

Captain Fraser had lived for some time, when a young man, in Paris, and Valerie's animated descriptions of the modern queen of cities amused him not a little. She spoke freely about herself except on the one subject of her marriage, and as she that while living in Paris, she had married a Scotch gentleman, who was completely silent on that portion of her history, and, of course, delicately forbade any questioning, where it was apparently her wish to be silent. Although the shadow that clouded her brilliant face as she casually mentioned her marriage, woke a feeling of sympathetic curiosity in the bosoms of Captain and Mrs. Fraser, while at the same time they carefully avoided the subject, as it evidently awoke unpleasant and sorrowful memories.

"As a girl, I remember well the gaiety of Montreal," said Mrs. Fraser, with a soft, meditative smile, "and the sort with which I mingled in it. It must be much changed, however, since I have had an opportunity of visiting it."

"I like it," said Valerie, with sparkling eyes, "the air of the place in winter is so clear and exhilarating, and it is very lively, I assure you. Ah! I have been almost happy during the three years I have lived with my dear aunt."

She kept back a heavy sigh as she spoke, and raised her slender hand as though to shade her eyes from the glow of the fire.

"She and I were educated in the same convent," said Mrs. Fraser. "As Mademoiselle DesLorges, she was exceedingly beautiful."

"Theodore is very like her," said Valerie, glancing at Olla, "and she is still extremely handsome."

"Theodore's lovely," said Sidney, looking in the same direction with mischievous eyes, "don't you remember Olla, when he spent a day here in spring, before Archie went away? He said that he was the beautifullest young man he'd ever glimpsed! He actually did, Mrs. Lennox. Though apparently her capricious fancy has veered round in favor of Mike since."

Valerie laughed, and Dolly, looking up from her task of tying a pink ribbon round "Cupidon's" neck, opened her rosy lips, and with a glance of large-eyed reproach at Sidney, said, "I don't think Mr. Denville is in the least like Mike, Sidney. Mike is almost quite plain and has no air, and is so much older, and his clothes are not at all nicely made. I'm sure Mr. Denville would not wear a coon-skin cap like Mike. 'Cupidon' carried it in here to me the other day, and it had a lame chicken in it, which Mike had put there to get well in the summer kitchen. I don't think Mr. Denville would put poultry in his cap, Sidney," and having raised her voice in defence of Olla's lover, Dolly resumed her decking of "Cupidon," in his pink favors, with the exalted air of a priestess adorning a sacrifice.

Sidney was so overcome at the idea of Dolly's views of her speech, that she laughed until the infection caught the others, and the room rang with the merry peal, which so excited "Cupidon" that he barked from Dolly's lap as furiously as though possessed of the soul of a mastiff, his eyes flaming from under his tangled hair like spots of fire. Olla blushed and laughed, and blew a sigh, and Valerie, pitying her crimson cheeks, turned to her with one of her bright smiles.

"Come," she said, "I remember what a charm your voice had for me in Montreal. Sing for me, pray; see, the piano is open."

Olla's voice was indeed rarely beautiful, and had been carefully cultivated, and with ready grace she complied with Valerie's request, glad to turn her speaking face from the group about the fire.

As intense cold and intense heat scorch the flesh, so the extremes of happiness and sorrow are parted by so frail a barrier, that either most certainly partakes of the nature of the other, and as Olla placed herself at the instrument, the tremulous joy that filled her whole being was mingled with that quivering of the soul, which leaves it uncertain whether tears or laughter will triumph. Her fingers strayed over the keys, and involuntarily into the prelude of a Scotch ballad, a great favorite with Captain Fraser, and she began to sing, while Valerie listened, leaning back in her deep chair, her eyes fixed on the fire. The wind wailed a melancholy accompaniment of Aeolian chords round the eaves, and through the pine tops, and the plaintive melody gathered new sorrow from the sound.

"A weary lot is thine, fair maid,
A weary lot is thine;
To pull the thorn thy brow to braid,
And press the rue for wine;
A lightome eye, a soldier's mien,
A feather of the blue;
A doublet of the Lincoln green,
No more of me you know,
My love,
No more of me you know."

"This morn is merry June, I trow,
The rose is budding fair;
But she shall bloom in winter snow,
Ere we two meet again."
He turned his charger as he spoke,
Upon the river shore;
He gave his bridle rein a snake,
Said "adieu for ever more,
My love,
Adieu for evermore!"

