

VIDA CAROLAN; OR, FATAL BEAUTY.

CHAPTER I.

A MOMENTOUS TELEGRAM.

The waters in beauty and brightness flow. While a corpse lies drowned in the depths below.

"From Pierre Jacquemart, Prefecture of Paris, to M. Dare Devereux, Carlton-gardens, London.—Please come at once to identify body found in Seine. Letter addressed to you in pocket."

On a sunny afternoon in June, this telegram was handed to the hall-porter of house in Carlton-gardens, and he in turn handed it to a footman to be taken to the master.

"I don't know if Mr. Devereux is in," said John Thomas, shrugging his shoulders, as he crossed the hall. "One never does know whether he is in or out—he's that erratic."

Nevertheless, though telegrams in these days excite no alarm in well-regulated minds, John Thomas knew better than to dawdle over delivering the message with which he was charged, and proceeded at once in search of Mr. Devereux.

Selecting the library as the most likely apartment in which to find his master, his sagacity was rewarded, for a soft, clear voice responded, "Come in!" to his knock, and John Thomas, entering, handed the telegram to a very handsome, aristocratic-looking young man who was lounging in an arm-chair, reading "Horace."

"A telegram?" "Thanks," said he, rather listlessly, and turned another page, scarcely glancing at the little missive; but in a few moments he laid down "Horace" and took up the telegram.

"From Paris!" he muttered, and he opened the envelope quickly. "What the deuce—"

The sentence was never finished. One glance of the large, quick blue eyes had taken in the whole message, and the young man sprang to his feet with a smothered cry, and the white fingers that had lingered carelessly over the pages of "Horace," were locked as if in mortal agony.

"Percival Claremont!"

The name fell from his quivering lips like the echo of a long-present thought, and for an instant he stood motionless, paralyzed by the shock of the fearful conviction forced upon him by that brief, grim telegram, enclosing in a few words a life's history and a tragedy.

But only for an instant. The next Dare Devereux had sprung to the door, and in another moment was in his dressing-room.

"Ellis," he said quickly to his astonished valet, "I must cross to Calais to-night. Read this telegram. I shall start in an hour to catch the boat-train."

Ellis, who had been in his master's service since he left Eton, needed no more. In an hour and a half Dare Devereux was whirling down to Dover as fast as express speed could take him.

It was laid in the Morgue for curious eyes to gaze upon, and morbid fancies to conjecture what sin or suffering could have made life too heavy a burden for this stalwart, well-to-do Englishman; for the dead man's clothes were of fine broad-cloth, and his linen of finest qualities. His features bore the hall-mark of gentle blood, and the smooth, soft-skinned hands had done no rough work.

The body was taken out of the Seine two nights ago, near the Pont Royal. There was nothing to identify it save the letter addressed to M. Devereux, and none of the police who saw the corpse could recall the features. The Englishman was evidently a stranger in Paris, nor did the letter afford any clue as to identity, for it bore no signature. One thing it seemed to indicate—that at the time of writing it the suicide had no intention of destroying himself. Was it, then, murder?

Heaven only knew how dear to young Devereux's passionate heart was the man who now lay dead before him.

Five years ago they had parted, and no line from Claremont had reached Devereux, till the long silence had forced the latter into the belief that his friend was dead. Alas, to know that through these years of silence he had lived, and died but two days ago—like this!

So soon as the corpse was formally identified, M. Pierre Jacquemart gave Devereux the letter, not that a woman was who which it would seem he had intended to post. It was a singular fragmentary epistle, and showed the writer to be in a very agitated frame of mind at the time of writing.

"Friend—more than brother, if I dare still call you so—try to think mercifully of me. Answer me quickly, for I shall not dare to come to you till you tell me I have not destroyed in your heart the power of forgiveness. Why have I shunned you? Because I could not face you—you, a lad, I, a man; because I could not endure that you should know me for the debased villain I am now and have been for so long. No need to tell you that a woman was the tempter, alluring me from a double allegiance. You know her; you heard me speak of her—to condemn her then, though I admired her beauty; to her have I lost all—wealth and honor. No need to say more in writing; you know enough now to almost forgive my sins. I could not shake off the chains that enthralled me; I could not clasp your hand while I feared to meet the gaze that if it fell would scorn me. But now the awakening has come; now I can at least strive to atone for, if I cannot reform, the past. One even there is more deeply wronged than you—But I cannot write more. Tell me if I may come to you, to seek, to strive for forgiveness."

