

A NON-CONDUCTOR.

They had told me that she was a soulless creature, frivolous and light; that the sole preoccupation, the one aim of her life was pleasure. In fact I had made her acquaintance at a ball, surrounded by an infinite variety of adorers, smiling, disdainful, allowing herself to be worshipped, completely indifferent. Naturally, after a turn of the waltz, in which she floated, light and elegant, I remained an enthusiast in regard to her, and since the reputation of a *sculpte*, given me by my friends, was not well merited, I joined the crowd of vain worshippers that surrounded the goddess. Did she notice my devotion? I do not know! I know that sometimes the profound gaze of her large black eyes, resting upon me, seemed to become melancholy, thoughtful. But it was momentary, for then that expression disappeared under her customary smile. That especial evening, leaning her arm on the railing of her theatre-box, she had turned towards me one of her enigmatical glances, accompanied by a slight bending of her head.

I confess that I started, and that a thousand thoughts flocked into my mind. Was the ice melted, perhaps? Had that atrophied heart begun to beat? I did not delude myself, I might be her father; she was twenty-three years of age; I almost fifty, although I tried not to show them. Yet I could not resist, and soon after my hand pushed open the door of box No. 4.

"Finally!" exclaimed the countess. "You really leave people to wish for your company."

"Signora," I replied "you are pleased to flatter me."

"I never flatter my friends, and I regard you as one of them. 't is so long that we have known each other. . ."

So long! It was not even a month; not knowing what to reply, I silently assented with a smile. She did not appear satisfied with my manner, and bursting into one of her gay laughs, she said.

"But do not you remember? At Venice, on the Lido, I came with my cousin, Signora Lini, and you with Giorgio Rigoli: have you forgotten us? I am sorry, because I wished this evening, recalling those memories, that you should pay a little court to me! . . ."

Decidedly. She was a coquette, I an imbecile! But as a gallant squire of dames, was I to remain defeated?

"Countess!" I exclaimed, "if I were to take your words seriously, be warned that you would have assumed a terrible responsibility."

"I am not afraid; I believe that my signature is still negotiable."

"Take care, countess, you are always playing with dangers; are you sure of conquering them?"

"If there were no obstacles, victory would have no value."

"Well, you always succeed!"

"Certainly! When I set about an undertaking I never draw back."

"And now you have undertaken to make me lose my head."

"Who knows? Would you be sorry to devote it to me?"

"For you, countess, I would sacrifice myself."

"For pity's sake, do not let us go into the usual common-place phrases of society; I like eccentricity, do you know! I wish to find in you an exception; then do not try to pay court to me, leave that privilege to the boys; but you! A serious man, sceptical, almost a philosopher! To care for an atom! That would be an antithesis!"

She was laughing at me. I rose to take leave.

"Wait a moment, I beg of you. . . I have something to ask you," and her voice trembled slightly.

"Countess, I am at your orders!"

"Are you a friend to me. . . a friend in the true sense of the word?"

"I hope so!" I replied.

"Well, tell me, away there in Africa, is Giorgio happy?"

"What! You still remember him; but, your marriage?"

"Was imposed upon me," she added excitedly. "But do not let us speak of that! It is of him that I wish for news, I have wanted so long to hear from him."

What was I to tell her? That he lived there alone, disconsolate, with her memory stamped upon his heart? Re-awaken the affection, sleeping, but not yet dead? Tell her that in every letter of his, overflowing bitterness, Giorgio asked after her, but that, believing himself forgotten, he had sworn never to see her again? She must not know it.

"Happiness is a chimeræ, countess; but he lives tranquil surrounded by affection and good will."

"But is his life in peril, does no one make war upon him?"

"He is very much liked, and is protected by the consul; he lives in that family as if he were a member of it."

"Ah! . . . are there many European families there? And she fixed her great eyes, with jealous anxiety, upon my face.

"Many. I should not be surprised indeed, to hear some day that Giorgio would settle permanently in Africa, making himself a home of his own there."

I was silent. Some people came into the box. I withdrew to the back of it. The countess had become very pale, tears were trembling in her eyes. With a resolute gesture, as if in answer to an inward question, she turned her dark head toward the parquette. When she turned it toward me again, her face was serene, the usual smile curved her lips.

"Then 'good-by, signor," she said to me ironically, "or rather *au revoir*, for

I hope, despite the total difference of our artistic opinions, that you will remain a friend to me."

And extending her hand: "I receive every Friday evening. I hope to see you there."

I bowed and went out slowly, while she, playfully and with extreme volubility, interrogated the new-comers about the things of the day.

The next day a letter was sent to Giorgio. "Do not return, my friend," I told him. "You would have a disappointment. She lives tranquil and happy and has asked me nothing about you; forget her, she deserves nothing else!"

To those hearts be peace! As for the husband, he may rest secure. She, with the safeguard of the memory of her only love, will fearlessly meet the battles of life.

RESOLUTIONS FOR THE NEW YEAR.

The lark I mean to quite anticipate;
My rising shall be so precipitate.

In business I shall scorn all mundane profit;
Even though my partners vote me "quite gone off it."

My taxes I shall pay before they're due;
And then complain because there are so few.

At my expense my debtors all shall dine
On richest viand, choicest fruit and vine.

When ere my wife desires a bonnet new,
I'll straightway go and buy the dearest? two.

My new umbrella with my friends I'll leave
While of their "holy" ones I'll them relieve.

At evening parties I'll be good and staid
And always choose for partner some old maid.

My neighbor's cat I'll feed and educate,
And "bless" him when he sings so loud and late.

All these resolves I'll keep: and yet one more:

My *min-law* I'll cherish and adore.

One of the saddest sides of life is suicide.

ONLY A PUN.

She—"And would you still wish to marry me if I had an artificial optic?" He—"Yes darling. With all thy false eye'd love thee still."

DOWN IN MAINE.

A wedding notice in a Maine paper the other day ended with the words: "No cake, no cake, nobody's business."

BOOKS.

Books should to one of these four ends conduce:

For wisdom, piety, delight, or use.

Sir J. Denham.