and was not a studied effect.

And one of Marguerite Ange's attractions is that she looks so young; she cannot have reached one score to judge by her flawless face and her slender figure, which is all bends and curves without an angle in it.

"I scarcely dared to hope that you *would* come and see me," she says in French that is true Parisian, though Delaval has heard that she comes from Arles, the birth-place of beauty; and she holds out, rather deprecatingly, a slim white hand, which, of course, he clasps eagerly, a sharp thrill going through him as he does so.

"Why not?" he asks in as excellent French as her own. "Could I be the only man to resist the Queen of *—Hearts?*"

And his voice has certainly a fervour and a ring of truth about it, which perhaps gratifies her, for a little smile, savouring of triumph, crosses her lips.

She throws herself back among her vivid scarlet cushions, and makes a gesture to him to sit down beside her.

Then, for the first time, he grows conscious of the presence of a third person, an old woman, hideous as Hecuba, who has seated herself close to the portière.

"That's the sheep-dog Shropshire spoke of," he thinks.

"Madame Perchard, you can go for a walk if you like. It is a charming day, and it will do you good. Stay! you might call at the costumier's, and desire them to send the domino and mask for the *Bal de l'Opera* to-morrow."

Madame Perchard, who looks as if she were well paid and well fed, smiles feebly and goes on her way, and the others are left *tête-à-tête*.

If anyone had suggested two months ago that he would be seated in a dimly-lit room, side by side with a music-hall singer, Lord Delaval would probably have scouted the notion, and resented the speaker's impertinence; but now it seems to him as if it is the most natural thing in the world that he should be here, at Marguerite Ange's feet (mentally).

He turns, and looks into her beautiful eyes long and steadfastly, without speaking, until she, who has grown hardened to the boldest stare, reddens a little.

"*Eh bien?*" she says smiling, and her voice startles him out of a reverie. He is not only thinking how exquisitely lovely she is, but taxing his brain once more to find out *who* she resembles.

"I was dreaming, I believe, Mademoiselle Ange! Will you forgive me for coming here like this? My only excuse is that my heart was stronger than myself," he says, in a low, passionate voice.

"I forgive you!" she answers. "Ah! you don't know what I felt the other night when I first saw you. You are very like someone I once knew—someone I loved as women only love once in their lives!—someone who is dead to me, and when I saw you I fainted."

So, this is why she fainted at sight of him—simply because he happens to resemble some sweetheart of other days. The idea is not flattering, and irritates him. Somehow, he had fancied that his own irresistible attractions had had an effect on her; but he cannot gaze on her and not soften at once.

"Mademoiselle Ange, why do you live this life?" he says abruptly.

"What harm is there in my life?" she asks. "It suits me!"

"It suits no woman to forfeit respect for admiration—modest life for public display; but what right have I to talk to you so? To what good can I talk? For, *is it not a little too late?*"

"You are very hard on me," she falters. "Ah! I see you will *never* like me—for you are prejudiced!"

"What does it matter to you if I am prejudiced? After all, you could only care for my liking as you care for the liking of a dozen other men. Come—strangers almost though we are—tell me who is the most favoured amongst your worshippers! For, in spite of being prejudiced, I have felt a great interest in you ever since I first looked on your face."

She glances up at him, and the colour deepens on her cheek.

"Why should you take an interest in me? I am only a poor artist, and quite below *your* notice," she answers, with a sort of proud humility.

"You would not say that if you knew how much I have thought about you, *how* your face has haunted me. It has bewitched me—*malgre moi*—I think. Do you know, Mademoiselle Ange, that if I am like someone you

knew, you are strangely like someone I have seen; someone who certainly was not so beautiful as you are, or I should remember her to my cost," he adds softly.

She flushes still deeper as she listens, then turns the subject by saying lightly:

"And what am I to tell you about myself? Only that I have a great deal of admiration and very little love! Perhaps you will think that is all I ought to expect, being myself! But really I don't believe anyone has ever *loved me!*"

"It would indeed, be strange if they hadn't," he replies, unable to remove his gaze from her. "You are deceiving yourself or deceiving *me*. You are not one to be seen and not loved—*madly loved!* No matter the dire results of it!" he cries eagerly, and her lids droop under the infinite passion of his eyes.

"It is very hard to tell the real from the sham in love, and in everything else I don't take the trouble to try; I class them all together, and value them at just as much as they are worth," she says with a low laugh. "You asked me which of them I liked best—no *one*; but somehow, though I only saw you two nights ago, *you* seem to stand apart from the rest, you are different *to me!* You won't be ashamed to come here now and then? I am not a *grande duchesse*, but still—"

"I'll come till you tire of me. I am afraid that will be *too soon*. You women are so capricious, especially lovely ones."

"To everyone else, perhaps, but *never to you!*" she almost whispers, looking right into his eyes now with a yearning, wistful look that might make him lose his head, and he feels already that the best thing he can do is not to see Mademoiselle Ange again.

But what man has the strength of mind to resist a sudden and violent passion like this? He thinks, as he gazes infatuated on her, of some splendidly plumaged bird, of a mirage in the desert, of heavily scented exotics, of burning skies, or rather he *feels* all this, for her prerogative is to inspire sensation. To look at her is a species of moral dram drinking, and she stands in comparison to better, purer women, women like Zai, as brandy stands to weak wine and water.

"If Rubens had seen this girl," Delaval says to himself, "he would not have sent down for all time a burlesque upon this splendid red and white, this fleshly magnificence!"

"Do you know I had an instinct when I saw you the other night? I believed you were my fate," she says in a dreamy voice, but so suddenly that he starts a little.

It *is* startling to think that he should in any way be connected with the fate of this exquisite woman.

