

My Commission.

It is an act of Faith
In this cold hearted time,
To choose a fan, my friend,
While yet 'tis winter time.

For waving meadow grass,
An apple blossom though
Are only things remembered
Like lovely visions now.

The reaper hot and brown,
Amid his golden sheaves,
The panting house dog laid
Beneath the dusty leaves.

The maiden robed in white,
The barefoot boy asleep,
The laughing brook a line,
Where minnows glide and leap.

The drone of bee afield,
The rose leaf's ruddy gleam,
Through this ice-smitted air,
All idle visions seem.

How can I prove them true,
How true their sake return,
If, only taught by Sight,
Faith's teaching I should spurn?

And so, to buy your fan
This bleak December,
It needs to trust, in truth,
As well as to remember.

To trust—O promise sweet!
His seed-time sure to ever;
June's harvest in His hand,
Beyond this wintry weather.

SELECT STORY.

Bought With a Price.

[CONTINUED.]

Chapter XII.

THE SQUIRE'S COMPANIONS.

Not quite. The squire was not prepared for the magnificent part he was called upon to play. It was not enough for him that his invitations were accepted, only because his wife was the fashion, and men flocked to her to do homage to her beauty; also that his wines and his "chef" were too perfect to be lightly refused. The squire knew that he was the host of these fashionable guests of his, only on sufferance, because he happened to be the husband of "la belle" Estelle, and was the fortunate possessor of unbounded riches.

As far as good breeding is allowed, he was wholly overlooked by those guests of his.

His vulgar ostentation disgusted them, and when, with low-bred familiarity, he forced himself upon their notice, they were frequently polite.

But the fellow is insufferable; stuffs his gold down one's throat wholesale.

What a brute to possess such a magnificent woman! there is no hiding his 'parvenu' origin. I should think "la belle" was disgusted with the encumbrance to the wealth. Why did the creature button-hole you just now, Fitz Clare; I saw you were booked for some offensive favor. That man has the most extraordinary ideas on his proper status in society.

You would say so, indeed, Travers, had you heard his request to me. The hound had heard that the Clarence is the most exclusive club in London, and knowing I was a member, asked me to propose him.

You refused? Undeniably. Even 'la belle's' favor would be hardly purchased at such a loss to myself-respect. Though the creature would be black-balled by everyone, there is no reason why I should appear to be in favor of his admittance.

If I mistake not, you are not likely to fall into disgrace with 'la belle' for failing to take her husband by the hand. She shows her scorn of him pretty freely; though I should think it was hardly safe; the man looks as if he could be dangerous, should not wonder if he pays her out in private.

It is pretty evident on what grounds that marriage took place. Heavens! low fond that peerless creature must have been of gold, to ally herself to such an one; it is a case of Beauty and the Beast, and no mistake. His wealth must be fabulous to have tempted her.

Thus it was that the millionaire's guests discussed him.

No wonder, then, they shrank from recognizing him as one of themselves.

The squire tried to demand Estelle's co-operation to his being admitted into one or two clubs which his ambition made him offer to enter. But his wife had tauntingly said—

It was beyond her power; she knew that gentleman alone ever passed their portals.

She was heartily disgusted with the man who was her husband.

Here, in London, among her old set, his low breeding was ever more apparent than at Ashton.

And the squire?

He, too, was disgusted with the wife he had chosen.

He saw her scorn of him, and knew now that no hope of aggrandisement to him would come through any effort she would make.

He even tried personal violence at different times, but Estelle was not to be moved.

She saw that her associates had passed their "veto," and that he was not to be admitted amongst them in spite of his wealth.

Estelle was not the one to risk her own popularity by forcing an unwelcome personage among her associates, so her husband was left to his own resources.

It is probable the squire would have retired from London in utter disgust, though Estelle little dreamt that such was likely, but that just when his self-esteem was the most deeply wounded, a friend suddenly appeared, an aristocratic friend, too, one who swore he was proud to know him—a right good fellow, such as he was.

The squire was his own pompous self again.

His new friend, the Honourable Herbert Montgomery, was a peer's son, and had promised to have his name entered for one of the best clubs in town.