The dead man was Mr. Percival Claremont, an Englishman of good family and considerable wealth. He did not know to whom the letter alluded. He could throw no light on the circumstances of Mr. Claremont's death. He did not intend to contradict the remark of one of the officials that Mr. Claremont evidently did not intend to commit suicide when the letter was written, but seemed to have resolved on it later. He only asked that he might be

removed to the body to England, and this he was permitted to do. Not know to whom the dead man alluded! Too well Dare Devereux knew, but the secret should be locked in his own breast. His hand and no other should avenge Percival Claremont.

A few days later Percival Claremont was buried in the churchyard of his native village, far away in wild Cornwall—buried at night with none to mourn by his grave but Dare Devereux and a distant cousin.

There was no will, and Dare Devereux, who had so passionately loved the dead man—who so loved him still—had no memento of him but that letter found on the suicide.

Was Percival Claremont a suicide? CHAPTER II.

HESTER RANSOME'S GUEST.

While vengeance, in the lurid air, Lifts her red arm, exposed and bare.

A blaze of light, repeated in lofty mirrors; the glow of crimson on furniture and draperies and flower-strewn velvet carpets; rich lace, veiling in graceful folds open windows, through which was wafted the scent of flowers; soft and varied hues of female drapery; soft murmur of voices; men's and women's commingled, and merry, but not noisy, laughter—all this formed an harmonious whole that might well chain eye and ear.

In this salon of a handsome house in the Parc Monceau, a company of perhaps twenty men and women had met together this evening, as they had met often before, not only for social intercourse, it would seem, for though there was plenty of conversation, and very charming conversation, for the most part in charming French, there was another occupation going on which absorbed at least as much attention, indeed a good deal more, than the latest gossip about Bernhardt, or the last new piece at the Palais Royal or Renaissance, and this occupation was card-playing; and if you looked at the company closely you would see that it was somewhat curiously constituted.

At a small table near one of the windows, an actress of the Opera Comique, and a Hebrew member of the Bourse, a "friend" of pretty Mlle. Trois Toiles—at least, so said rumor—sat the mistress of this private gambling salon, the handsome Englishwoman who was so well known at Monaco, Baden, and elsewhere, Madame Hester Ransome.

Some cynics doubted if there had ever been a Mr. Ransome, but of course Madame's daughter must be accounted for—This little girl had never yet made an appearance in the salon; but was reported to be a remarkably beautiful child.

Hester Ransome was perhaps thirty-five or six; a tall woman, neither stout nor slight, but robust; a handsome woman without doubt, and yet hardly, one would have thought, the kind of woman to have any very potent influence over men. Of this Hester Ransome, however, more anon. Suffice it now to add that she dressed as faultlessly as any Parisian, spoke French with very little foreign accent, and was an imitable hostess.

Madame had a heap of gold beside her. She was a lucky hand at all games of chance—a very lucky hand.

"I marvel," she observed presently, "that M. Saint-Marc is not here to-night. He asked to bring with him a young English friend whom he did not name. I expected him earlier."

"Does his friend play?" asked the marquis, to whom the hostess had addressed herself.

"Ah, I do not know. He is of noble birth, and wealthy. I know no more. Listen! some carriage has stopped without. Perhaps it is M. Saint-Marc's coupe."

In a few moments conjecture was set at rest, for the door was opened wide, and a man-servant announced:

"No need to tell them, madame," said the Opera Comique lady, with a broad sneer; they would hardly care to remain."

They went out, still chattering and gesticulating furiously—all but Saint-Marc and Dare Devereux.

"Monsieur," said Madame Ransome to the former gentleman, will you withdraw for one moment?"

Saint-Marc bowed and quitted the room. Then Hester Ransome turned to Devereux.