As she sits here before him, her hands clasped loosely together, a sort of abandon in her lovely figure, the light throws up richer gold on her hair, the soft folds of her satin gown fall round her moulded form like the robes of an empress, and he almost groans as he realises how impossible it would be to choose a life for one gifted with such rare physical beauty, that would not be hedged round with ten thousand dangers.

He shudders as he feels that this gift of beauty *must* be a curse, dragging her downwards.

"*I* your fate? God knows *what* your fate will be! You must have been mad to choose such an awful life."

"Because you think me pretty, you say that! What is the use of being good-looking if it can bring me none of the nice things I desire? I might as well be ugly and old and senseless, if I had to be shut up within the narrow limits of most women's lives. How could I gain power, the appreciation which is my due, if the public do not see me and judge for themselves? I wanted to be rich and I am so; I wanted to ride in carriages like I have seen women do, whose beauty has paled beside mine. What women care to live always in insignificance, obscurity, and, worst of all, in *poverty?*" she asks simply.

Lord Delaval is too much *homme du monde* to shrink from her when she says all this—when she breathes a creed utterly antagonistic to the training of *good* women. He does not revolt even from the evidently hard realism of her nature; the manner in which she seems to appraise and value her own attractions, setting no store on the beauty which womanly women hold as a gift beyond price, but only as a means of winning money, makes him regard her with a curious feeling that has no repulsion in it.

"Marguerite," he says—he has already come to her Christian name, but among her class this is so common that she probably never even notices it. "Tell me, have you no heart, no feeling, that you talk so strangely?"

"*Do I talk strangely?*" she asks with a bewildering smile. "Do I differ so much in my words and ways from your high-born English misses—the women who live in what you call your May Fair, your Belgravia, who sell themselves for gold? I have heard that it is the trade, the profession, of those ladies very often to lay themselves out to win some man, no matter how old he is, how ugly he is, so that he is rich! And then they give themselves in exchange for money or title. But it is a fair bargain, is it not so? So much flesh and blood for so much gold, and your aristocratic world smiles on them and honours them, while it and you condemn such poor girls as I, who only use my youth and good looks in the pursuit of my profession. There is only one difference you see, the matrimonial market is not open to such as me with my soiled name, so I am obliged to try and make a name and reputation for myself."

As he listens to her he wonders how a music-hall singer has learned the astute wisdom of the world, how words flow to her lips so easily, how, in spite of the surroundings of her daily life, her voice is so sweet and low and soft, her manner so well-bred, her language so refined.

"You say I have no heart, no feeling?" she goes on, drawing nearer him and placing her hand upon her breast with a melo-dramatic air, "but what have I to do with such things? Who has ever taught me what love means? Cruelty and insult I have suffered. Once—ah! I nearly died because he whom I adored, trampled on my heart as if it had been dust beneath his feet! But that is past and gone. I forgive him and I do not resent it, but love him still. Love, you know, like one gives to the dead. No! Respect and tenderness to me are just empty sounds. Who in all this world ever cared whether I suffered, whether I lived or—died? *No one!*"

Her face glows with emotion, and he, as her wild, reckless words sweep over his ear, feels as if some spell was at work; the room seems to stifle him, and Marguerite's great black eyes seem to blaze and burn into his brain.

"You see I am quite removed from the pale of men's sympathy. I cannot find any happiness in the way

other women find it. I am only a pariah—an outcast.”

“You say that you have no chances of happiness like other women have, that there are none who would care to marry you! You will find out your mistake some day, Marguerite. You will find that such a face as yours can win, not only admiration and love, but a husband,” he answers. And he actually believes that, if the Gordian knot was not already tied, there is no knowing what imprudence he might not commit for a creature as rarely lovely as this!

“Is that true?” she asks, lifting her head with a strange light in her eyes. “Would men who are far above me—like you, for instance—ever stoop to me?”

He half turns away from her. Perhaps his good angel is hovering near, for he comes to the conclusion that it may be best for her and best for himself if this interview comes to an end.

She seems to have the power of drawing him nearer and nearer to her every moment.

“When you know more of the world,” he says quietly, “*my* greatness will diminish very greatly in your eyes, if it does not cease altogether. Why, you have raised me aloft, Marguerite, when you don’t even know my name or the class I belong to!”

She smiles rather bitterly, and a bright pink surges over her face.

“I know who you are—you are Lord Delaval!” she answers in a very low voice, that lingers a little over his name. “Your friends who were with you the other night told me.”

“Ah!” he says, “and did they tell you more about me than my name?” he asks eagerly, for somehow he is very averse to her knowing that he is married.

“No,” she replies. “Nothing. Wait! They did say that you were not married.”

He flushes and is silent a second.

“They told you the truth,” he says calmly, but, lax as he is, his conscience gives a throb of compunction at denying the existence of Zai—Zai, who loves him with every inch of her heart. “But I *must* go now. I have been here too long already, Marguerite,” he adds rather abruptly.

“You are going?” she asks regretfully, and a tear glistens on her lash. “Do you know I believe I shall *never* see you again. Is this the only time—tell me the truth, it will be kinder!—that my eyes will look on your face?”

“No. Of *course* we shall meet again.”

“When?” she asks fervently.

“When? In a very few days, I trust.”

“Will you come here on Wednesday night to supper? Ah, *do!* Let me have some date to look forward to! Yet, no! Do not come! What use is it for us to meet again? Are you not as far removed from me as heaven from earth? as respectability from unrespectability? Say, is there not an obstacle between us two that we cannot surmount?”

Her lips are quivering. Her heart beats so loudly that he can almost count its throbs. Truly there is no acting in this. Marguerite has fallen in love with him at first sight, as he has done with her.