Then, too, he was to be his guest at one of his charming "petites soupers," which the Honourable Herbert was famous for giving to his friends.

It would have been a puzzle to inquiring minds to know how the Honourable Herbert Montgomery managed to be the possessor of such a well appointed 'menage' as he kept up in town.

Now and then, but rarely, he gave one of his noted 'petites soupers.' It was then known it was for the benefit of some especial guest, whom he meant to honour.

On this occasion it was in honour of our millionaire—the man whom society had spurned. What had the Hon. Herbert seen in him?

A conversation, which was at this very moment being carried on between the Hon. Herbert and one Captain Albany may perhaps enlighten us.

This Captain Albany was a sort of major-domo to the 'recreant' bachelor establishment, owned by his friend and patron, the Hon. Herbert Montgomery.

In his hands rested the financial expenditure, and he it was who was expected to cater for the entertainment of his patron's guests.

In return for these offices, he was able to be seen in the frequent society of this worthy scion of a peer. Reputation he had none. That had been lost years ago, when he had been cashiered from the army for having ruined many of the subs in his regiment with the high play in which he was wont to pass his leisure hours.

You understand, captain, that the guests must be men of title. This dupe of ours is inordinately anxious to be one of an equality with the members of the aristocracy. The Marquis of Brentford will, perhaps, be one, if you tell him he shall have his share of the pigeoning. He will be a rare sop for our parvenu.

It is to be strictly a bachelor party? Yes, best so the first time. I hardly know what our friend's proclivities may be. If I find it can be done, I will introduce him to 'ma belle' Adela. If she should take her off my hands, so much the better. The fair Adela is becoming "passe," and I am weary of her extravagance.

"Bon!" cried the captain. Our finances are not equal to the strain 'ma belle' Adela puts upon them. Affairs have not been prosperous lately. The members of the club complain they are actually praying on their own body.

The fools have received a lesson to be more cautious another time. All would have been well with young Fontenoy, if they had been less covetous. Instead of that they must needs pounce on the young fellow so eagerly, that, in a short time, he lost so much as to fear its becoming known to his father; then, to make matters worse, went and shot himself.

That was an unfortunate 'esclandre' for the club. It has made young men of fortune wary. We have been a long time without a dupe worthy of our prowess. This millionaire is a novice, I suppose?

Utterly so. Give a warning to the club that he is my "protege." They shall have their share in the plunder in due time, but he is to be left in my guidance.

Known 'roue' as the Honourable Herbert Montgomery was known to be, yet it was not understood by what means he managed to keep up one of the best appointed bachelor establishments in town.

Fathers dreaded his influence over their sons, and mothers guarded their daughters when he was in their neighbourhood, as though his very presence would defile their fair fame.

Still none knew what was the true vile mode of this man's life.

The 'beau monde' would have been horrified, had they known this man to be partner and part proprietor of one of the most desperate gaming halls in London.

Yes, this man had it in his power to

make or mar the success of any "debutant" in society.

His taste was considered so faultless, that his verdict was considered to put the stamp of fashion on any one he admired.

When, therefore, Estelle had reappeared in London as the millionaire's wife, the hon. Herbert had been pleased to pronounce her beauty faultless, and Estelle became society's belle, as we have seen.

The hon. Herbert soon saw that the reigning belle had no partiality for her low bred husband, and he determined to turn this feeling to his own account.

He had begun by paying much homage to "la belle," till he saw these attentions were favourably received.

Then he changed his tactics. He would make himself of such service to "la belle" Estelle, that she should learn to look to him for help.

He saw that this could be done by keeping her husband from her as much as possible, and to do this would answer his purpose very well.

He meant to control the lives of both husband and wife as far as he could.

Estelle's beauty had taken his imagination captive.

He longed to become the possessor of such a peerless being.

How he cursed his folly for not having secured her in her first season! But he told himself that her beauty had greatly developed itself since her seclusion.

He saw that Estelle was not one to lightly endanger her reputation or position.

He must bide his time if he hoped to succeed in wooing her to his protection.

