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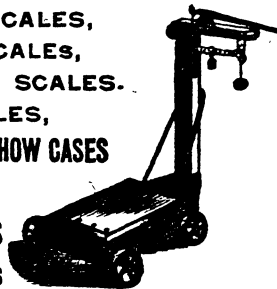
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BY

MRS. ALEXANDER FRAZER,

AUTHOR OF "THE MATCH OF THE SEASON," "A PROFESSIONAL
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DAUGHTERS OF BELGRAVIA.

CHAPTER I.

A LEADER OF SOCIETY.

“O Love! when Womanhood is in the flush,
And Man a pure unspotted thing,
His first breathed word, and her half-conscious blush,
Are fair as light in Heaven—or flowers in Spring!”

“LADY BERANGER

AT HOME.

A 1, Belgrave Square.—June 20th.”

ALL the *élite* in London know these bits of paste-board well, and all the *élite* like to avail themselves of Lady Beranger's invitation, for Lady Beranger's house is one of the swellest in town, and offers multifarious attractions.

Everything is *en règle* this fine June night, when myriads of stars keep high jubilee in the sky, and a round, yellow moon like a big blubber ball, promises to develop into yet greater brightness as the hours wear on.

The windows are ablaze from top to bottom of the Belgravian mansion. The floral decorations—

banks of purple and white violets, straight from the glorious Riviera, are perfect and costly.

Achille, Lord Beranger's famous French *chef*, has surpassed himself in dainty concoctions. Gunter has sent in buckets of his world-renowned ice, and Covent Garden has been ransacked for choicest fruits.

One little aside before we go any further. All this magnificence and lavishness is "on tic." The Berangers, like a good many others of their class, are as poor as church mice; but "Society"—that English Juggernaut that crushes everything under its foot—demands that its votaries shall even run themselves to satisfy its claims—but *revenons a nos moutons*.

Everybody who is anybody is here. All the lords and the ladies, the honourables and dishonourables, the hangers-on to aristocratic skirts, the *nouveau riche*, the pet parsons and actors, eligibles and detrimentals, and the black sheep, that go towards composing the "upper current." The spacious rooms teem with handsome thoroughbred men, and lovely *well-dressed?* — women. And yet "they come! they come," though the clocks are chiming midnight and Coote and Tinney's Band has been pouring out its softest strains for two hours.

The host and hostess are still on duty near the entrance, all ready to be photographed; so we'll just take them.

Lord Beranger is tall and thin. His hair is so fair that the silver threads thickly intersecting it are hardly visible. His eyes are blue—the very

light blue that denotes either insincerity or imbecility—his smile is too bland to be genuine, his talk is measured to match his gait, and he lives the artificial life of so many of his brotherhood, to whom the opinion of "the world" is everything.

Lady Beranger is fair, fat and forty—and a hypocrite—as she awaits her tardy guests, so weary, that under the shelter of her long trailing blue velvet skirts and *point de gaze*, she indulges in the gallinacious tendency of standing first on one leg and then on the other—her expression is as sweet as if she delighted to be a martyr to these late votaries of fashion.

Only once she loses sight of worldliness, and permits the ghost of a frown to flit across her brow, as she whispers to her husband :

"Is Zai with Delaval? I don't see that Conway anywhere!"

Lord Beranger shrugs his shoulders and answers nothing. Achille's best efforts in *Salmi de Gibier sauce Chasseur*, and *Baba au Rhum*, are just ready, and he is evolving the momentous point of who he should take in. He would not make an error in such an important thing as precedence for all the world! a regular society man is always a stickler for absurd little trifles like these. Does the handsome Duchess of Allchester rank higher than the elegant and younger Duchess of Eastminster? He turns up his light blue eyes and puckers his forehead in the vain hope of calling up to mind the date of the dukedoms, but it is futile; this salient fact has entirely slipped from his memory. So he goes in

search of the patrician lady who finds most favour in his sight.

Lady Beranger, still in *statu quo*, turns towards a girl who has paused near, in the middle of a waltz.

"Gabrielle, can you tell me where Zai is?" she asks in icy tones. The tone and the gleam in her eyes betoken dislike, and the girl addressed pays her back with interest. There is quite a ring of malicious pleasure in her voice as she answers her stepmother.

"Zai wanted some supper after three dances with Carlton Conway, so he took her in to have some."

Lady Beranger flushes angrily, and vouchsafing no further notice of her "cross in life"—Gabrielle—walks away in her stately fashion, exchanging pleasant words or smiles as she goes, but throwing a hawk-like glance round the room all the time.

Chafing inwardly at her stepdaughter's answer, especially as it was made before Lord Delaval, she does a tour of the capacious *salon*, then dives through the crowd at the door of the supper room, and finally subsides on to a seat next to a fair-haired, blue-eyed, good-looking miniature of Lord Beranger.

"Baby, have you seen Zai?" she questions, low but sharply.

Baby Beranger looks up into her mother's face with wide-open innocent eyes. It would be hard to credit the owner of such eyes with deceit, or such pretty red lips with fibs. Baby has such a sweet little face, all milk and roses, surmounted by little hyacinthine golden curls like a cherub's or a cupid

in a valentine, and her mouth is like an opening pomegranate bud, but no matter what her face expresses, she is born and bred in Belgravia, and is Belgravian to the backbone.

"Zai, mamma?" she says innocently, "she is waltzing with Lord Delaval I think."

It is a deliberate falsehood, but it comes quite glibly from the child-like lips, and Baby, though she is only seventeen, has almost forgotten to blush when she does wrong.

"*Gabrielle* is with Lord Delaval," Lady Beranger snaps crossly. "*She* is not one to let the grass grow under her feet if she has an object in view."

"What object has *Gabrielle* to gain, mamma?" As if Baby didn't know! As if she had not slipped in of a night, with bare, noiseless feet, and a white wrapper, making her look like a delicious little ghost, behind the screen in her sister's room, and heard *Gabrielle* tell Zai that she fully intends being Countess of Delaval in spite of Lady Beranger's circumventions! But though Baby is only seventeen she takes in her mother, who flashes *sotto voce*:

"What object has *Gabrielle*? Why, to make the best match in town. I don't believe that girl would stickle at anything."

Gabrielle's propensities to go ahead in everything are not interesting to Baby, who has quite a multitude of *affaires du cœur* of her own, so she agrees with her mother by a mournful shake of her curly head, and is speedily engrossed with a young German *attaché*, who, deluded by the apparent

wealth of the host, thinks the youngest Honble. Miss Beranger will be a prize worth gaining.

Once more Lady Beranger breaks in on the preliminaries of this Anglo-Prussian alliance.

"Where's Trixy?" she asks.

"Gone off to bed. She said she was ill, but I think she was angry because Carlton Conway forgot his dance."

"Why did he forget his dance with her?" Lady Beranger mutters sternly, with hydra-headed suspicion gnawing her mind.

"Why?" Baby is a little at fault. She is rather *distracte* after Count Von Niederwalluf's last sweet nothing, and she has not an answer ready, so she speaks the truth once in a way:

"I think Carlton Conway was out on the balcony with Zai, mamma."

"I wish you would not call him *Carlton Conway*. How often have I told you that it is very bad form for girls to speak familiarly of men," Lady Beranger rejoins in a harsh whisper, then she moves off, much to Baby's satisfaction.

"Miladi looks angry," Von Niederwalluf murmurs softly. "She does not frown because—*Ich liebe dich!*"

Baby has never been good at languages, or at anything, in fact, that her numerous governesses have toiled to cram into her pretty little head, but

"*Ich liebe dich!*"

She understands these three little words quite well. She has seen them in a little book called "Useful English and German Phrases for Tourists."

"*Nein*," she coos tenderly, "and if she *was* angry it would make no difference, for—*Ich liebe dich*—too—you know."

Meanwhile the moon has grown fuller and rounder and yellower, and is right prodigal of its beams—and no wonder—for its tender glances, satiated as they must be with mortal beauty, have seldom fallen on a fairer thing than this girl who, Belgravian born and bred, has braved that autocrat of her class, the convenances, and with a long dark cloak thrown over her snowy ball-dress, and a large hat hiding the glory of her hair, has stolen out amidst the fresh cool foliage of the square, to talk to her lover.

A fair young girl, with a pure soft face, that owns a magnificent pair of eyes, big and grey and black-lashed, a little straight nose, and a mouth sweet to distraction. Her hat has fallen back, and her hair looks all afire with ruddy gleam as the bright moonlight touches it, and even through the long loose cloak the perfection of her tall, slender figure is visible.

The man she has elected her lord and king for evermore is a man to whom most women give a second glance.

Women like height and strength in man, and this one stands over six feet two, and has broad shoulders, and carries his brown, cropped head as haughtily as if he were a prince instead of a pauper, and what in social parlance is too awful—a detrimental.

He has large brown eyes (sleepy as a rule, but

quite capable of suddenly kindling into passion), set deeply under straight, well defined brows, aquiline thin-cut features, firmly moulded lips, a slight moustache, and a sort of *debonnair* style that suits him admirably.

Altogether Carlton Conway, "*jeune amoureux*" at the Bagatelle Theatre, is very much worth looking at, and is just the sort a romantic girl falls down before in abject adoration.

"We must take our lives into our own hands, Zai," he says, very passionately, marking how sweet his love looks under the soft moonbeams. "We must run away, my child!"

One arm is round her slim waist, her cheek, lovelier and whiter and purer than a white rose, is against his breast, her small snowflake of a hand lies restfully in his strong clasp.

Zaidie Beranger starts.

"Run away, Carl?" she asks in an awed voice. Such a frightful defiance of the convenances has never been known in the annals of the Berangers, and it sounds quite too awful in her tiny pink ears. Possibly, or rather probably, she has passed hours, delightful, fleeting hours, in her own little sanctum sanctorum in Belgrave Square, picturing the pretty wedding at St. George's or St. Peter's, with the organ pealing out "The voice that breathed o'er Eden," the bevy of aristocratic bridesmaids, with Gabrielle and Trixy and Baby among them, attired in cream satin and dainty lace, and overladen with baskets of Marshal Niel roses, the central and most attractive figures on the scene her Carl and herself.

It is heartrending to think of the demolition of her lovely picture.

“Run away, Zai,” Carl Conway answers impetuously, for the moonbeams are falling full, on her face, deepening the lustre of the sweet grey eyes, dancing and quivering on the wealth of fair hair and making her seem if possible doubly desirable in his eyes. “If they won’t let us have our way quietly and comfortably, of course we must run away. Shall we let them part us for ever? Could you bear it, my Zai? Could you know that for the rest of our natural existence (and we may both live to a hundred) that we shall never see each other, speak to one another, kiss each other again, and live?”

She listens rapt, as she always listens to each word and tone of the beloved voice, and she fully realises the intense misery of the situation.

Never to speak to Carl, never to see Carl, never to kiss Carl again!

Her cheek grows whiter, her spirit sinks, her courage to do right dies an ignominious death; and a lump rises up in her throat, and then seems to fall back on her heart like a great cold stone.

“Well, Zai,” he cries, notwithstanding her silence. “Of course you think as I do, my darling?” You know it would kill us to part. Oh, Zai, you cannot surely be hesitating, you cannot be thinking of letting aught come between us two! You *must* feel that death would be better than separation!”

“Yes!” she whisperes, and now, under the

moonbeams, he sees a lovely pink colour steal over her face, and the sweetest, tenderest lovelight fill her big grey eyes. "Death would be a thousand times better. I could not live without you, Carl! I suppose it would be very wrong for us to go away, but it would be impossible to stay!"

"Of course it would, my child," he says, quietly, as if assured of the fact.

"If we could wait till I am twenty-one, Carl, perhaps——"

"No, no!" he interrupts, imperiously. "Why, Zai, you can't know how I love you—how you are life of my life—or you would not *dare* to suggest such a thing. Two whole long, never-ending, wretched years of feverish anxiety and jealousy and longing. They would drive me clean mad! If you love me as I love you, you would not pause. You would have but one wish, one thought, one resolve in your heart—to bind yourself to me by a chain that no man could break, or woman either," he adds, thinking of Lady Beranger; "but you don't love me as I love you!"

The wish, the thought, the resolve are in her heart of hearts now. She looks up at his handsome face, meets the fervour in his brown eyes, and her pretty white arms, bare almost to the shoulder and with ropes of pearls glistening on them, steal round his neck, and her red lips plead wistfully:

"Not love you as you love me, Carl!" she says, with her sweet mouth twitching like a child's.

Venus Victrix—as is always the case.

If she had said she hated him, and yet looked as

beautiful as she does, he would probably have adored her all the same, but now the clinging clasp, the loving grey eyes, the tremulous lips, and, above all, the abandon that love lends her, conquers completely, and the big strong man is the variest baby, malleable as wax, in the circle of these dimpled arms and within earshot of the throb of his love's true heart.

"My own, my sweet!" he cries, stooping and kissing her from brow to chin. "I know you will come when I bid you, my Zai!"

"When you bid me, Carl," she says, her head against his shoulder, her eyes fixed on his face.

Silence for a minute or two. The fresh night air sweeps over them, the leaves rustle gently overhead, and they are as virtually alone as Adam and Eve in Eden. Suddenly the strains of a band fall faintly on the quiet square, and they both start from dreamland into reality.

She listens a moment.

"*Estudiantina!* It's the eighteenth dance, Carl," she says, nervously, for Zai has a much more wholesome fear of her august mother than her sisters have. "How long we have been absent!"

He glances at his watch.

"Half-past one o'clock!—nearly one hour and a half. Who would believe it, little one? Nearly an hour and a half, that has flown like this because you and I are alone together. Just so our lives will pass like a delicious dream, my Zai. I don't think any two people in this world ever loved one another as we do. The very first time I saw you—

do you remember? It was at Lady Derringham's. I have been devoted to fat, fussy Lady Derringham ever since! I knew it was all over with me. No more flirtations, no more bachelor ways for me. I knew it was my wife standing before me, in a sweet little blue dress, with a bunch as big as herself of lilies of the valley in her bosom. Zai, did *you* feel any instinct of the kind?"

"Yes," she whispers, nestling into his arms and kissing his coat-sleeve surreptitiously.

The strains of the Estudiantina Waltz are still floating on the still air. The moon has hidden her face behind a bank of greyish cloud, and already the first pink tinge of dawn peeps down on earth.

"Tell me what you felt?" he says, forgetful of time, of the convenances, of Lady Beranger's wrath, and clasping her nearer, he tenderly draws the long dark cloak closer round her slender throat.

"In the first moment I saw you, Carl, it seemed to me as if God had chosen me out for such delicious—delicious happiness as no other girl ever had in the world. I loved you in that moment as much as I love you now, Carl! And that is—oh! how can I tell you? I don't believe that *was* the beginning of my love, for it was so great, and full, and perfect, that it *must* have been growing a long, long time. I love you!—I love you! I could say it every hour of my life, until you tired of hearing me. But you will never, *never* tire of hearing me say it, Carl, will you?" she asks wistfully.

Carlton Conway laughs as he listens, but it is

scarcely a laugh that denotes mirth. Eight-and-twenty—he has never found a true woman yet to his thinking, until this one came and sat down in blind adoration at his feet, and gave all her pure and loving heart and soul into his keeping—unreservedly—unquestioningly—and brought a sense of happiness with her which he had never pictured even in his dreams.

Tired of hearing that she loves him! When her love is the one thing in all the world to him. It is these words of hers that make him laugh. They seem so strange and absurd, when he knows that his whole being is full of her. So he answers her by wrapping his arms round her, and pressing fond, fervent kisses on her brow and lids and sweet tempting lips—the lips that are his, and that no other man has touched like this. He has culled their perfume and fragrance, and as he feels this to be true, each kiss that he gives and takes seems to be a link in the chain of love that binds them together.

“When do your people leave town, Zai?” he asks her, “and for how long?”

“The day after to-morrow, Carl, she answers, stifling back a sob, for Hampshire seems to be the world’s end from London, “but we shall be back in a week.”

“And who has Lady Beranger invited down to Sandilands?”

“Mr. Hamilton and Lord Delaval.”

Carlton Conway grinds his heel into the ground with impotent rage.

"So," he mutters, "both are eligible men. How well Lady Beranger knows what she's about. I wonder for which of her lovely daughters she is trying to hook old Hamilton?"

"For Trixy I think, Trixy always gets on with elderly men. I believe she is really in love with someone, and is therefore indifferent if her companions are old or young."

Carl Conway reddens. Of course everybody knows that Trixy Beranger, who used to be the biggest flirt in town when she came out two years ago, has sobered down strangely, and everybody puts down the change to the influence of Carl Conway.

"And Delaval is asked for *you*," he cries jealously.

"Oh, Gabrielle will take care of *him*," Zai laughs brightly. "Gabrielle is more fitted for a coronet than either of us. She is so tall and stately, and has so much of what mamma calls worldly guile."

"Which, thank God, *you* haven't, my own Zai. I have got an invitation for the day after to-morrow to Elm Lodge."

"Ah!" she cries, with a happy smile, "that is only a mile from Sandilands."

"Yes, but you know Crystal Meredyth is rather fond of me, and Mrs. Meredyth doesn't object to followers, even if they are artists or actors."

Zai shivers from head to foot in the warm June night, and grows white to her quivering lips as she draws herself away gently from his clasp.

"What is it, darling?" he asks anxiously.

No answer.

Zai's head droops so that he cannot see her eyes, so he puts his hand under her chin and lifts up her face, and as he gazes down at it he thinks that God never made so beautiful a thing as she who has been made for him. The red lips quiver, her sweet eyes tell him such a wondrous tale of love, that he forgets everything but himself and her.

How he longs to carry her away in his stalwart arms. His darling, his little sweetheart!

"Come, Zai, my own, own Zai! Speak to me, tell me once more that you love me, that no one will ever make you forget me. It drives me wild to think that those fellows at Sandilands will be near you, and I away."

"You will have—Crystal Meredyth!" she whispers tremulously, then she breaks into a passion of tears, each of which stabs him to the heart.

He kisses them off, and holds her to him fondly, and what with caresses and love words, draws the smiles back to her mouth, and the pink colour to her cheek.

"Zai, will you swear to be as true to me as I shall be true to you?"

"I swear," she replies unhesitatingly.

"And you won't let those fellows, Delaval and Hamilton, dare to make love to you?"

"I would rather *die*, Carl."

"I believe you would, my child," he answers in a trustful voice, "and now let us say good-night here, though I am going back to the house to show myself."

"Good-night!"

And, like Romeo and Juliet, they find parting is such sweet sorrow that it is some moments before it takes place.

“And when Zai leaves him, he murmurs to himself, truthfully, honestly :

“My God, how I love her !”

Ten minutes after, he is valseing to the strain of “Love’s Dreamland” with Crystal Meredyth, and whispering low to her, and Crystal, who has set him up a hero to worship, blushes and smiles with intense satisfaction.

“What a flirt that Conway is,” Lady Beranger soliloquises, as she watches him covertly. “I do not believe he really presumes to think of Zai, but it won’t do to have him interfering with Delaval. What a charming couple they make,” she adds with intense satisfaction, as Zai floats by with Lord Delaval, but she does not mark how *distracte* her daughter looks, and that the good-looking peer’s soft nothings fall on stony ground, and neither does she know that when the ball is over, Zai goes to bed and cries bitterly as she remembers that Crystal Meredyth is lovely and that men always like pretty women.

CHAPTER II.

SANDILANDS.

"Man's love is of man's life a thing apart,
'Tis woman's whole existence."

It must be a rose-tinted existence. So outsiders fancy as they look at Sandilands from under the shadowy light and shade that falls across some mossy bank, but before they venture an opinion on the subject, let them pause. The judging of other folks' lives by their external surroundings is the most deceptive work possible.

Sandilands is a paradise, but, like the original Paradise, it has a serpent crawling over its flowers—nay, it has more than one.

"Going down to Sandilands just for a breath of fresh air, you know, after the stuffiness of Town," Lady Beranger imparts to the Dowager Marchioness of Damesbury.

But the Dowager knows better. She knows that Lady Beranger delights in the stuffiness of Town, especially in the season, and that Sandilands is only a decoy duck for Lord Delaval.

So she shakes her curls solemnly at the fibber and says nothing, but thinks ever so much the more. She is an astute old aristocrat, old—Heaven knows *how* old—but as festive as a young thing of

one score, and always to be found at country houses as a sort of standing dish.

They do say—they who say everything—that she never spends any of her own income, but is kept in board and lodging by the friends whom she honours by feeding at their expense.

“We are only going down for a week, couldn't we persuade you, dear Marchioness, to run down with us?”

Yes. The Dowager accepts with pleasure. She is a bit of a wag. She has lived so long in the world that she has grown a little cynical and humorous over its fads and follies, and Lady Beranger amuses her immensely. It's such fun to think that Lady Beranger believes she takes her in, when all the while she reads Lady B. through and through, and knows that she is only asked down to Sandilands for mamma to talk to, while her daughters catch the eligibles.

The day after the Berangers come down to Sandilands is a day of days. A sort of day on which one feels satisfied with one's-self and with one's neighbours, and a day on which we forget all the bad days, simply because this one is so exceptionally beautiful.

A mite of a breeze swishes by, just to stir up the leaves overhead out of their laziness, and to make them grumble monotonously at being disturbed. The big brown bees greedily devour the faces of the fragrant roses, the morning is dressed up in pale crimson, the scent of flowers weighs down the babyish wings of the air, and a couple of pinkish,

purplish clouds stand like motionless pillars of Heaven.

It feels to the most unromantic like a hasty snatch of golden splendour gone astray from Eden, an hour in which "Society" forgets its paltry ambitions and heart-burnings, and feels as if there is yet some balm in Gilead, and a life beyond Tophet, in which human hearts will have peace and rest.

Zai has slipped out through the long French casement that opens on the lawn. Gabrielle has contrived to get Lord Delavel into the music-room, where she feeds him with passionate French love-songs, in a low, rich contralto. Trixy, leaning back, fair and indolent, and a trifle indifferent, listens to Archibald Hamilton's prosy discourse on the Land Bill. Baby has meandered down the flowery paths with young Hargreaves, the good-looking village Vet, on pretence of showing him an ill-conditioned Persian cat, but in reality to amuse herself with him *faute de mieux*.

So Zai, once out of sight, flies swiftly through the shrubberies, and only pauses when the far end of the grounds is reached.

It is just from this particular spot that a glimpse of Elm Lodge can be had.

She leans languidly against an old oak, with the grass, which is yet virgin from the Sun-god's kisses, making a dainty green carpet for her little feet.

Poor little Zai! A daughter of Belgravia is a traitor to her creed, for she is honestly, desperately in love.

If Carl Conway could see her at this moment, men

are such slaves to beauty that he would be doubly enamoured of his little sweetheart. The background of dark green glossy foliage throws up almost too vividly her lovely white flesh tints and her slender statuesque figure. Her hands are folded loosely together, and a far-off expression lurks in her big, luminous grey eyes, half veiled by broad, drooping lids and long, curling lashes.

Zai is dreaming—"only dreaming."

Her dreams are :

"Dim and faint are the mists that break
At sunrise from a mountain lake,"

but they are evidently pleasant, for a soft smile passes over her lips, and her face seems to overflow with sunshine, while all manner of entrancing dimples spring into life, and make a "*parfait amour*" of her as our neighbours across the Channel say.

Perhaps an acute physiognomist would find something wanting in the fair sweet, girlish face, a power, a firmness, character, in fact, but few of us are true physiognomists, even if acute ones, and very few eyes, especially masculine ones, would discover flaws in the entrancing beauty that has caught Carl Conway's worldly heart.

There is a wistful look in Zai's face however, which does not deteriorate from her attractions. It has come with the thought that just there over the clump of swaying pines, is the house where Crystal Meredyth lives, and where Carl is staying.

"Zai!"

Zai has been a fixture against the oak tree for

an hour, and so absorbed in her thoughts that the far-off expression lingers in her glance as she turns slowly round.

"Yes, Gabrielle."

"Your mother wants you. Her Ladyship's keen instinct divined that in all probability you were mooning away your time out here."

"Mooning, Gabrielle, what a word."

"A very good word, and an expressive one. All Belgravia speaks slang now; it has become quite fashionable to imitate the coal-heavers and the horsey men, and I don't dislike it myself. It is far better than the refined monotonous twaddle of those horrible *convénances*."

"Do you talk slang to Lord Delaval?" Zai asks with a smile.

"*Pas si bête!* I leave that till I have landed my fish!"

"I often wonder, Gabrielle, if you really care for that man, or if you are only trying to catch him."

"Both, dear. The first feeling naturally induces the last inclination. But we can't stay chattering here; lunch is ready and the stepmother wants you."

"What for?" asks Zai, with unusual petulance.

She does not want to leave this charmed spot, with the big trees arching overhead, the swallows foolishly whirling round and round up in the sky, the sunlight falling on hollow and glade and dell, and just over there the house where her Carl dwells.

"How should I know? Lady Beranger is not

likely to confide her desires to such a heretic as myself; perhaps she does not think it quite the thing for the flower of her flock to stand like a marble effigy of love and patience for the undergardener to gape at."

"As if I care *who* stares at me!" Zai mutters with unwonted recklessness.

"Of course you don't, *pas le moins du monde!* Zaidie Beranger, a modern Galatea, that only her Pygmalion, Carl Conway, can rouse into feeling or life, must naturally be as impervious as the Sphinx to curiosity," Gabrielle says mockingly, with an expressive shrug of the shoulders that, together with a slight accent, denote that she has only a part claim to English nationality.

"Don't chaff, Gabrielle, it is most unladylike," Zai says, imitating Lady Beranger's slow solemn voice, and both burst out laughing.

"But, really, I only came out for a whiff of fresh air; the house oppresses me. But there never is a bit of freedom at home, my mother never leaves me alone."

"Perhaps she has right on her side, just now. You are tanning your skin in this broiling sun, and looking ill from the heat."

"What *can* it signify *how* I look?" Zai cries contemptuously.

"Only that Lord Delaval was deploring this morning how white and thin you were looking. He even hinted that you had gone off a little, although you have had only one season in London."

“Lord Delaval! Gabrielle. Pray, what right has he to indulge in personal remarks about me, and how much can *his* opinion affect me, do you think?”

Gabrielle colours angrily.

“As for that, Lord Delaval is not isolated in the place he holds in your estimation. What is anybody’s opinion to you, you silly love-sick child, except one individual, and he is what Lady Beranger calls, a ‘detrimental,’ and the object of her unmitigated dislike.”

“If you have only come out to vex me, Gabrielle, I think you had much better have stayed indoors and entertained Lord Delaval with more of those songs. Mamma calls them positively indecent; she says they are simply a ‘declaration’ under cover of music, and that thoroughbred girls should be ashamed to sing them. I heard you singing to Lord Delaval this morning, Gabrielle,

‘Ah! je t’adore mon âme:
Ah! je te donne—tout! tout!
Et toi?—veux tu etre infame
Ah! veux tu me rendre—fou?’

and, you *must* say, it sounds like a declaration!”

A deep crimson wave sweeps over the stormy face of Gabrielle Beranger, making her look like a beautiful fiend. A frown gathers unmistakably on her forehead, and the large but well-formed hand, that holds her parasol, clutches the handle like a vice, with a passion that the owner does not care to conceal.

"So Lady Beranger said that? How dare she hit at my mother's birth as she is always doing? I am sure it does not show her to have any of the delicate feelings which aristocrats are supposed to monopolise! And after all, she only took my mother's leavings."

"How ridiculously sensitive you are on the point of your maternal history, Gabrielle. I wish I could make you forget all about it, that you might not remind one of it so often," Zai says wearily.

For Gabrielle Beranger, like many of us, has a decided cross. And that cross is the social status of the French *bouquetière* that Lord Beranger had elevated to his bosom and position in the days of his hot-headed, unwary youth. No one would believe such a peccadillo of him now—starch as his own stick-ups; full of proprieties, and a slave to the voice of the world.

Her dead mother's birth is the skeleton in Gabrielle's cupboard that is dragged out for her own and her step-sister's benefit continually, and yet, this same sensitiveness is curiously inconsistent with her self-complacency and undeniable pretension.

"Yes, Gabrielle, you are absurdly sensitive on some things. I can't think why, since we are all Lord Beranger's daughters," Zai murmurs carelessly, pulling off absently the leaves from a little bough of willow, and wondering what Carl and Crystal are amusing themselves with. Perhaps, ah! the thought makes her feel quite sick! Crystal Meredyth is regaling Carl on the same sort of passionate music as Gabrielle has favoured Lord Delaval with.

"Yes; we are all Lord Beranger's daughters; but

you all have the *sangre azul* running through your veins, while I have the muddy current of the Quartier Latin to boast of; and then again, all the money in the place, little as it is, came with my step-mother, and Papa and I are dependents on her bounty."

Zai does not answer, the subject is threadbare, and silence is so pleasant with the mighty elms sending long shadows across the emerald grass, with the foliage rustling gently, and fleecy white clouds scudding along the sapphire sky, tempering the amber heat.

The muddy current that Gabrielle hates is not the only misfortune Lord Beranger's early imprudence has brought her. He had married a second time, and the three girls, Beatrice, Zaidie and Mirabelle were no longer in actual babyhood when Gabrielle was brought from the French people who had charge of her to Belgravia—brought with all the faults and failings of bourgeoisie, faults and failings that to Lady Beranger's notions are too dreadful.

"It is far easier to eradicate bad temper, or want of principle, than to put *savoir faire*, or a due sense of the convenances, into a girl," she always says, but all the same she has tried to do her duty by this step-daughter of hers, in her cold steely way, and is quite convinced that she has been the means of snatching the brand from the burning, and saving a soul from perdition.

As Gabrielle and Zai stand side by side, quite a family resemblance can be traced between them. But it is only a general resemblance after all; for they are really as dissimilar as light and darkness.

Gabrielle has none of Zai's angelic type. A celebrated French author once said that womankind are divided into three classes—Angels, Imbeciles, Devils.

Zai is an angel. Gabrielle is certainly not an imbecile, therefore she must be in the last class.

Both the sisters are tall, and both are slender, and both bear upon them an unmistakably aristocratic air, though Gabrielle's claims to it are only partial. She inherits the creamy skin, the coal black heavy tresses, and the bold passionate eyes of her French mother, and in spite of her ripe and glowing tints of opal and rose, and her full pouting lips, she is cast in a much harder mould than Zai or the other sisters.

Gabrielle is in fact too hard and self-reliant for a woman, whose very helplessness is her chief charm, and in whom the clinging confiding nature that yearns for sympathy and support appeals to the masculine heart as most graceful and touching of all things, for timidity is the most taking attribute of the fair sex, though it has its attendant sufferings and inconveniences.

The self-assertion, and freedom, and independence that there is so much chatter about amongst our women now-a-days is only a myth after all, for a real refined womanly nature closes like the leaf of the sensitive plant at unaccustomed contact with the world.

But there are women, and *women*, and men who fancy each sort according to good or bad taste. There is none of the sensitive plant about Gabrielle Beranger anyway. She is of a really independent

nature that will assert itself *per fas et nefas*—a nature that can brook no control, and that throws off all conventional shackles with barely concealed contempt. She is a Bohemian all over, she has belonged to the Bedouins of civilisation from her youth up, and has run rampant through a labyrinth of low life, and the tastes that go hand in hand with it, but on the principle that all things are good for something, Gabrielle's hardness and self-reliance, united to acuteness, have served her during her career when a nobler but weaker nature might have sunk beyond redemption.

Her early years have unfitted her for the Belgravian life that fate has chalked out, and a treadmill of social duties proves so tiresome that no paraphernalia of luxury—dearly as she loves it—reconciles her to her lot. At least it did not do so until she fell head over ears in love with the fair, languid, and brilliant peer—the Earl of Delaval.

Her wilful, fiery spirit revolts at being a sort of pariah to her stepmother and her stepmother's swell relatives, the swells whom (until she knew Lord Delaval) her revolutionary spirit despised utterly. She would give worlds if the man she loves was a Bohemian like herself, and whatever is true in her is comprised in her feelings for him.

She is an enigma to her sisters, whose education has to a certain extent reduced ideas and feelings within the radius of "propriety," and taught them, at any rate, the eleventh Commandment—that all Belgravia knows,

"Thou shalt not be found out."

"Can anything—anything make you really happy Gabrielle?" Trixy had asked one day, years ago, when she and her two sisters had enjoyed, to their hearts' content, a big box at Drury Lane, and a pantomime with a transformation scene that had worked up their young minds into a fever of excitement, and Gabrielle had sat through it all without a change on her dark face.

"Happy," she had said, "can anything give *real* happiness? Of happiness in a positive state I knew nothing, my dear, properly-brought-up young sister. I am only able to make my comparison by a greater or lesser feeling of misery. I dare say I often shock you by my sentiments, but anyone who has been kicked about like a football in this world, as I have, is not likely to look at things in the same light as you Belgravian girls. I believe you all regard with suspicion the poor wight for whom life hasn't been all *couleur de rose*, and think it a shocking instance of depravity of human nature if one should not be intensely content in such a remarkably pleasant world."

"Where have you learned such a queer way of thinking, Gabrielle?" Zai and Baby demanded in a breath.

"Where, indeed?" Gabrielle was not going to say. *Pas si bête!* She averts her head and holds her peace, and is quite sharp enough to know that to the little pink, unsullied ears, it would not do to whisper the secrets of the past, when, almost a gutter *gamin*, she had picked up notions of life and its thousand joys and ten thousand miseries. A

little red and white *pirotte's* garb, in the rollicking mad Carnival time—a gaudy tinselled box of cheap and nasty bon-bons—a fragment of flimsy, soiled, but flaring ribbon—or a battered artificial flower to deck her coal-black plaits. These pretty well had been her catalogue of joys, but the miseries were just countless in the bare and squalid room *au cinquième* among the roofs and the sparrows—a mother always meretricious in her youth and beauty, but absolutely awful with faded cheeks and haggard eyes, dying the death of a daughter of Heth—without one prayer on her pallid mouth—without one hope in her reckless breast. Then—the woeful absence of bread, the continual presence of drink.

For can there be a spectacle more sickening than a drunken woman—dead for the nonce to shame and disgrace; the idiotic glare in the eye, the foolish simper on the grinning lips, the flow of words that pour unchecked from a debased mind?

When Gabrielle's memory conjures up all this she closes her black eyes tightly to try and shut out the horrible past, and yet she loves her Bohemia still, and hates Belgravia, save the one particular spot in it where Lord Delaval lives and moves, and has his being.

She is thinking of him now under the arching elms. Athwart their fluttering leaves she can see his blond aristocratic face, and she longs to be back to hear his voice, the languid accents of which are harmony to her ears.

“Shall I go in now and say you prefer dreaming

away the hours here to *cotelettes soubise* and cold chicken?" she asks, breaking in rather sharply on the long silence which has fallen, and during which she sees plainly enough that poor little love-sick Zai has entirely forgotten her proximity even. She is wonderfully practical is Gabrielle Beranger, a child of the south, for her maternal ancestors were pure Marseillaise. She is brimful of passion, but the passion is sufficiently material to permit of love of Lord Delaval and love of the flesh pots to go hand-in-hand, and it occurs to her at this moment, in the midst of her reverie under the elms, that the *cotelettes soubise* and *Cailles à point d'asperges* do not improve by growing cold.

"I am not day-dreaming, Gabrielle. Cannot one be allowed to think, even, without being called to account for it?" Zai asks wearily.