“There is no obstacle between us,” he whispers, once more denying his wife. “I will come on Wednesday.”

“You will?”

She holds out her hands to him, and as he clasps them closely, he bends his head and his lips nearly rest upon hers.

But it is only a passing madness. He is not quite lost yet. And Marguerite, as she looks up at him hastily, sees no trace of passion in his face.

When she is alone she kisses eagerly the hands he has held in his.

“He will come again, and again!” she says aloud. “He is not a man to stop at anything if inclination leads him. He spoke of my *beauty*. Oh! how I thank Heaven for it now—*now* that I know it will give me my heart’s desire yet!”



## CHAPTER VII.

### DEEPER AND DEEPER STILL.

“If one should love you with real love—  
Such things have been—  
Things that your fair face knows nothing of  
It seems—Faustine?  
.....

“Curled lips, long since half kissed away,  
Still sweet and keen,  
You’d give him poison, shall we say?  
Or what—Faustine?”

THEY are much sought after, the little suppers that Mademoiselle Ange gives on Wednesday nights.

Dainty, *recherché* feasts, where the guests are chosen more for social than moral worth, and the *cuisine* is irreproachable.

Mademoiselle, with the tact of a hostess to the manner born, and the *savoir-faire* that she has learned

goodness knows how, is careful that these small feasts shall savour rather of gay Bohemianism than the conventional dullness that some people deem inseparable from propriety.

But while she regulates the social element, she does not ignore sympathy between mind and body, and knowing that the nearest way to men's hearts is through their palates, secures the services of a noted *chef*, who drives to the Rue Tronchet in his own *chic* brougham, and disburses himself of a hundred-guinea diamond ring before he commences the momentous operation of trussing an ortolan.

This Wednesday night most of the guests are assembled in the *salon*.

Lounging on a sofa is a superb brunette, perfectly dressed and bejewelled. She is Leonide Leroux, a dramatic star both in Paris and London. By her side, languidly stroking his moustache, sits Ivan Scoboloff, a Russian baron with more money than brains. Beside these are little Rose Marigny, soubrette at the Theatre des Galeries, Monsieur Chavard, dramatic critic and author, and Louis, Marquis de Belcour, a good-looking giant and as rich as Croesus.

Mademoiselle Ange is not herself to-night. Lovely, of course, but with the sparkle of her beauty lacking, as she reclines in a red velvet chair, in an artistic pose, and gives small heed to the little tittle-tattle around.

The last Parisian scandal is discussed, the last *mot* of the coulisses related, but, contrary to her usual habit, Marguerite is evidently *distracte*, and every now and then she throws anxious glances towards the door.

The full light of the crystal chandelier falls upon the snowy white of her skin, the exquisite rose and opal tints of her lips and cheeks, and her large black eyes full of passion and fire.

The strongest glare can only show up her brilliance, and find no flaw or blemish in the marvellous colouring that looks as if it was Nature's own handiwork.

All that the best Parisian *modiste* can do has been done for her, and she is exceptionally well got up this evening; for she has abandoned her usual preference for gorgeous hues and costly heavy materials, and her trailing skirts of purest white fall in cloud-like masses round her as she leans back with the mien of a young empress. Opals and brilliants fasten the laces on her bosom, and a single tropical flower, with blood-red petals, gleams near her slender throat.

Suddenly a radiant light flashes in her restless eyes. The *portière* is held back, and Lord Delaval enters.

As he approaches, a vivid flush of pleasure surges over her lovely face, and, as he takes her hand, she says, in a low, reproachful voice:

"I feared so much you were not coming, but you have come! Will you take me in?"

He offers her his arm and at this moment catches sight of De Belcour, who is looking at him with ill-concealed jealousy and vexation. He has met this man before, a year or two ago, and nods recognition, then, turning towards his companion, forgets his existence.

The *portière* is drawn aside, and they enter the supper-room. On the table are antique silver tripods holding rare hothouse flowers and richest fruit, vases of exquisite camellias of every colour are interspersed between, and the whole are lit up by the soft light of waxen tapers. The supper itself is one of those which has made Monsieur Hector a king of *chefs*. Meats have lost their identity in the elaboration of the flavouring, cunning dishes are ingeniously devised to give zest to appetites already satiated. Rhenish of the rarest bouquet and Comet claret, tribute from the cellar of a youthful Duc, contribute to the hilarious enjoyment of the company.

The talk is animated, bright sallies and sharp repartee and racy anecdotes succeed one another, and amidst it all, pleasant as it is, Lord Delaval's conscience rather smites him for being where he is, while De Belcour waxes momentarily more wrathful at Mademoiselle Ange's evident partiality for the comparative stranger—" *ce milord Anglais!*"

"Are these to-night's spoils, Mademoiselle," asks Ivan Scoboloff, taking a lovely red camellia bud from its vase and quietly putting it into his button-hole. "I believe all the conservatories are pillaged for your especial benefit, and you'll turn Paris into a wilderness."

"I am afraid my reign will last too short a while for that!" Marguerite laughs, but in a tone rather tinged with regret, as she carelessly plucks an exquisite Sofrano rose to pieces, that lies by her plate. "I am only the rage of an hour, the fashion of a season, you know!"

"If you *did* lay Paris waste, what matter?" asks De Belcour, "and while a laurel grows, you should have its tribute, for are you not the Queen of—Hearts?"

"I hate laurels, they are so gloomy, and I love flowers! though they are not so lasting! still I prefer them, and as for tributes, of course the praises of the public are for the singer and not for the woman! and I like it so. I love to be applauded when I sing. It is life and soul to me, but as for individual tributes, I don't want them. I wonder why people pester me with baubles and with *billets doux*. Heaven knows I would rather be without them!" She speaks contemptuously, her eyes are scornful, and it is easy to see that she is absolutely in earnest.