"M. Dare Devereux, how have I injured you that you should bring upon me shame and ruin?"

"I will answer your question by another, madame. Have you already forgotten Percival Claremont?"

A strange cry broke from the woman's lips. She reeled back two or three steps, but recovering herself almost directly, said fiercely:

"And what was Percival Claremont to you? I did him no wrong!"

"He was my nearest and dearest friend. I loved him better than I loved my life. You ruined him, and drove him to his death."

He turned towards the door. Hester Ransome stepped before him.

"Hold!" she said, and for an instant the black eyes of the woman, the deep-blue eyes of the man, met full. "Is it to be war to the knife between you and me?"

"War to the knife," he answered steadily. She drew back.

"War to the knife then be it," she said through her set teeth; "and let us see, Dare Devereux, in this 'game of skill' which hand will win—yours or mine!"

"I accept the combat," said the young man calmly, "and will abide the issues.—Adieu, madame."

And he bowed and went out.

She turned to Devereux with a bright smile.

"Will monsieur try his luck?" she asked.

The young man looked her straight in the face and replied coolly:

"Merci, madame, I must decline to try issues with so skillful an opponent."

"Nay, monsieur, you may have better luck; do not envy me mine."

"Heaven forbid, madame, that I should envy you your luck! I would rather lose all I possess than win it by such 'luck' as yours."

The effect of these uncompromising words, spoken with deliberate emphasis, was electrical. All sprang to their feet.

Madame Ransome recoiled with blanched cheek and a mingled fear and defiance in her eyes. "Eton!" "Eton!" were freely bandied about; but glances of perplexity and wonder were exchanged, too.

The marquis walked up to Devereux.

"Monsieur, you have made a monstrous accusation against a lady, your hostess; you are bound to prove it, or to retract it."

Madame Ransome stood erect, looking straight before her, but uttering not a word. Dare Devereux seemed the most self-possessed person in the room.

"I owe," he said quietly, "an apology to M. Saint-Marc, to whose kindness I am indebted for my introduction to this salon; and to him I will presently render every explanation. But for the accusation I have just made, I owe no apology; I am quite willing—if Madame be willing also—to substantiate my statement."

Everyone looked at Madame Ransome. The guests gathered round her vociferating, jabbering, as only French people can.

Devereux stood haughtily aloof during this painful scene, and Madame Ransome stood like a tiger at bay, glaring at her accusers with a strange mingling of fear and defiance in her gaze and mien; but she spoke not a word. At length M. Saint-Marc and one or two others succeeded in producing a temporary calm, and Saint-Marc suggested that if Madame refused to clear herself, it would be better that she should return the money she had won that evening to those who had lost it to her.

"So be it," she said, speaking for the first time; "and let every one leave my house."

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Miss, or Mlle. Carolan?"

"Miss—thank goodness! There's a chance for you, my boy. No, not Mademoiselle—she is English, she says—but she might be French, Italian, or German, or all three together, for she speaks all those languages as well as she does English—almost better."

"For my word, Summers, you arouse me to a fascinating amount of interest. Go on—I am all ears. Tell me all you know about this mysterious goddess."

"She's eccentric—unconventional—Bohemian—what you will," continued Lawrence. She lives in Hertford-street in good style, practically almost alone, for there is no one living with her but an old duenna, and those sort of old ladies are as much a blind as a protection, in nine cases out of ten. Still, Vida Carolan has been taken up by the swells—or rather, I had almost said, she has taken them up. How? Ask the Delphic oracles, my dear boy, for I can't tell you. They say she is of good West Country family. She is certainly of gentle blood; on that point there can be no doubt. She is highly cultivated, plays splendidly, and everyone runs after her—even the beauties, who envy her."

"By Jove!" said the Hon. Rokeby, "I must get an introduction. There won't be any difficulty about that."

"Oh, dear no. I met her only the other day at Mrs. Staunton's at home. I'll introduce you."

Danvers thanked his friend, and turned to look at the crowd with more interest than he had previously displayed. He was seeking the new star that had suddenly shone forth on the London world.