"Not when the thoughts are, to say the least, very foolish ones. When the subject of them is one Carlton Conway, *jeune amoureux* at the Bagatelle, and very much the reverse of one of Lady Beranger's pet eligibles."

A swift colour like a deep rose pink sweeps over Zai's face, a colour that creeps up to the roots of her ruddy chestnut hair, and dyes her fair lily-like throat. The name Gabrielle whispers has a magical charm about it, for besides the blush, it evokes the softest of love-lights into Zai's grey eyes.

"I will go in with you if you like," she says in a voice that sounds quite meek and deprecatory, and Gabrielle, as she glances at her, feels sorry that her careless words should hurt this loving, tender heart.

If there is a soft spot in her heart for one of her own sex it is for this step-sister of hers. Trixy she hates, and Baby she despises, but Zai, although like the others, born and bred in Belgravia, is of quite another mould. But though Gabrielle is fond of Zai, she will not hesitate to plunge the dagger (metaphorically) into her heart if the time should come when such would serve her own purposes.

"I didn't mean to chaff or worry just now, Zai," she says quite softly, with a humility that is quite foreign to her, "but you know you wear your heart so much on your sleeve, child, that no wonder daws will peck."

Zai's lids droop, and her lips twitch as if fully aware of her shortcomings. She is desperately in love, and has a simple nature in spite of Belgravia's training, and she is much too loyal to dream of denying the existence of a love that is part and parcel of her nature. Her passion for Carl Conway is like the air of Heaven to her, invisible, intangible, but yet it encircles her soul, and is just the Alpha and Omega of everything.

"You see, Zai, the governor and her ladyship want a pull up and not a drag down—the family finances are so seedy that they want rich men for sons-in-law. Even a German prince wouldn't find favour in their sight. They mean Trixy and you to marry Lord Delaval and Archibald Hamilton; they don't care in the least which marries which, so long as both good *partis* are secured. Baby will follow suit, directly you are both safely settled down with your money-bags. She is of that infantile sort

that Shortland is supposed to have a fancy for, so probably the parents will go in for strawberry leaves for their youngest born. Zai, don't you pity any man who marries Baby? She is the greatest little caution in life."

"And what are they going to do with *you*, Gabrielle?" Zai asks, ignoring the hints at Baby.

"With *me*, oh, nothing. Nought can always take care of itself, for it never comes to harm, you know," Gabrielle answers bitterly, "but *you* are the one object of solicitude to Lady Beranger just now. Of course, with all her ambitious ideas, it does seem hard for you to subside into the wife of an actor, who has nothing to recommend him except a good-looking face, and a pleasant way of making love—a rôle he goes through nearly every day of his life, so that practice has made it perfect."

"His chief recommendation is—*himself!*" Zai whispers with quivering lips, and another hot and fleeting blush.

"Well, yes. *Je ne dis pas autrement!* I haven't a word to say against him. He is always nice to my face, though I don't believe he likes me in his heart. You see I am not of your sort, Zai."

Zai smiles softly at this, and then, with a woman's way of harping on love subjects when in love herself, says suddenly:

"I wonder if Baby will marry Lord Delaval one of these days?"

"Lord Delaval!" echoes Gabrielle, with a start and a frown. "And why on earth should she marry him?"

"Because he has been fond of Baby as long as I can remember. When we were all children together, he used to fight her battles, and Baby at five was the most quarrelsome little monkey that you can imagine. She does not care for him now, but used to love sitting on his knee, and patting his cheeks, and *on revient toujours*, you know."

"No! I *don't* know," Gabrielle answers with acerbity.

Her big black eyes dilate as she takes in each unwelcome word and her full red lip curls scornfully.

"I *do* hate stupid little reminiscences of childhood, Zai.

'I remember! I remember! when my little lovers came!
With a lily or a cherry, or a new invented game!'

Did you ever hear such inane trash as this sort of thing, Zai! Are you a simpleton or are you trying to throw dust in my eyes? We know each other too well for that. Let us speak truth always. I like truth under all circumstances, even if the hearing of it crushes my heart and spoils my life; but of course let those live on lies who like them!"

And she laughs, a harsh unpleasant laugh, that Balzac and Georges Sand have taught her, and to which is coupled a natural capability of catching at the under currents of life.

"I never was a hypocrite, Gabrielle and I hate falsehoods as much as you do," Zai answers rather hotly.

"Then why do you pretend that it's Baby and not

you that will become Lady Delaval by-and-by perhaps."

Zai faces her with a bright flush on her cheek, and a flash in her soft grey eyes.

"I Lady Delaval! Gabrielle, you must be mad to hint such a thing. Am I a child or a doll to be handed over to a man I would rather die than marry — if he were one of the Royalties and three times better looking than he is! Lord Delaval is an insipid dandy, with a weak face and—and just the opposite of what I admire!"

"Insipid, weak! Your ideas of him are just prejudice, Zai. You have heard your oracle run him down, and have taken in everything as if it was gospel. I am a bit of a physiognomist and I dare be sworn Lord Delaval never made up his mind to arrive at anything or anybody and failed!"

"He will fail ignominiously if he ever does me the honour of thinking of me as Lady Delaval! Gabrielle you *know* I shall never marry any one if I don't marry Carl!"

Gabrielle shrugs her grand shoulders again, while a shade of contempt passes over her mouth as she looks at her companion. Zai looks so fragile and weak—so unfit for any contest of life, a piece of rustic waxwork, in fact, to be carefully handled. She grows quite white as she glances, thinking how easily Lady Beranger will arrange the match if Lord Delaval is willing—Lord Delaval, whom she loves so desperately that she would rather shoot him dead on the spot than let any other woman call him husband.

Inspid! Weak! the words rile her as they recur to her mind, since it is Lord Delaval's very force of character that is his greatest charm in her eyes, for she is of a nature to adore daring, even if unscrupulous and exercised in dishonourable cause. It is Delaval's intense masculinity that has fascinated her, for before she came in contact with him, she had never met a man of an equal amount of vigour, combined with so much personal beauty.— Gabrielle Beranger is one of those girls that Mephistopheles calls of super-sensuous refinement. And weakness of character has something repulsive in it for her.

Her senses are too susceptible, and she has a habit of filtering her emotions through the medium of an imagination which is rather dangerously material.

"I hope you'll prove yourself a paragon of strength, Zai," she says, with a mocking smile. "Lord Delaval, to my idea, has such an absolute will that I sometimes think he has taken for himself the motto of Philip of Spain, 'Time and I against any two.' If I were you, child, I should take him and bowl Carl Conway over. There isn't much of the right stuff in your beloved Carl, but in Lord Delaval there are possibilities of something far beyond the ordinary. Do you know, I think he and Randolph Churchill are much of a muchness, and you must acknowledge Lord Randolph is delicious; there's a go about him which I love, and which makes up for his being a Conservative."

"Gabrielle, if you admire Lord Delaval so much,

why don't you try and marry him yourself?" Zai asks suddenly.

Gabrielle blushes, blushes a fierce, unmistakable red; she does not often blush, for this is a habit less known in Bohemia than Belgravia even, but the blush after all is only the tell-tale of the storm of feeling within, and her voice is hard as stone as she answers:

"I! you forget I am Gabrielle Beranger, with a lot of muddy current in my veins, and only my face as my fortune. Lord Delaval probably regards me as a naught in creation, a social mistake; handsome and fastidious, he can look for a wife among the Royalties, if he likes."

"Anyway, you *must* confess you are awfully in love with him, Gabrielle," Zai cries, with a mischievous laugh, and once more Gabrielle colours like a rose

"Silly child! I know my position too well for that."

"I cannot understand why you should think so much of his standing—he is no better, socially, than all the other lords about town, and I cannot see why he should not marry a girl with whom he is always talking and flirting."

"Flirting! Of course you think he flirts with me! You cannot believe that any man holds me in sufficient respect to treat me as he would you or any other girl of his own set. I should like to know if no one can really like me and not try to amuse idle hours by flirting with me, but I suppose that is too much to expect! I *must* be flirting material or nothing!"

Another silence falls on them after this outburst, then Gabrielle looks round and yawns.

"How I hate the country," she avers, "it is full of dismal sounds; the cattle do nothing but moan, the sheep wail, ah! ah! ah! and nature is one unceasing coronach. I wonder how many days it is Lady Beranger's will that we shall dabble in puddles, and look down empty roads. Do come along Zai, your respected parent will kill me by the lightning of her eye if I go in without you. Just throw C. C. to the four winds, and come and make yourself agreeable to the menkind indoors."

"I'll come in five minutes, Gabrielle," Zai answers absently, and as soon as Gabrielle's tall figure is out of sight, she forgets her promise in a delicious little reverie, in which the sunlight, glinting down through the tangled boughs, touches her cheek with the deepest pink and adds a softer lustre to her sweet grey eyes.

"I will never marry any one but you Carl, so long as I live," she says half aloud fervently, then she glances furtively around, and when she finds she is all alone with the sunshine, the swaying leaves, the emerald grass, the foolish child devours with passionate kisses a tiny gold ring, which, after the fashion of romantic schoolgirls, is attached by a thin cord that encircles her pretty white throat, and rests night and day on the loving, fluttering heart that the same C. C., actor, pauper and detrimental, has taken possession of, wholly and solely.

CHAPTER III.

AFTERNOON TEA.

“All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.”

REVERIES cannot last for ever, even with Carl Conway’s handsome face present in them, and Zai starts to find that the sun-god is making rapid tracks westward, and remembers that Sandilands is one of those clockwork houses where unpunctuality at meals is a cardinal sin.

It is hard ; for Zai, like a good many other girls who are in love, has no appetite. She fed to repletion on soft words and softer caresses in Belgrave Square, the night of the ball. And she wants nothing now until—until—some more of the same kind of nectar is given her.

She walks slowly down a narrow path fringed on either side thickly by glossy shrubs, and which leads to the back of the house, and indifferent to the regard and gossip of high life below stairs, runs up to her own room.

The sun has climbed up quite high in the western sky, and, enthroned in golden raiment, pours down such a reflection of his yellow glory on the toilette table, that she stands for a moment blinking and winking her pretty eyes like a newborn puppy.

Then she suddenly recollects something Gabrielle had told her, and stooping, stares hard at herself in her mirror.

She dreads to find that she has really grown white and thin, that she has "gone off" according to Lord Delaval's verdict. The thought that Carl, who is so fastidious in his ideal of beauty, may find her wanting is too awful ; so she falls to examining feature by feature eagerly.

These are what the looking-glass reflects back.

A small head, crowned with waves of hair, chestnut and silky, with threads of ruddy gold gleaming up here and there. A pair of big grey eyes, that can flash in anger, but are as sweet and serene as summer skies when her soul is in sunshine. A pair of lips, red and tempting, cheeks, fair and lily white, with the faintest of pink rose petals laid on them, long, dark brown fringes to broad lids, whose shadow by and by may help to intensify a look of sadness in the eyes ; but now all is brightness in this charming face of nineteen.

Zai looks, but is not satisfied with the catalogue of charms presented to her critical gaze. Compared with the delicate perfection of Crystal Meredyth's face, with its well-opened china-blue eyes and coral pouting mouth, she feels her own to be a decided failure. Her nose is not a bit Grecian, her expression has not the ladylike, inanimate look of Crystal's.

She muses on, while she tidies her rebellious tresses that Zephyr has been taking liberties with, and fastens a bunch of dark-red glowing roses into

the bodice of her white dress, and makes herself what Lady Beranger calls "presentable" before society. And, as she muses, a sparkling smile breaks on her mouth, for no reason whatever, except that she feels happy since she loves Carl, and Carl loves her, and with the sparkle of this smile still lingering on her face she goes slowly down the grand staircase to find the luncheon-room deserted.

With a look of dismay at the huge Louis Seize timepiece opposite, the hand of which points at half-past four, she crosses a large, square, tessellated hall, that opens into a boudoir that is a perfect gem in its way, and replete with all the luxury that "ye aristocrats" love.

The room is of an octagonal shape, with rare silken hangings of *bleu de ciel*; the walls, of ivory and gold, are decorated by Horace Vernet's delicious productions, varied by a pastel or two of Boucher's, and with a tiny but exquisite Meissonier, which even a neophyte in painting would pick out, gleaming from the rest.

Art is everywhere, but art united with indulgence and indolence. The lounges and ottomans are deep and puffy, and marvellously soft, and fat downy cushions lie about in charming confusion.

So much for the room, which cannot be seen without at once suggesting the presence of an ultra-refined spirit.

This spirit, embodied in a good deal of flesh and blood and known as Lady Beranger, is here, presiding at afternoon tea.

Folds of rich black satin fall around her ample

form, yards of priceless Chantilly go round her skirts and throat and wrists.

Satins and laces are her familiars, though the Beranger exchequer is low, for Worth and Elise, Lewis and Allenby, Marshall and Snelgrove supply them, and never worry for their bills.

Leaders of Society like Lady Beranger are walking advertisements of the goods, and it is so easy to make your plain Mrs. Brown, Jones or Robinson pay up any bad debts among the "quality."

Lady Beranger becomes her costly garments as well as they become her. She is a very tall woman, and very stately and handsome. Perhaps in the very palmiest days her beauty had never been classical. How seldom beauty is so; but she is very imposing to look on, and she is exceptionally thoroughbred in appearance. A woman, in fact, who bears upon her the unmistakable *cachet* of blue blood.

She has, of course, faults, and the gravest of them is love of money. It is the dream of her life that her lovely bouquet of daughters shall marry "fortunes," and her cross at present consists in the bitter knowledge that both Trixy and Zai are in love, and in love with a pauper.

A pauper, for Trixy is, in her way—a very different way to her sister's—as much in love with Carl Conway as Zai is.

Afternoon tea is quite an institution at Sandilands, and at half-past four Lady Beranger settles down to a substantial meal of cake and muffins and bread and butter, while the olive branches look on in silent wonderment, and ask themselves if a love

of the fleshpots comes hand in hand with riper years.

"Trixy, I forgot to tell you that I met old Stubbs near the Lodge gates, and he is coming to call this afternoon," Gabrielle announces, between slow sips of her tea.

"Is he! well he won't find *me* at home," a thin and peevish voice answers.

It seems to rise from the depths of one of the most comfortable chairs, on which an amber-haired white witch lies half *perdu*.

This is Trixy Beranger, Lady Beranger's eldest marketable article, and a lovely thing it is.

She would serve for an exact model, as she lounges here, of the lovely Persian girl that our Poet Laureate saw in his excursion up the Tigris to "Bagdad's shrines of fretted gold."

Trixy is a rare and radiant maiden—a bird of Paradise, over whom most men go mad, but do not care to wed, and to whom most women are cold, conscious that their good looks pale beside hers.

Gabrielle's glowing beauty of coal-black tresses and creamy skin, waxes quite dim in Trixy's proximity, and Baby's cherub face and golden curls are nowhere, but Zai—well, Zai is a law unto herself.

Society last year had fallen down helplessly on its knees, and worshipped the *débutante* of the season, the Hon. Beatrix Beranger. From the Royalties downwards she was the rage.

They even likened her to every poetical saint in the calendar, and Trixy, not overweighted with brains, and with her lovely head completely turned,

in acknowledgment of the compliment, considers herself in duty bound towards mankind in general and, in fact, a point of conscience, to "pose" accordingly.

She feels it incumbent on her never to allow herself to be out of drawing, as the R. A.'s have it, to be always (in spite of the discomfort of the thing) ready for an inspiration for a poet, or a study for a painter; so from sheer force of habit, that has become her second nature, she sinks perpetually into graceful attitudes, even if no one more important than Baby's dachshund Bismark is by to admire.

She even arranges herself with due regard for the picturesque, when she retires to her own little sanctum for a siesta.

If Trixy's beauty is in consequence marred just a little bit in the world by a *soupeçon* of self-consciousness, it is not a matter of marvel. A Belgavian damsel can scarcely, with all the *bonne volonté* imaginable personate Lalla Rookh, Idalian Aphrodite, Mary Anderson, the three Graces, a whole sisterhood of Muses, and herself to boot without someone suffering in the transmogrification, and that someone is naturally—herself.

Just now Trixy, who has been reading an article on the Porte and Bulgaria, is "doing" an odalisque, out of a Turkish harem. She is surrounded by a pile of satin cushions with a tender background of pale lilac and gold embroidery that helps to enhance the wonderful transparency of her skin, displays to greater advantage the yellow wealth of

her hair, and forms an effective relief for the little Greek profile, chiselled like a cameo.

Looking at her, it does not require much fertility of imagination to fancy her a Lurley, but Trixy Beranger it must be confessed is a Lurley more powerful to ensnare when silent than when she discourses. Such a stream of small talk of silly frivolities, that pour from her perfect lips! The Mikado, tailor-made dresses, Mrs. Langtry's American outfit, these are about the only topics on her brain, and she babbles about them in a sort of childish treble that soon brings on a reaction in the breast of her most devoted.

But though three parts of London have paid her attention, though dukes and earls have swelled the length of her train, long as a comet's tail, Trixy has never had one eligible offer.

So now, after two seasons' campaigning, and superseded this last year by Zai, she is slightly disgusted at the non-appreciative qualities of the upper-ten, though in no wise disenchanted with herself.

"May I enquire of whom you were speaking, Gabrielle?" Lady Beranger asks in a sepulchral tone, fanning herself with a huge Japanese screen, after her exertions with the cake, muffins, and bread and butter.

"Of old Stubbs! Of course he expects to find Trixy when he calls."

"But I shan't be!" Trixy reiterates decidedly. "I am going to Southampton to do some shopping. I am so comfortable I don't want to move, but

Gabrielle you might ring and order the carriage for me."

Gabrielle laughs, and going over to her whispers:

"Old Stubbs was clad in a yellow-brown alpaca suit, and looked such a guy. He put me in mind of the frog that would a wooing go. I wonder what was the end of that frog."

"About the same as old Stubbs' will be, if he makes a fool of himself about me," Trixy answers peevishly, while she settles herself in another picturesque attitude. "Still, whatever I choose to think of him, it is very unpleasant to have all one's admirers run down, as you have a shocking habit of doing, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle hearkens with a contemptuous smile, but she reddens hotly as Lady Beranger chimes in with:

"Of all things, flippancy is the most unladylike. Gabrielle, *your* flippancy jars on my nerves horribly, to say nothing of its being indicative of low birth and breeding. Old Stubbs, whom you are pleased to make a butt of, is one of our biggest millionaires, and a most eligible acquaintance."

"Old Stubbs' father was a butcher," Gabrielle breaks in defiantly.

"Mr. Stubbs is a self-made man," Lady Beranger says quietly, casting a scornful glance at her stepdaughter. "I admire self-made men immensely, and I hope Trixy knows better than to be guilty of such rudeness as going out."

A frown puckers the odalisque's fair brow.

"I *prefer* going out shopping, mamma, to staying at home to talk to such an ugly man," she says wilfully.

"Fiddlesticks! Trixy. Recollect he is Hymen's ambassador, that he is wrapped up in banknotes, and that beauty's only skin deep," Gabrielle tells her, with a laugh.

"If you think Mr. Stubbs so charming, mamma, you know you can have his society all to yourself."

"I shall certainly make a point of being present," Lady Beranger answers, without a ruffle on her tutored face. "You ought to know me well enough, Trixy, to be aware that I should never risk such a breach of the *convenances* as to allow a daughter of mine to receive, alone, any man, were he king or kaiser, who was not her acknowledged suitor."

"Who is not an acknowledged suitor?" cries Baby, bouncing into the room after her usual fashion. Her hat has fallen off to the back of her head, her eyes dance with mischief, and her cheeks are flushed like damask roses, but her muslin dress is tossed and tumbled, and not improved by the muddy paws of a miserable half-bred Persian kitten which she holds in her arms.

"Hargreaves is such fun, Gabrielle! He came to look at Toots' tootsey-wootseys, and made love to me instead," she whispers.

"What a Tomboy you are, Baby," Lady Beranger says sharply. "Lord Delaval will be in to tea presently, so run off and change your dress. You

look like a maid-of-all-work, with your fringe all uncurled and your soiled hands, and *don't* bring that horrid kitten here again."

"I *hate* Lord Delaval!" Baby cries frankly. "He is not half so handsome or so nice as—as—shoals of men I know."

"Not so nice as Hargreaves, the village veterinary," Gabrielle breaks in maliciously, vexed at her idol being run down.

"Hargreaves! What can Baby know of *his* niceness?" Lady Beranger questions, in her severest tone.

"Nothing, mamma; it is only Gabrielle's spite because she thinks Lord Delaval such a paragon!"

Lady Beranger passes her eye over Gabrielle, icily.

"I do not think it is of importance to us what you think of Lord Delaval, Gabrielle, so long as your sentiments in no way clash with mine on the subject. Did you ask Zai to come in?"

"I am here, mamma, do you want me" Zai says, walking quietly into the bosom of her family, and thinking what a very uncomfortable place it is.

The balmy breeze stirring the elm tops has not wooed her in vain—for her cheeks look like blush roses and her hair seems to have caught in its meshes every glint of sunlight that fell on it.

"Yes, I want you, or rather I don't want you to take up your residence completely in the grounds, to ruin your skin, and to catch those vulgar things, freckles! you have a coarse flush on your face now, like a housemaid. Zai, I must really put my veto on your goings on."

"What goes on, mamma? It is deliciously cool under the trees and this room is quite stifling. What can it signify if my skin does tan a little? I love to be out in the grounds, where I can think comfortably."

"Think! what on earth can you have to think about, Zai?" Lady Beranger begins sternly, and Zai knows she is in for a lecture. "Girls of your age, if they are of properly-regulated minds, let others think for them. You have three or four serious duties in life to attend to. The first duty is to honour your father and mother and obey them implicitly; the second, is to take care of your looks, and to dress well; the third is——"

"To marry an eligible," Gabrielle chimes in pertly.

"Exactly!" Lady Beranger says calmly. "Your chief duty is to show your gratitude to your parents, for all they have done for you, by making a good match."

"I don't care for money," Zai murmurs meekly.

"Of course you don't; you don't care for anything that you ought to care for, Zai. You positively ignore the fact of ~~who~~ you are, and forget common deference to society, which is, attention to the people around you. Last Thursday night, I heard Lady Vandeleur bewailing how *distracte* you were, and she smiled, Zai! smiled, quite in an aggravating way! She heard you reply to Lord Delaval when he asked for a valse: 'I'll take strawberry, please.' No wonder she hinted to me that you had something on your mind!"

"Poor old Lady Vandeleur fancies, perhaps, like Shakspeare, that Zai has—

' A madness most discreet,
A choking gall, and a preserving sweet ! ' "

suggests Gabrielle once more. "Why did you not tell her that your daughter is *stage struck*?"

"Your attempts at wit are dreadful, Gabrielle," Lady Beranger murmurs languidly. "Your tongue is, indeed, an unruly member."

"I really think Zai has softening of the brain," Trixy says spitefully. "She never remembers that her folly and eccentricity may compromise me. People might easily mistake one sister for the other."

Spite is Trixy's forte. Silky and saccharine, her tiny *pattes de velours* are always ready to creep out and scratch. Her mother understands her nature, and tries to check feline propensities; but Trixy, like many of her sex, is a born cat.

"Zai is more likely to compromise herself than you. She will establish a reputation for being queer, and damage her chance of securing an eligible *parti*."

"I wish there was no such word in English as eligible," Gabrielle cries impetuously. "I hate the very sound of it. I suppose I am too low-born and democratic to appreciate the term. It seems to me that every marriageable young woman should carry about a weighing-machine, and that, so long as Cyclops or any clod is heavily gilded—Hey! presto! he's the man."

Lady Beranger gives her a slow, level look, and wonders why such savages as Gabrielle exist.

"Please keep your *outré* notions to yourself," she remarks quietly. "My daughters have been taught to look on a good marriage as their due, and I am sure it never enters into their heads to degrade themselves by a *mésalliance*."

"I think poor men ever so much nicer than rich ones, mamma," Zai murmurs deprecatingly, and her white little hands nervously clasping and unclasping.

"Do you recollect Evelyn Ashley, mamma?" Trixy asks in a gentle, but hypocritical voice. "No one ever forgets that she fell in love with a riding-master, and was on the brink of eloping with him, when, luckily his horse threw him and he was killed. Of course, she is all right now, and very nice; but I don't believe anyone worth speaking of would dream of marrying her."

"I am sure an *eligible* never would!" Gabrielle says satirically.

Zai's grey eyes blaze, her little mouth quivers with excess of anger and indignation.

"By introducing that episode of Evelyn Ashley I conclude you mean to insinuate, Trixy, that her disgraceful affair is a parallel to what you think are my feelings for Carl?"

"Certainly. I call a riding-master quite as good, if not better, than an actor," Trixy retorts coolly, though Carl Conway is as much in her head as in Zai's heart.

"Gentlemen and officers have been forced throug

adverse circumstances to earn their bread by teaching riding, at least one hears of such cases. Of course it is not likely for *me* to have run across them," she adds with supreme arrogance and a little curl of her pretty lip.

"And you think anyone following the profession of an actor, from sheer love of his art, cannot be a gentleman? Not even if by birth he is one—and in fact related to the best blood in England?" Zai demands, quite haughtily, with a glitter in her glance which rather awes Trixy, who, like all bullies, is not very courageous when it comes to a stand-up fight.

But before Zai has a reply, Lady Beranger steps in with her low imperious voice:

"I am shocked at you both. Can it be possible that daughters of mine, girls supposed to be well-bred, should discuss such subjects, and throw yourselves into the violence of washerwomen, proving yourselves no better than the *canaille* in question. Zai, I see it is useless to try and reason with you. However, as I am your mother I am entitled to obedience, and I order you to abstain in the future from the society of Mr. Conway, so that, however much folly you may be guilty of, others will not be able to comment upon it."

No answer, but Zai's lids droop, and from beneath them big tears roll slowly down her cheeks, and her mouth quivers like a flogged child's.

"What a poor, weak thing she is," Gabrielle thinks. "Why doesn't she hold her own, and set that mother of hers at defiance?"

But Zai does not care for defiance. Even in Belgravia she has been taught to honour her father and her mother, and her natural instincts are all for good.

"I must say, Zai," Lady Beranger goes on coldly and cruelly, "that it is a wonderment to me, this romantic, *low*, fancy for that young man. The whole thing reflects on the proper amount of pride you ought to possess. Has it by any chance struck you what this Mr. Conway, this *actor*, must think of you?"

"What *could* he think of me?" Zai asks quietly, with level, half-closed eyes, but her assumption of courage is only skin deep. Anything unpleasant or invidious about *this actor*, as her mother scornfully calls him, causes her to tremble inwardly like an aspen leaf—her love, her own dear love, who, in her opinion, is higher than king or kaiser, simply because he is *himself*.

Lady Beranger calmly returns the gaze, and as she replies the words drop slowly from her lips, with a cool and merciless decision that is unwarrantable, considering that there are two pairs of ears besides Zai's to listen.

"Mr. Conway may think, without being especially vain, that he has made, without any effort of his own, a conquest of a silly, love-sick girl, who has not enough of self-respect to conceal from him or others the magnitude of her folly."

Zai gives a half-suppressed cry of indignation, a cry that makes even Trixy forget she is a languid odalisque, and start from the repose of her downy cushions.

"How dare you insult me so, mamma!"

Her tone strikes like an electric shock on her audience, and Lady Beranger, pushing her chair back, rises and stands tall and regal in her wrath.

"Zai, have you lost your senses that you presume to address me so?" she asks in slow, cutting accents.

Zai gives a gasp and shivers from head to foot, then she grows suddenly calm but for the storm in her eyes. Those grey eyes of hers, holy as a Madonna, are strangely disturbed, and their iris is several shades deeper.

"I beg your pardon, mamma!" she murmurs at last, with an effort. "When one is insulted, one does not stop to think *who* offers the insult. Perhaps this may excuse my having forgotten myself, but—" her voice waxes louder and her sweet mouth looks stronger—"if you think taunts or innuendoes will estrange me from Carl, you are mistaken. I trust in him too entirely to believe he will ever think badly of me. I believe he loves me as much as I love him," and Zai, having delivered herself of this, picks up her hat and leaves the room.

"Good gracious!" cries Trixy, "I could not have believed Zai was so brazen. Fancy her flaunting her love for that Conway before us all!"

"Zai is frank as daylight," Gabrielle says, taking up the cudgels for her favourite sister. "That is more to be admired than those who perhaps have the same low tastes, but hide them under grand sentiments. I have seen you walk out of the room, as red as a turkey cock with anger, when Carl Conway has been talking to Zai!"

An unpleasant silence falls on the party after this, and Gabrielle stares at her stepmother, who, in spite of her annoyance, looks like a Sphinx, and wishes herself a Œdipus, for to her a dissection of character is a fascinating study. But the *bien conservée* face before her has on its Richelieu waxen mask, and piques her by its impassiveness.

After a moment Lady Beranger sinks down into her chair again, pours out a second cup of tea, and butters a sixth piece of toast, then murmurs wearily:

"It would be impossible to say how much I have to bear with Zai. She is impressionable and wanting in pride! and she always forgets she is a Beranger. Just to think how wickedly she is in love with that Conway, that actor, whose good looks might captivate some women—but hardly a woman in *our* class. I told Lord Beranger a dozen times last season that it was the height of folly to have a play actor running loose about the house, but with the usual short-sightedness and obstinacy of men he pooh-poohed me—and this is the result! There are plenty of detrimentals about, but they don't all get their living by ranting and raving on the stage, for the benefit of the mob! And besides, the creature hasn't a sou but his weekly salary, and spends so much on his gloves and gardenias that I am sure he has not saved a shilling to his name!"

"It's no good saying anything now. Zai is quite gone on Carl Conway. She is so queer, too, she has even a heart, you know," Gabrielle says with a short laugh. "She is going to marry her

actor, and nobody else. I would not mind betting
_____”

“Gabrielle!” cries Lady Beranger, in a horror-struck voice, shutting up her ears with the points of her fore-fingers.

“I beg your pardon, my lady. I know ‘betting’ is an awful word in your opinion; I ought not to have said it. What I ought to have said was that Zai was such frightful spoons——”

“Gabrielle!” interrupts the severe voice again.

Gabrielle bursts out laughing, the horrified expression of her stepmother’s face strikes her as so ludicrous, and her laugh is so infectious that Trixy joins in.

But Lady Beranger’s unmistakable wrath nips the laughter in the bud, and after an instant, Gabrielle asks in rather a constrained voice:

“If you intend to nestle all day on those cushions, I really must go out, Trixy.”

“Trixy will remain at home. I especially request it,” decrees her mother.

“But I have no wish to see that horrid Mr. Stubbs,” Trixy murmurs petulantly. “I’ll be nasty to him if I am made to see him.”

“Trixy!”

“I promised Lord Delaval to work him a pair of slippers and I must go and choose the crewels,” Trixy answers determinedly. “And besides, Mr. Hamilton and one or two of the Irish Fusiliers are going with Gabrielle and me to see the trysting well in Archer’s Wood.”

“And one admirer at home is not half so amus-

ing as half-a-dozen outside, is he, Trixy?" says incorrigible Gabrielle.

"I wish you wouldn't amuse yourself at my expense always, Gabrielle! If you wish to know the truth, I do not want to go out to see all those men so much as I want to shop. I must have a new dress for the Annesleighs' ball on Monday, and I cannot trust you to order it. You haven't a bit of artistic taste and no eye for colours. In fact, your ideas are so wretchedly *bizarre*."

"Thanks! I never did go in for dress," Gabrielle answers flippantly. "You see beauty unadorned is adorned the most—but dolls are always prettier for the frocks they have on."

"You can go with me in the carriage to Stallard's and order the dress, Trixy—it will be much cooler, and less likely to hurt your complexion—after Mr. Stubbs' visit," Lady Beranger says saucily, but Trixy suddenly remembering the trip to Archer's Wood, and her host of admirers, frowns.

"We might see about that Honiton flounce you set your heart on the other day. It would be lovely on a pale blue merv. Stallard does not mind his account running on, so you had better get some tea roses to wear with it," Lady Beranger goes on carelessly, but noting that Trixy's eyes sparkle at the fine raiment in perspective. "And now, child, run up and change that tumbled muslin for your new mauve costume, or I shall not indulge you with the dress."

Trixy yields, and rising lazily, saunters out of the room. When she is fairly gone, Lady Beranger

leans back in her gold-backed fauteuil, and partially closes her fine eyes.

"How thankful I shall be to get Trixy off my hands. She is so dreadfully extravagant and so eaten up with vanity. Nothing short of pale blue merv, and the Honiton, which costs about three guineas a yard (Stallard sticks it on so for credit, always), would have made her see Stubbs to-day, and yet he is a——"

"Millionaire," she was going to say, when she remembers Gabrielle's presence.

"Gabrielle, if you are going out, I wish you could drag Zai with you. She sits moping in the grounds after that horrid actor fellow until her brain will soften to keep her heart company. What a frightful anxiety marriageable daughters are!"

"Poor dear martyr," Gabrielle murmurs. "I do believe I am the only consolation you have in your troubles, though I do jar on your nerves, and am perpetually kicking against those tiresome conveniences."

Lady Beringer smiles icily.

"You certainly give me less trouble than Trixy and Zai, as far as love and marriage are concerned," she replies pointedly. "In fact, it would perhaps be better if it were otherwise!" and Gabrielle, who is sharp as a needle, colours, and understands that the speech is simply a taunt that no one has offered to take her off her stepmother's hands.

When she is quite alone Lady Beranger breathes more freely.

"I distrust that girl," she mutters. "She is so

intensely clever and cunning, yet she might be a help to me. She loves Lord Delaval desperately, and to gain her own ends she will make Trixy marry Stubbs, and Baby Mr. Hamilton. So far, so good. Both men are rolling in wealth, and she will be so afraid of Lord Delaval fancying Zai, that she will force her into being a duchess or a princess. Zai is such a little fool, Gabrielle can twist her round her little finger. As for Conway, it is no use my bothering myself about him. Men in his position must find their own level; and only annoy like the sting of a passing gnat."

Just as she comes to this conclusion a loud rat-tat resounds through the big house.

It is not a refined or timid knock, but decidedly obtrusive, yet it does not, strange to say, offend the delicate ear of Belgravia.

Lady Beranger draws herself together, as it were. She has been considerably ruffled at afternoon tea, but she composes her face into the sweet serenity it generally wears before the world.

"Show Mr. Stubbs in," she desires, when the powdered flunkey hands her a card. "And, Theophrastus! not at home to any other visitors."

She knows that the gentlemen staying at Sandilands have driven some distance, and are not likely to be back till dinner-time. So she is safe to prepare the way for Trixy's future benefit. After all, is it worth while to envy Lady Beranger her charming home? or would not a dinner of herbs, when love and truth and honesty abound, be preferable to the stalled ox, and strife and scheming?

"How do you do, Mr. Stubbs?" she says, graciously, when a short, very obese man, and plain of feature, walks into the boudoir. He is very red in the face, both from exercise and from fond expectations, and he is not very ready of speech.

Lady Beranger eyes him keenly a moment from the top of his shining bald head to the foot, which is dumpy and decidedly plebeian.

He is certainly not a typical lover for the fairest *débutante* of 1888. But what matters?

He is Peter Stubbs, with a superb mansion in Park Lane, a gem of a place in Hampshire, and fifty thousand a year.

Does it signify one atom if he is as hideous as a gorilla, or as old as Mount Horeb?

Not in the very least.