Mrs. Lennox listened with hands clasped on her lap, and her ivory face intent upon the fire, and when the last cadence died away, she neither spoke nor moved; but Mrs. Fraser who sat facing her, saw a heavy tear sparkling on

her jetty lashes, a tear that did not fall, but dried there, and was followed by no more. Anxious that no one should observe, the witness of an emotion that she felt was based on some sad and sorrowful page in the history of her guest, Mrs. Fraser rose and glancing significantly at her husband who, she perceived, had also remarked it, said as she touched the bell,

"I must be rude enough to disturb our circle. We will have supper and then you must all really go to bed. Poor Dolly is half asleep, and as for Mrs. Lennox and Olla, they are at both be sufficiently fatigued. I suppose ready, Olla?" to the smart parlor-maid who answered the bell.

"Yes'm," said Rosie, who looked very acid indeed, "leastways nearly, for I had to see to that there Mr. Macer. Not that some people's nukes is as badly hurted as they pretend to be, by a good bit," and Rosie sniffed the air disdainfully.

"What nonsense are you talking, Rosie?" said Captain Fraser, a little sternly. "Are you alluding to Mr. Macer?"

"I'm not alluding to nobody, Captain Fraser, if you please," said Rosie, loftily; "but I'd be ashamed to make such a fuss about nothing. Supper'll be ready right away'm," and Rosie disappeared with a flourish, in the direction of the morning-room.

"My dear, that girl is allowed too much liberty of expression," said Captain Fraser, vexedly. "What does she mean, do you think?"

"She doesn't mean a thing, papa," said Sidney. "She has been quarrelling with Mike, I dare say, and feels a little spiteful. That's all."

Valerie excused herself from supper, and in a few minutes was in the solitude of her own chamber. She locked the door with hands that trembled, and then flung herself on her knees, her face pallid as ashes, her black eyes dilated.

"Oh, heavens," she groaned. "How nearly I came betraying myself, when she sang that song. But to-night will end all. I dare not venture to hope, and I dare not turn and flee, when I see the hawk hovering over these tender doves. Is it my hand that will bring fiery vengeance. I could almost die, if by dying I could shake the sword that I feel fate has thrust into my grasp, from me. Oh, the woe for a soul to be brought to this strait!"

She flung her white arms up, in a paroxysm of mutual anguish, and threw herself along the floor, with her face down, and long after the household was wrapped in profound repose, she lay thus, her form motionless except when convulsed by a dry sob, the pallid moonlight drifting over her through the window, in a ghostly pall. The firelight flickering, fading, dying on the walls and the wind playing word funeral harmonies without.

Was she the only watcher in that quiet house?

CHAPTER XXVI.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

Macer looked from the fire to the clock, a small, bronze one over the mantle-piece.

"A quarter of one," he said, silently, "and the house is perfectly quiet. The night, however, is fortunately showery and loud voiced. Hark! how the wind surges across the river, and roars amongst the pines yonder where that monument shines ghostly in all weathers. Queer old fellow to have such a melancholy sight constantly before him. It reminds one something of the medieval taste for skulls and crossbones. 'To this favor ye must all come,' and so on. What an old Bayard he is too! There is something in his silver hair and falcon eyes, old as he is, which has often made me quake either for fear that some mistimed feeling of reverence on my part, or those piercing glances on his should mar my little schemes. Even now I cannot quite cease regretting that success in them will bring his contempt on me. Pshaw! what nonsense to moralize and prate such sentiments!—but half an hour separates me from the commission of as dastardly a crime, as I could almost well be guilty of! And I know myself so thoroughly, too! No, not if Heaven opened and proffered me an immortality of bliss, as the price of my desertion of my present hopes, I know that I would not turn aside from the path I have marked out for myself, by so much as a hair's breadth. Yet am I human! I would gain wealth hand in hand with Virtue if I could, but if that is forbidden, welcome Vice, but welcome as an accomplice, not as a friend. I wonder what will this new complication of events lead to? No present danger, that is certain, for I went through the ordeal unrecognised, and I am not likely to see her again. Well, the fate that cast me a nameless wraith on the world will either mar or make my fortunes soon. They will not miss the document soon, or should they, why suspect me? a cripple confined to my chair, and without an object in purloining it. The only danger I have to apprehend is that it is not in the certificate, but I am convinced that it is. Once in my possession I will soon destroy all trace of it. As for recognition, I have had ample proof to-day how safe I am. Valerie! you are a cunning piece of nature's handiwork; but in truth I love you not! Go your ways in peace, pure and noble as I know your white soul to be and your spotless life, but cross not my path, or—A look of terrible darkness swept like the clouds of a hurricane across his face, and he clenched his hand as it lay on the arm of his chair until the muscles rose on the white skin, like whiplcord. He gazed into the fire, his face illumined by the lurid glow, working with stormy passion. It seemed as though across his forehead of triumph, which eye the had stained crimson of

disaster. He was at once and without new cause disturbed and agitated. "As the wind bloweth where it listeth, and we cannot tell whence it cometh or whither it goeth," so across the recent moments of guilty triumph sweeps a hurricane that destroys the content of the hour, and is nameless, a brilliant child of remorse and fear; remorse which does not lead to repentance; fear that yet stays not the hand from its work of evil. Such was the deadly wind that shook the soul of Macbeth, while the in order of his life was yet but a fearful pageant pictured on the mists of the future.