"How inscrutable is woman!" Delaval remarks, with a little of his old cynicism; "she despises the admiration she does all her best to inspire, and repudiates the passion she has taken an immense trouble to create!"

"Inscrutable you call us?" Marguerite answers, her face sparkling with animation. "And yet you affect to read us so easily! We are not inscrutable, I think, but we are inconsistent perhaps—cold and passionate, selfish and self-denying, tender and heartless, kind and cold, a mixture of the serpent and the dove; gentle as a faithful hound when we love, fierce and relentless as the hawk to the quarry when we hate, or have cause for revenge!"

"A list of contradictions that prove you *are* inscrutable, *ma belle!*" observes Chavard, filling up his glass with Roussillion for the fifth time.

"I thought *you* knew us better; it is your trade," Marguerite says carelessly, peeling a peach whose bloom is less lovely than her own. "I wonder when men who want to win our love will cease to woo us? The prize beyond a woman's reach is always the most coveted; it has been so since Paradise; it will be so for all eternity!"

Her voice sinks lower as she says this, and there is quite a wistful look in her eyes as she turns them towards Delaval, that evinces them to be no affectation, but a true echo of her heart.

"Don't let us talk of love, *ma chère*," Leonide Leroux breaks in brightly. "It is the wettest blanket in the world. Love may be a charming companion, but we all know it is an intolerable master. It's like this absinthe, delicious but dangerous; once let it get hold of you—*eh bien!*—the rest I know nothing about, but I have heard it is too terrible!"

"I cannot think what the devil people fall in love for," Ivan Scoboloff murmurs languidly; "it's an amusement that only suits boys and girls, but after five-and-twenty no sane man would think of such folly."

"And yet I have seen you go in for it, although I fancy you have arrived at a little beyond twenty-five," Chavard says quietly, with a meaning glance at Leonide Leroux.

"I am a girl, but I have never gone in for love," Rose Marigny cries in her bird-like voice.

"That's well done, Mademoiselle Rose; mind you keep to that. No love is half so sweet as *caramels à la vanille* or *marrons glacés*," Mademoiselle Leroux answers, as she piles the above comestibles on her plate.

Meanwhile De Belcour joins very little in either conversation or laughter, and grows momentarily more ill at ease. Desperately jealous by nature, it irritates him almost beyond endurance to see Marguerite bestow her attention upon any other man.

Hitherto he has hugged to his bosom the notion that she is invariably cold—to him only she has been kind of late, and her kindness has made a great impression on him, simply from its contrast to the capricious manner she has towards others.

Is the love which he had begun to persuade himself she bore him nothing but a passing caprice after all—an *amourette* of an hour—to be abandoned when it has lost the zest of freshness? Irritation, wounded *amour propre*, fierce jealousy, all mingle together in his breast and make a formidable whole when the fear creeps on him that the woman he loves to fatuous stupidity sets so little value on his feelings that she is ready to sacrifice it to the gratification of a passing whim, the transient excitement of a new conquest.

For what else, he argues, and not without reason on his side, can prompt her to look and speak to Lord Delaval with eyes and lips that too truly simulate a love she cannot possibly feel for him, stranger as he is?

Every word, every glance she gives, tortures this impassioned, impetuous Frenchman, and he determines to dog her steps and her house to find out the mystery that drives him wild.

"When's the new play coming out, Chavard?" Scoboloff asks, gloating, *gourmet* as he is, on the lusciousness of an apricot before him.

Chavard has written a play which his clique declare will take Paris by storm, and, intolerably vain of his brains, he is of their opinion.

"In about a month or two," he answers.

"Shocking bad time for that sort of thing, isn't it? No one will be left in Paris."

"No one at all to speak of—only about a couple of millions!"

"Keep your smartness for your play, *mon cher*. Of course I meant no one in Society."

"I don't mind *that*. You swells are so phlegmatic, you see. The *canaille* laugh, and clap, and hoot, and shout at my work, and thoroughly appreciate my pet points, but the golden youth sleep always, snore even, through my best situations."

"Quite true!" cries Leonide Leroux. "I have often noticed them yawn when I have been dying so beautifully in the Sphinx. What makes swells so sleepy, I wonder?"

"Affectation—a little *ennui*—and a great deal of dinner," says Chavard.

"Let us go into the drawing-room and have some music," Marguerite suggests, feeling possibly that at the supper-table she and Lord Delaval are too much *en evidence*.

So they all go, and Leonide Leroux sings them *Il Bacio* deliciously in a lovely soprano, while Marguerite lounges as usual in a large chair, and her eyes glance frequently at a group near the window of smokers, and which is composed of Scoboloff, Delaval and Rose Marigny, who puffs away prettily at a dainty *Sultan doux*, and evidently is no novice in the accomplishment.

Presently De Belcour draws near his hostess—De Belcour, with half his beauty spoiled by scowling eyes and a frown on his brow.

"Why waste your glances on people who don't appreciate them?" he asks, in a low voice that has a sullen ring in it.

She laughs, and does not answer, so he pulls viciously at his long moustache to vent his anger on something, since he is afraid to vent it on her.

"You spoke the truth at supper to-night, Marguerite, when you said to woo a woman was a sure way not to win her; and yet, poets rave about the softness and the tenderness of women, and call them the link that unites earth with Heaven. *Sapristi!* for cold-blooded cruelty, for passionless devilment, a woman is to a man what a hawk is to a dove, a tigress to a tame cat!"

Marguerite elevates her pencilled brows slightly.

"I wish you would try and be less violent and abusive in your talk, Monsieur le Marquis: if you *must* talk to me, let the talk be endurable, anyway."