"Trixy will be so charmed to see you, Mr. Stubbs. She was just complaining of the country, and longing for some civilised London friend to come and enliven her—rustic neighbours are so very uninteresting, you know."

Mr. Peter Stubbs reddens as if he were developing apoplectic symptoms, and smiles till he looks even more ugly than his wont.

"Did Miss Beatrix think of *me* when she longed for that civilised Londoner!" he asks with a simper. Trixy enters at this moment and makes an unmistakable *moue* at this question, but she is Lady Beranger's daughter.

While she has been donning her mauve costume and thinking how nice she looks in it, she has

realised the gratification it would be to have a *carte blanche* account at Worth's.

"Of course I did, Mr. Stubbs," she gushes effusively, with a beaming smile, "do you think I have forgotten already our charming chats in Belgrave Square, and our teas at your paradise in Park Lane?"

And she holds out her lovely plump hand, white as milk, which Mr. Stubbs takes and squeezes warmly.

"I see Zai at the far end of the lawn, I want to speak to her, so excuse me for a few minutes, Mr. Stubbs," Lady Beranger says with delicious affability.

"Certainly! certainly! your ladyship. Miss Beatrix and I can manage to get along together remarkably well, I am sure; maybe we shall not mind if you find a good deal to say to Miss Zai," he answers with a wink.

"Cad!" Lady Beranger mutters to herself as she steps out of the French casement. "Cad! vulgar wretch! Trixy will be thrown away on him, that is, her beauty will—as for herself, she is so avaricious and selfish that his money will make up for everything. Good Heavens! whose voices are those?"

She crosses the lawn noiselessly, threads the shrubbery, and steals behind a clump of elms.

It is the identical spot where Zai had held her rose-coloured reverie this morning.

A few paces further on, with the elm branches drooping low as if to conceal them from view, but with the yellow rays of the setting sun falling on

them, two heads, one close-cropped, the other crowned with ruddy chestnut, had been very near to one another, and these heads belonged to Zai and that "horrid actor fellow."

Carl Conway's arm had been round a slender waist, and Zai's sweet face upturned so that a moustachioed lip might rest on her coral mouth; but when Lady Beranger sees these two culprits, they have said good-bye, and are a discreet distance from one another.

CHAPTER IV.

LORD DELAVAL.

"We played at Bondsman and at Queen,
But as the days change—men change too;
I find the grey seas' notes of green.
The green seas' fervent flakes of blue,
More fair than you."

ALL the amber and purple and gold of the western sky has faded away, and only a faint rose glow lingers. The wind is dead, and soft and fragrant dusk lies like a mantle on the fair world, but the mantle of twilight is edged with the silver lustre of a tender young moon, and a shoal of inquisitive stars begin to peep at each other, when Gabrielle passes quickly upstairs and knocks at a door adjoining her own.

"Come in."

Zai stands before her cheval-glass—a thing of beauty in a shimmering white silk, pure and virginal, a cluster of blush *Noisette* roses nestle in her bosom, and there is a bright flush on her cheek that adds tenfold to her loveliness.

“You have come for Fanchette, Gabrielle, but the bird has flown; only five minutes sooner you would have caught her. Trixy and Baby wanted her, and though I had not quite finished with her, I let her go.”

“Trixy and Baby are the most selfish creatures I know,” Gabrielle answers captiously. “Why cannot they stick to Marie? I am sure they might teach her to dress them, without continually asking for Fanchette. *Au diable* with those girls! Please don't look so shocked, Zai. It is not half as bad as ‘Go to the Devil’ in English, and yet it is quite as relieving to one's feelings. How on earth am I to get my hair done properly?”

“For the Meredyths' ‘At Home?’”

“Of course. Do you know, Zai, Lady Beranger has asked Sir Everard Aylmer to go with us, and expressly confided him to my tender mercies.”

Zai opens her eyes and laughs.

“You see, Sir Everard has singled me out lately as an object of attention, and has actually talked to me for five consecutive minutes, somewhere about five times during our acquaintance—a frail basis to anchor hope on. Nevertheless, the stepmother, who, in spite of her ultra refinement, is an inveterate match-maker, has hatched a matrimonial project in her prolific brain for my benefit. You know I am

like a bad shilling, always on her hands, and she would gladly see the last of me; but there is of course, as you know, another arrangement. She is anxious to kill two birds with one stone."

"What can you mean, Gabrielle? You have the most marvellous fertility of imagination that I have ever met with. If anyone drops a lash, you discover a reason for the action, and the most trivial word, lightly spoken, possesses a mountain of meaning to your mind. What motive can mamma have, but one?"

"*Eh bien!*"

"She knows Sir Everard Aylmer is rich and has an old baronetcy, and she wants you to make a good marriage. Sir Everard is quite an 'eligible' you know."

"Lady Beranger's scheme doesn't concern Sir Everard or poor little me. We are a couple of noughts in her eyes, and she is not going to trouble her brain with machinations about us. The head and the tail of the matter is—*Lord Delaval!*"

"I *must* be a simpleton or else you are too clever by half, Gabrielle. What on earth can you and Sir Everard and Lord Delaval have to do with one another?"

"Zai, you haven't the tenth part of an inch the sharpness of Baby! the understanding of *that* child is miraculous. Well, I'll tell you all that is passing in Lady Beranger's head. To-night Trixy makes her appearance in public as the future Honourable Mrs. Stubbs! Heavens! what a name! By the way, what a short matter they made of that. Only three

days ago she hated the sight of him, and now her destiny is *une affaire faite*."

"Well?"

"Then—but you surely see through it all?"

"Not a bit."

"You *are* a simpleton, Zai. Don't you see that this is a splendid chance for you and Lord Delaval to be together. I shall be bear leader to Sir Everard, so you will have it all your own way."

"If I thought Lord Delaval was to be my attraction to-night, I would throw over the Meredyths, and go to bed," Zai says carelessly.

"But why? This is simply a little arrangement by which Lady Beranger hopes to allow poor Lord Delaval to insinuate himself in your good graces, Zai. For you know he admires you awfully, now don't you?" she asks, with a fierce jealousy making her tone tremulous. "And I am sure if he does, I don't wish to be Mademoiselle de Trop," she adds impatiently.

"Don't talk nonsense, Gabrielle. Lord Delaval is in love with Baby, if he is in love with anyone but—*himself*."

"In love with Baby!" echoes Gabrielle, scornfully. "I am sure he was never in love with her, and that he has a contempt for her fast, flirty ways."

"Well, if he does not care for Baby, and wants a Beranger, he will have to marry you," Zai says quietly.

"But it's *necessary* for you all to marry rich men. You *must*."

“Why?”

“Because, when your father and mother go over to the majority, you will be paupers.”

“Anyway, I am going to marry Carl,” Zai asserts positively. “And I would not go to the Meredyths’ this evening, only he is staying at Elm Lodge.”

Gabrielle bursts out laughing.

“Good gracious, what a *fiasco* it is! Lady Beranger will murder him, I believe. You won’t be allowed to speak to him.”

“Nobody could prevent——”

Zai pauses, for at this moment Fanchette trips into the room.

Gabrielle greets her effusively.

“*Dieu merci*, Fanchette! Now I may hope to get my hair done. Zai, don’t wait for me to go down. Have Miss Trixy and Miss Mirabelle gone down yet, Fanchette?”

“Just this moment, mademoiselle.”

“And how do they look?”

“Miss Trixy is *ravissante*. She was very *difficile*, nothing would please her. I tried coiffure à la *Ninon*, or ringlets à la *Cascade*, or the simple plaits English mees likes.”

“And which has she gone down as—Ninon or the Cascade?” Gabrielle asks with a smile.

“Not one or the other, mademoiselle. She would have her hair done with the weeds of the waves, and also *des petites bêtes*, I don’t know what you call them, fastened into it like a *syrène*.”

“*Ah, oui!* I understand. She is a mermaid to-night, with seaweeds and shell-fish. I can well

imagine Mademoiselle Trixy *difficile*; being an angel to men and an angel to one's *femme-de-chambre* are two different things. Fanchette, make me very beautiful to-night."

"*Mais, oui!* Mademoiselle has the grand capability to be so." And in a few moments her skilful fingers have gathered up Gabrielle's lustrous tresses into a sort of crown, which becomes her well.

"How nice I should look in the Delaval coronet," Gabrielle thinks, as she admires herself in the glass, with a truthfulness befitting a better cause.

Meanwhile Zai has descended the staircase, and, as she reaches the great square hall, Lord Beranger enters the house.

"Good evening, papa," she says, lovingly twining her arm into his, "I was afraid I was late, but it seems it must be early, as you have only just come in."

"Good evening, my pet," says papa to this, his favourite daughter. "You are quite right in thinking it is late, but we have been taking our post-prandial cigar and coffee under the stars. Might I ask what you are so radiant for? Is there a big party on to-night?"

"The Meredyths' 'At Home,' you know. Is it possible you have forgotten that Trixy is to make her *débüt* to-night as an engaged young person?"

"Ugh!" Lord Beranger mutters to himself, half aloud. "Poor Trixy!" Then he remembers his wife's admonition, and goes on blandly: "Stubbs isn't a bad sort, Zai; a little too much flesh, and a

little, too little, breeding; but we can't have everything, child, and money makes the mare to go."

"I hate money," Zai answers in a low voice. "I would not marry Mr. Stubbs if he were ten times richer."

"Tut, tut, my pet. You must get romantic notions out of your head—romance doesn't pay now-a-days. Good hard cash down, that's the thing, and when you have nailed that, it's time enough to indulge in other fancies."

"Papa, how wicked you are. That's one of mamma's sentiments. I don't like to hear you say anything that is not right."

"Don't you? well I won't. Kiss me, little one, as a proof of forgiveness."

Zai goes on tiptoe, and putting her arms round his neck, kisses him heartily, forgetful of the detriment to her bouquet of *Noisette* roses.

"Yes, Zai. It really quite escaped me that tonight Trixy makes her *entrée* into Society as an affianced one. Poor Trixy! And yet she is no object for pity, since Stubbs can supply her with all the gew-gaws she loves. Trixy always puts me in mind of that infant-mind that is pleased with a rattle—tickled with a straw. There is a charming youthfulness in her tastes, and a curious indifference in the manner by which she can satisfy them, that always puzzles me. There were never two natures so dissimilar as yours and hers. One could hardly believe you were children of the same parents. Trixy is so indolent and content, and you are just the reverse, my pet," he goes on with a

smile. "I suppose Delaval is back—he left us after luncheon at Kingsfold, saying he had something to do at Southampton—gloves to get, or something. And I am not surprised at his wanting to get back here, where he has such attractive metal, hasn't he, Zai?"

"I don't know anything about it, papa; nor do I wish to," Zai flashes rather impetuously. "I see nothing interesting in Lord Delaval."

"Don't you?" Lord Beranger says rather curtly. "Delaval seems to have faults in your eyes that no other woman appears to discover. Why, do you know, Zai, there is no man admired or run after by the fair sex—from the Upper Ten downwards—as Lord Delaval?"

"Possibly," is Zai's reply. And she bites her lips to keep from saying more, and walks with her father into a small room in which coffee is going on, amidst lights and flowers and baskets of fruit.

Up at the far end Lady Beranger, and her son-in-law elect, Mr. Stubbs, are sitting. The millionaire has only just arrived, and, while he imbibes the scalding Mocha, out of egg-shell china, he looks anxiously at his pair of new primrose gloves, one of which has burst down the back, and at his lady-love, who sits some distance off.

As a matter of bodily comfort, Trixy would infinitely prefer her usual downy nest among the sky-blue cushions, but whatever may be her shortcomings in other respects, she always knows better than to allow her toilette and her surroundings to *jur*er at each other, as the French say.

An instinct, the artistic instinct, that seems to be born with some women, to whom art itself is quite a dead letter, serves to guide this daughter of Belgravia aright, and being cast for Sabrina to-night in sea-green silk and misty lace, and coral and seaweed, and all the other concomitants that Gabrielle had yecept shell-fish—and Fanchette *les petites bêtes*—she keeps clear of blue background. Effect is a grand thing in her estimation, and it is the apparent study of her existence to attain it.

She converses languidly with Mr. Hamilton, never casting a glance at her “future,” whose red face grows redder and redder, as he remarks her indifference.

Within the embrasure of the big bay window that gives on to the lawn, lolls Baby.

She is sweet to-night, clouds of snowy tulle float round her lovely little figure, and she wears no ornament but one magnificent poinsettia that droops over her left shoulder. Her golden hair, her great innocent blue eyes, her exquisite flower of a mouth, are all bewitching in their way, and so a man seems to think, who lounges carelessly over the back of her chair, partially concealed by the velvet hangings, but who raises his face when Lord Beranger and Zai enter, disclosing the features of Lord Delaval.

Lord Delaval is—as Gabrielle has said—superbly handsome. He is tall and his figure is slender, almost to fragility, though not without certain signs of muscular strength, that a pugilist’s eye would recognise at once.

There is quite an elegance about his figure, a *je ne sais quoi* of thoroughbred style that renders Eric, Lord Delaval, a marked man in any assemblage, and his undeniably picturesque face does him right good service as an excellent passport wherever he goes.

A very handsome face it is, and a fatally fascinating one for those women to whom it appeals, with its Saxon beauty of fair, almost colourless, skin, faultless features, hair almost tawny in hue, straight eyebrows, cleanly pencilled, and deep blue eyes of eminent softness, and yet a softness that no one would mistake for gentleness. In spite of his fairness, no one could call him effeminate—on the contrary, men looking at him feel at once that he is not to be trifled with and that his keen, fearless determined physiognomy, indicates a nature ready to meet any emergency, and not likely to quail before any obstacle.

Not always, nor altogether, a pleasant face by any means, but one with an attractive force about it, that it is impossible to deny, and sometimes very difficult to resist.

This is the man that Baby had once cared for in her wilful, queer, childish way, and with whom she still loves to coquet, and this is the man that Gabrielle Beranger worships with all the fire and energy of her fierce, unsatisfied nature, while he only thinks of himself and his own interests. To him, women are but instruments to reach a wished-for goal, or toys to amuse and be broken—foolish fluttering butterflies on whom he looks with a

good deal of contempt, and whom he carelessly crushes in his grasp.

Clever and self-sufficient, feminine brains are beneath his notice, feminine minds unworthy of deciphering.

So many beautiful women have laid the treasures of their heart at his feet that he has learnt to look on a "woman's heart" as easy of access, and not especially valuable in possession; still, Lord Delaval likes to win them in a quiet, subtle way, if it is only for the feline gratification of playing with and torturing them by turns, till he is sick of them and throws them aside.

He is only a type of most of his sex, after all, especially the portion of his sex who wear the purple, feed on clover, and grow enervated in luxury.

He and Miss Mirabelle (who looks to-night too old for her appellation of Baby) make a pretty, lover-like tableau enough, as they sit close together in the embrasure of the window, ensconced in half shade, with the soft night, full of mystic stars, and the silent, fragrant flowers in the background.

Yet Lord Delaval's face, when he raises it from whispering in Baby's ear, wears anything but a lover-like expression. Stolid indifference is in his handsome eyes, and a cynical smile on his lips, but the moment Zai enters, he grows more animated, and rising, walks towards her.

"Don't you think we shall be very late, Miss Zai? It is not a large affair, I hear, and we shall be disturbing Miss Crystal Meredyth in the middle of '*Tais toi mon cœur!*'"

Zai winces slightly at Crystal's name, but recovers herself at once.

"May I not be allowed a cup of tea?" she asks, looking up at him with her big, grey eyes, in which he thinks there is something of the gleaming yet transparent lustre that water shows under a starlit sky. For a moment these eyes catch his fancy, and influence his imagination, but only for a moment.

Lord Delaval at heart is a rock, and a rock that no woman's hand has as yet succeeded in making a cleft in.

"Yes, there's time enough for that, and indeed, I will keep you company. Tea is a blessing to the race of mankind—and womankind, too," he goes on languidly, as he sips. "But tea is a paradox; it calms one's turbulent feelings, and yet it is a mighty stimulant and keeps one awake—and it is for this last of its properties that I indulge in it to-night."

"To keep you awake!" cries Zai, eyeing him rather contemptuously, as she listens to what she considers his soulless remarks. "Are you likely to fall asleep among the music and singing and chatter then, or are you so wrapped up in your noble self that no one or nothing can interest you?"

He wanted to provoke her to speak to him, and he has succeeded. Her contempt does not touch him a bit, in fact, it makes her more *piquante*, and gives a spice to society "twaddle." There is an utter coldness in her towards him that frets his *amour propre*; it is so different to other women;

and he longs intensely to subdue her, as he has subdued scores of girls whom he has desired to subjugate and make mere puppets in his hand.

He draws his chair nearer to hers, and settles himself as if he has forgotten the flight of time and the disturbance of Crystal Meredyth's favourite French ditty, and makes up his mind to try and draw Zai's young heart into his net with the skill of an experienced fowler.

Just at this moment, Mr. Stubbs finishes his cup of coffee at a gulp, and rising up in a perfect steam, betakes himself and his primrose-coloured kids to the lovely Sabrina opposite.

"A man or a porpoise—which?" whispers Lord Delaval with a mocking smile, as he watches the millionaire's progress across the room.

"At any rate, if he is a porpoise, we have an opportunity of studying a little zoology, and finding out that porpoises are by no means laggards in love," laughs Zai. "Look how eagerly he goes, though there is nothing very encouraging in Trixy's face. She forgets to beam on him as she does on other men!"

"And who can blame her? Don't you think it must require a vast deal of gold to gild that creature's bulky form, and a vast deal of avarice and interestedness in a woman to take him for better—for worse?" Lord Delaval asks, with a sneer.

"I should think you must be almost tired of sneering at everyone, Lord Delaval, or is it a chronic habit of yours?" Zai questions carelessly.

"You see, if some men have the misfortune to lack beauty and refinement, there may be some as handsome and polished as yourself."

"Are there many of the same nonpareils, Miss Zai, or do you think there is only—one?" he answers with a lame attempt at jesting, but the most obtuse can see he is nettled.

"There may be many for aught I know. That there is *one*, I *do* know," she returns quickly.

"Granting even so—pray does one swallow make a summer?"

"Not exactly, but you have a hateful habit of running people down, Lord Delaval, a habit that to my mind is not to be admired."

"I know what you mean," he answers, flushing a little. "Just because I happened to say, during our last valse at your ball the other night, that a man, because he chooses to lower himself, cannot lift his new *confrères* to the grade which he has forfeited, but remains lost to himself, to his family and to Society. I could say a deal more on this subject."

"Please don't edify me with it," cries Zai, impatiently, "I do not care to hear any dissertations on it. You never lose an opportunity to sneer at Mr. Conway, and Mr. Conway's profession, and it is hopeless to rebuke you for it, or even to notice your remarks,"

"Zai, I think you are giving your unruly member too much license. Lord Delaval must be horrified at such unconventional talk," Lady Beranger breaks in angrily from behind.

"Oh let little Zai prattle," Paterfamilias says indulgently. "Delaval must be sick of conventional talk, and her unworldly wisdom must be quite refreshing. Besides, animation becomes her style of beauty."

"I am sorry if I treated Lord Delaval to a lecture, mamma, it is a great waste of breath I know," Zai replies wilfully, ignoring her mother's warning glance, "but he seems to find no subject so interesting as abuse of Mr. Conway."

"To the best of my knowledge I did not mention his name even," Lord Delaval says in a martyr-like tone, "but you always treat me cruelly, Miss Zai. I confess I do not care about actors being dragged into Society as they are. They ought to be kept in their places."

"There are actors, and *actors*, I suppose," Zai says flushing deeply, "and I don't see that a gentleman is the least bit not a gentleman, no matter what profession he follows."

"Then you would call a chimney-sweep a gentleman, Zai, if he happened to have been *born* one," Lady Beranger asks in a suave voice.

"There is some difference between the calling of a sweep and an actor, mamma. You may all differ with me in my opinion on this subject, but I cannot help holding to my notions, and speaking them out truthfully."

"Truth is not always to be told, my pet. Whatever the ancients thought on the subject of unerring veracity, it is an exploded error! *Nous avons changé tout cela!*" Lord Beranger ordains with the air of a modern Lycurgus.

"I shall never consider it an error to speak plain unvarnished truth, papa," Zai says fearlessly.

"One would think you had been born in Arcadia and not in Belgravia," Lady Beranger remarks angrily. "I only hope that Lord Delaval may feel more indulgent towards such *bizarre* sentiments than I do."

"Of course Delaval will be indulgent. Did you ever know any young fellow who was not indulgent to a pretty girl's fads and follies? There are men, and *men*, as Zai says. You are a peer, Delaval and Conway is an actor. I have remarked that the feminine element, now-a-days, inclines to a weakness for the stage. Thespian votaries, what with their shows, and their glitter, their stereotyped smiles, their parrot love-making, have a subtle charm," Lord Beranger suggests, more for emollient for Lord Delaval's evidently wounded vanity than for any genuine faith in his own words.

"I think the difference in our callings is not the only distinction that Miss Zai makes between myself and Carlton Conway," Lord Delaval says with a meaning glance that brings a scarlet flush to the girl's face, and makes her lower her long curling lashes over her tell-tale eyes.

Then he leans his handsome head against the tall backed chair he occupies, and watches the flicker of the lovely colour, and the lashes, through his half-closed eyes, with a glance she could not help to *feel* although she studiously avoids meeting it.

Lord Beranger moves away a few paces, and his better-half follows him, then Lord Delaval bends

forward again till his breath sweeps Zai's cheek, and he asks in a low, concentrated voice that is inaudible to others :

"There is another distinction between Carlton Conway and myself, is there not?"

"Yes!" she answers frankly, for she glories in her love and her lover. "There is a distinction between you, and you know what it is."

"I do not know why you should think so well of him, and evidently so ill of me."

"Don't you? then I will tell you. I believe Mr. Conway to be as open as the day, to have no narrowness in his heart, no pettiness in his soul. He could no more shackle himself with the opinion of 'society' than he could stoop to do a mean thing. In fact I know he has such a true, gentleman-like nature, that if he were reduced to a blacksmith's calling, he would be a gentleman in the estimation of all those whose judgment is worth having."

She says it all hastily, impetuously, taking up the cudgels for the man she adores with all her heart, a sweet pink flush on her face, fervour shining out of her grey eyes. Lord Delaval stares at her hard, with a sudden hot red spot on his usually pale cheek, and with a kindling glance, but his voice is languid and cold enough.

"Let us have the reverse picture," he whispers in a mocking voice.

"No occasion, it is not an interesting topic," she answers carelessly.

"Of course it is not! You have made me understand, perhaps too often, the opinion you have of me,

the atrocious number of faults you endow me with. I should be a thousand times blacker than the traditional blackness of the Devil, if I were all you think," he says, rather bitterly.

His tone vexes her, and the colour deepens while her eyes glow, and just at that moment Gabrielle enters, and takes in the whole situation. As she crosses the long room towards them, Lord Delaval puts his head down low, and almost hisses out his words.

"You make me *hate* Conway. I see he is the bar to every hope I have in life."

Then he walks away, and in another moment is whispering into Baby's ear, while she laughs and coquets to her heart's content.

"You should always talk to Lord Delaval if you wish to look well, Zai," Gabrielle says angrily. "It is wonderful the colour he has evoked on your cheeks, and the light in your eyes."

CHAPTER V.

CROSS PURPOSES.

"Though matches are all made in Heaven, they say,
 Yet Hymen, who mischief oft hatches,
 Sometimes deals with the house t'other side of the way,
 And there they make lucifer matches."

"I SAW Conway riding with Crystal Meredyth this afternoon, looking awfully spooney." This is what Zai overhears Sir Everard Aylmer say in his inane

drawl to Gabrielle, in the carriage, on the way to Elm Lodge.

A lump of ice seems to settle down on her heart, and two small, very cold, hands clasp one another under her white cloak; but she is a daughter of Belgravia, and to a certain extent true to her colours; so when she walks into Mrs. Meredyth's not over-spacious, but unpleasantly crowded room, her face shows no emotion, and the only effect of Everard Aylmer's words is a lovely pink flush, that makes Carlton Conway's affianced wife tenfold more attractive.

And it is fortunate that, young as she is, her breeding has taught her self-control; for the first thing her grey eyes fall on is her lover and Crystal Meredyth floating round the room, and very much enjoying their valse to all appearances.

So Zai turns away from that which is dearest to her in the world, and turns towards Lord DeLaval, who, either by chance or on purpose, stands at her side.

As Zai looks up into the peer's face, she acknowledges, for the first time, that he is certainly a handsome man. And, indeed, there cannot be two opinions on this score. He is as handsome as the Apollo Belvedere—a fact of which he is quite as well aware as his neighbours.

Tall and slim, his hair a fair golden, his eyes ultramarine to their deepest depths, his features perfect, his mouth carved like a cameo, and almost as hard. Yet, however vain he may be, there is nothing really offensive in his vanity, nothing of that

arrogant self-deceit, that overpowering self-complacency that makes puppyism a mild epithet to apply to some men.

Lord Delaval is spoilt, of course—an *enfant gâté* of the fair sex, and prone to that general masculine failing of fancying himself perfectly irresistible; but on the whole, women adore him, and men pronounce him "not a bad sort."

At the present moment he suffers from *embarras des richesses*; for he knows that Gabrielle and Baby are both delightfully disposed towards him and—wonder of wonders—Zai seems to have suddenly awakened to a proper appreciation of him as well.

But he is quite equal to any emergency of this kind. In his heart he admires Zai more than any of the Beranger family, and—he detests Carlton Conway.

"Shall we have a turn?" he asks.

She assents at once as she meets the ultramarine smiling eyes. And they too float round and round the room. They both waltz splendidly, and when Carl pauses a moment to give his partner breathing time, his eye falls at once on them, and in the same moment, someone remarks near him:

"What a handsome couple Delaval and Zai Beranger make."

Before, however, he has time to recover from his anger and jealousy, Zai and her escort have disappeared out on the lawn.

Ever since she could toddle Zai has held her own. No one in the world is better able to paddle her own canoe than this beautiful little daughter of

Belgravia, and from sheer feelings of pique, she is positively satisfied with the companion on whose arm she wanders through the flowery walks of Elm Lodge. There are plenty of other couples doing the same thing, so there is nothing against the convenances. And Zai knows that her mother is at this moment revelling in dreams of Lord Delaval for a son-in-law.

"Let her revel if she likes," Zai says to herself. "I shall marry Carl all the same."

And even while she soliloquises thus, she teems with coquetry; but it is a coquettishness that is perfectly subordinate to good taste, and her instincts are all those which come from gentle breeding.

There is in her none of the making of what we call a fast young lady. When time has fully opened the flower, it will be of a higher order than any of those gaudy blossoms. Only nineteen, she shows a grace and subtlety, and a *savoir faire* that astonishes Lord Delaval, and then, though beauty is only skin deep, Zai is so very beautiful. After all, this must be set down as her chief attraction.

There is a bewildering charm about her little face that words cannot describe—a deliciousness about her soft colouring, and her great, grey eyes are brimful of a liquid provoking light, as they look up at her cavalier and tell him, in mute but powerful language, that he finds favour in their sight, although it must be confessed it is for "this night only." Her cheeks are still flushed, and smiles play on her pretty mouth, and, like all women, this bit of a girl is surely a born actress, for the man of the

world, wary as he deems himself, and skilled in all the wiles of the sex, really believes that he has done her an injustice in crediting her with a *grande passion* for "that actor fellow," and is satisfied that, like Julius Cæsar, he has conquered.

Presently the flowery paths are deserted as the sweet strains of "THINE ALONE" fall on them. Zai shivers a little as she remembers that to these she valed last with Carl—Carl, who is so monopolised with Crystal Meredyth that he has evidently forgotten the existence of any other woman.

Pique and jealousy drive her to lingering on in these dim-lit grounds. Pique and jealousy make her little hand cling closer to Lord Delaval's arm, and her manner and voice softer to him; but the convenances must be considered. She is too much Belgravian to forget them. So she says:

"Had we not better think of going back to the ball-room?"

"Why should we?" Lord Delaval murmurs softly.

Enchanted with his companion, he has no inclination to return to the beauties of whom he is sick and tired.

"I am sure the lawn is delicious; but if you wish to go in, of course, let us go."

"No, I do not exactly wish to go in," she answers hesitatingly. Just this particular night she does not desire to vex him. She wants, in fact, to *afficher* herself with him, only to show Carlton Conway that other men appreciate her fully, if he doesn't. "But we have been out for some time. You see we are left sole monarchs of all we survey, and mamma

may entertain a faint sensation of wonder as to what has become of me."

He smiles under cover of his blond moustache; he knows Lady Beranger is perfectly aware with whom her daughter is "doing the illuminated lawns," and that, as he happens to be an eligible, she does not trouble further.

"Let her wonder," he answers languidly. "It is very good for her, don't you know? Wondering develops the—the speculative faculties. Don't go in just yet. It is so seldom I get a chance of talking to you quietly. There are always such a lot of bothering people about!"

"Do you mean Gabrielle or Baby?" she says with a laugh, though her heart is aching dreadfully, and even as she talks, she can, in her mind's eye, see her Carl looking into Crystal Meredyth's china blue eyes, as if those eyes were the stars of his existence.

"I mean—*Conway*—tell me, do you really care for him as—as much as you have made me think you do?"

A flutter of leaves in a neighbouring shrubbery makes her look round.

There, against the dense dark foliage, stands out in relief like a billow of the sea, the pale green diaphanous garments which Crystal Meredyth wears to-night, and close beside her a tall figure, that Zai knows too well.

Her heart beats fast and a blinding mist seems to rise before her vision, but she has not been tutored by Lady Beranger in vain.

"Have you yet to learn, Lord Delaval, that women do not exactly wear their hearts on their sleeves for daws to peck at?" she says, with a low, musical laugh, "or do you think Mr. Conway so irresistible that no one can resist him?"

As she almost whispers this, her conscience is troubled with a compunctious throb, her glance seeks the tiny, almost invisible chain to which the locket containing Carl's picture is attached, and out of the cloistered greenness and dimness Carl Conway's handsome face seems to look at her reproachfully for denying her love for him.

"So glad to hear you speak like this!" Lord Delaval murmurs quite tenderly, and he slightly presses against him the little hand lying so snow-white on his arm, "especially as a little bird has told me something."

"What has it told you?" Zai asks carelessly, while her eyes follow the two figures of her evidently inconstant lover and his companion, with a pathos and wistfulness in their depths that the dusk luckily hides from Lord Delaval.

"It told me that Conway is going to marry Miss Meredyth.

For half an instant Zai forgets her Belgravian training. Under the Chinese lanterns her cheeks grow white as death, and there is an unmistakable tremor in her voice as she says:

"Are they engaged? But it is not possible!" she adds more slowly.

"Why isn't it possible?" asks Lord Delaval, rousing out of languor into a suspicious condition.

"Is it because he has been trying to make you believe that Miss Meredyth's bank stock and horses and diamonds are of no importance in his opinion?"

"Miss Meredyth's money," Zai says in a low voice. "I—I did not know she was very rich!" Then she cries impetuously:

"How contemptible it is for a man to be mercenary."

"Some men cannot help being so," he replies quietly. "For instance, what can fellows like Conway, who have no substantial means at all, do?"

"Do? Why—

'To go and hang yourselves, for being yourselves,'"

quoths Zai flippantly, as she moves towards the house.

Suddenly she pauses, she *cannot* go in just now into the crowded ball-room and look with calmness on her faithless—faithless lover.

Ah! how unutterably wretched she is. She feels as if life were over for her, now that Carl is going to marry Miss Meredyth.

"I have got such a headache," she says wearily (she might say heartache), "and if I go into that suffocating room, it will be worse. Then to-morrow I shall make my appearance at breakfast with great haggard eyes, red-rimmed and underlined with bistre shades, and a horrid white face that will draw down *such* a scolding from mamma and Trixy! *You* know well enough all I shall have to endure."

The trivial bond of sympathy which her stress on

the "you" seems to indicate sounds strangely pleasant to his ears, but he preserves a silence, though he gazes at her fixedly.

For, under a flickering light, Zai is truly a thing of beauty and a joy for ever.

"Lord Delaval, *will* you do me a very great favour?" she pleads prettily, glancing up at him.

"Of course!" he answers rather dreamily. He is a Society man, a scoffer at sentiment, an Atheist in love, but this little girl's ways and proximity exercise a curious influence over him. They are in fact something like the opium trance, of which De Quincey gives so wonderful a description in the "Suspira."

He is conscious of an intense longing that the favour she asks will be to kiss her! He feels at this moment that he would willingly give up everything in the world, his successes of the past, his hopes for the future, his schemes in the present, just for the sake of touching this soft scarlet mouth once.

"To waste his whole soul in one kiss
Upon these perfect lips,"

in fact, but there is an inexplicable sensation of reverence for her that no other woman has ever raised in his breast.

And there is a purity in the face shewing up in the semi-light, that fills him, *blasé* as he is—satiated as he is, with a wonderment that no woman's face has ever created in him before.

"I want to go right round the garden."

The request is so simple, so childish, that it brings

him down at once from the height to which imagination has raised him to practical every-day existence and he laughs aloud at his own sentimental folly.

"What will they say to our escapade? The garden is a large one, and it is close upon twelve o'clock now. You know how strict Lady Beranger's notions are regarding the *bienséances*, and that such a nocturnal excursion will be in her eyes, flagrant. Unless, indeed," and he lowers his voice to the most harmonious key, "you were with a man you were engaged to!"

She does not seem to hear, or else she does not heed, the concluding words of his sentence, a deafness and indifference on her part that riles him considerably.

"If I were Gabrielle, I should answer, *au diable* with anyone who wants to coerce me, especially when what I wish to do is innocent enough. As it is, those dreadful bogies of my life, the *convenances* and *bienséances*, must be infringed, the flagrancy of a nocturnal escapade braved, for I will go round the garden, and you, Lord Delaval, you will surely be kind enough to stay here quietly under these lovely trees, until I come. Don't let any one see you, for Heaven's sake, that is, not mamma, or she will be suspecting I am flown, goodness knows where! I won't tax your patience for more than ten minutes I promise."

So after all she has not proposed a longer promenade for the sake of *his* society, he thinks angrily. It is simply girlish nonsense that she wishes to indulge in, or—perhaps she wants to have

a quiet cry over Carl Conway's engagement to Crystal Meredyth. This suspicion ices his tone, and alters his manner strangely.

"I cannot possibly let you go by yourself, but if you *will* go, I will go with you!"

"No! No! Do let me go by myself. What I want so much is to be alone with night, with the silence—with myself," she answers hastily, then she adds quietly:

"You see I have *such* a headache, Lord Delaval."

"I cannot let you go alone," he replies, rather haughtily, dreadfully irritated at her evident reluctance to his company, when he fain would give ten years of his life to be able to catch the slight figure in his arms, and to rain down as many caresses as are his bent on her sweet face, and withal he yearns for the power of making her fold her lovely butterfly wings, to settle down at his feet, possibly to be spurned when sick of her.

"If I let you venture out of my sight at such an hour, what account should I be able to render to Lady Beranger? So you see I must accompany you."

"Then I will go into the house at once," she flashes.

"The most sensible thing for you to do," he says, coldly, and his tone vexes her immensely, for she does not of course know that he is only too willing to stay here, in these quiet, deserted grounds, with myriads of stars overhead, and the great elms casting down cool shadows on them, while he can gaze his fill on what seems to him to-night the rarest loveliness he has looked on in his thirty years.