It was in his favor that she despised her husband.

Estelle had little recked the dangers which would surround her path, when she sold herself to this millionaire when she despised.

In the meantime Estelle's lover decided to make use of some of this millionaire's gold.

If he meant to take his wife from him, it would also be fair that he should possess some of the "parvenu's" superfluous wealth.

Estelle saw, with surprise, that this fastidious man of fashion had become the associate of her husband.

She was too glad to find her husband no longer troubled her receptions, to care to know how he employed his time.

She was relieved of the incubus of his presence, and that was sufficient.

Her guests never troubled about him—indeed, most of them forgot his existence.

Estelle was quite grateful to her II. n. friend for his taking such an unwelcome burden off her hands, and was less cold in her demeanour to him when they met.

But what of the squire? He, poor man, was elated beyond measure.

How foolish he had been to fret and fume over the coldness shown to himself by his wife's guests!

Here was he receiving with the greatest 'bouhonnaisie' by men of higher rank than ever graced his wife's receptions.

The 'petite souper' had been a success. A real live marquis had expressed delight at meeting him, and promised to renew the acquaintance as soon as possible.

There had been 'ecarte' after supper, and his friend, the Honourable Herbert, had been at much pains to show him the game.

Under his auspices, the squire had performed wonders.

Montgomery, your good friend hardly needs your help, cried the marquis. His shrewdness is so great, he must win. I wish he would transfer some of his luck to me, I have lost every time.

All the guests vied in declaring the squire was the best player they had ever seen at 'ecarte.'

His luck was so great they longed to try their skill with him at other games.

The squire was intoxicated with all this flattery to his skill; besides which he had suddenly become seized with the true gambler's fever.

He longed for the time to meet his new acquaintances the next night, when he had promised to give them their revenge.

The squire's fever did not abate. Even when he lost, it only made him the more eager.

He was never happy unless the cards or dice were in his hands.

He had been admitted among the other members of the club, where he learnt that his previous stakes at his friend's house had been mere child's play.

It did not suit his friend to bring matters to a crisis too soon.

Estelle was friendly with him but continued to shun any bold advances on his part.

But he had done enough to have some hold on Estelle.

The latter had even made him her confidant so far as to own that she was happy at not seeing much of her husband.

Then her friend had secured her still more.

He had promised to leave her free to spend the intervening time, before the next season, in any way she could devise without the intolerable presence of her uncongenial husband.

For this purpose he had arranged a party to Baden; and the squire was delighted at receiving an invitation to become one of them.

His friend told him that there he would see play on grander scale than any he had yet seen a participant in.

So to Baden the squire went—that El Dorado of all gamblers.

On his return to London, the next season, the passion for gambling was intensified.

He had already lost large sums of money but this had no effect on him.

His friend and adviser the Honourable Herbert Montgomery, told him of the many whose luck had turned, even when they had thought themselves ruined.

So when his dupe lost, he only longed the more for the time to come to again try his luck, and win back his gold.

But, eager as the squire was after this new and exciting pleasure, all his time could not be spent at the gaming table.

His friend had other means of making the millionaire useful to him.

He had introduced his dupe behind the scenes at the opera, and had made him acquainted with 'la belle' Adela, who had, for some time past, enjoyed the protection of the Honourable Herbert.

The squire was easily guided by the idea that the charming 'demoiselle' had conceived a penchant for him.

My dear squire, you are proving yourself irresistible; my friends complain that you carry all before you with cards, and now, I no sooner make you known to 'ma belle' Adela, than she immediately throws us over for you. Well, it is no use resisting my fate; it is Kismet, and I must submit.

The poor dupe vowed eternal gratitude to the friend who was prepared to make such sacrifices for him.

He hardly believed in his good fortune—more especially when he became aware that the fair Adela had scorned to be under the protection of any commoner before.

So, at least, his friend told him. The squire felt that he was now in truth a man of fashion.

He had a right to rank himself among them now that he was known as the fortunate possessor of the brilliant Italian antiques, who, some few years before had taken London by storm.

The squire did not know, however, that his friend, the Hon. Herbert, had proposed to Adela that she should transfer her affections to the millionaire.