As the smoke of a great fire is tossed to and fro by the rushing tempest the vast flames themselves attract, so the soul of the guilty man is shaken violently by the storm his crime has brought howling round him, but still, as the eager, naked flame leaps on to destroy, so his soul knows no retreating, and rushes in fiery billows on its path of desolation and destruction.

Macer was a bad man, but a bad man more from education and circumstices than from the moulding of nature. He would fain, as he said, gain his will, like Macbeth.

"Holly, wouldst not play false,
Yet wouldst wrongly win."

but yet would bate no jot of that will, because virtue must needs fly in his gaining of it.

Gradually his wide brow resumed its usual placidity, and once more his eyes sought the clock. Its hands pointed to two, and a sombre smile crept over his heavily bearded lips.

"The innocent and young as a rule are not wakeful," he thought, "my time is nearly come. The house is quiet as the grave."

A low, but profound sigh, that almost stirred his hair, sounded behind him and with a start he lifted his head. His lamp he had extinguished an hour before, but the firelight threw a vast shadow across the floor and wall of the form standing motionless at his side, so close to him that the folds of her drapery almost touched his hand, as it lay on the arm of his easy chair.

His heart gave a great bound, like the swing of a mighty hammer, but at once his indomitable will was again master of the expression of his emotions, and his face expressed simple astonishment, but only such as would be natural in a man who has his solitude invaded at midnight by a lovely and unknown woman.

"Madame," he exclaimed, "Mrs. Lennox! may I ask to what I am indebted—?" He paused and looked at her as though unwilling to credit the evidence of his senses. There was nothing theatrical in his manner; no one for a moment could have suspected what a subtle piece of acting it all was; no one but the woman at his side.

She stood for a moment looking at him with piercing eyes; eyes of dumb accusation, of mental pain subdued by a strong will,—eyes, the changes in which were swift and inexplicable as the shiftings of the northern lights. The lines in her face were deepened, the mouth expressed invincible determination, illimitable and cold. A lofty and mournful compassion was shining on her calm brow. She moved forward, so as nearly to face him. "Malcolm," she said, in a low and guarded voice, stretching her hand towards him, as though to command his attention, "you see we have met at last!"

He looked at her curiously, with a smile of amusement and surprise, tempered with a courtly kind of deference that was always noticeable in his bearing towards women.

"There is some strange misapprehension at work in your mind, Madame," he said, gently. "My name is Harold Macer, Artist and Bohemian, and really I cannot recall ever having seen, before, a face which once known must remain for ever an integral part of one's memory." He looked at her with an air of respectful admiration, such as frequently fell to the lot of very pretty women from the tribe, a member of which he called himself, critically too, as though he were pleasing himself with thinking what a fine study she made in the red and light falling on her ivory face and purple raiment from the fire.

"This subterfuge is useless, Malcolm Lennox," said Valerie, in the same muted voice, and never for a second removing her large, dark eyes from his. "May, however, it be fraught with danger to yourself. Your disguise would deceive any gaze but that of your wife. To me it was none. The moment I saw you I knew you for the husband who deserted me, and—"

She dropped her head for one second and her cheek became white, but she raised it again and looked at him, and plumed my employers," she breathed, rather than spoke.

Macer's very brow became red. He made as though he would have turned, but sank back again with a half grown apparently extracted from him by the force of his strained foot.

"Madame," he said, with a gesture of proud denial, and meeting her eye with his eagle glance, unflinchingly, "were you a man, I should know but of one reply to your extraordinary accusations; as it is I must beg of you not to give way to so unhappy an hallucination. I am the person I have stated myself to be and none other!"

"Oh," she said, with a sad and proud smile, "do not misunderstand me, Malcolm. I have no desire, in seeking you thus, to lure you to my side again. I can confess to you that you are still the dearly beloved of my heart, and in the same moment I can swear to you that no consideration of whatever kind could move me to let you even flow in the same channel again. No, my purpose in coming to you thus is to warn you."