But Zai, though she fumes inwardly, thinks discretion is the better part of valour and says nothing. In truth, all she longs for is a few moments' quiet, during which she can nerve herself to pass Carl Conway calmly, now that she has found out his duplicity.

And she would have staked her existence on his honour and fidelity!

Turning suddenly, she wanders down the first path and on and on, communing with her own heart, fighting with the love which is greater and stronger than herself, utterly forgetful that a tall, stately form stalks by her side in dignified silence.

Then, when more than ten minutes have elapsed, Lord Delaval's voice rouses her into consciousness of her whereabouts and her supreme folly.

"Well!" he says, "do you think we have had enough of this garden? The dew is falling fast, and I am unsentimental enough to be liable to rheumatism."

Zai stops short and faces him.

"I beg your pardon, Lord Delaval. I—I really forgot you were with me. Let us go back at once, of course."

She has braced up her courage to meet the grand ordeal—the ordeal which she believes will lay her young life in ashes.

It is to look Carl Conway in the face, like Tennyson's Lady Clara Vere de Vere; to slay her unfaithful lover with a glance.

Thinking of this, she hurries on, oblivious again of Lord Delaval's proximity, until they reach the house.

Just as they are on the point of entering, a hand pushes back the lace curtains of the long French casement that gives out on this portion of the lawn, and lies diagonally as it were with the path leading up to the entrance, and without any reason the two pause side by side a moment. Two figures—a man and a woman—stand well relieved against the background of brilliant light. The woman is very tall and slender, and clad in amber flowing drapery, with a blood red pomegranate flower burning vividly against her massive coronet of black hair. The man is also tall, and wears a fair, boyish appearance.

The two voices float out distinctly enough on the stillness outside.

“It is growing very late, and Delaval and your sister, or Beatrice and Benedick, as you call them, have not put in an appearance yet,” Sir Everard Aylmer remarks presently, glancing at a tiny enamelled watch he wears.

“Doubtless they have lagged on the lawn for a sociable quarrel. Beatrice and Benedick had a weakness that way, you know,” and Gabrielle Beranger laughs somewhat artificially. “According to the hackneyed old proverb, ‘the quarrels of lovers are the renewal of love.’”

“Delaval and your sister must be a most interesting pair of lovers,” drawls the Baronet with a smile. “Can you tell me, Miss Beranger, why quarrelling should be considered an incipient sign of love?”

“*Dieu*, how should I know? I never take the

trouble to quarrel with anyone, and certainly was never in love."

Gabrielle speaks out sharply, and at this moment she believes completely in her assertion, for the knowledge that Lord Delaval is wandering about a dew-lit lawn, with Zai's lovely face at his side, and a white hand laid on his arm, makes her feel as if she positively hates him with all the force with which she is capable of hating as well as loving. That hydra-headed monster, yclept Jealousy, just tears her in twain, and it is with the utmost difficulty she keeps up a calm appearance and a desultory conversation with the man whom Lady Beranger has consigned to her kind devices with a—

"Now don't forget, Gabrielle, that Sir Everard Aylmer is the sixteenth Baronet, that he has a purse as long as his pedigree, and is an impressionable fool—you'll never have such a chance again."

"You never take the trouble to quarrel with anyone, and you certainly were never in love?" Sir Everard repeats after her, pretty nearly verbatim, like a parrot. "My dear Miss Beranger, how very dreadful! or rather, how very charming it would be for someone to try to vex you, so that having gone through the first exertion, you may, perchance, fall into the second state."

"Ahem! Hardly probable, I think," she answers carelessly, averting her head, and peering out into the fragrant shadows. But like Sister Anne, she sees no one, and all she hears is the leaf shaken by the wind; not a sign of the absentees meets her sight, and all her pictured enjoyment at Mrs.

Meredyth's "At Home" turns into the veriest Dead Sea fruit.

"Will you give me leave to try, Miss Beranger?" pleads a voice that, though drawling in tone, sounds more genuine than the plupart of voices in Tophet.

"To make me quarrel with you? Why, certainly! as the Yankees say; but I warn you that you will not be able to renew the combat a second time."

"Why?"

"Oh, because quarrelling is such a nuisance, and it is so seldom worth making it up again, that I always eschew the acquaintance of the belligerent party, you know," she says flippantly.

At this moment she is not only indifferent to, but she detests the very vision of the position and wealth Lady Beranger has put before her in such glowing terms, and which the "impressionable fool" beside her has it in his power to offer. Gabrielle's heart—if what she has of heart is worthy of the name—is being sorely lacerated by the absence of the only face she loves to look upon, and she recollects fiercely that her sister's grey eyes can gaze their fill on it, while her own glaring black ones are denied.

So she clenches her small fist and in her Bohemian fashion swears inwardly at the cruelty of fate that divides her from Lord Delaval, and barely hears the words of this evidently struck "sixteenth baronet."

"But why should you make that a rule?" he persists.

He is not given to talking, but to-night he seems positively garrulous.

"Beatrice is a most delicious creature, why should you repudiate being like her, Miss Beranger?"

"Because I have no fancy for a Benedick."

"Would you like to be a Katherine, then? Is there a Petruchio living at whose bidding you could grow tame?"

Is there? she knows there is, and a bright flush suffuses her face while she acknowledges to herself that at his bidding she would be the veriest slave that ever trod the earth, and she answers all the more impetuously, with her eyes flashing.

"No! no! no! a hundred times no," and Sir Everard cannot doubt that she answers truly.

She is so handsome, though, in her wild gipsy beauty, that he rouses out of his insular quiet ways of thinking, and decides that it would be a pity to tame her defiant spirit, or to hush the ringing tones of her voice.

"Would a Romeo suit you?" he questions in such soft womanish accents that her scarlet lips curl as she listens.

"To smother me in sweets, do you mean? oh, no, Sir Everard! *Aucun chemin des fleurs ne conduit à la gloire*, you know, and I have lived such a work-day life, before I was brought into the sacred precincts of Belgravia, that to me, love and glory and ambition are synonymous words."

"I have it!" he cries gleefully, like a schoolboy who has succeeded in unravelling a problem of Euclid. "After running through this list of cele-

brities, I have pitched on the right one to please you; now, 'pon honour, isn't it a Marc Antony you like best?"

"Perhaps he touches me nearer, only I am of such a horrible avaricious nature, and my ambition is so insatiable, that I should prefer some who would gain a world for me, instead of losing one."

"Almost a fool could do that," he murmurs naïvely, and she, remembering Lady Beranger's opinion of him, bites her lips to control a laugh. "I am sure I could aim at anything if you were not such a bright and particular star, and I could hope to reach you," he goes on *pêle mêle*, mixing up prose and poetry in a helplessly dismembered fashion.

Gabrielle laughs out freely at this, a laugh that is a perfect death-blow to sentiment although it is harmonious.

"Now, that's a charmingly turned speech," she replies, "I might almost fancy you a Frenchman. I am sure you have nothing to improve on it in your quiver, so on the principle of a *bonne bouche* we'll go in and report to Lady Beranger that the others have not come in yet. I am afraid she will be angry at such a defiance of the *bienséances*," she adds, but she thinks:

"Not that she will mind a bit, she will only think Lord Delaval is having all his own way with the aid of his handsome face and that oily tongue of his."

The two move off, and the lace curtains fall back into their place.

Then in a hard sort of voice, Zai turns to her companion:

"I hope you won't be surprised at my speaking to you plainly, Lord Delaval, and don't be shocked if I ignore the convenances in my words."

He is feeling rather irritated against her. The evening had begun as he thought so sweetly, and now a latent suspicion is in his mind that Zai's willingness to be with him so much to-night has proceeded from some *arrière pensée* which he cannot quite divine.

"Continue, and do not mind about shocking me I beg of you; I am capable of standing a good deal, you know," and he gives a curt laugh.

"You heard, of course, all that Gabrielle and Sir Everard Aylmer said about us?"

He bows his head.

"Of course, Lord Delaval, you don't require me to tell you how ridiculous all they said was, and since they were so ridiculous and never would be anything else, imagine how distasteful they are to me."

"Which part of their conversation was distasteful?"

Zai blushes under the starlit sky.

"You *must* know which part," she answers half shyly.

"That part about you and I being *lovers*?"

"Eh, *bien!*"

"Well, we are not, you know."

"Admitted, but that is no reason we should not be."

"Lord Delaval!" she flashes, "what can you be thinking of? You know quite well that you are

nothing to me—nothing—and of course I am nothing to you!”

“Zai—don’t start, I must call you Zai, for I think of you as such—there is no distance between us two in my thoughts. I can prove to you, too, that you are mistaken in what you say; the man who has learnt to love you with a love that is uncontrollable, and the dearest desire of whose heart is to pass his life in proving that love, cannot possibly be *nothing* to you! while, believe it or not, you are simply *everything* to him!”

“Lord Delaval!”

Carl had asked her whether she would ever allow other men to dare to make love to her, and she had answered that she would sooner die! and here she stands, alone with the starlit sky, the silence and the shadowy trees, herself and a man who not only dares to make love to her but absolutely does it in a possessive positive fashion that takes her breath away in sheer indignation and amazement.

Zai is very young, and though a daughter of Belgravia, so strangely ignorant of the tricks and wiles of her own and the opposite sex, that for a moment she gasps, and then loses the sense of dignity in anger.

“How *dare* you say such words to me?” she asks, unconsciously using Carlton Conway’s word “dare.” “You know they are false—false as—as *you* are! You know that if you have any love it should be given to Gabrielle or Baby. You ought to be ashamed to say such things to me, when you know how you have made Gabrielle love you!”

"Gabrielle!" he repeats, with a complacent smile. Why! Zai is jealous after all! "Is it possible that you think of her and me in the same breath? You might accredit me with better taste, I think. Come, Zai! will you let me try and convince you of the sincerity of my love for *you!*" he says softly.

"No! No!" she cries hastily, thinking it is base treason to Carl, even to listen to all this. "No! it would be useless, a waste of time on your part, since I tell you frankly that *I* could never love *you.*"

"A good many women say that, and yet learn the lesson of love at last, learn it too well, to their cost," he remarks with supreme conceit.

"It may be so, very likely it is, in fact," she replies as she scans his face, and, in spite of Carl, is fain forced to confess to herself that to women who love physical attraction, this man with his fair languid beauty, his earnest ultramarine eyes, must be irresistible. "But I could never be one of them."

"Do give me leave to try," he whispers in a voice that is wonderful seductive. "You shall be as free as a bird, only—I—I shall be bound—and willingly."

"No! No!" she says, almost sharply.

It is not that she fears temptation, but the very idea of love from anyone but Carl is odious to her.

"I could never care for you. I could never marry you."

"Reconsider that, Zai!"

"If I reconsider it for ever I should never change my mind!"

Lord Delaval shrugs his shoulders slightly, and fixes his eye steadily, almost rudely, on her.

"I am not, as a rule, a betting man, or I should be willing to lay very heavy odds that you will live to regret those words, or to unsay them."

Why is it that at this moment an ice cold hand seems to grasp the girl's heart and hold it in a vice? She is really as free as air, no human being has power of compulsion over her, least of all this man who dares to threaten her. Yet she shivers a little in the soft, warm June air, and without answering a word walks hastily into the house.

Lady Beranger and Gabrielle stand near the entrance of the ball-room, and beyond them Zai sees Carlton Conway, and on his arm, just emerging from the supper-room, Crystal Meredyth.

A faintness creeps over her and her hand grows chill as death, while her face blanches to the hue of a white rose.

It seems too hard, too hard! that he should flaunt his flagrant flirtation with this girl before her very eyes; but she is equal to the occasion. With her dainty head erect, her slender figure pulled up to its utmost height, she passes her mother and sister, Lord Delaval still at her side, and, as she nears her lover and her rival, she looks up, smiles in Lord Delaval's face, and lays her hand on his arm.

"First some supper, and then ten waltzes at least," she says in a bright ringing tone, "and *après cela, le deluge.*"

A little haughty bend to Carl—Carl, whom she is loving at this moment with every fibre of her

being, and she is gone, while Lord Delaval shrugs his shoulders once more and presses the little, white-gloved hand to his side, and says to himself with a feeling of complacency :

"Femme souvent varie—folle qui s'y fie !"

CHAPTER VI.

MISS FLORA FITZALLAN.

"Love in a hut - with water and a crust
Is, Love forgive us ! Cinders—ashes—dust !"

A PRETTY little house, *parfaitement bien monté* in Halfmoon Street. Plenty of marqueterie and rococo about, heaps of china monstrosities, heaps of nude statuary and glowing pictures, and shoals of devices in the shape of soft armchairs and cushions and sofas, to contribute to the well-being of man.

Altogether a charming little *ménage*, of which the presiding deity is Miss Fitzallan, leading lady at the Bagatelle Theatre.

They having been playing "Hearts *versus* Diamonds" at the theatre to-night, a comedy in three long acts, with a lot of emotional acting, which, when it goes on week after week, is, to say the least, a trifle fatiguing.

The Prince and Princess, accompanied by a party of foreign royalties, have been amongst the audience and have been demonstrative in their approval. Altogether the evening has been exciting, and the

actors are glad when it is over and each one can drop down from his stilts of artificial feeling to the level of real life.

Miss Fitzallan is tired too; her rôle has been the most arduous of all, perhaps, save that of the *jeune amoureux*, who has had to play the handsome but rejected lover, with a passion he can simulate better than he can feel. So the leading lady sinks back into her luxurious little light blue brougham, with an enormous sensation of relief, and is driven quickly to her bijou house, where a small but exquisite supper is laid out.

The covers are for two.

Herself and the *jeune amoureux*.

Flora Fitzallan is past first youth, though she has never owned to more than twenty-three for the last ten years; but dress and the skilful touch of art completely conceal any ravages that time may have imprinted on her face.

On the primary glance, she is beautiful as a dream. On a second and more leisurely inspection, an acute and impartial observer may detect some undeniable flaws in her physiognomy.

Her eyes are a great deal too wide apart, although they are of a velvety brown, and melting in expression, and their brows and lashes are perfect. The nose is a little too *retroucée* or tip-tilted, according to Tennysonian phraseology, and her mouth is large, though the lips are red and tempting. She is a woman on a large scale, with a fulness of form which promises to develop into unromantic fat; but, supper finished, as she stands in a long,

trailing white silk, with brilliants sparkling on her hair and neck, and ears and arms, there is really so much grace about her careless attitude, so much of imperial dignity about her, that is impossible to stop and analyse her defects when her claims to admiration are so evident. She is clever, too, a sharp cleverness with nothing *spirituelle* about it, and, considering her birth and position in the social world, she is ladylike and even fastidious in her tastes. She is quite a woman of the people, with no mysterious aristocracy hanging over her advent into the world. Her father was a bookmaker, well known to every sporting man, and her mother had been one of the ballet at the Alhambra, until years and obesity had displaced her from that honourable berth.

A popular actress at one of the most fashionable London theatres, and a woman about whom several men, from Mayfair to High Holborn, have gone mad, she can have lovers at her feet every hour of the day, and enumerate them by legion; but though Miss Fitzallan is a professional, and attempts no display of prudery, and (this in an aside) very little of morality, she is a woman, with a woman's natural tendency to love one man "*de cœur*" amongst the many aspirants to her favour. This man is—Carlton Conway.

He lies now, extended at full length on quite a sumptuous sofa, with a cigar between his lips, and his eyes closed. He has supped remarkably well, off dainty little dishes and the very best wine, and feels perfectly comfortable and satisfied physically,

but his thoughts are not pleasant, and are wandering far away from his luxurious blue satin nest, within which he is enshrined as a deity, and installed in all the dignity of lover A 1.

He is not thinking of Miss Fitzallan, or of her good looks and success, although half the club men would willingly give some hundreds to fill his place with this charming Aspasia.

He is thinking how coolly Zai Beranger bowled him over for Lord Delaval at the Meredyths' "At Home" two nights ago. He has loved Zai as much as such a nature as his *can* love, but it is a love that is subservient to *amour propre*. He had meant to seek her, to dance with her, to take her out on the lawn, to kiss her, and to believe that she was his, and his only.

And all these intentions were frustrated by his jealous ire at seeing Lord Delaval at her side. To pique her, he had devoted himself to Crystal Meredyth, and the tables had been turned on himself. The haughty little bend of Zai's dainty head, as she passed him on the peer's arm, had riled him more than he has ever been riled in all these years of unprecedented success amongst women, and, impassioned lover as he was of hers, the blow she has given his vanity has loosened her hold entirely upon him. He is not a man to waste his feelings on an unappreciative being. Crystal Meredyth likes him—he knows it, and she has money, lots of bank stock, and horses and diamonds—according to Lord Delaval—at her back, but somehow, Crystal, with all her prettiness, her

innocent china-blue eyes, and her naïve conversation, has not caught his fancy, and as he lies here, he is making up his mind to throw Zai's sweet image to the four winds, and to immolate himself and his handsome face and figure on the alter of Moloch. Miss Fitzallan stands patiently watching for a considerable length of time the reverie in which her lover — on and off the stage — is indulging, either forgetful, or else utterly regardless, of her very presence in the room.

She understands Carlton Conway's light, fickle and selfish character, from the top of his head to the soles of his feet.

A man is never known so thoroughly in the domestic relations of life as he is by a woman like this, whose lover he has been since almost the first days of acting together.

With Miss Fitzallan, Carl throws off all restraint, and has no silence, such as he would have to preserve with a woman who was his—wife.

It is at Miss Fitzallan's house that he feels himself completely at home—where he can fling himself *sans cérémonie* with dusty boots on satin sofas, smoke unrebuked the cigar interdicted in other drawing-rooms, and order the dainty dishes he prefers. He has suffered *ennui* covertly in the presence of the *grande dames* in whose *salons* he had been gratified to find himself, but he yawns unreservedly in the very face of the Aspasia who belongs to him *pro tem*.

To Miss Fitzallan he speaks openly—thinks audibly—and is exactly the same before her as he

is by himself. It is Balzac who says that if the mirror of truth be found anywhere, it is probably within the boudoir of Venus.

"Tell me, Carl, what you are thinking of? Is it of that doll of a thing I saw you go and speak to the other night, between the acts? Is it the money I hear she has or her silly face that runs in your head? And yet—no, I don't care to hear it is her face, for then I should be jealous—jealous as a tiger-cat, Carl! and jealousy is an ugly sensation to which I have not been subject, thanks to the goodness of an appreciative public!"

And as she speaks, she walks up to the sofa, and bends over him with a steady, keen look, adding in her tenderest, softest tone:

"Surely, Carl, you are not going to bowl me over for another woman?"

Carl gives a final puff to his nearly consumed cigar, and deliberately removing it from his mouth, throws it negligently into a superb Dresden casket that stands near him on a marble slab. Then he does not rise, but quietly turns over to his side and faces her.

Not a gleam of liking for her can be traced on his handsome aquiline features by the most adept of physiognomists. His eyes have a cold and callous light in them as they meet the fine melting brown orbs that search for a reciprocal look, and the tone of his voice is hard and utterly passionless as he answers her.

"Whatever heart I have is, of course, your's Flora, but one cannot subsist on love, you see. No

one knows this better than you do, judging by all this splendour. You have said you were in love with me—and I believe you are, but nevertheless, that love hasn't been enough for you, and the Duke of Beaudesert, Lord Lennerdale, etc., etc., have all been tolerated when Cupid came, laden with marqueterie and Chelsea, and so on. The 'doll of a thing,' as you are pleased to call Miss Meredyth, is not such a magnificent piece of flesh and blood as yourself—but she is *very respectable!*”

The colour flames up into the leading lady's cheek, her eyes shoot angrily, and for an instant she looks quite plain. His words sting like nettles.

“Very respectable! Did you say that to insult me, Carl? For you know I am not what prudes and fools call very respectable, and I don't want to be! Don't you dare to taunt me, Carl! You will try to marry that Miss Meredyth,” she goes on in a sharp voice, her rather ponderous foot beating a tattoo on the velvet pile; “but it will be only for her money. Oh, you cannot deceive me! I, who know each turn of your mind, who read you like an open book! And for an excuse for your paltry, interested motives, you lie there, and talk to me of her—*respectability!* Good heavens! I begin to feel contempt for you—a contempt all fellows deserve when they are ready to sell themselves to the highest bidder!”

A flush slowly mounts into the man's pale cheeks, and he bites his lips hard as he listens to her insolent tone, but he is too lazy by nature to be roused quickly into recrimination, and he cares too little

for her to take much heed of her words or contemptuous gestures.

"Flora, you are going too far," he says very quietly, with a callousness that goes far to irritate her more. "You forget whom you are speaking to. Your noble admirers may bow down to your tempers, but I won't. I am too proud to subject myself to them, and too indolent to retort, so, as you are not too amiable, I will wish you good-night, and when we meet again, I hope you will be more pleasant to look at, and to speak to."

"You shan't go, Carl! you and I have been together for three years, and I *won't* have you marry that girl. I'll forbid the banns, and make such a scandal in the church that all London will ring with it."

Carlton Conway looks up at her, and taps his well-varnished boot with his silver-headed cane.

"Pshaw, and why?" he asks with an accent of surprise.

Miss Fitzallan regards him fixedly and passionately, then throws herself down tragically on her knees by his side.

"Because I love you, Carl."

"*What* did you say? But enough of this, let us finish this folly at once, Flora! You appear strangely to misunderstand the nature of our relations to one another. If so, you had better rectify your ideas on the subject as soon as possible. The relations that may have existed between us yesterday are not forced to exist to-day. It is the old story, my dear Flora, acted in every part of the

world, in every phase of society from the Royalties down to the costermongers, and yet you, sharp as you are, don't seem to comprehend it. It is that in this world there are two sorts of women—one sort, charming like you, lawless like you, to whom a man gives either an hour or a year of his life, according to his own free will—a sort that please him one day, and disgust him the next, who ought not to expect from him anything, but attention sometimes, caprice and changeability always. A sort he takes up without any reality of feeling, and puts down without compunction or remorse. The other sort is like Miss Meredyth, brought up properly, with decent notions and respectable ways. To them a fellow naturally gives his life, his love, his respect, his name, and for these he abandons such as—Flora Fitzallan. You were born to be a plaything for a time; Miss Meredyth was born to be a guardian angel. You have insulted me, my dear Flora, you have credited me with vile interested motives, and forced me to place the above truisms before you, and now, perhaps, you *will* let me go."

He rises slowly, takes his hat, and drawing on his gloves lounges to the door.

Miss Fitzallan looks round, and tries to find in his face some signs of indecision, but fails, and she notices that there is no perceptible lingering in his step.

Frantic jealousy and anger, mingled with love for him, possess her. He is really the only man she has loved, and whose companionship has given her any genuine happiness in her tinsel existence

of stage spangles and hypocrisy ; without him she thoroughly believes she cannot live.

“ Carl, come back, don't leave me like this,” she cries pitifully. “ If my love for you has made me say one word to vex you, see, I ask your pardon on my knees, for Carl, you know how I love you, worship you, that there is nothing in the whole world that I would not sacrifice for you and your good except the sight of you, Carl, and that I *must* have or die ! Come back, and give me a kiss of forgiveness, and if you do anything horrid I will be mum.”

Miss Fitzallan has assumed a pose that would bring down the house if she were on the stage at this moment. It is so fine, so artistic, and she has called up all the emotional fire she knows into her big brown eyes, exerting herself as much to chain and enchant this man as though she was the cynosure of all London. It seems to her at this moment that there is but only one thing worth striving for, or existing for, and that is Carlton Conway's devotion.

Her nature is perverse like other women's, coveting what seems difficult to gain, undervaluing what is willingly offered.

“ My dear Flora, now you are yourself again,” he says carelessly, just sweeping his moustache across her brow, and then sinking into the arms of a capacious *fauteuil*, “ and I don't mind confiding to you the lamentable fact that I am deuced hard up. What with garments for the stage, and off the stage, button-holes for the Park and the balls

(Hooper in Oxford Street had the impudence to charge me three-and-sixpence for a gardenia the other day), I am just at the end of my tether. I want a new hat, new gloves, a new kit altogether, and devil a bit do I know who to squeeze the tin out of. I *must* sacrifice myself to a fortune, you see."

"Oh, Carl, but it's hateful the thought of your marrying anyone else. If it wasn't for some silly prejudice you might marry me; I have got heaps of money, you know."

Yes, he does know, and that how the money was got is a fact that it is better not to enquire into. Marry her? marry the leading lady of the Bagatelle Theatre? when he is a regular swell himself, in spite of his being an actor! The shade of his uncle, the Marquis of Eversleigh, forbid it!

He stares at her incredulously, and seeing she is in earnest, bursts into a loud laugh.

The next moment he asks her pardon for his rudeness, for Carl is a gentleman born.

"You are cruel to me, very cruel," she sobs, always with a due regard to the artistic, "but you will promise me one thing, won't you, Carl? It is that once married, and the fortune secured, I shall see you again as often as I do now?"

"All right, Flora, but that will be on one condition. It is that you won't bother me with letters or anything. Letters are so deuced dangerous, you know, especially if one's wife gets hold of them, and grows close-fisted with the pocket money. If I marry Crystal Meredyth," he adds to himself,

"she'll have to fork out pretty considerably to make up for the amount of insipid talk that falls from her lips. Now, if it was Zai! Ah! I'd take her with nothing, and work like a slave to keep my dainty little girl clothed like a princess, but she has thrown me over for that lardy-dardy swell, and joy go with her."

"Good-night, Flora," he says, rising lazily, "and mind and keep my counsel. If father and mother Meredyth, who are the properest couple alive, were to hear one whisper about you, they would send me flying."

"I'll keep your counsel, Carl; I wouldn't injure a hair of your head, not to save my life."

"Well, perhaps you wouldn't, little woman, or perhaps you would, *cela selon* I never had much faith in mankind, or womankind either to say the truth, and I am too old in worldly wisdom to begin now—ta-ta."

CHAPTER VII.

LAST NIGHT.

"Trifles light as air
Are to the jealous confirmation strong
As proofs of Holy Writ."

"ALLOW me to congratulate you, Zai," Gabrielle says with a sneer.

Zai leans against the casement, idly toying with

a spray of deep red roses she has just plucked from the trails that cover the wall hard by. She is very pale, and dark shadows underline her pretty eyes, and her thoughts are evidently far away, for she starts visibly as Gabrielle's voice falls on her ear.

"Congratulate me, and what for?" she answers rather bitterly.

Congratulations indeed! when her poor heart is so sore, her spirit so wounded by Carlton Conway's apparent defection last night.

"On your conquest of Lord Delaval," Gabrielle flashes out. "What a horrid little hypocrite you are, Zai. To think of how you spoke of him only yesterday morning and how you flung yourself at his head last night!"

"I don't understand," Zai murmurs, but her cheeks are quite flushed now and her grey eyes droop, for she remembers perfectly how, to pique Carl, she had flirted, as folks might think, with Lord Delaval.

"Zai! Zai! I thought you never told lies, and now you stand there in broad daylight uttering a monstrous falsehood."

Upon this, Zai bursts into an uncontrollable passion of tears, and flinging herself on the sofa presses down her face on the cushions.

Gabrielle attempts neither soothing nor scolding. To her such emotion is a display of childishness for which her hard nature has no sympathy. She rests calm and unmoved in her chair, languidly inhaling eau de Cologne and occasionally sprinkling herself

with a fragrant shower while she waits for the tears to subside.

"It seems very foolish spoiling your eyes by crying, Zai," she remarks at last contemptuously, when her not too great a stock of patience is, like the widow's cruse of oil, exhausted. "Of course I don't deny that Lord Delaval flirted with you as much as ever you could wish, and I suppose if you are engaged to him, it does not much matter if you *did afficher* yourself with him so shamefully."

"Gabrielle, you know I would sooner die than engage myself to that man!" Zai exclaims impetuously, dashing away her tears and sitting bolt upright.

"Child, you must surely be joking," answers Gabrielle, with a well-feigned accent of surprise, and with a quick uplifting in a curve of her dark brows.

Gabrielle is a rare actress by nature, and her vocation in life is the stage assuredly.

"Do you mean to tell me then that you are not engaged to him? If so you are certainly most indiscreet. All I know is, that if I descend to *afficher* myself before society with anyone, I shall take some man I like, and not one I was always professing to detest!"

"I *do* detest Lord Delaval!" cries Zai, in a shrill a tone as her bird-like voice can take. "I don't profess to detest him, but I detest him with all my heart and soul, and you know it."

"How on earth should I know it?" Gabrielle says sarcastically. "In fact I quite differ with you on this point; you may possibly fancy that you

dislike him, but actions always speak so much louder than words that I am certainly sceptical."

"And pray what action of mine has shown any liking for him?" persists Zai, her eyes blazing angrily.

"Did your proceedings last night show any dislike? Instead of staying in the ball-room with the rest of the world, you prefer to remain outside. It was desperately dangerous and sentimental work that, Zai—only the Chinese lanterns and Lord Delaval's handsome eyes to keep you company, while you hung on his arm, and probably arrived at the conclusion that Lord Delaval is not worse looking than most of his sex!"

"Don't!"

There is quite a ring of pain in Zai's voice, and she gives a little shudder. The whole situation these last words bring so vividly before her is one she hates to realise, for she knows few would be creditable enough, and certainly not Carl, to give credit for real dislike to such a rare-visaged character as Lord Delaval, whose eyes, though their expression at times is hard and chilly as marble, when he desires, have an undeniable fascination in their sapphire depths, the bare outline of whose face is simply superb, and who looks what he is, an aristocrat all over.

The passionate looks Carlton Conway had shown her have been her guiding stars, and she believes that she would unhesitatingly follow their lead into the deadly Styx itself, so it can be imagined how her very soul revolts as Gabrielle

insinuates that she flung herself at Lord Delaval's head.

"Oh, Gabrielle, do you really doubt in your heart I would give anything I possess never to see Lord Delaval again and to be all right with Carl?"

"I don't care about going into possibilities," Gabrielle replies pettishly, "I prefer restraining myself to simple facts."

"Perhaps you will be less sceptical of my feelings if I explain a little about, last night, Gabrielle," Zai murmurs deprecatingly. "You see I heard what Sir Everard said to you about Carl riding with Crystal Meredyth and looking 'awful spoons.' How those vulgar horrid words cut me through and through, Gabrielle! Then when we arrived, the first thing I saw was Carl waltzing with her, and—and—as if he really enjoyed it! I could not bear the sight of that, so when Lord Delaval proposed to go and see the illuminated grounds, I was thankful to go. After we had been out a little while I was anxious to come in, but he told me that Carl was engaged to Crystal—that he was obliged to marry some one who was rich, Gabrielle," and Zai flings herself down at her sister's feet and lifts up great pitiful eyes. "Instead of bullying me you ought to feel for me! I am heart-broken!"

"Heart-broken! You silly child, hearts are tough things and don't break so easily, I don't believe Carl Conway is going to marry that girl, but if he is, you must know he is a deceitful interested creature not worth thinking of. Well, what did you say to Lord Delaval in return for his information?"

"I only insisted on going round the garden by myself. I wanted to be alone with my wretchedness, and I wanted to call up courage to meet Carl face to face without betraying all I felt."

"Well?"

"Lord Delaval would not let me go alone, but I swear I forgot his existence even!"

Gabrielle gives a short unpleasant laugh at this.

"It is true, Heaven knows. We returned and were just going into the house when you and Sir Everard spoke about us—we were not a stone's throw from you, and of course every word you said fell out clear and distinct. I confess I was surprised at all I heard, as you know you did not speak the truth. However we won't discuss that point now. What I did hear made me resolve on an explanation with Lord Delaval at once. So I just told him frankly that I did not care for him and would never marry him!"

"In other words, you were amiable enough to neglect him before he had the trouble of offering himself," Gabrielle says with a mocking smile.

"He had told me before that he loved me passionately, Gabrielle!" Zai murmurs with a hot reproachful blush.

Her delicacy of character would not have let her reveal this except in defence of the seemingly fast conduct that has called down Gabrielle's sneers. And Gabrielle is well punished for her sneers—for the revelation of Zai's drives the colour from her cheek, and makes her writhe with jealousy.

"Very probably he did," she answers sharply

"Lord Delaval is a would-be monopoliser of women's hearts, and passionate love-making is one of the tricks of his trade. I don't believe there was a bit of genuine sentiment in all he said."

"I don't know, and I don't care if it was so. His protestations hadn't a feather's weight with me. And I never wish to see him agrin," Zai says quietly and truthfully.

"It never appears to strike you what people will say of last night. Society hasn't much romance in its composition. Society does not know, and would not credit that Zai Beranger wanders by day and night, blind to external influences, with a buckler girded on her heart on which is written 'Carlton Conway.' And if Belgravia cannot comprehend such high-flown sentiment, is it strange that I, born and bred amongst the *canaille*, with unlimited faith in the practical and matter-of-fact, and with a contempt for the foolish and the sickly romance of women, cannot help doubting and blaming you?"

"Blame has no effect on me," Zai says rather defiantly, with her little head erect. She is astonished and irritated at the cool condemnatory way in which it pleases Gabrielle to speak. It strikes her that there is too much presumption in it, and her really sweet nature, trodden on, like the traditional worm, seems inclined to "turn."

"But Lady Beranger is a slave to *on dits*, and she will lash herself into a fury if you don't carry out her scheme of marrying you to Lord Delaval after your curious behaviour last night."

"It is mamma's fault, and not mine that

happened; she is always throwing Lord Delaval and me together, and the whole thing is hateful to me.'

"Fiddlesticks! Mamma and lover being leagued, the odds are too much against you. You had better make up your mind to marry him; you will *have* to do so by-and-bye."

Lord Delaval's threat almost verbatim. Zai blanches with a sudden thrill of fear, and her heart gives a quick bound, but she says lightly:

"*Nous verrons!*"

"*Nous verrons!*" is the answer, and after a moment, Gabrielle goes on in studied accents: "I think it right to tell you, Zai, that I am resolved not to persuade you any more to marry Lord Delaval. I am a soldier of fortune, you know, and have to make my own way in the world; Lady Beranger deserves no tolerance from me, so I warn you, that I am going to try and serve myself, and if my interest clashes with anyone else's I won't yield an inch."

"In other words, Gabrielle, you give me notice that you are going in for Lord Delaval, yourself! I am sure I wish you *bon voyage* in your undertaking. I hope you will find the result, if gained, a happy one."

"I am not afraid, I never knew what fear was in my life. Cowardice in man or woman is the biggest crime in my eyes," Gabrielle says with a dare-devil glance.

"But," replies Zai, "why on earth should you consider it necessary to warn me of your project, I,

who have no interest in the matter except to wish you happy?"

"Simply because I should wish the point made clear to you, so that you may not think me deceitful in the end. I owe the world—*your* world of Belgravia—nothing. But I have determined to take all I can gain from it by my woman's wit."

"Follow Trixy's example, and sell yourself to the highest bidder you can find in my world, then!"

"No one has ever bid high enough for me," Gabrielle cries bitterly, at the same time tossing her head with the proud air of a De Rohan. "Pariah, as I am, I have that which many of you Belgravians lack—the knowledge how to *live*. *Mon Dieu!* What a magnificent specimen of a *grande dame* I should make! Would that I were a peeress, and rich!"

Zai looks at her wonderingly, then she says quietly:

"I cannot think why people do not consider an inordinate desire for money sinful. It seems to me that money is at the bottom of every crime ever since our Lord Himself was betrayed for thirty pieces of silver."