He clenches his teeth to suppress the oath that rises to his lips.

"Marguerite! listen to me! Tell me, I implore of you, what spirit possesses you to-night? Is it your vanity, your love of fresh victories, that induces you to treat me like this? Marguerite, for the love of Heaven!—for the sake of what we have been to each other—do not make me suffer like this."

But he might as well plead to a marble pillar.

"I wish you would go and smoke, and not talk nonsense," she says, almost in a whisper, with a flush of annoyance on her cheek. "I only wish *I* could smoke."

"If *that* is your only ambition, do it; most things *end in smoke*," he replies meaningly and savagely; and



while all this is going on, Lord Delaval watches her covertly, and it is dear incense to his vanity when he marks that De Belcour moves away from the evident contest, foiled and angry. "After all, perhaps Shropshire and Silverlake wronged her," he thinks, and rather than the Frenchman shall monopolise her, he throws away his half-smoked cigar and saunters towards her.

Her eyes flash with pleasure as he approaches—her cheeks glow—and she listens enraptured to his voice.

Yes! It is evidently love at first sight with her, and to this man she is certainly not acting a part. As her sweet warm breath sweeps past him, he feels the sensuous delirium of a dream, he is intoxicated by the power of her beauty; and she, hard and cold as she really is, deadly in her revenge, cruel in her greed of love, relentless in her hate, her heart yearns to him with quite a real feeling, a feeling which, though wicked and worthless in itself, yet ennobles her to a certain extent, for it makes her feel her own utter unworthiness.

"Stay a few minutes," she whispers, as he rises among the other guests for his adieux.

And so he stays, but in his mind's eye he sees his wife's face, and—man of the world as he is, flirt, *vaurien*, lax to the last degree—his deep blue eyes actually glisten with generous remorse.

"Poor little woman!" he thinks. "By Jove! what an awful fool I was to come here."

He calls himself a fool, but fool is a mild term to apply to a man who deliberately seeks temptation, knowing himself to be uncommonly weak in the flesh; nevertheless, he stays a little longer, and yet a little longer.

Marguerite Ange leans back in a pose that would drive a sculptor into a phrensy of delight. The fragrance of her golden hair goes out to him, and her charming red lips tempt dreadfully.

How he anathematises inwardly the *convenances* so dear to his mother-in-law's heart!

The conventionalities (he does not dream of calling them by any more serious term) that bid him and her sit apart.

"It is growing very late, I am afraid," he says, after a little.

"If it is, what matter?"

"I am afraid!"

"Afraid! Afraid of whom?"

"Afraid of *myself*," he answers.

"Is that really true?"

"Quite, *quite* true, so help me Heaven! Marguerite, you don't *really* doubt me! Have you lived till now, and never learnt that a man often fears to try and climb to the highest pinnacle of his desire, be it for fame, or fortune, or bliss, lest he fall before he has tasted it. Don't you know what your face can do to a man?"

She shakes her head, and the bright light glistening on it seems to turn each tress to living gold.

"It can send him into a dream of Heaven! fire his soul with rapture, or drive him mad with disappointment and regret!"

He pauses, a little breathless. Sentiment is not a plant of common or spontaneous growth in our aristocracy, and it is not at all in Lord Delaval's line.

The age is far too practical for it, more's the pity.

He is, in fact, a little astonished at his flight of eloquence, mediocre though it be, and a little silence ensues.

Then Marguerite Ange leans forward, puts her white hand, all sparkling with gems, on his arm and looks up in his face.

He is certainly the handsomest man she has ever seen.

"The *last* would never be *your* fate," she says, in a low, thrilling tone; but he hears her, of course. Trust a man, even if he is partially deaf, not to hear any sort of incense to his vanity, if he can hear nothing else; and this man is especially vain, from the top of his blond head to the sole of his well-made boot.

His ultramarine eyes kindle at once into great fires, and the red spots glow on his cheeks to match.

"Do you know what your face has done to me, Marguerite?" he asks slowly.

She does not reply, but somehow this face of hers seems to have come nearer him, and through a bewildered haze he sees nothing but a pair of lips, soft and maddening; a pair of eyes, black as midnight, lustrous as two stars, with a depth of passion in their liquid depths that stirs his pulse and makes his head whirl.

It is a picture that brings oblivion of everything, save of dangerous proximity.

"I told you a falsehood the other day, Marguerite, when I said I was not married. I *am* married! I have not been married two years, and I married for *love*. My wife loves me with all her soul, and it would break her heart to lose me, and yet—Heaven forgive me!—I feel to-night as if I *hated her*! because she seems to rise up between you and me."

She averts her face, and a little smile passes quickly over her mouth—a smile that has triumph in it, a smile that is absolutely *wicked*.

"When I entered this house to-night something told me of the end. It seems utter folly for a man to go mad over a woman's face like this, doesn't it? But, Marguerite, it *is* so. I *have* gone mad, I believe, for, strangers as we were but three short days ago, I love you as I *never* loved anyone before! I swear it, Marguerite!"

She does not smile now at his rhapsody. She knows he is watching her, and he sees nothing but the sweetest, tenderest light in the wonderful eyes, a softer look on the perfect mouth.

"Strange!" she says simply, "that we should have felt the same to-night—that——"

"*We?*" he interrupts. "Say that again, Marguerite!"

"Yes! Did I not tell you the first time we spoke that you were—*my fate*!" And Marguerite's head is very close to his shoulder, and her lips seem to seek his. But she starts away hastily as De Belcour, unannounced,

strides into the room.

"Pardon, Mademoiselle!" he says through his set teeth, "I forgot my gloves! I am sorry to have interrupted you."

And Marguerite, forgetting the conventional smile which is one of the tricks of her trade, sits silent and a little uncomfortable.