She paused a moment and recovered her breath;

but his eyes were full of fire and gloom as he looked at her.

"Not being in a position to claim the position you would assign me," he said deliberately, "I must beg, madame, to decline pursuing the conversation. Were I not content, as you see, to my chair, I should do myself the honor of opening the door for you. The hour is scarcely reasonable for such an interview."

For the first time a shade of disdain of him flitted across her perfect face, but it faded instantly, and a kind of tender anguish and compassion of him filled her radiant eyes instead.

"Listen to me, Malcolm," she said, in a voice that was not alone plaintive, but tremulous with the agony of a high soul who feels that pleading is useless to turn, even for a moment, the feet of one who errs from the precipice on the brink of which he totters. She stretched out her hands to him as she spoke. "Listen to me, for the sake of the love no longer existing, I know, in your breast, but strong and immortal in mine—strong and vital enough to risk all to save you, but one thing—Honor."

For the first time a hunted look stole into Macer's eyes, and, with unwilling steadfastness, he gazed at her as though spell-bound by her voice and manner. Even then he had sufficient command of his emotions to mask his agitation by a show of haughty surprise. He would have spoken, but she hurriedly waved her hand and continued:

"When you deserted me in France and fled, covered with the odium of a felony, the forgery of your employer's name, I felt neither anger nor scorn of you. I thought of the hard fate which had thrown you as a nameless wraith from infancy on the world, and oh! Malcolm, it was with a great compassion for you that I weighed against your crime the fiery temptations which had surrounded you through life, the evil influences which, like a postillon, had blighted the germs of good in your soul. When your utter desertion of me grew to be a fact that I could no longer doubt, I still loved you. That I still love you I have said, but, at the same time, I cannot, will not refrain from showing you the fearful position you have placed me in."

She clasped her hands together, and looked for a second upwards, when Macer broke in impatiently, as he glanced furtively at the clock.

"Really, Mrs. Lennox," he said, "I am utterly astounded that, in the face of my assertions to the contrary, you persist in mistaking my identity."

She looked at him with melancholy calmness and raised her hand commandingly.

"Hush!" she said; "your assertions but confirm the fears with which I sought this interview. You know that I have no desire to claim you as my husband. I married you because I loved, and thought that love returned. To me it would be insufferable degradation to force my affection on one who was capable of treating its bestower as you have done." Here a slight flush of lofty pride swept across her ivory face and faded. "And all this you know as well as I myself know it. Therefore, in your persistent denial of your identity to me, I see but a confirmation of my suspicion."

"May I ask what they are which you honor me by entertaining?" he said, looking at her with deadly eyes.

"That you are engaged in some plot disastrous to the happiness of the innocent family under whose roof I find you, disguised and bearing a false name," said Valerie quietly, steadfast under the baleful glitter of his gaze; "such are my suspicions. This is my warning: if so much as a hair of these innocent heads suffers through your machinations, I shall at once denounce you, even if in so doing I should break my heart. Otherwise," she added, lifting her superb head with an air of inexpressible pride, "I should be the first of my race who tarnished our pure annals by becoming the supine witness, and hence aider of wrong and treachery."

He wound in his chair in a sudden frenzy of uncontrollable rage. For the first time in his life, in the light of her love and scorn, he saw what an abject wretch he really was, and he was stung to quick if passing madness by the real anguish of soul which for a moment possessed him. Then, too, the terror that his plans would be frustrated added its viper lash, and, pallid as the grave, he looked in her face, even by such a whirlwind of contending emotions that his reason for a second seemed plunging her long from her throne. To be a comfortable villain, it is not necessary to take comfort, the fawn son of the morning," for once a villain, for writers agree in placing his lot, not in material flames, but in the tortments of a debased grand soul, torn by the refined anguish of an immortal remorse, which is not repentance,—it is simply necessary to get rid of all impulses of good, murder the soul as far as possible, and cultivate one's mind and digestion. Your villain with a sickness of remorse upon him is but a pitiable wretch, who, in making ruin for others, makes a hell for himself before he enters the shadowy bark of old Charon.

Valerie was a brave woman, but only a brave woman, not an Amazon, and she moved back a step as her husband gazed at her dumbly.

"I will go now," she said, glancing towards the door. "I thought you at this hour in order that nothing would be suspected concerning you. Look to it, Malcolm, that you save yourself and me from the alternative I have pointed out. If I am mistaken in your designs, we meet no more, if not, I shall see you as your accuser."

She walked towards the door, and, glancing