"Why don't you preach all this to Trixy, then? She is practical in her greed for gold. You know all my rhapsodies may be purely theoretical."

"It would be a waste of time and breath to preach to Trixy. She has not a tenth part of your common sense, Gabrielle, and she cannot be held so accountable for her actions. Of course, mamma

has literally coerced her into this awful match. She will endure the existence she has in prospect better than I should do, however. She won't think of Mr. Stubbs and his vulgarity while she has fine dresses and jewels. Sometimes I believe these things constitute her ideas of real happiness, do you know! But you, Gabrielle, are so different; if you pretend to lack a heart, at any rate you don't lack brains."

"No, I certainly don't," Gabrielle answers conceitedly.

Lack brains! Why it is on these very brains that she relies to bring honey and roses into her life, to get her luxury and ease, purple and fine linen, such as she loves actually quite as much as Trixy does: but has the *savoir faire*, or rather cunning, to keep her petty weaknesses locked up within the citadel of her own breast.

For a woman—and a young one—few could hanker more greedily after the flesh-pots and the silken attire of the children of Heth than this girl does.

To deck her ripe glowing beauty in the splendour of satins and velvets and soft bright hues, to see her long graceful throat encircled by the gleam of oriental pearls, her dusky braids crowned with a diadem of glittering brilliants, has been the dream of her life.

Ever since the old days when she loved to don a faded scarlet bow or a tarnished gilt brooch, to queen it over her sister *gamins*.

"By the way, Zai, I found out last night, that

Baby has accepted old Archibald Hamilton! It was only by chance, as the little brat wants to keep the matter a secret from us for a while, I believe."

"Baby!" cries Zai, in amazement. "And yet I ought not to be surprised, for I might have read the news in Lord Delaval's face when he looked up from beside her at tea last night. I expect he likes *embarras des richesses*, and is angry that even one of his worshippers should secede from her homage."

"It is no reason, because Baby gives her fat, dimpled hand to old Hamilton, that she should consider it necessary to close her heart to the fascination of her quasi lover!" says Gabrielle, with her Balzacian ideas, ideas that find no response in the pure mind of Zai.

"I can't stay chattering any longer, Gabrielle," she says hurriedly, and in the twinkling of an eye she is gone; and, as Gabrielle looks up surprised at her summary departure, she sees the tall figure of Lord Delaval slowly crossing the lawn towards the house, and guesses at once why Zai has disappeared in such haste. She bends forward, and, with wildly beating heart and tightly clenched hands, eagerly watches him.

Everyone who knew Gabrielle, sooner or later, asked themselves if she had a heart; and nobody amongst those most intimate with her, had yet been able to answer the question at all satisfactorily, excepting Lord Delaval.

But he does not seem to deem it worth his while to study her at all, though indirectly, and at all favourable opportunities, he lets her be fully aware,

through the medium of his handsome eyes and his voice, that he *knows* she had a heart, and that it is one he reads like an open book and finds remarkably interesting.

According to Dickens, there are chords in the human heart—strange varying strings which are only struck by accident, which will remain mute and senseless to appeals the most passionate and earnest, and respond at last to the slightest casual touch.

And so it is with Gabrielle.

She has reached over a quarter of a century.

Her nature is as passionate as that of a daughter of the south, and her early nurturing has been as wild and free as an Arab's; but no man's hand had struck the keynote of feeling until Lord Delaval put in an appearance on the scene.

He came, he saw, he conquered; and Gabrielle fell down at once, helplessly and hopelessly, to worship him.

CHAPTER VIII.

FLIRTATION.

"What the years mean—how time dies, and is not slain,
How love grows, and laughs, and cries and wanes again,
These were things she came to know and take the measure,
When her play was played out so for one man's pleasure."

GABRIELLE'S cheeks grow crimson and her eyes glitter with pleasure, that for a little while they two

will be alone, with no stranger to intermeddle with their joy, as she watches Lord Delaval approach nearer and nearer and finally step over the sill of the casement.

There is always a peculiar directness, an odd sort of intimacy in his manner towards her, whenever they are thrown alone together, that produces at once a most unconventional effect.

Now, as he walks up towards the sofa where she sits, the orthodox smile of greeting is lacking on his handsome face, the ordinary hand-clasp is unoffered, and Gabrielle does not even attempt to rise from her nest of downy cushions, while her face droops away a little from his gaze.

There is just a softer gleam in the big black eyes, a quick, nervous pressure of the even white teeth on the full, red underlip, and these are the only signs that she recognises his presence on the scene.

But Lord Delaval—confident and complacent—requires no spoken welcome. He has come in not knowing who he may find in the room, but finding Gabrielle, is ready, *faute de mieux*, to make love to her in the underhand way that does not compromise a man, and passes away an hour.

Ever since Baby's marriage to Archibald Hamilton had been hinted at by Lady Beranger, and he had suspected Zai's weakness for the popular actor, he had insinuated a passion, if he had not one, for Gabrielle. It may be that her evident liking for him, and her undeniable personal attraction, had touched him; but—probably it was only a selfish gratification he is given to seeking.

"I am so glad to find you alone. I wanted to see you so much," he says in a quiet outspoken fashion, that to a girl who hates what she terms the insincerity and shams of society is, in itself, fascinating.

"You wanted to see me, and you are glad to find me alone!" she repeats, then, to cover the nervousness his proximity always brings, she adds flipantly:

"Really, Lord Delaval, if Lady Beranger heard you she would drop at such a breach of the *convenances*."

"Possibly," he answers coolly, "but hang the *convenances*. "Don't you know that there are times in every fellow's life when he comes into collision with the conventionalities, and either breaks them, or else risks being broken by keeping them? So long as I can run with my Juggernaut, alias 'Society,' I am content, but I cannot throw myself before it and get mangled. Do you know I rather fancied I had a chance of finding you alone here, and so I determined to make chance a certainty?"

Gabrielle gives him a quick glance of surprise, while her heart throbs faster than it has ever done before in the six-and-twenty years she has lived.

Lord Delaval has often *looked* love at her—hinted at love, but he has never gone as far as this.

She has met him by appointment once or twice; still nothing has been said to make her believe he really cared for her.

Now she reddens like a rose, and feels a nervous

tremor run through her, and yet his manner is scarcely like a lover's. There is, in fact, nothing in what he says that could not pass as the ordinary talk of Society, yet the conversation seems lifted out from an ordinary atmosphere. They two, Lord Delaval and herself, are alone, and he talks to her just as if they were disembodied spirits. There are men occasionally in this world who have the power of bringing a woman they approach into direct contact with their own natures. They have a special gift of penetration, and one feels that in whatever relation one meets them, it is sustained by one's *real* self towards an equally *real* individuality on the other side.

Lord Delaval always makes Gabrielle feel this, and his intense manner adds to the feeling, but, with the supreme wilfulness of her nature, she refuses to yield to the magnetic influence he has over her without, at any rate, a struggle.

"You can have nothing to say to *me*, Lord Delaval, that all the world and the world's wife cannot hear. Are you mistaking me by chance for Zai?" she asks, carelessly, but she has no control over her features, and the excitement of his presence lends them a flashing, bewildering beauty, that possibly dazzles him—*pro tem.*!

He fixes his deep blue eyes on her with an expression of fervid admiration, and her lids fall beneath the passion of his glance, but she lifts them bravely, and meets his gaze full.

"You really look as if you thought I did not mean what I say!"

"And no more you do, *ma belle*," he answers quietly. Outside the sun shines down furiously; the air is warm as an Indian summer. Up and down, up and down, the butterflies skim over the flowers, and a lazy rose-twig gives an inert tap on the window pane. Gabrielle does not reply. She feels shy, and as shyness is foreign to her, it is not only an uncomfortable, but a painful sensation.

"You snubbed Aylmer last evening," he says.

"Yes!" she answers laconically.

"But why? Did you forget how many good things he has to offer you? Most women would jump at such a match."

"*Soit!* but *I* don't," she answers indifferently.

"Of course not," he tells her. "I know you better than you know yourself—no one will ever know you as well as I do—and, still more, Gabrielle, no one will ever love you as *I* love you! No, don't start!"

For she rises from her seat, feelings of various kinds surge over her, and she clasps her fingers tightly together.

"Gabrielle, I have been longing to tell you this." he goes on, in a concentrated voice, which has a deal of suppressed passion in it; "I see no reason for denying myself the expression of what is strong within me. I don't want you to tell me that you love me, for I should hate to evoke from your sweet lips words that your *heart* doesn't force through them, in spite of *convenances!* I only want you to listen to me when, instead of dilating on the beauty of the weather, and so forth, I lay bare *my* heart to you."

Gabrielle believes he is laughing at her, and the belief lashes her into fury.

"Please, Lord Delaval, reserve your amusement for some one else. I am not of sufficiently elevated position for you to waste your breath on. Do you forget that Lady Beranger looks on me as a sort of social pariah, and almost a gutter-girl!" she flares out scornfully, her lips trembling, and looking doubly tempting in their wrath.

Perhaps Lord Delaval, with his worship for pretty things, feels their increased attraction, for as his eyes fall on them, his manner grows really more impassioned. He moves closer to her side on the sofa, but she averts her head, and piques him by a feigned coldness.

"I can't see your face, Gabrielle! And I *want* to see it while I talk to you," he pleads quite tenderly.

The tone touches her, not because she credits its sincerity, but because she has never dreamed that *he* could ever speak to her thus.

"Gabrielle, do you believe in affinities?"

"I believe in sympathy," she answers, wondering what he is going to say now.

"I am a firm believer in affinities, and don't believe in the possibility of love existing between two persons devoid of affinity. Tell me, Gabrielle! do you follow me at all?"

She makes a slight gesture of assent, but she doesn't in the slightest comprehend what he is driving at. No matter, he is close beside her. If she likes she can touch him, and this is enough to

put this impassioned child of Eve into a fever of delight.

“I don't believe that anyone can give another anything that does not belong to that other. He may withhold it to a certain degree, but it *must* be given in the end. Perfect love is when one meets someone to whom one can give all, and from whom one desires all. Imperfect affinities are all that most people in *our* world know of love, and, Gabrielle, Belgravia is horribly ignorant, do you know? Being so, they call a part of such and such a thing the whole, and demand allegiance of one's whole nature to a feeling that belongs to, and feeds but a small part of it! Now, Gabrielle—my beautiful, tempting Gabrielle! you and I have this in common, that we hate sham, and never pretend to fine sentimental feelings unless we possess them. Isn't it true?”

Lord Delaval bends over her till his face nearly touches hers, and he smiles conceitedly as he notices how rosy red the cheek near him grows by his proximity.

“I knew when I first saw you that you and I were exactly alike in our ideas and feelings. Somehow I felt it directly we spoke. I knew that you would never give to any man that which was not his—for you are dreadfully proud and cold and hard at the core, and when I found out, a day or two ago, that unconsciously I had learned to love you—do you hear me?—to love you with my whole being—when I found out that nothing short of an entire surrender of your soul—*of yourself*—would satisfy

me, I trembled at the vision of bliss or torture that possibly lies before me—look at me, Gabrielle! ”

There is a quiet command in his voice which she never attempts to resist. To everyone else sharp, caustic, cold, and full of sneers, to this man she is the humblest of slaves; his, to do with as he wills. A daughter of Belgravia, with Lady Beranger's worldly-wise notions dinned into her ears, and with worldly, ambitious women examples for her in daily life—of this man she wants nothing, only *himself*; to gain his love, and above all, to be let to love him, she would fling all other considerations to the four winds without a murmur or a regret.

In a sort of maze, she lifts up a pair of big, incredulous black eyes to him now—eyes so soft and wistful—so filled with new-born light that no one would believe they belonged to Gabrielle Beranger.

She forgets everything but him and the giant fact that he is hers. In spite of her peculiar nature and practical turn, she has pictured, like most of her sex, a paradise of love about this man, and lost in the golden vision of Love's paradise gained, she lets her usual scepticism slip out of her mind, and only knows that Lord Delaval, whom she has worshipped for three years with the feverish fierceness of her Bedouin nature, *is* wooing her—strangely and abruptly, but in the sweetest, subtlest way that a man can woo. Gabrielle is sharp as a needle, yet it never crosses her brain in her love-sick frenzy that *real* feeling is *not* eloquent in expression, and that when a man *really* craves anything and trembles

lest he should not grasp it, flowers of rhetoric are usually denied to his tongue.

She sits spellbound, with drooping lids. Literally *nothing* seems to live in her, save a vivid sense of his words, and the intensity of their meaning. Her keen intelligence is lulled to sleep, her habit of doubting is dead, *pro tem*. She does not try to subject his protestations to any analytical process; they only seem to float through her mind in a kind of soft mist, and she sits white now and silent, and feeling, as she thinks she can never feel again, content, almost in a dream, and yet full, awfully full, of an intensified vitality.

“I want to tell you, Gabrielle,” Lord Delaval says very low, while his audacious arm steals round her magnificent shoulders and her crimson cheek is pillowed on his breast, “that I love you as no one has ever loved you, and that I am *determined* to win from you all that I wish! I have *never* been balked yet, if I determined to reach anything. If I preserve my will intact, I shall not accept anything but the *whole* from you, the *whole*, sweetheart—do you hear? Of your heart and soul and body I will have all—*all!* or die unsatisfied. My hope to gain all this is by knowledge of your nature. It is you—*you* that I love, not a part of you, not an ideal being of you, not what you represent to other eyes, but what you are with your thousand men’s imperfections, even blots. Nothing, Gabrielle, will change me towards you, for I have only given you what is yours by the law of affinity, and you,

Gabrielle—well, I *defy* you to say that you are not wholly and solely *mine*.”

It is masterful wooing this, insolent in fact, and it would revolt most women. Zai and even Baby, with her fast proclivities, would not understand it, and it would jar on their thoroughbred natures, but Gabrielle likes it.

The whole thing fascinates her—a visible shiver runs over her. Lord Delaval feels the shiver, and his arm draws her more closely to him, while the ghost of a cynical smile crosses his mouth. He stoops his head and looks full into her eyes, and then his lips rest upon hers, long and passionately, while her heart beats as wildly as a bird in the grasp of a fowler.

Luckily for her, she *has* been partially imbued with a respect for Lady Beranger's beloved *convenances* and *bienséances*. Luckily for her, Belgravian morals, though they may be lax, are too worldly-wise not to know a limit.

Even while Lord Delaval's kiss lingers on her mouth, she pulls herself away from him, angry with herself that she has allowed that long passionate caress, and yet feeling that she would have been more than mortal if she had resisted it. But she resolves to sift him *au fond*, to find out at once if in truth the man is only laughing at her, or whether, oh, blessed thought, she has caught his errant fancy or “love” as she calls it.

“Lord Delaval!” she says in a voice in which pride and shame mingle strangely together, “because I am a woman, with a woman's weak nature,

do you believe me to be a fool? Do you think for a moment I deceive myself or let your words deceive me? Only last night you flirted horribly with Zai. Before, it was in Baby's ear you whispered your soft nothings. It was Baby's hand I have seen you furtively clasp. I know, therefore, that the love you profess for me is all stuff and nonsense! that playing with women's feelings is delicious food for your vanity. But *why* you should pick me out, why I should be a butt for you, I am sure I can't guess! I don't care to believe that because I am what Lady Beranger thinks me, that *you* want to insult me!"

A look of pain crosses her brow, and an appeal for forbearance, dumb but very taking, goes up from her eyes. Lord Delaval seizes her hands and holds them fast while his gaze bears steadily down on her.

"You should not doubt, Gabrielle! I have told you the truth, upon my soul! No woman's face can tempt me from you now. Whatever the past may have been, I swear I belong to you now and for ever! While I wait to claim you as my wife before the world, and I *must* wait, for reasons which will be satisfactory when I tell you them, you will go on doing as you do, draining men dry to the one drop of their souls that you can assimilate. But that is not love, though they may lay their lives and fortunes at your feet. Aylmer would never satisfy your heart, Gabrielle, but you may flirt with him if you like, and drive him mad by these sweet eyes these soft red lips," and he lifts up her face and

studies it for a moment, "so long as when *I* want you, you come to me at once. It will be no sacrifice on your part, for you will only be obeying the law of your nature in loving me and I—I shall take you not as a gift, but as a right, my Gabrielle!"

Before she can answer him, he has taken her into his arms, and rained down kisses on her brow and cheeks and lips and is gone, with the conviction in his mind that, if he wishes it at any time, it will not require much pressing on his part to mould *this* girl's future to his will.

True he does not care a snap of his fingers for her, but any woman, beautiful of face and form, is not an object to be disdained or rejected, and Lord Delaval is not the only voluptuary among the Upper Ten.

Alone with the gathering shadows, and still wrapped in the presence that has left her, Gabrielle sits for an hour undisturbed. In the latter days she has thought several times that Lord Delaval had begun to recognise her claims to admiration, in spite of his flirtations with Baby and Zai, and alas! for Belgravian nurturing, it is a truth that the consciousness that her attraction for the man is *only a physical one*, in which her brains and soul bear no perceptible part, is far from being an unpleasant sensation.

"How very shocking!" a few prim spinsters may exclaim, but it is nevertheless the truth and nothing but the truth. It may be that most women love to conquer with the legitimate weapon, *beauty*, of the

SEX.

Poor plain Madame de Staël would willingly have exchanged all the laurels men laid at her feet for the tiniest, meanest blossom offered in a spirit of "love" or "passion" by them to women whom she justly regarded as her inferiors.

Gabrielle forgets her cross, her mother's low birth, Lady Beranger's taunts and everything else unpleasant, as she positively revels in a sense of Lord Delaval's admiration.

Rising from the lounge, she walks to the mantelpiece, and placing her elbows on it, stares in a fixed, almost fierce way, into the mirror.

The shadows that flit over the room are broken here and there by a few last dying sunbeams, and her beauty is improved by the flickering light. The sweet eyes and soft red lips to which he had alluded, gain fresh merit since they are decoys to his erratic fancy, and have fanned the spark she has tried to ignite into a flame that has at last burst into words.

Then between her and the mirror the superb face of her lover rises up, and the cheek that has just been pressed against his breast glows a lovely carmine, that is wasted on the unappreciative dusk, as she clenches her little fist, and swears in true and forcible Bohemian fashion to bring all her woman's wit to aid in winning this man for her husband.

Just at this moment Lady Beranger walks in, and without noticing her stepdaughter by word or look, throws herself a little wearily into an arm-chair.

"What are you thinking of, *belle mere*?" Gabrielle asks after a little.

"Thinking of! There is plenty to think of I am sure," Lady Beranger retorts curtly. "I shall never be at rest till the girls are safely off my hands; unmarried daughters are the greatest responsibility breathing."

"I will try and lessen your burden," Gabrielle says, in a bland voice, but with a curl of her lip which the dusk hides, "I'll promise not to say 'no' if anyone asks me to marry him."

Lady Beranger laughs a sharp unpleasant laugh.

"It is not likely *you* will lessen my burden!" she says sharply, "Everard Aylmer, who was my forlorn hope for you, told me he was off directly for a tour in India, so *he* is not going to ask you."

"May be, but then you see, there are other fools beside Sir Everard Aylmer in this world, Lady Beranger," Gabrielle answers flippantly, as she saunters out of the room.

"Hateful girl!"

And having relieved herself of this, Lady Beranger settles herself more comfortably, and begins to build castles in which Zai and Lord Delaval, Trixy and the fascinating Stubbs, and Baby with her elderly *inamorato* figure.

"That actor fellow showed his cards well last night," she soliloquises. "He is after the Meredyth filthy lucre of course, so now there's every chance of Zai catching Delaval. Trixy is thrown away on that dreadful cub, but after all, it doesn't much matter who one marries. After a month or so, now-a-days, the women think twice as much of other people's husbands as of their own. Baby will be all right in

Archibald Hamilton's keeping. That child really frightens me by her defiance of everything, and I shall be truly thankful to wash my hands of her before she goes to the furthest end of her tether. As for Gabrielle," a frown puckers her ladyship's patrician brow, "I wonder who she has got running in her head? I *hope* it is not Delaval; a neck to neck race between her and Zai would end in her winning by several lengths. Zai, though she is my own child, is the biggest little fool, with the primitive notions of the year One, and I *can't* alter her, worse luck!"

CHAPTER IX.

"FROGGY WOULD A WOONG GO."

"Gold, gold, gold, gold,
Bright and yellow, hard and cold;
Molten, graven, hammered and roll'd,
Heavy to get, and light to hold,
Price of many a crime untold."

"Poor Mr. Stubbs," sneers Gabrielle.

"Poor Mr. Stubbs," says Zai.

"Poor Mr. Stubbs," laughs Baby.

And with very good reason.

It is his eighth visit.

Trixy has deserted her downy nest among her cerulean cushions, and sits bolt upright on a tall-

backed chair. To-day is devoted by her to the personification of "Mary Anderson."

Her attire is of virgin white, not flowing in undulating waves of Indian muslin, or ornamented by tucks *à l'enfant*, but falling in severe satin-like folds round her beautifully moulded figure; her wealth of yellow hair is gathered at the back of her dainty head in a classical knot, traversed by a long gold arrow. She wears no bracelets or rings to mar the perfect whiteness of her arm and fingers, and while one hand toys lazily with a mother o' pearl paper-knife, the other rests on a well-thumbed copy of "The Lady of Lyons."

Opposite her, but at a discreet distance, her Claude perches nervously on the edge of his chair; his face has acquired more flesh and blood with his increased importance as the *fiancé* of the beautiful Miss Beranger, and his puffy cheeks glow like holly-berries under her glance.

Not that her glance by any means shows the odalisque softness, of which mention has been made; on the contrary, there is an incipient loathing in it, that she tries to conceal under the shelter of her long golden lashes.

But everything nearly has two sides, and the white drooping lids find favour in her adorer's sight, for he attributes them to the delicate shyness peculiar to the *china* beings of the Upper Ten, and unknown to the coarse delf of his own class.

Once, and once only, has he ventured to lift the lissom white fingers to his hungry lips very respectfully, *bien entendu*.

It was the day when, Lady Beranger standing by, Trixy agreed to barter her youth and beauty for :

"Gold, gold, gold, gold,
Bright and yellow, hard and cold;
Molten, graven, hammered and roll'd
Heavy to get, and light to hold.
Price of many a crime untold."

But she had drawn back her fingers before they arrived at his desired goal, with a sudden hauteur that almost petrified him into a stone.

It was the first time he had been thrown in such close contact with "high life," and when it bristled up in aggrieved delicacy it appalled him; but the next moment, he awoke to a profound admiration for the maidenly reserve that was, of course, part and parcel of a refined nature.

Poor Mr. Stubbs! well may the Beranger girls pity him. He little dreams of the melting glances Trixy's sweet blue eyes have given to Carlton Conway, or how eagerly the hand like a snowdrift has gone out to nestle in Carlton Conway's clasp, and how the faint blush rose on her cheek has deepened into damask bloom when in the old days Carlton Conway whispered in her ear, nor how, tell it not in Gath! her pretty mouth had even pouted for Carlton Conway's caress.

But we all know that where ignorance is bliss, etc., etc. Ever since Mr. Stubbs has been duly installed in the dignified position of "future," to Lady Beranger's eldest daughter, he makes periodical visits to Belgrave Square.

As it has been told, to-day is his eighth visit, but

he approaches no whit nearer to his divinity as regards heart—in fact he has decidedly made a retrograde movement in her opinion.

Trixy fully realises the truth of the old saw, “distance lends enchantment to the view,” and the nearer she sees him the more difficult it seems to her to swallow this big bitter pill, although it is heavily gilded. Still, she is determined to marry him somehow, for as regards more substantial things their hearts and such obsolete absurdities—she has fully realised the advantages and benefits this horrible sacrifice of herself, as she styles it, is likely to bestow.

What daughter of Belgravia hesitates long between love and ambition? That is, if she has been properly brought up? and how often are the marriages solemnised at St. George’s or St. Peter’s—marriages *du cœur*? A popular author writes of modern love—

“Though Cupid may seek for sweet faces,
From ugliness fly as a curse,
May sacrifice more for the Graces,
He’ll sacrifice much for the—*purse*.
The priest, if inclined for truth’s rigour,
Might write on each conjugal docket,
‘When a lover’s in love with the figure,
The figure must be in—the *pocket*.’”

And he is very nearly right.

Trixy has on a table that stands beside her two open morocco cases. In one, a magnificent necklet of diamonds sparkles and scintillates in the daylight, flashing back glances at a set of pigeon-blood hued rubies that repose alongside.

When her eyes rest on these the odalisque softness steals back to her limpid glance.

"Do you approve of the ornaments?" the millionaire asks nervously of his "liege ladye." He would not have ventured to say "Do you like me?" for all the world.

He is brimming over with gratification at his sumptuous gift being accepted, although Trixy has not had the grace to say even "thank you."

But then she is so sure of him that she does not trouble about common politeness.

"I have not yet learnt your exact taste, you know," he mumbles a little sheepishly, reddening to the roots of his more than auburn air, possibly with the pleasurable vision of the time when he *will* know Trixy's taste better.

Poor Mr. Stubbs!

At present she is still "doing" Mary Anderson, and may be a statue of Galatea for aught he can find in her of warmth, or learn of her tastes and feelings.

"The ornaments are very well," answers this often-to-be-met-with type of Belgravian daughters, with an insolent indifference which is quite assumed, for such costly baubles are her heart's delight. "I should certainly have preferred sapphires to rubies. They suit blondes so very much better."

Poor Mr. Stubbs feels and looks extremely disappointed and crestfallen. He has paid such a very large sum for the rubies. He has ransacked all the leading jewellers' shops that the stones

may be large and flawless, and the exact colour of pigeon's blood, and here is his reward.

For a moment it seems to him that there is something a little disheartening and depressing in aristocratic coldness and ingratitude, and that some of the gushing thanks of little Imogene of the Vivacity, or pretty Vi Decameron of the Can-Can Theatre would not be amiss, but only for one moment does his tuft-hunting soul turn traitor to the high life it adores, and he quickly brightens up.

"If you will allow me, I will take back the rubies, and desire sapphires to be sent instead."

"Oh, no, no! it would scarcely be worth the trouble of changing them, these will do very well," she answers in a tone of languor, but she remembers the vulgar old adage of "a bird in hand is worth two in the bush," and to put a bar on any chance of losing the disparaged rubies, she quietly clasps the morocco cases, and locks them into an ivory and ebony Indian box.

The big drawing-room in Belgrave Square is very dull. From outside comes the rush of vehicles, and the June sunshine tries to peer through the closed jalousies that fine ladies love. The clock ticks rather obtrusively, but Trixy likes to hear it, for it tells of the flight of time; a prospect she has at heart at this moment, and a short silence falls upon as ill-assorted a pair as ever a longing for the world's vanities has brought together. Looking at them, the story of Beauty and the Beast presents itself, excepting that the Beast is not likely to turn out anything else, save as far as riches are con-

cerned. From the day Mr. Stubbs popped the question, as Baby has it, and Trixy accepted him, Lady Beranger has thankfully thrown off the onus of chaperonage, which a rigid adherence to her beloved *convenances* insisted on before, and long *tête-à-têtes* are vouchsafed to the "happy young couple," as she calls them (Extract from the Stubbs' family bible—"Peter Robinson Stubbs, born July 12th, 1820," rather upsets the word young), but her lady-hip cannot stand the man in spite of his youth and happiness, and slips out of the way whenever his loud knock resounds through the mansion. She has no fear that Trixy will prove refractory now that the die is cast, and the match has been announced formally in the columns of the Court Journal and other Society papers. Besides, a dissolution of the contract would involve a return of very expensive presents, including the despised rubies, and Lady Beranger's insight into human nature, or rather into her eldest daughter's nature, leads her to think rightly. Trixy is her mother's child to the backbone.

In spite of her utter loathing for the man to whom she is going to swear glibly love and eternal fealty, she has received too heavy substantial tokens of his regard to allow her golden calf to drift away. She has thoroughly made up her mind—such as it is—to cast away all romantic nonsense, *i.e.*, her adoration of Carlton Conway, for the sake of worldly benefits, and now it is ten to one, that if the all-conquering C. C. came in his noble person to woo her, she would deliberately weigh against his un-

deniable fascination the prospect of being a leader of Society, with magnificent diggings in Park Lane, and the very comfortable sensation of a heavy balance at Coutts'.

"You think you really would prefer Park Lane to Carlton Gardens?" Mr. Stubbs inquires deferentially.

Under the powerful glamour of Trixy's beauty he feels as if he could buy up the Fiji Isles, or even that very uncomfortable residence, Bulgaria, if she wills it. Of course, she likes the big house in Park Lane. What woman, especially a daughter of Belgravia, would not? with its superb array of balconies and galleries, and conservatories, and its vast reception rooms, where Trixy fully intends to queen it over other leaders of Society, but she just bends her pretty little yellow-crowned head in assent.

One may have a dancing bear, but one is not forced to converse with him, she thinks, and she gives him a long level look, wondering what animal he is really like. Gabrielle had likened him to a frog, but he is too bulky for that; a bear or a buffalo, she decides, and while she does so, he has come to the decision that no cage can be too gorgeous for his radiant Bird of Paradise, and he glances, but covertly, at her in a sort of maze at the curious freak of fortune that is going to bestow on him such a *rara avis*.

He looks sideways at her sweet scarlet lips, and marvels what he has ever done in his prosy, money-making life to make him worthy of their being

yielded to him—not yet, no, *certainly*—not yet, he is aware of that, but perhaps, some day! He gloats with an elderly gentleman's gloating on the supple young form and perfect face, and quite a delightful awe creeps over him at the very idea of the future presence of this flesh and blood divinity at his hearth and board.

Nature has not been munificent to him in the way of looks. He has a broad, florid, rather flaccid physiognomy, and his proportions are not symmetrical, but, taking him all round, he is not a bad sort, and he has a good heart.

True, it beats beneath a huge mountain of flesh, but, never mind, it beats all the same with a good deal of honest warmth. His feelings towards his fair autocrat are a mixture of profound admiration and profound gratitude—the last sentiment being born of the first.

Gratitude is in fact an intensely tame word to express what he feels for Trixy's munificent gift to him of herself. With all these feelings rife in his very broad breast, feelings that would gush forth eloquently in most men, Mr. Stubbs remains strictly practical and common-place, and fortunately his wife elect is better able to sympathise with him as he is than if Cupid spoke from his lips in flowers of rhetoric.

"And the furniture? From Jackson and Graham's, I suppose?" he asks deprecatingly, as if it was *her* money and not his that was to pay for it.

"From Jackson and Graham's, of course! You

surely are not thinking of going to Tottenham Court Road, Mr. Stubbs?" Trixy says raspily, with a little sniff of her Greek nose.

"No, no! *of course* not!" he murmurs alarmed.

"Remember, I cannot have any hangings but *blue*—blue suits my complexion, you know; not *dark blue*, mind, but *bleu de ciel*!"

"Blue, certainly," he answers humbly, much more humbly probably than Jackson and Graham's foreman would.

"And Mr. Stubbs, pray don't forget that I hate anything modern. I like everything *old*, in *furniture*, I mean!" she says, warming up with her subject. "Chippendale and all that sort of thing."

"Florid carving you would like, of course?"

"Florrid! Horrid! Plain chairs, with shields at the back for the——"

She stops suddenly, while a look of disappointment and dismay creeps over her face.

"But you haven't a crest, have you?" she adds, with as much solemnity as if she were asking "Have you hopes of salvation?"

"A crest?—of course I have!" he replies jauntily, not a bit offended at her doubt on the subject. "A sweet little crest. It has a little turretted house on the top, with what they call in heraldry a martinet perched on it. I don't understand much about birds, but in plain English, I expect it's a swallow, or maybe a tom-tit. And the motto is a very nice one, and very applicable too—*Fortes fortuna juvat*," and he smiles complacently.

Trixy has a horrible suspicion that he also winks.

"I don't understand Latin," she says scornfully. "You see, they don't teach it at fashionable schools. It is a language that does very well for prescriptions and things, and is only fit for doctors."

"I know a little Latin, and my motto in English is 'Fortune favours the brave!'" he explains pleasantly, with another affable smile and meaning look, which are quite lost on Trixy, whose worst enemies cannot accuse her of any undue 'cuteness, as the Yankees have it. She has no more idea that the man is alluding to himself and herself than if he was speaking Greek, which is another of the languages she knows nothing of.

The only thing that strikes her is how funny he would look if his bravery was called into account, and how slowly his short stout legs would carry him, if he ever wanted to run away from an enemy.

"You say the crest has a castle with a bird on it. That will do I fancy on the furniture. People don't trouble much about the subject, so long as there *is* a crest to make the things look more aristocratic. Can't the Beranger motto be added to yours? It is French, and everybody knows French."

"May I ask what it is?" he asks wondering how he can have overlooked it in his diligent researches into "Lodge" and "Burke" and "De Brett," works that, bound in velvet and gold, have prominent positions in his library.

"It is '*Noblesse oblige*,' 'Nobility forces,' you know."

Mr. Stubbs reddens as he thinks the addition she

suggests will very likely provoke a smile from ill-natured people, who *might* fancy that the Hon. Trixy Beranger's finances forced her to become the Hon. Mrs. Stubbs.

"I don't see how it can be done," he remarks. "It would be going against the rules of heraldry I am afraid."

"What does *that* matter?" she cries captiously. "It would be very hard if I really set my heart on anything, to be done out of it just because some stupid sign-painter's ideas did not coincide with mine."

"Heraldry is not exactly sign-painting, it is a science," he ventures to remonstrate, anxious to smooth down her ruffled feathers.

"Really, Mr. Stubbs, you seem to think my education has been dreadfully neglected! I was five years at Mrs. Washington de Montmorency's *élite* establishment for daughters of the nobility only! Then I was at Madame Thalia de Lydekerke Beaudesert's finishing academy for *la crème de la crème* only, and Lord and Lady Beranger have spared no expense in educating me! Signor il Conte Almaviva taught me Italian, Rubenstein considers me his show pupil, Patti was heard to say that she envied me my voice, and—and—of course I know that heraldry is a science, but science or no science, I cannot see why I should not have exactly what I want carved on the backs of my own chairs and sofas. However, it really isn't worth the trouble of discussing," and Trixy half closes her eyes and falls into languor, a manner beneath which he

invariably feels the social gulf widen between them.

He cannot, even if he tries, affect this supreme indifference, this delightful repose that sits so easily on Lady Beranger and her belongings.

Leaning back against the *Prie Dieu* chair, with half-closed eyes, Trixy looks like a marble effigy of Resignation, but she does not show the gentleness and patience with which the virtue of resignation is generally invested. She is rather a cold, hard martyr to untoward circumstances, with a big wall of ice raised up around her that seems to freeze up her companion.

Surreptitiously he glances at a monster watch, like a bed-warmer, with half-a-dozen gaudy seals and charms attached to it. He really is anxious to find that the three-quarters of an hour, which Lady Beranger had hinted to him was the proper term of a courtship, are up; but time has not flown on the wings of love, there are yet ten minutes wanting, so he settles himself in his seat, and just escapes the sight of Trixy's pretty mouth elongated in a long yawn.

He commences a sort of auctioneer's catalogue of the worldly goods and chattels she will possess directly she is mistress of Park Lane, divining that this is a subject which really interests her, and hoping to make her forget about the crests and mottoes.