"We may as well walk a little way together," Lord Delaval says quietly. "Mademoiselle's society is so charming, I really forgot the hour!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

### "DON'T YOU KNOW ME, DELAVAL?"

"And where the red was—lo! the bloodless white,  
And where truth was—the likeness of a liar,  
And where day was—the likeness of the night,  
This is the end of every man's desire!"

THE world seems very dark to Lord Delaval to-day—a terrible chaos, in fact, in which right is hopelessly, inextricably, mingled with wrong.

He hates and scorns himself for this passion for Marguerite Ange, which gives him neither rest nor peace.

He swears he will leave Paris and never set eyes on her again; then he believes it is Kismet, bows to the inevitable, and resolves not to struggle against a feeling that is evidently stronger than himself.

Then comes a reaction once more.

"There is nothing to be done but to go right away. There's not much fear she'll break her heart, or that I have really inspired a *grande passion*. Her sort are not much given to fretting after one man, when a dozen are at her beck," he says to himself sardonically. "But I will go and wish her good-bye. That much will be but gentlemanly."

So he goes, a few days after the supper party, to the Rue Tronchet.

The lovely cause of so much heartburning leans back as usual among her vivid scarlet cushions, doing nothing, as is her wont—like the lilies of the field, she neither toils nor spins, but she looks in her shady, luxurious room, provokingly cool and languid, and far away from the troubles and perplexities of this work-a-day world.

But the dreaminess of her eyes is lost in the radiant light that transfigures her face as Lord Delaval enters, and starting up, she holds out two hands without a word, but with a smile that is more than a welcome.

He takes them absently and seats himself beside her in rather an abstracted way, and when he speaks, it is of the subject that is uppermost in his mind.

"I've come to say good-bye, Marguerite."

"Good-bye?" she repeats in a startled voice.

"Yes. I am going away."

"Where?"

Her accents tremble, her face blanches. It dawns upon her at once that this is no ordinary leave-taking.

"Oh, somewhere! Anywhere! What does it matter *where*, since it will be where I shall not see *your* face?" he asks, and he bites his lip to hide its quivering.

Not a word falls from her at this speech. She sits quite still and as white as snow, her hands clench together, and her breath comes quick and hard.

"But I *couldn't* go away without coming to see you once more, Marguerite—without carrying away with me one more glimpse of your face."

In spite of him he falters, and with the perverse nature of his sex, is angry with himself for rolling the stone to his own sepulchre.

"Why must you go?" she pleads, looking up wistfully. "Why can't you stay? If you go I shall feel that I shall never, *never* see you again."

"Are you sorry to lose me, Marguerite?" he asks softly. "I believe you *are*. I believe you really care for me just a *little*."

"A little! Oh, Heavens!" she murmurs with her face all set and drawn, and her figure rigid, as if despair had turned her into stone. "You *dare* to say that!" she cries suddenly and fiercely. "You *dare* to say that, when you know—ay, *must* know—that all my life, all my love—ah! what am I saying?"

Then her passion, her bitterness, melts, and she wails out:

"Have you no mercy, Lord Delaval? Am I so low—*so low*, that you cannot even feel pity for me? See! I am praying here for clemency, for pity at your hands! Praying you not to break my heart!—not to ruin my life for ever and ever!" and she flings herself down on her knees and lifts up a face still more wondrously beautiful through the emotion that lives in every feature.

"Marguerite! Oh! what have I said?" he cries in an agony of remorse. "I would not give you a moment's pain for the world. You say I deem you 'low,' Marguerite! Ah! if you could see into my heart, you would find that it is because I not only love you, but *honour* you, that I have come to say good-bye!"

He tries to draw away the hands with which she has hidden her face—the face that has undone him—but she droops her head, while her whole frame trembles with uncontrolled passion.

"You must not mind what I say," she whispers, after a moment, in a low, hoarse voice; "it's only my own folly—only I cannot help—oh! *how* can I *help* loving you? Listen to me!" she goes on, pouring out her words in an eager, impetuous torrent. "I shall never see you again, you say—shall never speak to you! I will tell you all the truth then, and after that we shall part, and you will forget my madness, and I—never mind what I shall do—anyway, I shall not blame you; it isn't your fault that you are *yourself!* and that I could not help loving you. You have been the one man in all the world to me. Ah! you can't imagine how I have worshipped you, how you have seemed to me as the light of Heaven, as a being of another world who had deigned to speak, to look, to smile on me. It was idolatry I felt when I first looked on your face, the germ of a love that was to wreck my whole life. It has been my one ambition that you should do justice to the attraction I possess; you have been my religion, my conscience; and all I have wanted was to prove to you that I was capable of winning men's hearts, though yours might be denied me. I have gloried in my beauty because I believed it had won you; I thanked God only yesterday on my knees that my life was crowned with your love! But it's all over now! I have hung on every word you have spoken, I have clung to every kindly look, believing, hoping, praying that at last—at last!—no one could come between us two!"

She drops his hand, and, springing up, stands opposite him, speaking fast and almost incoherently now.

"It has come to this now—*now*, that you have decided to part—that I, who thought myself strong and brave, cry out in my weakness to you, tearing open the wound that you may see me writhe under it. You may scorn me, despise me, hate me if you will! I have been wicked, treacherous, unscrupulous, but if you had loved me and stayed with me I should have become a better woman. You have wrecked my whole life, but through it all, through everything, through heartlessness, caprice, falsity, dishonour, and even insult, I have loved you—loved you as no woman will ever love you in this world! I have given you my life, my soul, everything! Don't you know me *now*, Delaval?"

Dazed, almost stunned, he stares at her aghast, while his face grows ashy white, even to his lips, from which no word issues, only—only, as he gazes, in his mind dawns a misty memory, a doubt, *a repulsion*.

