

parquet. At one end a high double door led to the Trianon drawing-room with its lovely panels painted by Watteau. At the other end there was the well-known orangery, dimly lighted and full of the mingled scents of sub-tropical fruits and flowers. On one of the deep-cushioned settees in this place Stella Lacon was seated by the side of the man with whom she had been dancing. His name was Julian West—a very tall man with a bronzed face and dark hair with a suggestion of gray about it. Everyone would have known him for a soldier. A few years earlier the name of Colonel West had been in the mouths of a good many people, on account of his splendid dash that had relieved one of the beleaguered garrisons in the Transvaal.

"I have only seen you once since your return to England," she was saying when they had left the hall and entered the orangery. "You left very suddenly for that big game hunt—how long ago?—eight months ago, was it not?"

"Yes; very suddenly," he replied. "Did you expect me to go to you to say good-bye, Stella? You know why I went—no one else."

"Do you mean to talk about that?" she asked.

"I will never refer to it again if you only tell me now that you have forgiven me," he said.

"Forgiven you—for what?" she inquired.

"For my—my—my madness. I have not forgiven myself for it."

"You told me that evening that you loved me. Was that madness?"

"The madness was not in loving you, Stella; the madness was in telling you that I loved you—in cherishing the hope that you would leave that man whom you could never have loved, and link your life with mine. That was the mad hope of a moment! I should have known more of your nature than to fancy even in the delirium of my love for you that you would ever be otherwise than a true woman."

"A true woman, you say. But what is a true woman? Is it one who is true to herself—to her womanhood—to the love which she bears a man, or is it one who through fear of offending against the conventions of society is ready to submit to daily insults levelled against her—against her womanhood—against her sex—against herself?"

He looked at her at first with a puzzled expression on his face, then, eagerly. The flush that came to his face was plainly to be seen under his bronze.

"For God's sake, Stella, explain yourself," he whispered. "Do you tempt me into my old madness; and that is what you are doing, if you refuse to speak plainly. Tell me what you mean by asking me that question—a true woman—a true—"

"Is a true wife always a true woman? That is the question I have been trying to solve for the past three years—ever since I became a wife," said she. "I thought I had solved it when I told you that you had insulted me by begging me to go away with you. I was mistaken. I have found that out only to-day. It is a woman's duty to be true to herself, let the consequences be what they may."

"Stella! My love! My love!" he whispered.

She did not allow him to interrupt her.

"You see that mark on my forehead," she said. "You heard how they laughed about it at dinner? Lord Altonhurst called it the mark of the Beast. He was quite right; that is the mark of the beast who is my husband."

Colonel West sprang to his feet.

"The infernal ruffian!" he cried. "By heaven I will thrash him within an inch of his life. The cowardly bully! I'll—"

"When he struck me he boasted that he had taught me a lesson that I should not forget. He was right. I made up my mind that I would never forget that moment."