Thoroughly mercenary himself, he quite understands how pleasant it must be for her to know all she will gain as his wife. Exchange and barter

are household words to him. Ever since he was in knickerbockers and short pants he has been buying and selling, and he sees nothing at all extraordinary or revolting in this young person giving him her youth and beauty in exchange for his money.

Love! Well, love to his fancy is an excellent thing for boys and girls, but Mr. Stubbs has reached an age when passion *ought* to lose most of its fierceness and glamour, and a placid liking sound more comfortable.

He has given up business now, so he knows he will be usually at hand to guard his beautiful wife from the impudent swells—idle, good-for-nothing specimens of the *genus homo*—to whom morality is an unknown word, and whom he dislikes thoroughly, though he is deferential to their faces.

So that on the whole his matrimonial scheme bears a remarkably smooth aspect.

“There are one or two other little things on which I should like your opinion before I write my directions.”

Hearing which she brightens up at once into an attitude of interest.

“Didn’t you say the other day that you preferred a brougham to a clarence?”

“A brougham by all means, and it *must* be by Peters.”

“Have you a particular fancy for Peters?”

“Yes, yes. He is the only maker who is *chic*. Most of the others turn out heavy lumbering vehicles, with not the style about them that would suit *me*; but then you see, we have always been considered

to be so very *difficile* in our tastes, and the brougham *must* be green."

"With scarlet under carriage, and body well picked out with broad scarlet lines?"

"No, no! Picked out with black," she says very decidedly, wondering at the awful taste of the man. And there is not a doubt but that his taste *is* showy, he wears at this identical moment a miniature yacht in full sail, in gold and enamel, as a scarf pin, and a tie of violet satin, with orange stripes; orange is in fact his pet colour, from rhubarb down to the primrose of his gloves.

"Yes," she says, as if reflecting deeply, "the brougham must be green, a *very* dark green, and picked out with black, and brass mountings."

"A little sombre, don't you think?" he suggests timidly.

"Good heavens, Mr. Stubbs! Do you want me to drive out only on the ninth of November and look as if I was a part of the Lord Mayor's show?" she asks excitedly, raising her voice and causing him to give a little jump on his chair.

It is the first time she has displayed any variation of feeling, and the spice of devilry in her eyes, though it does away with Mary Anderson, heightens her beauty. Usually Trixy Beranger resembles a large waxen doll, with yellow hair and pink and white cheeks.

But she recovers her temper directly. It strikes her that this glittering fish may prove a slippery one if she allows the stormy side of her character to burst out before the matrimonial noose is tied.

"But, of course, I know you were you only joking about the colours for the brougham. I am *sure* your taste is similar to my own, and that you think nothing can be too quiet to be aristocratic. Mamma rather wants me at four o'clock, have you any idea what the time is?"

He glances once more at the leviathan time-keeper he carries, and discovers that he has outstayed his limit fifteen minutes, and that his regular constitutional before feeding time will have to be curtailed.

"I, too, have numerous letters to write, so I think I'll say *au revoir*."

Trixy sticks out five fingers carelessly, and he takes them in silence, but he is not bold enough to squeeze them ever so little, and he breathes more freely directly he is outside the big drawing-room door.

His broad back turned, Trixy steals out on tip-toe upon the landing, and when he is fairly out of the house, she opens the ivory and ebony box, takes out the two morocco cases, and walking up to the large mirror opposite, she leisurely puts the chain of brilliants and the band of rubies round her snowy throat. Rubies flash in her ears, and a huge bracelet of the same gems gleams blood-red on her rounded arm.

For a minute or two she gazes enraptured at herself, then she rushes up the stairs, two steps at a time, like a tomboy, and bursts like a whirlwind into what is called Baby's school-room.

Baby has for some time given up instructive

books for more refreshing waters of literature in the shape of French romances; but she still clings, with the small amount of tenacity there is in her nature, to the old ink-stained table and hard chairs, in whose company she tottled up four and four, and invariably made them nine, and wept bitter tears over the dry food provided for her mind by Miss Jenkinson, a staid sanctimonious old spinster that Lady Beranger had picked up out of the *Guardian*, and who, for twenty pounds a year and her laundress, agreed to the herculean task of bringing up the youngest Miss Beranger in the way she should go, so that when she was old she would not depart from it.

Alas! Miss Jenkinson's counsels have fallen on stony ground, for Baby is the biggest young reprobate that ever danced through life in kittenish glee and kittenish mischief.

The school-room, now that Miss Jenkinson is gone, probably through worry, to a premature grave, is used as a sort of *omnium gatherum* for all the Miss Berangers, and here they gather usually when not *en toilette* and *en evidence*.

"Look at me," cries Trixy in a shrill voice, "and admire me."

And jumping on to the centre of the table she stands with a half-conscious, half-comical expression on her face that elicits a burst of laughter from the other three.

"How *can* old Stubbs make such a fool of himself? He *must* know you are only marrying him for those things!" Gabrielle says contemptuously.

Trixy takes no notice. Gabrielle is not a pet or a pal of hers, and Gabrielle's wits are too sharp for her.

"I say, Zai, what *wouldn't* you give for such beauties as these?"

"Nothing! I don't care a bit for jewels, and I wouldn't accept such costly gifts from a man I did not care about for anything," Zai answers quietly, going on with her drawing.

"Grapes are sour, my lass. The man you *did* care for might not be able to give you them," Trixy says spitefully.

"I would accept them fast enough if I had the chance," Baby confesses ruefully, climbing on to the table as well, and enviously examining the brilliants and rubies. "Just fancy, that old Hamilton has never offered a thing but that!" and she sticks out her third finger, on which reposes an old-fashioned ring, with a bit of Archibald Hamilton's sandy hair shining through the crystal. "Scotch are such screws, I hate them. Do you know, girls, that I have nearly made up my mind to give the old gentleman the slip, and to elope with Gladstone Beaconsfield Hargreaves."

"Heavens! what a name for a common village Veterinary," Gabrielle says, with a curl of her scarlet lip. "And to think of his awful people having the audacity to mention Beaconsfield in the same breath with *Gladstone!*"

"Rather mentioning Gladstone in the same breath as *Beaconsfield!*" cries Zai, horror-struck. She is a thorough little Conservative to the back-

bone, and even goes to sleep in her dainty white-curtained bed with a badge of the Primrose League upon her bosom.

"A very good name it is!" flashes Baby, taking up the cudgels in defence of her rustic admirer. "I think his godfather and godmother were sensible people, and had no narrow-minded party-feeling and that sort of rubbish in their heads. Real Liberal-Conservatives they were of course. I can't stand politics, Trixy, can you?"

"Can't abide them," Trixy murmurs lazily. "I hate everything it gives one trouble to understand."

"Politics make me quite ill," Baby goes on, as she jumps off the table and flings herself full-length on the hearth-rug. "When the governor and Lord Delaval begin at them, I always feel inclined to roar. The governor shuts up one eye, and tries to look so awfully clever, you know.

"Dolly Churchill, my dear fellow, is the man—the *man!* Our *only* hope in these days of misguided, dangerous democrats. Our *only* stay! The Liberal Government have been the very devil—they have played ducks and drakes with everybody and everthing, and if they had lasted one day longer—*one day longer! mark my words!*—we should have been at—at—well, *not where we are now!*" And Delaval, who is a red-hot Republican at heart, just smiles that beautiful cynical smile of his, and thinks the governor a regular jackass, and *so do I.*"

"You shouldn't speak so of Papa, you irreverent monkey," Zai says gravely.

"Shouldn't I *really!*" Baby replies, mimicking her voice. "Well, then, I *will*. I love my Papsey. He is a dear old boy, but all the same, I don't think he will ever set the Thames on fire with his brilliancy. Why, ever since he has been in the House he has never said anything but 'hear, hear!' or joined in the ironical cheers."

"Lord Salisbury thinks a lot of the governor. I heard him say to Count Karoly the other night that Beranger was one of the most reliable men in the House, and so very cautious," Zai says quietly.

"No wonder, as he never opens his mouth," Baby laughs. "What do they have a lot of dummies for in Parliament?"

"Oh, just to make the whole thing look more imposing than it is, I suppose," Trixy drawls languidly. "Very likely they prefer most of the members not speaking, as the stupid ones might let out the secrets to the Opposition."

"*Gladstone speaks!*" Gabrielle announces solemnly, as if it is not a remarkably well-known fact. "He has been known to speak for three days and three nights without pausing to take breath even, and his eloquence has so overwhelmed the House——"

"With sleep, that no one ever got at the real meaning of his speeches," interrupts incorrigible Baby. "Any way, the Irish didn't. My Hargreaves is an Irishman (that is why he was christened Gladstone Beaconsfield I dare say. The Irish muddle up politics so, you know), and he told me

that in Paddy land *Gladstone* is the new name for *Blarney-stone*."

"I wish you would not regale us with the imbecile witticisms of your Vet, Mirabelle," Gabrielle mutters crossly, for she worships the G. O. M., and feels a slash at him acutely. And Baby knows she is wroth, for it is in ire only that she calls her Mirabelle, but Baby cares for nothing or nobody.

"My Hargreaves is *not* a vet. now. He is assistant riding-master to the great Challen."

"Baby, is this why you coaxed the governor into letting you have riding-lessons?" Zai questions anxiously.

Baby springs up from the hearth-rug, and turning a pirouette, pauses beside her pet sister.

Leaning over her she whispers in her ear:

"It is, but if you promise not to peach, Zai, I'll tell you something about——"

"Who?" Zai whispers back, colouring vividly.

"C. C., but not before Gabrielle and Trixy."

Zai blushes more deeply still as she bends over her drawing, and wonders if the letters C. C. will always send the blood surging over her face and set her pulses throbbing.

In spite of his heartless conduct at Elm Lodge she loves him dearly still, and lives from day to day in the hope that the clouds will clear away, and give her back the sunshine of life—Carl's love and presence.

And as she sits and drops off into a sweet waking dream, Gabrielle's voice startles her, and drags her back into everyday existence.

"Seven o'clock! We must be off and dress for dinner. There goes the first bell. Zai, there's a treat in store for you to-night."

Zai looks up, the dreamy expression still lingering in her eyes. A treat! For one moment she really fancies "he" is going to appear somewhere or somehow, but the next instant she fully awakens to her folly.

"Lord Delaval dines with us to-night, and afterwards we are all going to the theatre."

"*What* theatre?" Zai asks quickly.

"The Bagatelle, to see '*Hearts versus Diamonds.*'"

"And '*him!*'" Zai thinks to herself, waxing white as a lily at such an ordeal with Lord Delaval's mocking smile before her, and Lord Delaval's cold, keen gaze watching her face.

"Who sent the box for to-night?" she asks, for she knows Lady Beranger never spends her money on such things.

"Lord Delaval."

Zai colours again, and stoops down on pretence of picking up her pencil. She *feels* that Gabrielle is looking at her.

"That man has sent it on purpose to vex me," she thinks. "I detest him."

CHAPTER X.

AT THE BAGATELLE THEATRE.

“ Why did she love him ? Curious fool, be still,
Is human love the growth of human will ? ”

WHEN Lady Beranger and her party enter a large stage-box and settle themselves noiselessly in their seats, the first act of ‘ *Hearts versus Diamonds* ’ has begun, and the big bass is booming out a lugubrious overture to Ferdinand—the deserted lover’s reproaches to his faithless and diamond-worshipping Lady Yolande.

On the whole Carlton Conway looks superbly handsome and effective, when, as Ferdinand, he takes up a highly picturesque pose right in the centre of the stage. His head erect, his chest well thrown out, a little after Kyrle Bellew ; his shirt-front ample ; his tail-coat, and waistcoat and trousers, his patent leather boots, unimpeachable ; and a gardenia from Hooper’s, in Oxford Street, although he can ill-afford the half-a-crown paid for it, fresh and snowy and fragrant, reposing on his broad breast.

With one white hand uplifted, the forefinger pointing in scorn ; the third finger sparkling with a tiny but pure brilliant (Zai’s gift), he hurls :

“ Oh, cursed hunger of pernicious gold,
What bands of faith can impious lucre hold ? ”

in a deep, impassioned voice, that fairly electrifies his audience, but makes very little impression apparently on the Lady Yolande, who has quite made up her mind to give up love and poverty for a comfortable mansion in Mayfair and plenty of diamonds and money.

Miss Flora Fitzallan, as the Lady Yolande, is at her best to-night. She looks, in fact, as if a whole page of "Debrett" was devoted to her ancestry, thereby proving that we are not what we seem, and often seem what we are not.

In the palest of blue brocades, heavily embroidered with silver, and a tuft of pale blue ostrich tips placed jauntily a little on one side of her head, and a long Court train, edged with the very best imitation ermine, she looks quite good enough for a leader of Society.

On the finger of scorn being pointed at her, the Lady Yolande laughs tragically, and with an artistic twirl of her skirt swoops down close to the foot-lights, and while her glance roves over the *jeunesse dorée* gathered in the stalls, cries in a contralto voice:

My name is Blue-blood ! In the House of Lords
 My father sits and has his say ;
 My mother was a Mistress of the Robes,
 Before those awful Tories had their sway !
 Thou forgettest, Ferdinand, that sangre azul flows
 Through all my veins ; that in my face
 Not only love, but high ambition glows,
 With which, alas ! thou never canst keep pace !
 Lapped in soft luxury, born in marble halls,
 Vassals and serfs to answer to my calls,
 I could not brave the humiliating woe

Of in this world coming down so low.
 Ferdinand, forgive me ! and let me go !
 Without my purse full, I should surely pine,
 I love good dinners, and I love good wine ;
 My beauty decked in velvets, satins, lace,
 A jewelled diadem to crown my face.
 Ferdinand, I leave thee ! with a sigh,
 Without gold and diamonds I should die !

Upon this confession Ferdinand shows the laceration of his feelings by striking another attitude, an attitude of giant but picturesque despair. He folds his arms tightly across his chest, strides heavily towards her, and wears generally a depressed appearance.

“Oh!” he exclaims, lifting up his fine eyes to the gods in the gallery. “Lend me, I pray, strength to bear her perfidy.”

As his glance slowly travels earthwards he espies Zai, and starts slightly, but the sight of her sweet face gives real pathos and eloquence to his voice as he murmurs tenderly :

“Yolande ! Beloved Yolande ! Thou knowest not the vulture that gnaws my heart, or thou would'st pause in thy fiendish work. False Yolande ! Thou hast *never* known what heart is, but—

“I will tell thee what it is to love.

It is to build with human thoughts a shrine,
 Where Hope sits brooding like a beauteous dove
 Where life seems young and like a thing divine.
 All tastes, all pleasures, all desires combine,
 To consecrate this sanctuary of bliss.
 Above, the stars in cloudless beauty shine.
 Around, the streams their flowery margins kiss
 And if there's Heaven on earth— that Heaven is surely this !

Carl Conway is really a very fair actor, and his

voice is both musical and *entrainante*, and he spouts these lines with a wonderful passion and softness that appeal to all the women present, and as he speaks them, ever and anon his handsome brown eyes rest a second on the stage-box where poor little Zai sits well back in her corner.

Her eyes fixed on the beloved face, she forgets the existence of anyone else, her cheeks are flushed with excitement, her heart throbs fast, and a suspicion of a tear shines on her long lashes. Not a word does she utter, not a word does she hear; engrossed in this, the first love of her life, the play itself goes on without her taking in the gist of it. All she sees is Carl—Carl, with his superb face, and with his eyes full of the old, old passion as they linger on her and seem loth to turn away.

The curtain falls and rises twice over, and she thanks Providence that for once her people leave her alone so that she may gaze her fill. Who knows when they two will meet again—and how?

The girl's poor heart grows cold as ice when the *dénouement* of the play comes, and Ferdinand, praying for the boon of a last kiss, the Lady Yolande yields her proud lips to him.

Yields them *con amore*, too, it seems to Zai, as she shrinks back from the sight with a jealous pang that makes her shiver and clasp her little hands desperately together.

Then the curtain falls for the last time, and she looks up and catches Lord Delaval's eye.

It seems to be searching her very soul with a fixed, keen gaze that has something regretful

about it, though his lips have a half-mocking smile.

"That fellow, Conway, really acts tolerably," he says aloud to Gabrielle. "Did you notice the ring of pathos and truth in his voice? And yet those sort of chaps lead such a hollow life of shams and tricks, that they can't possibly have a genuine feeling in them. What do you think of Flora Fitzallan, Miss Beranger?"

"Just what one thinks of such creatures," Gabrielle answers contemptuously, "outside all paint and powder. Inside——"

"Pray don't give your opinion on people like Miss Fitzallan, Gabrielle. They are not fit subjects for your discussion; at any rate before me and my daughters!" Lady Beranger remarks severely.

Gabrielle elevates her brows and shrugs her shoulders. Then, as her stepmother sweeps away, she says:

"I think one thing about Miss Fitzallan, Lord Delaval. I think she has a *grande passion* for Carl Conway, and I expect she does not try to hide it—*off the stage!*"

And Zai hearkens in bitterness of spirit, but does not love Carl one whit the less.

"I say, Zai, did you see that Lady Yolande kiss Carl? She kissed him *right on the mouth*. And I have heard that it is not *convenable* to do that sort of thing on the stage!" Baby whispers.

And still Zai holds her tongue, but as she listens, it seems to her that it is the last straw to break the camel's back.

CHAPTER XI.

CARYLLON HOUSE.

“ You loved me, and you loved me not
A little, much, and over much ;
Will you forget, as I forgot ?
Let all dead things lie dead—such
Are not soft to touch.”

FANCHETTE, having arrayed Trixy and Baby for the Duchess of Caryllon's fancy ball, finally seeks Zai. Zai—who still lies dreaming her love's young dream in the soft twilight, while a star or two peeps down inquisitively through the open window upon the increased loveliness that love has called up on her sweet face.

Regretfully she rises at Fanchette's entrance, and certainly no fairer daughter of Belgravia ever tripped through Belgravian *salons*. When her toilette is complete, Fanchette does wonders with her little artistic touches here and there, and Zai's costume, though simple, is exquisitely picturesque.

The bodice is long-waisted; the stomacher thickly embroidered in pearls; the Vandyke corsage is low in front, with a high ruffle behind, and the whole makes a beau-ideal of the old time Maestros; ropes of glistening pearls go round the slim throat and are wreathed in the chestnut hair. The dress of Blanche of Navarre is marvellously becoming, and

would be becoming to a plain woman. What, then, must it be to this daughter of Belgravia, to whom Nature has been lavish in seductive tints?—this girl with a beauty so very fair that

“If to her share some human errors fall,
Look in her face and you'll forget them all,”

and who is very proud of herself, as she thinks that Carlton Conway will be at Caryllon House to-night, and will see how “nice” she looks.

Let us own that a woman must be composed of very strange materials who does not feel that it is charming to be young and pretty, considering that youth and beauty are the recognised weapons for slaughtering men's hearts.

Lady Beranger has always a fancy for “her own party” when she goes to a ball, and on this occasion the dinner in Belgrave Square has three additions to the family circle—Mr. Stubbs, Archibald Hamilton, and Percy Rayne—a connection of Lord Beranger's—a clerk in the Foreign Office, good-looking, harum-scarum, a pauper, and a detrimental. Lord Delaval was asked, of course, but had another engagement. When all her brood is gathered together, Lady Beranger, in silver *moire*, with the Beranger diamonds (but no! not the Beranger diamonds, for they are under safe lock and key and surveillance of one of the many Attenboroughs—but the duplicates in finished Parisian paste, which are quite as lovely and costly to the uninitiated eye), steps into the family landau.

They are late, and the crush of the room is un-

comfortable beyond description, like all London crushes. But great as it is, Zai makes a decided sensation as she wades through the crowd on Percy Rayne's arm. Gabrielle is a Spanish gipsy; Trixy, Fair Rosamond; Baby, with her pink and white skin, golden hair, and white short draperies showered with rose-buds—a delicious piece of "Dresden"—but Zai to-night puts everyone into the shade. There is the usual quantum of sea-nymphs and flower-girls, characters from history and characters from fiction, of piquant costumes and of costumes which are chiefly remarkable for being *bizarre*.

As she and Percy Rayne fall into the line which just now is promenading the long room in the interludes of dancing, the Foreign Office clerk is conscious of that pleasant thrill of complacency—a sort of moral and even physical inflation—which a man feels when escorting a woman whose beauty glorifies her escort.

Zai's card is soon full—so full that only one waltz remains, which she guards pertinaciously. She is determined to valse it with Carl, even if the heavens fall. Several ask for it, but she laughingly says she is keeping it for a friend. That friend does not, however, seem in any haste to take advantage of her generosity.

She has been nearly an hour in the room before she even sees him, and then he is talking earnestly to Miss Crystal Meredyth, and only acknowledges *her* by a formal bow; and to add to this, Crystal Meredyth makes a very lovely Ondine to-night. How strange it seems to her that he should bow

like this, when only a week or two before he looked at her with all his soul in his eyes, at the Bagatelle Theatre!

Zai's heart is full to bursting, and her red lips quiver a little; but while a weeping and gnashing of teeth is carried on inwardly, she returns his bow with one still more frigid.

And at this inopportune moment, Lord Delaval comes up to her.

"I think the next dance is mine?" he says, rather stiffly, offering his arm.

"You mistake," Zai answers.

She does not wish to go off with one man when she can stand here, the centre of a group of *jeunesse dorée*—all begging for "one turn," and this within earshot of Carl.

She would give anything to pique him now that he is so engrossed with this girl who has money.

"The next dance is Mr. Rayne's; at least his name is on my card," she goes on.

Lord Delaval bows—not a bow like the one Carlton Conway has given her just now, but a bow on the Grandison model. His taste and tact are perfect; nothing would induce him to dispute a point of this kind; but a look steals over his handsome face which is not common to it when Zai is its object—a look of cold hauteur, a look that has even a *soupeçon* of dislike in it.

"I understood the dance was mine," he says, and quietly turning on his heel, he walks away. There are visible surprise and satisfaction among the butterfly youths at this little rebuff to the best

match in Town—for lords of the creation, noble animals though they be, are yet creatures of weak mould.

But Zai's conscience smites her.

That the dance is Lord Delaval's she knew quite well when she allowed Percy Rayne to write his name over his. At the moment she felt a sort of perverse defiance of displeasure on the part of any man. But now she regrets having sullied her lips by a white lie, and she feels ashamed—as one always feels ashamed—when one has taken shabby advantage of the immunity which is chivalrously permitted a woman to do or say uncivil things by Society. It is a retributive justice perhaps, which accords her nothing for her incivility, for Carlton Conway, who is standing not far off, and alone—Miss Meredyth having gone off to dance—presently moves off too, without even a glance in her direction. It is really too much!

Blanche of Navarre's grey eyes sadly follow his retreating figure, and with a decidedly sinking heart, and forlorn spirit, she sees him a few moments after, careering "*au grand galop*" with his arm round Miss Meredyth's supple waist. Always that Miss Meredyth!

She feels wickedly vindictive against this girl—almost ghoulish, as though she would willingly scrunch her up, bones and all—this dollish beauty who has lured away her lover.

Zai grinds her to powder (mentally), under her high military heel, and turning to one of her adorers, asks for a pencil and deliberately writes

down Lord Delaval's name for the dance she has reserved for Carl.

It is some time, however, before this tardy reparation becomes known. Lord Delaval feels that he has borne as much as aristocratic flesh and blood can stand from this girl, who seems so little aware of the magnificent distinction he has conferred upon her, and that it is full time to assert his dignity.

He asserts it therefore in the ordinary fashion of men who are *épris*—by bestowing his attention upon other women, of whom there are a multitude willing—and Gabrielle in particular—to accept everything or anything he chooses to offer, this Prince of Beauty, with his blond hair and ultramarine eyes.

Like so many poor boxes, they are ready to receive the smallest donation—a smile—a word—his arm for a promenade—or his hand for a dance. Yet even while apparently engrossed in wholesale flirtations with the fairest of the sex in the room, even while lavishing soft nothings, pressing fingers, he finds himself covertly looking again and again, and fervently admiring the slender figure in its old-fashioned quaint costume, the fair sweet face of the girl who he knows is over head and ears in love with “that actor fellow.” Despite himself and his anger he cannot help secretly owning that never did woman exist more fitted to wear the purple, and to don the Delaval coronet than this one, and he resolves to win her—somehow.

Having “put down his foot” on this point he feels that all flirtations with Carlton Conway, Rayne

and all others must end, that he must clearly make it understood that such doings must stop.

Flirt though he has been himself ever since he dropped round jackets and donned the *toga virilis*, and flirt though he probably intends to remain until the very end of the chapter, he has not the slightest idea of allowing his wife to indulge in the same amusement.

No! no! no! a thousand times no!

The woman of his choice must be an exceptional being, and a very different stamp of woman to the puppets of the Belgravian *salons*, with whom he has been in the habit of dallying and associating, and with whom he has passed so many hours of agreeable foolery.

Cæsar himself may of course do what he likes, but we all know what is expected from Cæsar's wife.

It is an old, old story—carried down from generation to generation, and alas! for the honour of Society, a story infinitely more theoretical than practical.

The hours go on towards midnight—the crowd is suffocating, the heat intense, the gaiety at its height.

Since they entered the room, all the Beranger girls have been dancing, they are not the sort to personate wallflowers, none of them, and Zai in particular has not been five minutes under her mother's ample wing.

Instead of looking worn out, however, she seems in higher beauty and gayer spirits than usual, when Lord Delaval again approaches her.

"You are only just in time," she says, meeting his vexed eyes with a little laugh which he would think the most delicious in the world if he had not heard it bestowed upon any number of the golden youths during the last hour. "I have put your name down for this very waltz, and I was reflecting a moment ago whether I should have to send Percy to look you up, or whether I should give it to the multitude who are begging for it!"

Zai says all this with an air of delightful coquetry which is perfectly foreign to her. Poor child, she is of course only playing a part to hide her misery and mortification about Carl, but she plays it extremely well, and the coquettishness is remarkably becoming to her.

"I wonder you hesitated over the alternative, when there are so many to whom you could give the dance with satisfaction, no doubt, to both sides;" he answers a little sulkily.

"Yes! there *are* a good many," Zai admits with ingenuous frankness. "But then, you see, I thought you really wanted it! If you don't——"

"You know I do!" he cries, quite unable to resist the pure, soft, sweet face uplifted to him.

All his mighty vexation is scattered to the four winds as he looks down on her.

In this world everything repeats itself.

Like the judges of old—whose fiat was stayed by fair Phryne's face and form—so Zai's pretty grey eyes, snowlidded and blacklashed, and her smile, even though it be forced, disperse this man's anger in a trice.

As he speaks the band strikes up "Bitter Sweet," and putting his arm round her elaborately whaleboned waist, yet a dainty lissom waist in spite of whalebone, he whirls her away.

It is a glorious waltz—the room is lengthy, the floor well waxed, the lights glitter, and the music peals out an exhilarating strain, and these two have danced often enough together to know well the other's step and peculiarities.

It is also the end—though they do not know it—of butterfly flirtation.

A very fitting end, too, for flirtations.

In the end of some serious love affairs, so much faith and hope go down for ever that we might well play over them that *Marche Funébre* of Chopin—that charming old Listz called the *Mélopee*, so funereal, so full of desolating woe.

But for the end of flirtations, what can, we ask, be more appropriate than the light, gay and entrancing strains of the Bitter Sweet Waltz?

"You must be awfully tired! You had better let me take you somewhere to rest!" Lord Delaval says, rather tenderly. Zai is tired, and does not demur; and he takes her out of the ball-room into a long corridor, in which the wax lights are a little dim, and in which fewer flirting couples than usual are to be seen.

Like a huge maelstrom, the *salle de danse* has engulfed them, so there is not much difficulty in finding the quiet and secluded corner, free from interruption, of which Lord Delaval is in search.

He wheels a cosy, velvet-cushioned chair near an

open window, and when she has dropped into it he settles himself opposite her on the window sill.

Zai shuts her eyes, it may be from physical fatigue, or it may be that she does not care to meet the keen, searching gaze—anyway, a short silence follows, during which she slowly fans herself, and he—well—he is considering how to plunge at once into the subject nearest his heart—for he hates to wait for anything.

“I don’t care to talk about myself,” he says, after a minute or two. “If there is an abomination in the world, it is an egotistical man; but I should like to know if you have ever heard things about me which have caused you to shun my society at times? I know I have a number of kind friends in Town ready to tell you that I am a flirt, and worship myself only.”

“Yes,” she answers truthfully. “I have certainly heard your friends say both things of you.”

“Perhaps in one thing they were right enough—I have flirted desperately in my life—every man who has never felt a strong exclusive attachment does flirt, you know, but never more! never more! I shall never flirt again—for——”

He bends forward until his face almost touches hers, and whispers low:

“The strong exclusive attachment has come to me!”

Zai does not answer, though she flushes in spite of herself.

“You cannot doubt that I love you, Zai!” he pleads, passionately, “and that I shall be the

happiest man on earth if I can persuade you to marry me. Zai, do you think you will ever care for me enough to do that?"

He catches hold of her hands, and holds them as in a vice, and though she draws them away, she does not rebuke him from calling her "Zai." Perhaps she scarcely heeds that he does so. She is sore at heart about Carl. She would give a good deal to show him that if he does not appreciate her there are others who do; and what could be a greater triumph for her than to leave the Duchess of Caryllon's ball the future Countess of Delaval. She would be more than the bright, gay, and rather spoilt girl Belgravia has made her if she did not hesitate before she rejects this triumph over Carl and "that Miss Meredyth," who, of course, knows that she has usurped Carl's heart. Zai has considered herself bound in honour to Carl; but he, himself, by his conduct in the latter days, has given her back the freedom she did not want. There is really nothing to prevent her accepting Lord Delaval except—and that is a great deal—her own wilful, rebellious soul, that clings to Carl with a tenacity stronger than herself.

"You will not press me, Lord Delaval, for an answer, will you?" she asks quietly. "I should like to think a little, to reflect. One can't make up one's mind in a minute, you know," she winds up more hastily.

"On condition that you won't keep me too long in suspense. Will you let me know my fate at the State Ball on Friday? That is two whole days."

"Yes," she answers, gravely; then she jumps up from her chair.

"I have promised Percy Rayne, Number 24," she says, examining her ivory tablets, "and I hear it beginning. 24 *Le Premier Baiser*. It is such a delicious air that I never miss it."

He rises and offers his arm in silence.

"It was Rayne who suggested your fancy dress, I suppose? I know he is great at such things," he says, a trifle sullenly.

"Yes; do you like it?"

"No!"

"No! How very rude of you, Lord Delaval. I thought you were the pink of politeness," she replies, laughing.

"I don't like it because I feel as if you belonged to me, and I don't care for you to wear what any other man suggests."

"But I don't belong to you," she blurts out, on the spur of the moment. "Your feelings make a great mistake if they tell you I do."

"They tell me that you will belong to me, however," he answers, in a masterful tone, and Zai feels a thrill pass through her—a thrill of fear almost. It is not the first time she has felt it when this man has had a possessive ring in his voice.

Five minutes afterwards she has thrown off the feeling, and is dancing away as if her heart was as light as her feet; but when the waltz is over, she leans back against the wall, and wishes that she was dead.

"If you have one dance left, Miss Beranger, will you give it to me?" says a voice beside her.

Zai starts, the colour flames into her face, her limbs tremble, and her heart beats so that she places her hand unconsciously on it as if to stay the throbs.

"Yes, I have a dance—this one," she says hurriedly, almost incoherently, and unseen by her people or Lord Delaval, she passes through the swaying crowd on Carlton Conway's arm.

"Come out of the room, Zai, we can't talk here."

Ah! how his voice seems to bring back life and hope and happiness to the love-sick girl. To think! to think! that after all Carl has not thrown her over—that she has been doubting him, doing him injustice all this time.

And as they reach the same corridor in which Lord Delaval has just asked her to be his wife, but passing out of it enter a deserted balcony, the moonbeams fall on her face uplifted to her lover's.

"Once more," Carl murmurs with genuine feeling. "Oh, my love, my own—own love! I have wearied for this!"

And clasping her in his arms, he kisses her—kisses her with the old, old passion—on her sweet lips, that smile and quiver with bliss at his touch.

"It was not true, Carl, what they told me?" she says very low, with her eyes so wistful and one white arm round his neck.

"What did they tell you, Zai?" he asks brokenly. For fickle and light of nature—he cannot look on these sweet, wistful eyes—he cannot feel the clinging clasp of this white arm unnerved.

"They told me you were going to marry—Miss Meredyth, Carl."

Her heart throbs so fast he can hear it, but though he knows suspense is a terrible thing, for a few moments Carlton Conway gives no answer.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE BALCONY.

"But you!

If you saw with your soul what man am I,
 You would praise me at least that my soul all through
 Clove to you—loathing the lives that lie.
 The souls and lips that are bought and sold,
 The smiles of silver and the kisses of gold!"

ZAI looks up hastily at her lover, and her eyes meet his.

It is not only at the touching of the lips that spirits rush together, as many believe. Who has not seen the soul leap up into the eyes, and utter there its immortal language far plainer than mortal speech can interpret it—when pride, or honour, or duty, or interestedness has laid an iron hand across the mouth.

At such a moment we seem to realise with startling force the existence of the divine spark prisoned in its house of clay. The power of spirit over matter, the subtle imagination which, without words, can lay bare

"All thoughts, all passions, all delights,
 Whatever stirs this mortal frame."

Before Carl can utter a sentence, he half forgets everything in the sweetness of the grey eyes, in the fairness of his young love's face.

"My darling—my own darling," he whispers, straining her again to his heart, which, to do him justice, he verily believes is devoted to her. "Why have you forgotten me for—Delaval, Zai?"

Zai starts and flushes.

"But I ought not to blame you," he goes on; "after all, class should mate with class, and I am not good enough for you—nor rich enough. I have plenty of shortcomings, I know, Zai, but you must not think worse of me than I deserve."

Her heart flutters like a bird at this, and her eyes glisten through unshed but irrepressible tears.

"Worse of you than you deserve, Carl!" she falters, while her arm clings closer to his neck, and she feels that this man is a king among his kind, and that she may well be forgiven if she worships him. "Why should you imagine that I think any ill of you?"

"Because I merit it after the brutal way I treated you at the Meredyths', and even in the beginning of this evening, my Zai. I doubted you, you see, and when one suffers one is apt to be unreasonable, and wounded vanity is quick to come to the side of wounded love, and after all what is more natural than that you should not love me?" he asks, but clasping her even closer and kissing the bright chestnut hair that gleams up so ruddy under the moonbeams. "What more natural than that you should love—Delaval!"

But in his heart he does not for a moment believe that she or any other woman could pause between any other man and *him*.

"Nothing more natural, I suppose," Zai answers, nestling her hand into his, and feeling her spirits rise and her courage rear its crest aloft as she thinks Carl has only acted thus out of jealousy. "But natural things do not always come to pass, do they? There are exceptions to all rules, you know. I told you before, Carl, that I was the exception to the rule in the Beranger family of being dazzled by Lord Delaval's fascinations. Have you forgotten this?"

"I thought *you* had forgotten it!" Carlton Conway murmurs in his most melodious and reproachful accents.

"Why should you have thought so?" she asks wistfully.

"It would be wiser to ask why I should have thought otherwise," he returns, a little drily. "Your sweet face has bewitched me until I have had no sense left I think, but still I am not *quite* mad. I know my superiors, and am not surprised when fate and fortune compel me to bow to them."

"But Lord Delaval is *not* your superior, Carl!" she cries earnestly, "not in any respect—except that he is a little richer, perhaps."