"Is there so little of love's instinct in your heart that a paltry mask of pink and white, a little Golden Wash, has hidden from you that I am—?"

"*Gabrielle!*"

He almost shouts in a voice that has a sharp ring of pain and horror in it, and he shrinks back from her, while the warmth and tenderness his face had worn fade right away, and in their place comes a cold, hard, pitiless, passionless look that stings her to the very core.

She shivers from head to foot, with a dumb agony in her eyes that might touch a heart of granite, but it does not touch this man, who only cries:

"Thank God!—Thank God! I have been saved in time!"

She falls upon her knees once more, grovelling at his feet.

"Oh, Delaval! my love!—my love! don't despise me! don't loathe me! Have you no pity for me?—*one word!*"

But he spurns her from him with a rough gesture, and rising, she stands a little apart.

"No!" he says, in a hard, metallic tone, "I have no word for you—*not one!* If there are things I hate, they are lies and deceit. If there is a thing I never forgive, it is being made a fool of. Thank Heaven you have told me now who you are. *What* you are, I do not care to know! Under the mask of youth and guilelessness you had nearly made me your slave, you had fired the train that was to bring me to everlasting shame and disgrace. Oh! I could kill myself for my cursed folly, my credulity, my utter blindness! But I am saved!—saved from being a dupe to a base woman, who scruples at nothing, not even the ruin of her sister's home and life, just to salve a paltry wound to her vanity, to hold in her chains a man who had set her aside long ago, knowing her to be—*what she is!*"

Clear and cutting, like a knife, his words fall on the shady, luxurious, silent room.

Silent for one moment only, while he goes towards the door without one backward glance.

Before he reaches it, however, a sharp click breaks the silence and Lord Delaval falls across the threshold—

*Shot!*

Gabrielle Beranger stoops down and gazes at the face of the man who has insulted her, then she kisses his lips, and, closing the door after her, steals noiselessly away.

\* \* \* \* \*

The stars cluster thickly in the clear sky, and lights twinkle at each other across the broad bosom of the Seine, when a woman comes slowly and, pausing, looks down on the shimmering water.

"Better to die *so*," she mutters. "I am not good, neither was *he*, so we two may yet meet again!"

A dull sound like a break in the water, a glint of golden hair on the edge of a ripple—

\* \* \* \* \*

Her face is fair even in death, as she lies here, in the terrible Morgue, among ghastly things that bring horror and shrinking to human hearts.

"*Sapristi! C'est Marguerite Ange! La Blonde aux Yeux Noir,*" a man in a blouse says in a hushed voice, as he peers through the little glass window.

"*Elle est belle à faire peur!*" answers his companion.

And this is her requiem.



## CHAPTER IX.

### THROUGH THE SHADOWS.

"It is not much that a man can save  
On the sands of life—in the straits of Time,  
Who swims in sight of the third great wave,  
That never a swimmer shall cross or climb.  
Some waif washed up with the strays and spars  
That ebb-tide throws to the shore and the stars.  
Weed from the water—grass from a grave—  
A broken blossom—a ruined rhyme!"

THROUGH the mantle of dusk the lights shine brightly in the Place Vendôme, but the room in the Hotel Bristol looks dark and dreary, save for the fitful flame of the fire, when Zai, who has grown tired of her own society, hears footsteps on the stairs.

All the long afternoon she has been alone; even "Baby," her resource on most occasions, has slept through the hours as sound as the Seven Sleepers.

So, when a human tread falls welcome on her ear, she forgets that it is not quite the thing for a countess to rush out on the landing of a hotel.

"Is that you, Delaval?" she cries in a bright ringing voice, for she is longing to see him again, longing with a great longing that will not allow her to study the *convenances*. But she draws back as the figure of a stranger, a tall, handsome man, with a face after Velasquez, confronts her.

"Pardonne, Madame!" he says in a very low voice—and there is a gentle sympathetic ring in it, for De Belcour is a thorough gentleman by nature as well as by birth—"I have a mission to fulfil, a mission which pains me more than I can say," he adds earnestly, as he looks on the fair sweet young face of his rival's wife.

But Zai does not speak, something—a dreadful instinct—seems to gather round her heart, like an iron band. She stands as white as an image of marble and as motionless as if she were rooted to the ground—with the glad laugh on her pretty lips hushed into an awful silence, and with a terrible fear filling her big grey eyes, as, slowly passing her, they bear their burden into the room, and place it upon the very couch where she had lain this afternoon full of hope and happiness and with the sunshine of life dancing in her eyes and breaking into smiles on her mouth, for Zai is young and lovely and rich, and she adores her husband and the child that God has given her.

Not a word falls from her now, and she never stirs from the spot where she stands, but all the while she vigilantly watches the movements of the men, and follows them with great piteous looks, and her little hands clench and twist together in terror and despair.

"He is not dead!" De Belcour whispers, "but—*dying*, I fear."

"*Not dead!*" The words break from her almost in a shout of joy, and she springs past him and crouches down beside what they have brought her—beside all that is left of *him*. Her eyes are quite dry, and glitter, undimmed by a single tear, as she sways backwards and forwards in the plenitude and abjectness of her suffering.

Then she raises a white, forlorn face, and falters:

"Is no one coming to him?"

And De Belcour, who feels himself moved to a great compassion for this slender bit of a girl, stricken down in the very beginning and flush of her life, bows his head in answer.

She forgets his presence then. Bending over her husband, she touches his closed lids and his cold cheeks very softly and caressingly, as if her little fingers loved to linger in their task. She puts her hand on his heart, which beats, but so faintly as if each throb were its last, and she keeps on murmuring tender words to the ears which do not hear them.