"What does Dare Devereux say of the new beauty?" asked Danvers, after a short silence.

"He hasn't seen her yet. He has been abroad ever since last June, and only returns to London on Monday next. Hist!" he suddenly grasped the other's arm, "there she is—by Jingo—coming this way. You'll see her best in a minute. We shall see here just as well as anywhere else, though just now your paragon is hidden by the mob."

"She'll show up presently. I think she is with Sir Thomas and Lady Marvyn—I thought I saw them just now close by her."

On came the crowd slowly, paying no more attention to the pictures than if there had been none to look at, but all directing their attention to the one tall, slender girl in the midst, who moved forward unconcernedly, talking to her companions, exchanging salutes with those she knew, and either superbly indifferent to the homage of which she was too conspicuously the object for the possibility of unconsciousness, or possessing in a consummate degree the art of assuming indifference.

And so at last she drew near the spot where stood the Hon. Rokeby Danvers and his friend, and Danvers drew in his breath with a quick muttered:

"Heavens!—what beauty. The girl is divine!"

A tall, slim, supple form, perfectly graceful in bearing and movement; an oval face, with a pale, dark skin as clear as opal, the brow broad and full, the large eyes of dark, reddish hazel shining through long black upward-curling lashes; delicate red lips at once firm and mobile, showing as they smiled glimpses of glittering little white teeth, a wealth of dark chestnut hair clustering in short curls over the nobly balanced head, and low enough on the forehead to soften its masculine development of intellectual power, but not too low to conceal that unique evidence of mental force; these were the elements—in general terms—that made up the remarkable whole, known in the London world as Vida Carolan.

Her dress was simple, but artistic; a cavalier hat of old-gold satin with sweeping plumes, and a dress of black velvet, with lace puffs to the sleeves. There was rich lace about her throat, but no ornament save a bunch of stephanotis and maidenhair fern worn almost on the left shoulder.

While Rokeby Danvers gazed on this beautiful picture in admiration so profound that he forgot all about politeness, Summers hastened forward to claim acquaintance.

Miss Carolan turned to him at once, holding out her hand with a smile of rare brightness, yet which no keen physiognomist would have called a happy smile.

"How has the world used you, Mr. Summers, since I saw you last?" she said, and both her intonation and accent betrayed the habit of speaking foreign languages. "Were you not on the Row yesterday? I thought I saw you in the distance."

"If I had been there, Miss Carolan, I must have seen you, with a bow."

"Very fair," said she, laughing. "I think some of you men get up a kind of a stock list of compliments, and you are pretty safe to have one for every occasion; if something quite out of the common occurs, then you are nonplussed. Isn't that so, Lady Marvyn?"

"You are terribly hard on the poor men," returned that lady.

"And overlook," added Summers readily, "in some cases the potency of the inspiration!"

"Quite enough, thank you. One cannot live on sugar and puff paste. Mr. Summers, though they are very well in their way; so please give me something better, or I shall forget my manners and beg you to carry your compliments elsewhere."

"I cry you mercy, and in proof of your forgiveness, deign to smile upon a friend of mine who is dying to be presented."

"With pleasure, if so simple a process as an introduction can save a no doubt valuable life."

Poor Rokeby Danvers, who had usually plenty of assurance, positively blushed as he bowed before this superb looking girl, and felt almost as shy as he did at his first love. He was in the seventh heaven, and could not, even in thought,

resent it when Vida turned some of his prettiest speeches into ridicule, and when he was in the midst of some compliment asked him, with delicious *ang froid*, what he thought of such and such a picture, or if he worshipped Brune Jones.

"I dare say," she added, on one of the occasions, "you have not studied art very attentively; you come to galleries to see the people—not the pictures. Now you are opening your mouth for a very obvious and common-place compliment; please leave it unuttered. I know what it is, and will accept it for as much as it is worth."

"Miss Carolan, you are too cruel."

"I am cruel to be kind," she answered. "I want to teach some of you, if I can, that a woman does not want to be told every five minutes that she is handsome and adorable, and all that sort of thing. If she is handsome, her glass will tell her so; and if she is not, her vanity will."