"I did not mean to imply that he is my superior because he is a swell," he observes rather haughtily, "but the very point of which you speak is the very one that makes his superiority, probably, in *your* eyes."

"In my eyes!" she answers in amazement. "Oh, Carl, I am sorry you should give me credit for such things. I don't think that kind of superiority worth anything—*anything!*" she goes on scornfully. "I don't think that money and position and all that sort of thing makes people really happy!"

"Everyone in Town thinks you mean to make the experiment, anyhow!" he replies.

"But *you* didn't. Surely you didn't, Carl! You know I don't care for Lord Delaval—and that I love *you!*" she whispers, *les larmes au voix*.

He looks down at her sweet downcast face. It is a face bathed in blushes. For Zai always blushes when she tells him all that is in her heart. But she need say nothing. He has only to look at her face, which tells its story of love with exceeding clearness and sweetness to his vain, incense-loving eyes.

"Zai! do you really love me so very much?"

He asks the question from sheer selfishness and a desire for incense to his overweening vanity. He knows he has sought this opportunity to tell her something which will break her heart. But no— hearts are tough things, and do not break easily. But something which will surely wreck her implicit child-like faith in the fidelity and sincerity of all men. Never after to-night will Zai Beranger perhaps feel that loving words and honest words are twins. Rather she will shrink from them, knowing that they may be uttered only to betray.

Now she believes in Carlton Conway with her whole soul. And when he asks:

"Zai, do you really love me so very much?"

She lets both white arms form a circle for his neck, and woos him to touch her red lips.

For one moment she forgets her maidenly reserve, and only remembers that in her own eyes she is his wife—in heart, if not in name.

“Oh Carl! Carl! let us marry at once—dear! and then no one can come between us two!”

“We cannot!” he says hastily.

Zai starts as if she had been shot, and covers her face with her two little hands, while a burning blush surges over it.

It comes to her suddenly, the terrible, terrible shame, of *her* having asked—of *his* rejection—and then the colour leaves her cheek.

She leans against the balustrade, with the moonlight falling on a face white as undriven snow. Her eyes have a dumb misery in their depths, and her mouth quivers like a child's.

“Oh Zai! forgive me if I hurt you by saying we cannot marry!” he whispers brokenly, for her white face and trembling lips move him strangely, worldling as he is. “You know very well how I am placed! I have nothing but my salary, and that is dependent on health; and if I don't marry some girl with money, I don't know what will become of me, Zai!”

A deep silence ensues for a minute or two. Up above the glorious moon sails serenely along, and a few feathery clouds float athwart the great sapphire plain of sky. From within, the sound of music is carried out on the fragrant night, but human eyes and human voices are nowhere near.

These two are alone, entirely alone, on this isolated balcony, and they have for many months played at making love.

Listen then in what passionate words Belgravians and worldlings say farewell, if farewell must be said by them.

We all know that Romeo and Juliet would not have said it, but they were foolish inconsequent young people, who fortunately did not live to test the agreeabilities of a narrow income.

"Then I suppose you are going to marry Miss Meredyth?" Zai asks in a low voice, that has a hardness in it which no one has heard before.

"Zai! can you blame me? Can you think it possible for me to act otherwise?"

"No! I don't blame you!" and again bitterness mars the sweet voice.

"Of course you cannot blame me!" he answers, "for you know *you* are forbidden fruit, Zai. You have been reared in certain social conditions, which of course it would be sheer wickedness on my part to ask you to resign!"

This is a very different sentiment to what he has expressed before; and even she, much as she loves him, feels indignant.

There is a sudden flash in her grey eyes as she lifts them to his.

"You know that you ought not to say this, Carl! It is not my interests you are thinking of, but you have made up your mind not to marry anyone who has no money!"

"Granted!" he replies quietly, though a crimson

flush dyes his face, and he bites his lip hard. "But though you seem to reproach me, you know why it is so! You know that people in *your* world cannot subsist on sentiment, or on a few paltry hundreds a year. I am, I avow, one of those miserable devils to whom the bitter irony of fate has given the tastes and habits of a gentleman, without the means of supporting them. You are the corresponding woman. Common sense—the commonest sense—will tell you whether or not it would be sheer madness for us two to marry, although we love each other so passionately, Zai!"

Zai does not answer. There cannot be the least doubt, she knows, but that common-sense *does* tell her that marriage with her would not suit Carl Conway; but it is none the less true that common-sense is not what she cares to listen to now. In the most vapid soul that sojourn in Belgravia ever starved, there is still some small lodging left for that divine folly that men call "Love."

"And Zai, born and bred in Belgravia, is as desperately and honestly in love with this man, who has played fast and loose with her, as a milk-maid could be.

She longs—how she longs—for just one crumb of comfort, just one little word of sweetness from his lips.

Only a quarter of an hour ago he held her to him and kissed her with apparently the old, old passion in his soul, and now he stands a little apart, calm and cold as a statue.

Conway is a wonderfully handsome man, and Zai

worships his beauty. The more she looks at him the more she craves for a gleam of love in his brown eyes—the stronger grows her desire to listen to love from his well-cut lips; but she listens in vain.

“Yes, I know all that,” she says very wearily, with a dreadfully heart-sick feeling of disappointment, “it was hardly worth while you telling me. I have heard papa and mamma and Gabrielle, and all the others talk of ‘common sense,’ but one grows tired sometimes of hearing the same thing.”

The tone of her voice tells more than her words; there is a betraying quiver in it that makes him turn quickly and look at her.

The eyes that meet his own have great glittering tears in them. Never in her life has Zai looked more lovely or more lovable than at this moment, and Carl recognises fully all that he is sacrificing for money.

“Forgive me for having repeated anything then that wearies you,” he says softly, clasping her cold white hand in his own, and Zai lets him. Even now—even now! in spite of his falsity, his avariciousness—the touch of his hand thrills her through and through, and her white lissom fingers linger in his grasp. “Zai, my darling! you *must* feel that it is as hard—much more hard indeed—for me to utter than for you to hear. Good heavens! do you imagine I am thinking of myself? (For a moment, perhaps, he really fancies he is not). It is of you, my dearest, that I think. How can I be so cruel—so selfish as to ask you to give up for me everything that you have been taught all your life to consider

worth possessing? But if you really wish to do so, Zai, I can only say that you will make me very happy. And, darling, you know I shall strive very earnestly to keep you from regretting it!"

Brave words these are and bravely spoken, with not a single falter in the tone—not a sign of what they cost, but a swift pallor sweeping across his face.

Let us do this worldly credit—let us confess that it is very well done for a man to whom nothing could be more ruinous than to be taken at his word.

But frankly, Carlton Conway has not reckoned without his host. It is a curious rather than an absurd sense of honour that forces him to risk this declaration; but he knows the girl beside him too well not to be *almost* certain of her reply.

The event justifies the expectation. Zai loves him to distraction, and the loss of him will create a void in her life which she believes no one on this earth will fill up—not if she lives to be as old as Mount Horeb.

Carl's handsome captivating face tempts her—the most genuine love that a woman can feel tempts her to keep him at any cost.

But it is only for a moment she wavers.

She knows that Mammon and Cupid have run a race in Carl's heart, and that the former has beat by several lengths.

Young, ignorant of guile, and innocent, a sort of instinct teaches her this.

"It is impossible!" she falters, with the sharp

thrill in her soul echoing in her voice. "You are perfectly right, Carl, in all you have said, and I—I know it as well as you do. I have been reared under certain conditions and for certain ends, and perhaps I could not put them entirely aside. I am fit for nothing but Society, and Society would not recognise me if I was poor and struggling, so we should simply mar each others' lives and render each other miserable. And Carl," she tries to speak calmly but the effort is terrible, "I could not bear poverty and neither can you, though——"

She breaks down completely, large tears chase one another down her cheeks, but she dashes them away, wroth at herself for her weakness and want of pride. "Therefore, we must not think of marrying, of course!"

Another dead pause. Madam Diana sails along more brilliantly than before, this time with an enormous court of glittering stars around her. The cool night air passes quietly by, lifting up the chesnut tendrils of hair that stray on to Zai's brow and fanning her poor hot temples. The time is flying by, and someone will be coming this way, but nevertheless Carlton Conway cannot end this interview without a few more words.

"And you will of course let Lady Beranger persuade you into marrying Delaval?" he asks, jealously—angrily.

Like the dog in the manger, he does not want the girl himself but he grudges her to another man.

Jealousy is a passion that is often wonderfully independent of the passion of true love.

Carl is very loth indeed that Lord Delaval, whom he has always hated, shall have this lovely piece of nature's handiwork for his.

"I don't know," Zai murmurs wearily. Then she calls up all the high spirit she has in her and says quietly—"After all, the matter might be worse—for Lord Delaval everyone says is charming, you know."

"But you care nothing for him, Zai! You care for *me!*" he exclaims passionately, with almost a mind to claim her sooner than she should pass out of his life in this manner.

"I know—and yet——"

"And yet you *may* become Countess of Delaval?"

"I may."

Upon this Carl releases her hand pettishly and subsides into silence. He is not of a nature to ponder deeply on social or any other kind of evils, but just now the sordidness of this strikes him very forcibly, and he wonders how such girls as the Berangers hold themselves even a degree better than the Circassian and Eastern females who sell themselves for filthy lucre.

"Zai, tell me the honest truth. Do you care for Delaval the least bit in the world?" he asks earnestly, longing for her to deny the existence of any liking for his rival, to protest the enormous height and depth and width of her love for himself.

"Not yet—but," Zai adds slowly and meditatively, "if I marry him I shall do my best to care for him, and even if I didn't—what of it? Do people

in our world deem it necessary to care for the man or the woman whom they marry?"

And Carl Conway cannot honestly affirm that they do.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE STATE BALL.

"I have hidden my soul out of sight and said
Let none take pity upon thee. None
Comfort thy crying—for lo! thou art dead.
Lie still now, safe out of the sight of the sun;
Have I not built thee a grave, and wrought
Thy grave-clothes on thee of grievous thought?"

THE June sun is full of pranks to-day. There it is, scorching up the leaves in the square, broiling the toilers on the white pavements, shining down on everything with a lurid glare that makes one wink and blink, and generally uncomfortable, and now it is peering into the windows of Baby's school-room, showing up the short-comings of the faded carpet, the ink stains on the old table, and streaming full on to a corner where, before her easel, Zai stands, palette and brush in hand, but idle.

"Oh, it is hot! hot!" she cries impatiently, throwing down her painting apparatus and pushing her hair back from her forehead.

"Here's something to cool yor.!" Gabrielle says, throwing across the *Morning Post*, and then she

has the good feeling to pick up a book and pretend to be buried in its contents, while Zai reads what she considers her death warrant.

“A marriage has been arranged and will shortly take place between Miss Meredyth, daughter of John Meredyth Esq., of Eaton Place, and Carlton Conway Esq.”

Three times Zai reads the announcement over—mechanically spelling each word—then she drops the paper on the floor, and going up to the open window, looks out.

She does not find the sun hot now, although it is dancing on her chesnut hair, and turning each tress to fire. Her heart lies so dreadfully cold within her breast that it seems to ice her whole frame, and though her eyes face the strong yellow beams, they do not shrink from them.

Since she read the words in to-day's *Post*, she seems to be blind and deaf to everything, save the fact that Miss Meredyth has won from her that which she valued most in life.

“Well, Zai?”

Zai has been standing at the window perfectly motionless for half an hour, her slight figure almost rigid, her head a little thrown back, her face white as marble and almost as impassive, her two little hands clasped behind her as in a vice, and Gabrielle thinks it high time to recall her to a sense of everyday life with all its ills.

“Well, Gabrielle!”

The girl turns and faces her step-sister: her eyes look as if she were stunned, but her lips smile.

Gabrielle stares at her for a moment, then she bends over her volume again.

"There, child, don't act with only me for an audience!" she says quietly. "You have had enough of acting and actors, goodness knows. What a brute the man has been!"

"Why?" Zai asks defiantly.

"Why?—because he pretended to love you, and he *knew* you loved him, and yet he has quietly bowled you over for that doll of a thing."

"He cannot help himself, Gabrielle!"

"Why cannot he help himself, pray?"

"Because Carl is so poor. Oh, Gabrielle! Gabrielle!" and, the tension passed, Zai throws herself down on Baby's favourite hearth-rug, and sobs as if her heart would burst. "What an awful, *awful* thing money is!"

"The *want* of it you mean! But the man Conway knew he was poor always. Why did he ever spoon you as he has done?"

"He loved me so—he could not help it!" Zai says tenderly. "And we love each other dreadfully—*dreadfully*—still, but he thinks I should suffer so if I did not have the luxury I have been accustomed to all my life!"

"And he does not think about himself, poor dear unselfish fellow!" Gabrielle says with a little sneer. "Zai, take my advice, and don't waste another thought on him. He is going to marry Miss Meredyth for her money, let him, and don't let Miss Meredyth have the pleasure of seeing that you envy her her husband!"

"I must try and forget Carl," Zai murmurs feebly. "It would be a sin to love him when he is married, but I don't know how to begin. He seems to run in my head and my heart so!"

"Let some other *genus homo* turn him out of them. There's heaps of eligibles about. Lord Walsingham, for instance, he is young, good-looking and tolerably well off."

"Why he squints, Gabrielle! and has red hair!" Zai protests mildly.

"Never mind. What does it matter whether one's husband has red hair and a squint. All one wants is a nice house, and fine carriages and horses, plenty of diamonds etc. Is there no other man you know who could make you forget that actor fellow?"

"No one!"

Zai blushes crimson. There is meaning lurking in Gabrielle's manner and eyes, although her words are simple enough, and she remembers that this step-sister of hers has resolved to win Lord Delaval for herself.

Let her, Zai thinks; she has never felt so much distaste to accepting Lord Delaval's offer as she does at this moment, when her heart is so sore and her spirit so humiliated.

"I won't cry any more!" she exclaims, feigning to be indifferent, but in reality anxious to change the subject. "I must look well before the Royalties to-night, you know! The Prince was very nice to me at Caryllon House, and said I was the belle of the room! What are you going to wear, Gabrielle?"

"Black lace—and you, I suppose, are going to wear sackcloth and ashes!"

"No I am not!" Zai answers lightly. "Mamma coaxed Swaebe out of another six months' credit, and so Trixy and Baby and I have loves of pale blue faille and white illusion, and water lilies trailing all over us. I want to look beautiful to-night for a reason.

"What reason?" Gabrielle asks suspiciously.

"Only because——But no; it's a secret for the present," and Zai, running out hastily, rushes up to her bedroom, and, double locking her door, cries to her heart's content.

They are about the last tears dedicated to the memory of Carlton Conway; but, by-and-by she bathes her eyes in cold water and smoothes her hair, and putting on her hat, goes out into the Square. But the Square is associated in her mind indelibly with that evening when she stole out from Lady Beranger's ball to meet her faithless lover, and rising hastily from the bench, she walks home again.

"Go and lie down, Zai, and rest yourself; you look like a ghost!" Lady Beranger says harshly, meeting her on the stairs. "Or better still, put on your white chip hat with the pink roses, and come with me to the Park. The air will beautify you, perhaps."

And Zai—who has learned by this time that Lady Beranger's suggestions are really fiats—goes up and adorns herself, and is quite bewitching in the chip and roses by the time the Victoria is at the door.

Lady Beranger leans back, a trifle pale, and with the *souçon* of a frown on her brow, and the carriage is just at Hyde Park Gate before she volunteers a remark.

"You have seen the *Post* to-day?" she says, carelessly.

"Yes, Mamma, and I am so glad to see Mr. Conway is going to be married; Crystal Meredyth is very nice, and awfully rich, you know."

Lady Beranger turns round slowly and fixes her keen searching eyes on her daughter.

But Zai has not been born and bred in Belgravia for nothing.

Not a lash quivers—not a change of colour comes—under the scrutiny.

"I always said Carlton Conway was a cad!" her ladyship observes coldly; "and I am very glad you have found it out too."

"But I haven't, Mamma, not the least in the world. I think quite as well of Mr. Conway as ever."

Zai's self-possession amazes and almost annoys Lady Beranger. She is positively out Heroding Herod! But she only says, in a cold, hard voice

"Think as well of him as you like, Zai, so long as you keep it to yourself. His sort of people are all very nice in their proper places, but I have never advocated their being in Society. There is the individual in question!"

Zai looks eagerly round, and her cheeks grow crimson and then wax pale, and she bites her lips to stay their trembling, as the Meredyth's high

Barouche with stepping roans dashes by, having for its freight only Miss Meredyth and her *fiancé* ! (Mrs. Meredyth, not so scrupulous as Lady Beranger about the *bienseances*, thinks there is no harm in an engaged couple being seen alone in the Park.)

Miss Meredyth, dressed in rose colour, with a sailor's hat perched coquettishly on her fair hair, looks uncommonly pretty, and so Carlton Conway seems to think, for he is so engrossed in regarding her that the Berangers' Victoria is passed unnoticed.

"I thought it was the Meredyth girl's money the man was after, but he seems to be *énormément épris*," Lady Beranger remarks indifferently, hoping the shaft will fly 'straight home and cure all remaining nonsense in her daughter's head, or heart, or wherever it may be.

Zai answers nothing. With a sharp pang of misery and jealousy, she, too, has noticed how devoted Carl seems.

She is thankful when her mother orders "Home." She is sick of bowing and smiling when she would like to lie down and die; but nevertheless she trips airily down to the dining-room, eats more dinner than is her habit, and after this goes into the conservatory and plucks a couple of the reddest roses she can find.

"Fanchette, make me awfully pretty to-night!" she coaxes, and the *femme de chambre* is nothing loth. Zai has every "possibility," as she calls it, of being *belle comme un ange*, and more than satisfies her exquisite Parisian taste when her toilette is complete.

"She wants but two little wings to make her a veritable angel," Fanchette says to the English maid who assists her in her duties. "Mees Zai is the flower of the house!"

"Flower of the *flock*, you mean," Jane corrects.

"No, I do not," Fanchette replies, offended. "I have *never* heard of flowers in a flock. I have heard of a flock of goose—and *you* are one of them."

Meanwhile, Zai stands before her mirror. Her eyes are so sad—so sad, that they look too large for her small white face.

"Oh, Carl! Carl!" she says, half aloud, "you have forgotten me quite! And I love you—love you so much that my heart is broken, Carl!"

"Zai, the carriage is ready," cries Baby, drumming her knuckles on the closed door.

Zai starts guiltily. What right has she to be murmuring love words to a man who will soon be another woman's husband!

She clasps a pearl necklace round her throat, fastens a pearl star into her bonnie brown hair, then pauses one moment.

It is the first time in her life that she has ever had recourse to the foreign aid of ornament, and it seems quite an awful thing to her. But no one must guess at her feelings from her wan face to-night. She had not been proud with Carl because she loved him so, but she must be proud with the world, and not wear her poor desolate heart on her sleeve for daws to peck at.

She takes the two roses she plucked, pulls off

their petals mercilessly, then rubs them on her cheeks, and flinging on her cloak she runs downstairs.

Lady Beranger is putting the finishing touches to her elaborate dress of primrose satin and *point de Flandre*, in which she looks like an empress, and only the three girls are assembled in the hall when Zai appears.

"How do I look?" she asks, throwing off her wrap. "Fanchette says I look *belle comme un ange*, and I want to be especially beautiful to-night!"

"What for?" three voices ask at once. "It's only a State Ball, on the pattern of all the others we have been to. The Queen won't be there to make anything different. So what on earth does it signify how you look?"

"I'll tell you!" Zai says slowly and deliberately and unflinchingly. The rose petals hide the pallor on her cheeks, and the smile on her lips does away with the sadness in her eyes. "But, girls, you must keep it a secret from the Governor and Mamma. I want to look my very best to-night, because I intend to make my bow before the Princess as a future *Peeress!*"

Lady Beranger enters at this moment.

The State Ball is worth seeing after all, though the Beranger girls had said that it was exactly on the same pattern as its predecessors, and that Her Gracious Majesty was not going to shed the light of her august presence to make it any different.

Seldom within four walls has more beauty been gathered than to-night. Of course, everyone ad-

mires the Princess most, but of feminine loveliness there is every possible variety to suit every possible taste.

There is also a good deal of the feminine element which is not lovely. But, as if to atone for Dame Nature's shortcomings, it is generally expensively dressed.

Zai soon has cause to forget or despise Fanchette's soothing doctrine of the fitness of things, and to feel that her pale blue *faille* and white illusion, garnished with water lilies, are chiefly remarkable for their fresh simplicity, as she views the superb silks and satins and laces that do honour to Royalty.

She dances away with half-a-dozen of the Household Brigade, with the Duke of Shortland, Lord Walsingham, and several Belgravian *habitues*, and then she walks through the room with Percy Rayne.

He is quite as good as a catalogue in a ball-room. Ever since he was a small boy Fate has hung him about the Court of St. James'. He has the names of the upper current, and all the social celebrities, on the tips of his well shaped nails, and faces he never forgets. Added to these, he has all the fashionable gossip on his tongue, for in the interludes of "business" at the F. O., as well as at the other "O's," they enjoy a dish of scandal as much as the softer sex do.

He points out the Beauties now to Zai, who in spite of her heart-broken condition, regards them with admiring interest.

"There!" he says, "is an American Mrs. Washington Ulysses Trotter, called the Destroying Angel, because she kills everyone dead, from Princes downward, by a glance of her beautiful eyes; but unfortunately for her, her triumphal car will be probably stopped in its career. The Yankees are going out of fashion, you know. Royalty has decreed it. For Royalty, like common flesh, is liable to get bothered with being run after and accosted as if it were Jack or Tom or Harry. But Mrs. Washington Ulysses Trotter does not mind much. She knows her little outing at Buckingham Palace is quite enough to get her the *entrée* into all the Fifth Avenue houses. She will talk about the Prince——

"Oh my, isn't he elegant, and so chatty! I felt just like talking to Cyrus Hercules Hopkins—that's my cousin down Chicago way, you know. And the Princess! well, certainly, *she* isn't proud! It was just like being at home in our English basement brown stone house, Maddison Avenue—at Buckingham Palace!"

Zai laughs, and he rattles on:

"That's one of our big financier's daughters. Ugly, isn't she? I hate the type. The *parure* of brilliants isn't bad, and those yards of lace—*point D'Alençon*, isn't it—that trail about her are worth more than my year's salary. But they are so devilish stingy in the Offices. We work like slaves, and get neither tin nor *kudōs*. And you would not believe it, Zai, but the Foreign Secretary hasn't more responsibility on his back than I have on

mine! See! there's the famous wife of one of the ministers—Count Schöen. She has been a celebrated beauty in her day, and cannot forget it. And they say she enamels and bakes her face in an oven. What do you think a cousin of mine—an *ingénue* from the country—did, at the Caledonian Ball? She went up to the end of the room, and after intently examining Count and Countess Schöen, said aloud,

“‘How funny that they have Madame Tussaud's figures here.’

“Imagine the horror of her partner!”

Zai laughs again. But this time the laugh is forced, and she catches her breath hard.

Through the swaying crowd she espies Gabrielle among the bevy of beauties.

Gabrielle holds her own to-night. Her black lace dress becomes her white creamy skin admirably. Scarlet japonicas burn and gleam in her coal-black hair and on her bosom. On her cheeks the bright pink flush lends increased lustre to her large dark eyes. As she sweeps along she has that suprême unconsciousness of manner which is never seen save in a woman who feels she is well dressed and able to defy the criticism of her own sex.

Gabrielle does not see Zai or Percy Rayne looking at her, for her eyes are mostly cast down on the fan she carries, neither does Lord Delaval, on whose arm she leans, observe them, for he is bending and speaking very low under the sweep of his long fair moustache, while his glance rests on the undeniably very handsome face near his shoulder.

"Don't they make a good-looking couple?" asks Rayne. "What a pity they don't arrange to walk through life together—they look so well doing it through a ball-room."

"They are both handsome," Zai answers indifferently, but she is, spite of her, a little piqued.

This man—to whom her answer has to be given to-night—has not even deemed it worth his while to ask for it, though the evening is wearing on. His neglect hurts her more, sore and suffering so lately from Carlton Conway's behaviour, and poor little Zai feels that she would like to hide her diminished head for ever.

"I am very tired," she says to her partner; "Do you think I could get a seat somewhere?"

"Yes; but come out of this crowd. It's awfully hot, and you look like the whitest lily, Zai—we'll find a seat somewhere."

So they go out, and he finds a chair for her in a vestibule, where a little cool air revives her.

"I *must* go. I have to dance this with Lady Vernon. Do you mind sitting here quietly till I come back?" he asks kindly, seeing how weary and wan she looks.

"I should like to stay quiet here very much," Zai answers gratefully; "and don't hurry back for me."

She half closes her eyes, and fans herself slowly, and feels desolate—so desolate.

Her womanly triumph over Miss Meredyth has evidently fallen to the ground; Lord Delaval has either changed his mind, or else he was only laugh-

ing at her at Caryllon House—and as she thinks thus, Zai shivers with mortification and shame, and leaning her head against the wall, grows lost to external things.

She does not know how long she has sat here, and she does not care—all she yearns for is the solitude of her own room; but the ball is not half over, and hours—dreary hours—lie before her.

“Zai! is it to be—Yes?”

She starts up, flushing red as a rose—her heart beating wildly, her eyes with a dumb wonder in them.

She is but a bit of a girl, she has been cruelly jilted by the man she loves, and she craves for a little incense to her *amour propre*, even though it be dearly bought.

“It is—yes,” she almost whispers; then in a sort of mist she sees Lord Delaval’s face light up, and the colour creeps warmly over his blond skin.

“Thank you, my darling,” he says, very low, bending over her, and she feels his lips touch her bare shoulder. Then she puts her hand on his arm, and without another word they walk back into the ball-room, and up to Lady Beranger.

“Let me present to you the future Lady Delaval!” he says quietly, and Zai slips her ice-cold fingers into her mother’s clasp, and for the first time her mother looks at her with positive affection in her glance.

“Is it true, Zai?” she asks, eagerly.

“Quite true, mamma,” Zai answers without a falter.

A little later the news has been told to the Royalties, and with kindly smiles and words they give their congratulations on her future happiness.

But though the Royalties know of the match in prospective, Zai pleads that it may be kept a secret from her sisters for the present. It may be that the death and burial of her first love is too recent to permit of matrimonial rejoicings just now, or it may be that she wants to realise what has come to pass, and to resign herself to the future before the others touch upon the subject, and probe not too gently the still open wound made by Carlton Conway. Lord and Lady Beranger are too well pleased that matters have turned out so satisfactorily to refuse her request.

And, as for Lord Delaval himself, perhaps he feels a little uncomfortable at appearing on the scene as a devoted lover before Gabrielle—Gabrielle who has told him, in the passionate words that rush unchecked to her scarlet lips, that the day of his marriage to any other woman will be the day of her death.

She is not one to kill herself; she is not romantic enough for folly of that kind; what she means, is probably a social and moral death; but Lord Delaval—with the innate vanity of his sex—believes that Gabrielle's handsome face and superb figure will be found floating on the turbid bosom of old Father Thames, and he shrinks more from the scandal of the thing than from the remorse likely to rise up in his breast. Zai's desire, then, that the engagement shall be kept quiet for a while, meets

with his approval. After all, he can find chances to gather honey (if not all the day) from his betrothed's sweet lips—and stolen sweets have always been nicer to his thinking than any others.

When they say good-night, he contents himself by squeezing five very cold fingers, and slipping a magnificent brilliant on to the third one, which pledge of her bondage Zai does not even glance at before she drops it into her pocket.

"Did you like the ball, Zai?" Trixy asks, as they brush their hair before going to bed.

"I hated it," Zai answers, giving her chesnut tresses an impatient pull. "I wish I had never gone to it!"

CHAPTER XIV.

"SIMPLE FAITH THAN NORMAN BLOOD."

"You'll look at least on love's remains;
A grave's one violet;
Your look? that soothes a thousand pains.
What's death? You'll love me yet!"

"Just be careful who mounts that chesnut to-day, Hargreaves," Challen, the riding-master, says, pausing on his way at the door of the stable, and passing a keen glance over the horse in question. The chesnut is a big, good-looking hack, with a sleek satin coat, and just what would take a woman's fancy, but there is a look about his eye that Challen does not like. "Put Miss Edwards on him, she has pluck enough to ride to the devil, but mind none of the new pupils go near him."

Hargreaves assents, but he does not look content.

"She wants to ride the chesnut," he says to himself. "She's set her mind on it, and I hate to disappoint her, bless her heart! Why, what's the matter with you?" he continues aloud, going up to the chesnut, and passing his hand over the long, lean head. "I like you because she likes you! You'd never think of hurting her, I'll be bound, no more than anyone would, I know! My pretty one, I'd kill myself if any harm came to you—that I would!"

And Gladstone Beaconsfield Hargreaves, quasi village veterinary, but now assistant master of the Belgravian riding-school, pulls out a tiny locket from his breast and kisses it a dozen times, then holds it up to the light reverentially as if it was the holiest thing to him on earth.

"Just like a bit of gold it is, for all the world! The same colour that angels' hair is. Oh! my pretty one; my sweet one! There's never a night I don't go down on my knees and thank God that you don't scorn me."

It is the morning after the State Ball, and while the other Beranger girls take an extra hour or two of slumber, Baby, fresh as a lark, dons her dark-blue habit that fits her lovely little figure like wax—and is off for a riding-lesson.

The weather is true summer, and the little lazy breeze that floats across the Serpentine is a boon to man and beast. Right away in the upper portion of Kensington Gardens, the trees throw down some

grateful shade, and Challen's riding-school wend their way down the broad walk at a snail's pace, for the heat is awful.

Up above there is not even a cloudlet to temper the sun's rays; the sky is as clear and as blue as Baby's own eyes, and everything around looks as bright as her smiles.

There are not as many aspirants to equestrian honours as usual to-day. The season is on the wane, and the Ball and Reception gives pile on the agony fast and strong, so that the young *débutantes*, fagged and worn out by no~~g~~urnal exertions, find the arms of Morpheus more to their liking than the caresses of Boreas.

Miss Juliana Edwards, a strong-minded, steel-nerved brunette, and Challen's show pupil, is here, well to the front of the small cavalcade, but she does not ride the chesnut.

Her dare-devil propensities find but small play, for her mount is a dapple-grey gelding, who looks as if neither whip nor spur will rouse him out of riding-school jog-trot.

There are only eight riders in all, and the first lot go in threes, while some little distance in the rear Hargreaves keeps close to the chesnut, on whose back is Baby.

"You'll kindly look to the other ladies, Miss Edwards, won't you?" he had said on starting, with a deprecatory smile. "I think I had better keep an eye to Miss Mirabelle Beranger's horse. She doesn't ride like *you* do, you know!"

And Miss Juliana Edwards, to whom a compliment

on her horsemanship is dearer than anything, smiles in return at the handsome assistant, and agrees to keep a sharp look-out.

The chesnut goes steadily enough—so steadily in fact, that Baby, who is an awful little coward, forgets all about him, and gives her whole attention to her teacher, who, in the neatest of grey tweed suits, and with an unimpeachable wide-a-wake perched jauntily on his curly head, looks quite *the gentleman*.

“I *wish* you had been at the State Ball last night!” she says, with a beaming smile, that almost takes the young fellow’s breath away.

“I! fancy me at a State Ball, Miss Mirabelle!”

“Why not? I am sure there was no one so good-looking as you there!” she cries, looking admiringly at the trim, slight figure, and the straight features and undeniably winsome eyes of her companion. “I *wish* you would not call me *Miss Mirabelle!*” she adds with a little pout of her charming red lips.

He reddens visibly as he hearkens.

“I *dare* not call you anything else, Miss Mirabelle!” he almost whispers, his heart throbbing violently under his tweed waist-coat.

“There it is again! *Miss Mirabelle!* why can’t you say ‘Mirabelle,’ when—when—we are *quite* alone?” she asks impatiently, throwing a covert glance towards the other riders to see if they are out of earshot.

“Oh! I *couldn’t!*” he murmurs very low—shy of speech—but his large hazel eyes are eloquent

enough. "I would as soon think of calling the angels by their names!" he goes on nervously.

"I have heard of Michael as the name of an archangel, but I don't think the female angels *have* any names," Baby says irreverently. "Do you think *me* an angel? because I'm not, not the very least bit in the world. The governor calls me a little devil, and I know my sisters don't think me an angel!" she laughs.

"You are an angel to *me*, anyhow!"

A little pause, while she looks straight into his eyes, with the prettiest, faintest pink colour creeping over her cheeks.

"I say, Hargreaves, how long are we going on like this?" she asks abruptly.

He gazes at her amazed, and Baby laughs again, a little, low, musical laugh that entrances him.

"I mean that—that—s we care for one another, why should we pretend not to?" she asks in a hushed voice, putting her hand on her pommel, for the chesnut pricks up his ears and frightens her. Hargreaves' hand is on hers in a second. He is really rather nervous about the horse after Challen's warning, and besides, it is Heaven to him to feel the soft velvety skin of the dainty little hand that gleams up like a morsel of alabaster statuary under the sunlight.

"Miss Mirabelle, for God's sake don't go and make me forget what I am. I try night and day to remember the distance between us, and though I could go down on my knees and worship you all my life—though I could die for you willingly—

willingly, I know I dare not *live* for you! I love you—*there!* Only God knows *how* I love you, but it isn't a love like a fellow gives to his sweetheart! It's a love like a faithful dog, that would lick your pretty hand and be content; that would watch over you so that no harm came near you; that would just lie down and die by the side of *your* grave."

Baby listens with an involuntary tear twinkling in her eye. She is only seventeen, but she has been too long in a Belgravian world not to know that this young fellow loves her with a beautiful, unselfish honest love—the like of which no Belgravian fine gentleman would feel. This primitive, self-abnegatory sort of courtship is so novel that it has a glamour for her, and Baby is—undoubtedly—a little fast.

"I would rather *live* and find out how much you *do* love me, Hargreaves," she answers, with a tender smile; "do you think you love me to—to—the extent—of—marrying me?"

"Miss Mirabelle!" he gasps.

The veins swell on his forehead, his eyes fix on her with a bewildered look, and his breath comes quick and fast. Then he droops his head, and a forlorn expression sweeps over his white face.

"Don't laugh at me, for my dead mother's sake," he whispers in a hoarse tone.

"I am *not* laughing," she says slowly. "not laughing one little bit, Hargreaves. Would you think it very fast of me if I said something—something quite out of the way, you know?"

"I could not think ill of you, no matter what came," he replies earnestly.

"Well then, here goes! I am ready to be Mrs. Hargreaves as soon as you like."


He stares at her like a man in a dream, and as he lifts his eyes to her lovely little face, Baby's snowy lids droop over her cerulean orbs, while her mouth twitches with something between a quiver and a smile.

He is not a gentleman born and bred, but he has a heart that can love. Blue blood may not flow in his veins, but honest, devoted, even chivalric feelings live in his breast, and he *knows* that this girl—in spite of the words she has just spoken—is a thing he dare not grasp.

No, if her love and her presence are Heaven and the loss of her undying misery—and regret, he does not dream of hesitating between them for her dear sake.

She has offered herself to him—the sweetest, most precious gift he could have on earth—but sooner than take her, sooner than drag his dainty high-born darling down to his own level, he would shoot himself.