"Delaval, darling, speak to me, only one word—one little word, Delaval, that I may just hear your voice. Oh, God! won't he speak to me again? shall I never hear him speak kind, dear words as he did to-day—before he went away to—die? Die! Oh! you won't die, Delaval, darling, my own darling, you have not left me—left me—*for ever!*"

The last words go out from her in a wail loud enough, and piteous enough, to reach the sky.

Faint and dizzy with fear, she stretches out her trembling hands, like a blind woman, towards the form lying before her with the rigidity of death, but, before they reach it, she falls back and drops senseless on the floor.

\* \* \* \* \*

Maybe her piteous cry has reached beyond the sky, for he has not left her "for ever."

The shot of a vengeful woman, wounded in her terrible love, driven to the phrensy of a wild beast, has grazed the right lung, and for a long time he hovers between life and death, while his wife nurses him unwearyingly night and day with a devoted unselfish love that is not often to be found in the worldly daughters of Belgravia.

Then, after a little, when they tell him he has crept slowly—slowly, but surely—out of the shadows—and that life (not the old life, but one twin with suffering perchance) yet lies before him, he feels that he will regain health and strength sooner if the burden of a secret is removed from him.

It is very hard to face Zai as he makes a clean breast of it, but he does it.

"My pet," he murmurs, in a low weak voice which is very unlike his old accents, and the sound of which goes right to her heart, "I have something to say to you."

So she kneels down beside him. It is the place she likes best now in the world.

"Do you love me very much, Zai?" he asks her, while his thin white hand rests on her shining chesnut hair, and, looking up, she sees that there is an actual mist of tears in his handsome ultramarine eyes.

"Ah, don't I?" she whispers, catching hold of his hand and kissing it passionately, and he reads plainly enough the love that is patent on her face.

"But would you love me so much, Zai, if you knew that I had been unfaithful—that I had forgotten you just for a little while?" he asks, his lips quivering and his heart beating very fast. For somehow he holds on to her love with a strange tenacity. It seems, in truth, to be the only—only—thing worth living for.

She does not answer for a moment, but she has his hand still clasped close in her own, while her face grows deathly white, and there is a startled, stricken look in her grey eyes that cuts him to the heart.

"It is *quite* true, Zai. For a little while I *did* forget you. Another woman's face came between us, and for the life of me I *couldn't* shake off its power over me, though I tried. Upon my soul I *tried!*"

He pauses, breathless, and a pallor creeps over his face—a face as handsome as Apollo's, in spite of suffering.

"Well, Zai, I saw her, not more than half-a-dozen times, perhaps, but each time she seemed to draw me closer and closer to her, and further—from—you—till the—*last time.*"

Zai listens to it all—to this confession of sin and wrong—her gaze never swerving from his face, and her heart full to bursting.

"Did you *kiss* her, Delaval?" she whispers at last in a faint, scared voice, and on the impulse of the moment she puts up her little fingers to stop her ears, in dread of his saying "Yes." Then she drops them desolately.

"No! thank God I never did!" he says quite heartily, and Zai breathes more freely. And, the tension gone, she lays her head down on his arm and cries like a child, but the tears are more of relief than of bitterness, and the world does not look half as dreary to her as it did a few minutes ago.

"No! I thank God, that you have nothing to forgive on that score, though I am bound to say that both the spirit was willing and the flesh was weak; but a lucky fate prevented it. No! it was only my *heart*, Zai! Pshaw! fancy my calling it my *heart*. It was only my senses, Zai!"

She ponders a moment. It is dreadful to know that he has been caring for another woman; but still it is a great comfort—a very, very great comfort—to know that he has not *kissed* her. So she lifts up her face with a smile, half-piteous, half-glad, on her mouth, and her arm steals round his neck.

Poor fellow, he looks so thin and white and haggard, she could not be angry with him for the world.

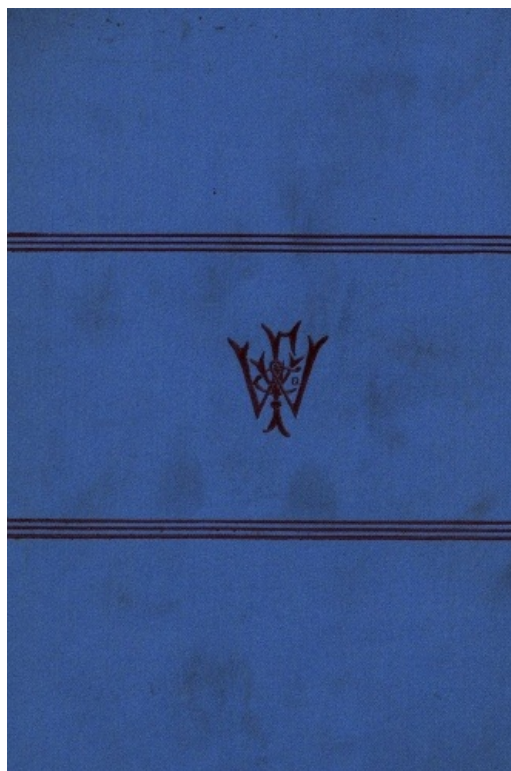
"Well, my little one?" he says, but he knows quite well that she loves him so much she will never be hard on him, and, after all, it was only a venial sin, he thinks, with the self-indulgent complacency so common to the style of man he is.

"I forgive you!" she whispers between fond fervent kisses on his lips, "for you know, darling, that 'to err is human.' "

"Yes! my own, own love! And 'to forgive—divine!' "

But there is one secret yet that Lord Delaval keeps religiously from his wife's innocent ears. It is, that the woman who tempted him was—*Gabrielle!*

THE END.



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