"Will you try and learn the lesson?"

"I will try and learn anything you may deign to teach me, Miss Carolan."

"You are a very docile pupil. You may deserve a good conduct medal by the end of the season. Lady Marvyn," turning to that lady, "is that Whistler you spoke of near where we are?"

"No, my dear; but I wanted to introduce you to Lady Mansfield. I saw her a minute ago. Ah, there she is!"

A handsome, middle-aged lady came forward smiling, followed by a fair young girl of perhaps twenty, who looked with frank admiration at graceful Vida Carolan.

"Allow me," said Lady Marvyn, and the introduction was gone through in due form; and Beatrix Mansfield felt quite delighted to know the star, about whom everybody was talking, and who in phrase suitable to the surroundings, was "quite consummate."

"Perhaps, Miss Carolan," said Lady Mansfield, presently, as they turned back to make a second promenade of the rooms, "if you are not engaged, you will honor my garden-party on Thursday next?"

"I shall be most happy, Lady Mansfield."

"Thank you—mind you come early. Lady Marvyn, I want to have you both in good time."

"Very well; we will not fail. Vida, my dear, look here. What do you think of this picture? I want to have your opinion."

It was a painting of two gamblers, who seemed, by the evidences of departed guests, to have prolonged their game far beyond reasonable hours. The other frequenters of the *salon*, a private one manifestly, had gone, and these two, one of them the host, continued to play, with absorbed faces and hands that trembled with eagerness. She almost held her breath as she gazed on the canvas, and for a moment, one brief flash of time, a look came into the great dark eyes not pleasant to see, a dangerous look; but it passed as she said, with a half laugh:

"I wonder which will win! It is a fine picture."

"Isn't it? I am so glad," added Lady Marvyn, "that Lady Mansfield has asked you on Thursday. Her garden-parties are so delightful, and she expects one person whom I am sure you will like."

"Who is that?"

"I dare say you have heard of him—Dare Devereux, of King's Royal."

The hazel eyes were drooping, and the long veil of lashes sweeping over them gave them a half dreamy, languid expression. There was no apparent change in them; that veil hid the light that leaped up again; no change in the sweet, rich-toned voice, as the girl said deliberately:

"No, I do not think I have heard the name before."

But she looked back over her shoulder, as they turned away from the picture of the two gamblers, looked back and smiled, and the movement of her lips might almost have seemed to frame again the question she had asked: "I wonder which will win!"

CHAPTER IV.

A CRUEL TASK.

For 'tis sweet to see the engineer Hoist with his own petard.—SHAKESPEARE.

In a handsome dressing-room in a well-appointed house in Hertford-street, Mayfair, stood Vida Carolan, resting one foot on the rung of a chair which was tipping backwards and forwards while she spoke to the only other occupant of the apartment—a woman who, though she looked her fifty years, was still handsome, and in whom robustness of figure had not degenerated into stoutness.

Vida was dressed for Lady Mansfield's garden-party, all save hat and gloves, which lay ready to be donned when necessary, and her dress of creamy-white mixed with crimson became her as much as had the black velvet.

Strangely contrasted were the two women who were working for the same end; the one declining towards the old age of an ill-spent life, the other:

A maiden flower full bloom— A passion-flower! A maiden whose rich heart Burned with intensest fire that, not the light Of the sweet eyes into a warm dark dew.

The face of the woman opposite to her should not be an unfamiliar one; we have seen it before in the *salon* in the Parc Monceau; but the fourteen years that have passed over Hester Ransome have been years of vicissitude—the life of an adventuress; to-day living in luxury, eating ortolans and drinking Chateau Margot; to-morrow turned out of a lodging for lack of five francs to pay the week's rent; and "excess and passion and pain" have done their work too, and left their mark, more cruel and more ineffaceable than any lines of age.

What had wrought this change? Not the years between thirty-six and fifty, but some master-passion that subdued, if it could not crush, the lesser passions. The apparel of this woman seemed to be a disguise, for it did not belong to the rank of life—that of a lady—which she obviously occupied. The black bonnet, laid aside, was shabby and unfastidious,