Adela had at first shrieked with laughter.

She took it as a joke of her companion—transfer her affections to that man! A brute, a low bred ruffian! 'Sacre!' the idea was too ridiculous!

But when her companion had told her of the low-bred brute's great wealth, and that his attentions were engaged elsewhere—that, in fact, he was doing a kind office to 'la belle' Adela by providing her with a substitute, as he had already intended to withdraw his protection from her; then the fair Adela had been wise enough to make no more objection, and thus it came about that she had suddenly become enslaved with the 'droie de visage' of the millionaire.

The fair Adela was rather pleased with the change of protectors.

Her mouste, as she called him, amused her with his pompous love-making.

She was quite as willing as Estelle to be Bought for a Price, and like her showed no disinclination to receive her price in full.

Estelle often met the 'piquante' little Italian in the drive, and admired her exquisite toilette and charming equipage, though she little knew that her husband was the provider of all this splendour.

Estelle was too much occupied with self to care much for anything connected with her husband.

Yet her blindness was almost culpable.

Everyone but herself knew that her husband's way of life had become notorious.

Estelle did sometimes wonder, when the vivacious little Italian was in her neighbourhood, that her companions should gaze on her so curiously.

But she supposed they were comparing their two peculiar styles of beauty—both were the belles of their own especial coteries.

That her husband had become initiated into the fashionable vices of the day would have been the last thing she would

have thought of, or that the bewitching and popular little Italian should have chosen her common place husband, rather than the many men of fashion, who would have gladly been the protector of one who still reigned supreme among the 'demi monde.'

She did not take into consideration that (to others) the millionaire's gold was his attraction.

The fair Adela was quite as mercenary in her nature as was Estelle.

This season was not quite so triumphant a one to Estelle as the previous one had been.

She still drew round her a certain set of admirers, but she knew these were not men who bore the best reputation in the world.

Her position was becoming perilous, and there was no one to warn her of the dangers which beset her path.

How different the careers of the two cousins!

Lily's pure and gentle nature, guarded with such living care—the betrothed wife of one who was honoured among men; as a beloved daughter to one of the most refined and highly cultured of her sex; the idolized sister of one of the world's rising men; and the belle of the most select of the 'beau monde'!

On the other hand—Estelle with her luxurious home, irreproachable equipages and horses, the centre of attraction to a certain class of admirers, but such as Mrs. Hamilton would not have permitted to approach her charges—also a recognized belle of society!

But unlike Lily, she was not surrounded by friends who loved her, True, she had many companions, but no loving friend.

She was alone—a despised wife and wretched woman!

Her wealth could not give her happiness, though she made it a cloak for the misery which was sapping her life.

She shuddered as she saw the life before her.

The price for which she had been bought had lost its value.

How she envied her cousin Lily's happier fate.

The squire at this time was well content to leave his wife much to herself. His more congenial companions wholly occupied his time.

In this one thing he was more honourable than Estelle—he allowed his wife the Price for which she was Bought!

It suited his purpose that the world should recognize the beauty of his wife, and see her surrounded with the splendour of his wealth.

But his present companions took care that his time should not hang heavily upon his hands.

The enchanting Adela was somewhat 'exigente,' more especially as, at every visit he paid her, he was sure to bestow upon her some article of jewellery for which she had taken an ardent fancy.

He is so delightfully 'gauche' and simple the fair Italian would say to her companions; I believe he really believes I love him!

The idea was so absurd that bursts of laughter would echo through the room as her companions enjoyed the joke.

Adela was wiser, however, than Estelle. Even if she despised the man whose gold was lavished upon her, still she did not make him aware of it.

She took care never to wound the self-esteem of the parvenu.

So the squire's time passed very pleasantly in that charming villa which he had taken for the fair Italian.

It was well, perhaps, that he had other occupations which prevented his bestowing too much of his time on his fascinating mistress, or his presence may have become 'gene.'

The gambling table to him was even more attractive than Adela's society. The Honourable Herbert Montgomery's pupil had done him credit.

No need any longer for him to act as prompter.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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