"No, no, Miss Mirabelle! I should be a rascal, a cur, if I thought you were in earnest. I have no right to love you; but love is a thing that comes alike to all, and I may feel it so long as I don't let it harm you, Miss Mirabelle. God bless you for liking me, for speaking to me kindly; but I ask no more than that—only—*only*—may I just kiss your hand—*once*—Miss Mirabelle"



He raises a white, stricken face as he speaks. He has made up his mind to throw up his situation this very night and to go away—to America—Australia—anywhere so that she may never see him again, and regret perhaps that she has spoken to him thus. He will pass right away out of her life, but he wants one kiss of her little white hand to take away with him; that kiss and the locket that holds a bit of her shining hair—his two priceless treasures.

Baby's eyes are full of tears now. The young fellow's voice has such a ring of pathos in it—a ring she has never heard in the voices of Belgravia—but she says nothing, only pulls off the gauntlet from her right hand and holds it towards him.

"*Good-bye,*" he whispers so incoherently that she doesn't catch the word, and stooping, Hargreaves fastens his trembling lips on the soft white flesh, *when*—

The Chesnut has started forward, and off her guard and terrified out of her senses, his hapless rider loses all presence of mind and clings on as the horse careers madly along.

The rest of the school have turned to the right and disappeared from view. Hargreaves, horror-struck, almost stunned, does not follow for a moment, and only the Chesnut with its helpless burden dashes on and on. Turning sharply to the left he gallops furiously—so furiously that all obstacles give way before him. On and on, on and on! till the gardens are left long behind, and the road by the Park is reached, while the poor pale little rider

clings desperately on with all her might and main for dear life.

Suddenly the horse swerves to the right down a narrow street, and losing her hold, the girl falls off.

Pray God that the horror of her fate is over!
but no!

The tiny foot is entangled in the stirrup, and for nearly thirty yards the brute drags her along, when all at once he stops dead short, frightened and quivering, and the jerk snaps the stirrup leather in two.

But it is a little too late!

They pick her up, a little white dainty thing. Her hat has fallen off, and her long hair—angels' hair, as Hargreaves has called it—streams down in such long rich shining waves that it seems to envelop the small slender figure in an armour of burnished gold.

She is not dead—her blue eyes, blue as the sunny sky—are quite wide open, and some one, a slight young fellow, who has just ridden breathlessly up, falls down prone on his shaking knees and looks into them with the poor piteous look of a faithful hound.

"Miss Mirabelle, Miss Mirabelle!" he calls in wild despairing tones.

But she cannot rebuke him now for his formal address, poor little soul!

Presently her eyelids droop, and the long curling lashes rest close against cheeks that are almost ashy now.

They lift her up gently and carry her "Home,"

the home she had left only two hours before gay and blithesome as a bird and so full of life, and when it is reached they take her straight into the library, the door of which is ajar, and laying her down on the couch, they leave her, all but one, and he does not enter the room that contains her, but stands trembling near the threshold.

Another moment and the awful thing that has happened is known to all in the house, and Hargreaves shrinks away still further as father, mother, sisters of the girl he loves pass him with scared faces and stricken hearts to find Baby—*so!*

Not a word is spoken. At such a moment what word can be said? Even Lady Beranger bows her proud head beneath the fiat of Heaven, while Lord Beranger sobs aloud over this little one—this brightest, merriest one of all the flock.

After a moment, revived by a stimulant, Baby opens her pretty blue eyes.

“Don't cry, governor!” she says in a voice so faint—*so faint!*—that it seems to come already from that distant shore. “It serves me right! I was going to leave you—I was——”

She stops, struggling for breath.

“Let me just see her, my lady! Oh, for God's sake let me just go near her! I won't dare to touch her—I won't even dare to say *good-bye!*” a voice whispers so hoarsely, so brokenly, that my lady starts and turns round, but does not understand.

But Baby has heard, through the faint mists that are rising up around her; the voice of the man who loves her finds an echo in her heart.

"Let him come near, governor," she says slowly, with an effort. "He isn't a gentleman, but I loved him and asked him to marry me, but he wouldn't, governor. He said he wouldn't hurt me by doing it."

"Quite right of him," Lord Beranger falters through the tears that roll down his cheeks. "Hargreaves, come closer."

He draws closer and kneels down beside the couch, and taking up one long, glittering tress, he puts his quivering lips to it.

"You may kiss me, Hargreaves," Baby murmurs, with a half smile on her pale lips, "There are no *convenances* where I'm going!"

He rises from his knees and, bending over, kisses her for the first and *the very last time*.

"Good—bye—all!" she gasps. "I have—had—a—jolly—time—but—I'm—not—sorry—to—go! Go—od—bye!"

Her eyes close, a grey hue runs round the pretty lips and the shadow of the Angel of Death falls on her little face.

Only a few hours more and Baby is gone!—gone with her smiles and her wiles, her coaxing ways and her naughty ways—gone to that land which only faith can pierce and where only love can follow.

There is not a dry eye in the household, when with awesome spirit and noiseless tread they go in to see the last of her.

She lies like an exquisite waxen image, her sweet voice silenced, her blithe laugh hushed, her slender

white arms, crossed on her stilled heart, and a snowy Eucharis lily resting upon her breast.

"Oh, my lord! put this somewhere near her from *me!*" poor Hargreaves had said through blinding tears.

"One touch of nature makes the whole world kin," and Lord Beranger, knowing with what a true, honest, unselfish love this young fellow had loved his lost child, placed the lily on her breast with his own hands.

* * * * *

The day after Baby is laid to rest, Hargreaves is found near the Beranger vault; one hand grasps a locket with a bit of golden hair in it, near the other hand is the revolver with which he has shot himself. It was true what he had said, that he loved her with the love of a dog, that would just lie down and die beside her grave.

But the matter is at once hushed up, for the *convenances* do not allow of *canaille* even *killing* themselves for the sake of daughters of Belgravia.

CHAPTER XV.

LET THE DEAD PAST BE BURIED.

"Let this be said between us here,
One love grows green when one turns grey,
This year knows nothing of last year,
To-morrow has no more to say to yesterday."

"THE pomps and vanities and sinful lusts of the flesh" being put a stop to by poor little Baby's untimely death, Lady Beranger has elected to mourn in sackcloth and ashes among the sylvan shades of Sandilands. It would be dreadful to assert that this worldly mother does not lament to a certain degree the gap in the domestic circle, or that now and again the memory of Baby's sweet pretty face and winsome, kittenish ways does not bring a mist into her fine eyes, but this much is true, that she leaves Belgravia with regret, especially as the season is not quite dead. And now that three months have nearly gone by since

"MIRABELLE BERANGER,
Aged 17,"

went away to the angels, Lady Beranger, knowing that mitigated affliction in the shape of jet and

bugles is always becoming, has "just one or two intimate friends" come down to share the quiet of the country and to sympathise with the family woe.

It need not be said that, with that worldly wisdom that looks sharp after its own interests, these intimate friends are Lord Delaval and Mr. Stubbs.

Of course such glittering fish must not be lost sight of before they are safely landed.

It is not unusual in the Upper Ten, as has recently been proved, for the *noblesse* to rise from the funeral baked-meats to sit down to wedding-cake.

Anyway, as the *convenances* are not rigid on this score, it is on the cards that before Trixy's crape grows rusty she will don the orange and myrtle.

And now that Sandilands offers no flirting material with which she can keep her hand in and show off her power, save "poor Mr. Stubbs," she goes with less reluctant feet towards the altar of Moloch than she did in Town, where her "future" cut such a comical appearance among the golden youths that she really hated the very sight of him.

"It's rather a bore one can't go and get married respectably at St. Peter's," she remarks pettishly to Zai. "I might as well be a housemaid, to walk across the garden path to that paltry little church, and hear old Bore some gabble a few words by which Stubbs and I shall be made—*one!* Ugh! Do you know, Zai, I expect we shall be very much *two!*

We haven't a single idea in common, and only one pleasure—contradicting one another.”

“Don't marry him, then, for goodness sake, Trixy! You'll be a wretched girl if you do. If you *can't love* a man, you must at any rate respect him, or look up to him as having a superior intellect to your own.” Zai replies, thinking of Lord Delaval; then she frowns and chases away the thought of him as fast as she can.

“Well, I don't love Stubbs—(he asked me this morning to call him *Peter*, but I *couldn't*, I really *couldn't*)—and I don't respect him particularly, and I certainly don't consider his intellect superior to mine, but I intend to marry him all the same. Love and respect! Good heavens, Zai! Such things are all very well in their way, but you don't suppose that I should think of balancing them with that lovely suite from Jackson and Graham's? Why, those white and gold chairs, with the crests carved on the backs, are ten times more worth having than all that fiddle-faddle of love and respect!”

Zai does not answer. She knows, perhaps, that some of Trixy's notions are unanswerable, and is simply conscious of the fact that she rather envies her her sentiments.

“And what's the good of having *point-de-Venise* on my dress for the gardeners and stable boys to gape at?” Trixy goes on, peevishly. “I think it is too bad to be done out of everything like this! I had made up my mind to have a fine wedding, all the good-looking men in town,

a lot of bridesmaids, and—why, what's the matter, Zai?"

The matter is that Zai has allowed a sob to break in on her talk.

"Nothing," she says in a low voice; "only your speaking of bridesmaids made me think of *Baby!*"

"You were always a wet blanket, Zai. Whenever one is trying to look on the bright side of things, you are sure to say something horrible," Trixy replies, in a tone of martyrdom. "*I think of Baby, too; but I drive sway the thought because it is my bounden duty. Mamma says I'm not to make myself ugly with crying and fretting, and, Zai, do you know, I don't think there's much to grieve about Baby. She's escaped marrying a—Mr. Stubbs!*"

It strikes Zai again that Trixy's ideas are a little out of the way, and wiping her tears, she takes up a book.

"I say, Zai! I want to tell you something," Trixy announces suddenly, in a half whisper. "It's a secret, a dead secret, and you will have to swear you will keep it."

"I promise," Zai answers quietly, wondering what important thing is to be divulged, as Trixy crosses the room and comes close up to her.

"No, no! you must swear."

"I never swear; but my promise holds as good."

"Well, then, listen. Gabrielle told me this morning that there is something between you and Lord Delaval."

"Well, if there is, what of it?"

"Only that Gabrielle went down on her knees on the damp grass, and swore (she swears awfully, you know) that if he married you, she would destroy herself, body and soul!"

"I am sure she is welcome to him if she wants him so very much," Zai flashes impetuously; "but I *must* say that if Gabrielle really fancies he is going to be her brother-in-law, she ought to curb her feelings for him!"

Trixy opens her big blue eyes wide with amazement.

"You don't mean to tell me, Zai, that there is the very least bit of foundation for Gabrielle's fancies?"

"Yes, I do," Zai blurts out, "a very great deal of foundation. I have been engaged to Lord Delaval ever since the State Ball, and I suppose I shall marry him some day."

"And you really accepted him in cold blood, although you have always said you disliked him so?"

Zai reddens to the roots of her chesnut hair.

"Women are allowed to change their minds, I suppose?"

"You didn't change your mind, Zai. You have only accepted Lord Delaval out of pique. It's all because that dishonourable fellow, Conway, pitched you over for Crystal Meredyth. Oh! Zai! *cannot* you arrange to be married the same day as I am? It would make me so much jollier to know I had a fellow-sufferer! It is quite a month to it—lots of

time to gallop through the trousseau—and then people won't say that you only married Lord Delaval when Carl had put a Mrs. Conway between you and him."

Zai looks up at her sister rather piteously; her grey eyes are dimmed with tears, her face is very pale, and there is a falter in her voice as she asks:

"When is Mr. Conway's wedding to be?"

"Just six weeks hence."

A pause. The September sun shines down hot and glary, but under its broiling rays Zai shivers. Her heart is cold, her hands are cold, and it seems to her that life altogether is awfully cold. Still in this moment she makes up her mind.

"All right, Trixy!" she cries, in ringing accents, just as if she was as blithe as the sunbeams and the birds; "the same day shall make us both—wives—on two conditions. One is that you will not tell Gabrielle a word about our little arrangements until I give you permission. The other condition is——" She pauses a second and turns away her face, and when she speaks again her voice is so husky that Trixy wonders—"that you will never mention Mr. Conway's name to me again! Before I marry Lord Delaval, I should like to bury my dead past for ever and for ever out of sight."

"But Mamma must know of our arrangement, and she will tell Gabrielle, of course."

"Oh, no, she won't; not if I ask her. Look here, Trixy. We are a set of paupers! Even our mourning for Baby—" in spite of her she falters—"is all

on credit. I heard May's man say, 'Crape's a very dear article, my lady; and the deeper the affliction the more it costs, in course! So it's only the quality, my lady, as can *really* indulge in mourning; the commonality mourn usually in narrow frills or small pleats, *but the quality, to be fashionable, must mourn in deep kilts*. Sorrow cannot be better shown than by as little silk as possible, and full crape draperies, the buttons to be covered in crape, in course, and crape collars and cuffs, and jabot on the bodice.' 'The mourning must be deep, of course. I suppose, in your very large way of business, you do not trouble to make up the account but once in a year or so, do you?' Mamma asked in a most benign voice. 'The mourning must be sent home with as little delay as possible, and of course, if it inconveniences you to wait, I will give you a cheque in advance.'

"Good gracious!" cries Trixy, "what a state of funk the mater must have been in for fear he'd take her at her word!"

"Yes; but he didn't. 'No, no, my lady. We can afford to wait quite well. We are in no hurry whatever; in fact, we shall be only too pleased and honoured by having your ladyship's name on our books, so long as your ladyship will allow us;' and it was only in this way that we got this outward and visible sign of our grief for Baby, and it is only in this way that we get our bread and butter, you know. The Governor and Mamma are delighted at your marrying Mr. Stubbs, and the idea of my catching Lord Delaval has filled their cup of

bliss to the brim; so they won't do anything to make us turn rusty. Besides, Mamma knows better than to tell Gabrielle anything, in case she should put a spoke in my wheel of matrimony. She is so much in love with my *fiancé*.

"And does he care for her?"

"What a question!" cries Zai, flushing a little.

"Now is it likely that he should want to marry me if he cares for my step-sister?"

"*Cela selon!*" Trixy replies carelessly. "Men don't much mind that sort of thing. I heard Charlie Wentwaite only made love to Virginia South because he admired her mother!"

"You shouldn't listen to such things, Trixy. Lord Delaval may have talked nonsense to Gabrielle, because she encouraged him, but I am sure he only cares for *me!*"

"And you—are you in love with him?" Trixy asks in a solemn voice, putting her hand on her sister's shoulder, and staring at her fixedly.

But Zai cannot or will not meet this enquiring gaze.

She springs up from her chair and throwing up the window-sash looks out on the fair world, the glowing fragrant roses and the clear blue sky overhead. There isn't a fleecy cloud on the azure surface. Somehow all these things have a subtle charm of their own, and bring her an impetus to bury her dead past as fast as she can, and to begin a new era. So instead of answering Trixy, she plucks a rose with a deep blood-red heart and flings it deliberately at somebody who is lying his full length

of six feet two inches on the sward, his straw hat thrown aside, and the daylight falling full on his very handsome blond face. His lids are closed, and he looks the picture of laziness—but a picture that most women would take the trouble to look at several times. As the rose falls full on the tip of his aquiline nose, he slowly opens his ultramarine eyes, and looks up at the face at the window with a depth of admiration and tenderness in the look that makes Zai blush and hastily withdraw her head.

“Yes, Trixy!” she cries with quite a beaming smile. “I believe I *am* in love with him, anyway I intend to be directly I am Countess of Delaval!” And five minutes afterwards Trixy sees her on a rustic bench under a big elm tree, and Lord Delaval lying at her feet. Trixy watches them a moment. What a handsome couple they make. She sighs as she looks at them, and rather envies Zai the good looks of her lover. Then she turns away and murmurs in a tone of resignation:

“A handsome man always wants worshipping, while I like to be worshipped myself, and another thing, poor old Stubbs won’t ever make me jealous!”

CHAPTER XVI.

“ARE YOU GOING TO MARRY ZAI?”

“If I could but know after all,
I might cease to hunger and ache,
Though your heart were ever so small
If it were not a stone or a snake.”

It is the truth that Gabrielle is desperately in love with Lord Delaval, and it is equally true that, thrusting all maidenly reserve to the four winds, she does not hesitate to let him know it.

Last night—will she ever forget it? She was sitting in the twilight, shaded from view by the amber hangings of the music room. For an hour she had been singing the passionate French and Italian songs in which she could pour out her soul freely, but she had tired of it since he was not by for audience. So dashing her music aside she pulled a chair into the embrasure of the bay window, and with her chin resting on her hand, was soon lost in a waking dream, of which he, of course, was central figure.

How long she sat there she never knew. Anyway, the purple twilight had merged into grey gloom, through which myriads of twinkling stars peered down at her flushed cheeks and passionate

black eyes, when suddenly a voice startled her, a voice whose accents bore such genuine feeling in them, that for a moment it seemed unfamiliar to her ears.

And this is what it said—while Gabrielle listened with beating heart and bated breath, rent with jealousy and rage.

"Tell me, when is my probation to end? Have you no mercy for me?"

"What for?" and Zai's tone, in comparison with his, was strangely hard and cold.

"What for? Don't you know that I want to claim you before all the world? Don't you know that I am longing to take my darling in my arms and swear on her sweet lips how I love her?"

Whether Zai answered this phantasy tenderly or no, Gabrielle never knew, for the two passed the open door and were out of hearing.

The two!

Her faithless lover and her step-sister!

Gabrielle flew up stairs noiselessly, and reaching her own room, locked the door.

She was alone now—alone—thank God! alone! Here there were no mocking eyes to note her horrible folly, to laugh at her awful, awful anguish, here she could grind her white teeth in impotent rage, or grovel on the floor in humiliation and a futile passion. She flung off the pretty dress she had put on for dinner to please his eyes, a delicious *melange* of white lace and vivid scarlet, the colour that suited best her soft creamy skin and coal-black hair, and matched the hue of her perfect lips, and

she thrust impatiently aside the glittering bracelets and rings with which she loved to deck her rounded arms and tapering fingers.

What were these baubles worth now, that she had lost the jewel of Lord Delaval's heart?

Vanitas Vanitatum!

Sackcloth and ashes are the garments she should wear, poor, passionate, reckless creature, a victim to a worldling's fickleness. And Gabrielle, the cynical, the votary of Balzac and Georges Sand, the unbeliever in true feeling, wept bitterly over the wreck that had been made of her life "for one man's pleasure only."

Her strictly worldly surroundings forbade her from giving way to an honest violent grief that would serve for sluice-gates to her heart. And she smothered back the sobs that broke from her with a rapidity of passion that she couldn't restrain.

Poor soul, that a sojourn in Belgravia had starved, it could find no balm in Gilead, no physician, now that the one human creature she had placed on a pedestal to worship had tumbled down ignominiously, to her thinking the veriest lump of clay. And she writhed as she remembered that not only by words and looks, but even by kisses on her red lips, he had betrayed her.

She positively wailed out her misery and her wrath in a low deep wail, weird enough to be a cry from one of Dante's lost souls. Yet—

"Is it worth a tear? is it worth an hour?

To think of things that are well outworn,

Of fruitless husk and fugitive flower,

The dreams foregone, and the deed forborne?"

Had she not lived long enough in her twenty-six years to know that man and fickleness are synonymous terms, and to be avoided?

Apparently not—for even while she groans and moans over his short comings, a mighty love fills her for the man whom she adores with a wild, unreasoning, selfish passion, and whose happiness she would immolate unscrupulously, if it pleased her to have it so. It must be owned that Lord Delaval is both a flirt and a butterfly, and that he has played fast and loose with mostly all the pretty women he has come across.

Flirting comes to him as to the manner born; it lurks in his ultramarine eyes, in the corners of his mouth, in his voice, in his manner, and in his actions, and he thinks nothing of it.

Some women regret his love, some resign themselves to his fickle ways, but Gabrielle Beranger is not of the common herd. She is a law unto herself in all things. She can love well (in her fashion), and she can hate well, with her great black gleaming orbs, her white passion-tossed features, her tumultuous, unscrupulous spirit. She regrets now, bitterly, but she does not dream of growing resigned.

"*Tout vient a celui qui sait attendre,*" she mutters to herself.

Lord Delaval has laid a burthen on her which she cannot bear. She has but one stimulus left in life, but one object. It is to appeal to him—to his honour—to his love. If she fails—but she does not dream of failing.

One thing, she will separate the man she loves, and the man who has loved her, after the fashion of some men's love, from her step-sister. If not now, she will some day, even if Zai marries him.

To her the words—"Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder," are but idle prattle. A mere formula of the Church, a creed which her blind unbelief in all good things makes her mock and fling aside like the voice of the wind.

Gabrielle is one part Belgravian and three parts French, and has the faults of both. Honour and loyalty are dead letters to such women. Strong and practical of nature, animal in instinct and passion, savage and cruel in greed of love, is it likely that women possessing such qualifications can wage war and be beaten?

Cunning, craftiness, deceit and falsity, ranged against truth, innocence, purity and simple mindedness, form a very uneven contest, my readers.

And, in spite of the pleasant doctrine that goodness rears its head over badness, it is a fact that human creatures of the Gabrielle Beranger type have often a better time of it in this world than their purer sisterhood.

Gabrielle is not going to leave Lord Delaval in ignorance of her sufferings, for she is not of the nature of a violet, or likely to let concealment like a worm, &c., &c.

"Are you going to marry Zai?" she asks abruptly. She has come face to face with him, accidentally on

purpose, in a walk that is out of sight of the windows at Sandilands.

Lord Delaval, Greek almost in indolence and love of rest and luxury, has one habit to which most of our golden youth are not given—a habit of rising early and going out early.

So that Gabrielle has him all to herself this bright sunny morning, while the Beranger family are still enjoying their slumbers.

For an instant, surprise—and it must be confessed irritation at meeting her—keeps him silent, so she repeats:

"Are you going to marry Zai?"

He looks at her—to say that he quails would be perhaps going too far—but he is unmistakably nervous. There is more moral cowardice in men than in women as a rule.

She stands like an image of Nemesis, right in the centre of the path—immovable—a trifle formidable, her tall figure pulled well up to its fullest height, her features rigid and white as a sheet, and only her big black eyes burning with quite a hungry ferocious look as they rest on the handsome blond face of the man who has made love to her.

How remarkably sorry he is for it now! But there is no denying it; he has certainly made love to her, under the cover of some incomprehensible doctrine all about "affinities," in which he believes no whit himself; he has beguiled her affections, or rather her passions, by the sweet words that are as sweet now as when Adam whispered them to his Eve in Paradise; he has beguiled her by soft trea-

cherous kisses, in which the beak of the cruel vulture is hid beneath the tender touch of the dove, until this woman has paid him back by an enduring but terrible love that is not only a nuisance but may be worse.

Why Lord Delaval has made love to her, really not caring for her, is not difficult to tell. He adores beauty, and Gabrielle has plenty of it; her other attraction to him has been her intense contrast to the other women of the London world, with whom his flirtations have been as numerous as stars in a southern sky.

With her big black gipsy eyes, her demonstrative manner, her *bizarre* words and ways, and with the very vehemence and intensity of the passion that has repelled him even while it attracted him, his erratic fancy has been caught, but never enchained. He rather dislikes her now: and, after this, what breath can fill and re-inspire a dead fancy?

"Lord Delaval, is it true that you are going to marry Zai?" she asks for the third time, in a quiet hushed voice, that yet teems with a keen concentrated scorn that she means to cut like a whipcord, and from which he recoils angrily, for he is a thorough Epicurean in his liking for pleasantness, and a mental tussle disturbs his equanimity.

"It is quite true!" he says, rather haughtily, but when he sees her turn whiter than before, and her mouth quiver with pain, he relents. "I should have told you before, but Zai wished it kept quiet!"

"She did, did she? She knew she has acted a

a treacherous, deceitful part. Good Heavens! what are you marrying her for?"

"Because I love her!" he answers coolly, "and because she loves me!"

"Loves you—you! Why all London knows of her love for Carlton Conway!"

He shrinks a little from this, and the colour mounts hotly to his face, but soon recedes again, leaving him quite pallid.

"All London knows a good deal that does not exist!"

"*Il n'y'a pas de fumée sans feu,*" she says sneeringly.

"Zai is too good, too pure, to deceive any man," he answers quietly, but the remark about Carl rankles in his mind. "You don't understand your sister, Miss Beranger, or you would not depreciate your own judgment of human nature by believing her capable of deceit, or falsity, or evil of any kind! If all women were like her the world would be a paradise!"

"Fools' paradise!" she cries contemptuously. "I certainly never gave *you* credit for being hoodwinked by a few babyish ways and innocent smiles! a man of *your* mind!" she goes on frankly—a frankness which is the very essence of consummate flattery—but he is not to be taken in.

"Thanks for the pretty compliment! it would turn my head if I was younger, coming from such fresh scarlet lips," he replies with a Jesuitical smile; "but I am getting quite old, and as hard as adamant; not even *your* approbation can make my

mind rise to the height of folly which would discover flaws in angels or paint a lily black."

"I really think you have begun to hate me!" she says passionately, with tears welling up in her eyes; "Have you?"

He looks at her for a moment steadily. He has thought her face, in spite of its beauty, false, wicked, and meretricious. He sees it now lovely in its creamy tints, its superb eyes, its chiselled features, and its waves of dusky hair, and withal a soft and tender expression leavening the whole.

"No!" he answers slowly. "I don't hate you at all. It depends on yourself, Gabrielle, if I hate you later!"

She marks at once the relenting in his features, and, like the busy bee, improves the shining hour.

"You'll *never* hate me, for pity's sake!" she cries, and flinging herself down on the path she wreathes her arms round his knees, while her fierce black eyes, with a good deal of the tiger-cat in their depths, seem to devour greedily his handsome face. "Delaval! who will love you as I do? who will hunger and thirst for your every word and look like me? Oh if you were ever so poor and humble, but still yourself, I would slave for you, *die* for you! only—only—I could not bear that any other woman should cling to you like this!" and with a sudden spring she throws herself on his breast, panting, breathless, quivering from head to foot. "Delaval, you have pretended to love me. You have kissed me, and you have made me love *you*, till I am mad with misery, till I lose sight of all that women hold

dear—pride—reserve—delicacy! For mercy's sake don't give me up, and place an insuperable bar between us two!"

But he coolly puts her aside—not roughly, but very determinedly.

"So," she says, standing tall and erect before him. "So! words are of no avail. Love is a theme you have heard so often that its name has an empty sound! You are an honourable man, Lord Delaval! Your conscience can never prick you. For you have never acted basely, cruelly to anyone in your life!" she cries, with a sneer.

He feels quite an aversion to her as he answers:

"Men may be dishonourable towards women, perhaps. But rely upon it, it is the woman's fault if they are so! Men may act cruelly, basely, but I'll be sworn baseness and cruelty have been forced from them in order to check a woman's undisciplined feelings, in order to recall a woman to the decorum which belongs to her sex! I think, Miss Beranger, since I am not honoured by your good opinion, my best move will be to say 'Good-bye!'"

She feels that she has played her game wretchedly. The man is a vain man; and instead of reaching his heart through fair means, she has lost her temper, wounded his *amour propre*, and placed a further barrier betwixt them. Once more she is down on her knees, her clasped hands lifted, her face quivering with emotion. Gabrielle is a born actress; but now her acting is supremely good, for there is a deal of genuine feeling in it.

"Delaval! Forgive! forgive! I was mad to

“speak as I did! Oh I could kill myself for it! Say you forgive me, Delaval!”

But he stands motionless and impassive still.

“You won’t? Have you grown utterly hard and cold and strange then to me? Have you no mercy, no pity, no compunction? Can you face me like a stock or a stone, and trample on my heart like this? Don’t you know that you gave me the right to love you — by your kisses, by the specious words that have fallen from your lips? And I believed in them. I believed, that someday I should be your wife! Oh Delaval! if I have showed an undisciplined mind, a want of decorum, it is your fault. You are a man, I but a poor weak loving woman. You are the stronger, I but the weaker vessel. It is you who should have saved me from myself. It is you who should have placed a dam against the sluice-gates of a love that is going to wreck my whole life! Delaval, dearest, say, have you *never* cared for me? Has it all been untrue, a hideous delusion, a chimera of my own brain?—a device of the Devil to lull me in a slumber of Paradise only to awake to a full sense of his tortures? Oh, if I could die! If I could die! For I have nothing to live for now—nothing! I *shall* die; for I could not live and see another come between my Heaven and me! I could curse her!”

Lord Delaval winces a little at this. Curses are hard words to come near the soft little tender girl he is going to marry, and whose words and looks are as shy as the light of a star.

But, just for once, he is taken rather aback.

Shoals of women have loved him, and reproached him, but never like this. It is the first time he has evoked such a fierce tornado, and for a moment it staggers him. Then he becomes conscious of a feeling of thankfulness that this woman, beautiful and adoring, is not going to be his *wife*!

"I can do nothing but regret!" he says gently. "My faith is pledged to your sister, and—and—forgive me if I say that I do not wish to recall it! It is kinder to you, and kinder to myself, to speak openly!"

After this, nothing can be said, she feels.

She rises slowly from her knees, and stands a little apart. After all, she is not bad, she is not lost to shame; and it dyes her cheek crimson, while her lids droop over the fire in her eyes, and her mouth trembles—as much perhaps with wrath as sorrow.

What man can look utterly unmoved on such a spectacle as this?

"I feel so much for you," he says quite softly, "but Fate has decreed our paths to divide, and who can act against Fate? My faith, as I said, is pledged to Zai; but there is no reason that you and I, Gabrielle, should be foes. I shall always care for you, always take an interest in you, always be glad to be a *brother* to you!"

"A *brother*!" she mutters. "I am no hypocrite! I could never feel like a sister towards you, and I will not pretend it! But we'll part in peace! Only—only—!"

She flings her arms round him, and lifts up wild

wet eyes, their fire and wrath all quenched in the passion that floods her whole being.

"Say that you *have* loved me, if you do not love me now!"

It takes not only a perfect man, but a strong one, to reject a pleading woman, especially if her prayer is for Love, and the lips with which she utters it are fresh and tempting; and Lord Delaval is an imperfect man, assuredly.

So he stoops; and while her flushed stormy face lies against his breast, he kisses her, but only on the cheek, with the comfortable conviction that he has preserved his loyalty to Zai intact by avoiding Gabrielle's lips. Most men now-a-days are so addicted to splitting hairs!

"Good-bye!" she whispers, "I cannot stay here and see you and her together!"

She says it so tragically, that he half smiles. He has always thought her an excellent actress, but now she excels herself.

"Nonsense, Gabrielle!" he answers carelessly. "For God's sake don't make a scandal whatever you do! If we *have* made love—how many men and women do the same—without one or the other bringing the house down about their ears. You are not the only girl I have kissed and vowed all sorts of things to, but no one else has made me repent my folly as you have done. Come, kiss me—a kiss of peace—and forget that a kiss of love has ever been exchanged between us. We must all bow to the inevitable, and you cannot expect to be exempt."

"But the inevitable in this case does not come from the hand of Providence, but from the hand of the man who ought to be the last to hurt me!" she says, passionately. "I *will* kiss you—ay, kiss you a dozen times; but, Delaval, they will be the kisses that one gives to the man one loves best, and upon whom one will never look again!"

She kisses him as she speaks—kisses him on his brow, and eyes, and lips, wildly, fiercely; then she almost pushes him from her.

"Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" he answers quietly, "since you will have it so; and when we meet again——"

"We shall *never* meet again!" she says, abruptly.

"What folly!" he exclaims, impatiently. "I hope we never shall, until you have regained your senses, and don't act like a mad woman."

"If I am a mad woman, you are the man who has made me so!" she retorts, impetuously. "God forgive you for it, for I cannot!" and turning on her heel, she is soon out of view.

He shrugs his shoulders, and forgetting all about her, saunters back to the house whistling an opera bouffe air.

But though the opera bouffe air runs in his head, in his mind there is an unpleasant conviction that Gabrielle will make a scandal of some sort.

"These hot-headed, hot-hearted women are the very devil," he mutters angrily to himself; "and I should not be surprised if she goes and peaches to old Beranger and her Ladyship—but no matter—a

coronet, and a good-looking fellow like myself, to say nothing of the tin my dear miserly old dad hoarded up, are proof against any back-biters, and I'll marry Zai yet, dear little thing. I do believe she is beginning to love me!"

But even with this comforting reflection, he gives a little start at luncheon when he sees one chair empty, and hears Trixy whisper to her sister, "Gabrielle is so queer to-day, queerer than usual. I really think she's going off her head."

Later on, at dinner, come Miss Beranger's excuses.

"Gabrielle is not very well, and cannot come down," Lady Beranger remarks indifferently, going on with her *potage à la Reine*, and Lord Delaval makes a tolerable meal—drinks a little more than usual, but not too much (wine bibbing is not one of his faults), laughs and talks a little nervously, and even is slightly *distract*, while Zai sings in her fresh sweet soprano a bit of Swinburne, set to pathetic music—

"If I could but know after all,
I might cease to hunger and ache,
Though your heart were ever so small,
If it were not a stone or a snake."

He seems to look past her dainty chesnut-crowned head, as he listens to these words, at Gabrielle—Gabrielle, with her wild wet eyes, her white passion-tossed features, her clinging arms and bitter reproach.

All night long, through his sleep, they come back to him, and will not be thrust away.

Once more, at breakfast, the empty chair faces him, and in spite of himself he says to his hostess, "I hope Miss Beranger is better to-day?"

"Yes! I think so," Lady Beranger answers; "at any rate, well enough to travel. Gabrielle went off by the early train to Southampton, I believe, didn't she, Trixy?"

"I think so, mamma; at least, Fanchette told me. She has gone, but she never said good-bye."

"Ah! just like her," Lady Beranger observes, carelessly. "Gabrielle is so queer, so *bizarre*, you know." And she takes another help of *fillet de sole*, and gives no further thought to her step-daughter.

"Will you come out on the lawn, the morning is perfect?" Lord Delaval says to Zai, when they make a move from the table, and she, who has determined to love him and obey him, turns up a fair sweet face, and smiling, runs away for her hat.

He looks after her slender figure with visible admiration in his eyes. Zai is his beau ideal, *pro tem*, of womankind.

"Don't be long away," he calls softly; and he longs to have her with him, where, sending the *convenances au diable*, he can gaze his fill on her beauty, and kiss her to his heart's content.

"A letter for you, my lord."

He starts and stammers as he asks:

"For me?"

And, as he takes the sealed missive in his hand,

a sort of foreboding makes him pale and shrink from opening it.

He even forgets to wait for Zai, but walks out of the house, and down towards the far end of the grounds, before he breaks the seal.

“When you read this, Delaval, I shall be dead. ‘What folly!’ I hear you say. But folly or not, it is the truth. Oh, Delaval, I wonder I did not die yesterday! when you killed me with your hard words and looks. I cannot, I say, live and know that the love and caresses that are all the world to me are given to another woman. I have no home, no friends, no money. What, then, is left to me but death? Good-bye! my love! my love! My last prayer will be that some day you will say to yourself, ‘She loved me best of all.’ Good-bye!

“GABRIELLE.”

When he has read it all, his first thought is, “What a very unpleasant state of affairs.”

He cannot show the letter to his future wife or her people. He cannot give a hint that Gabrielle may have committed the atrocious folly of putting an end to herself. True, the uncertainty of her fate does not conduce to his comfort or his equanimity of mind, but it is not to be thought of that he should cut his own throat by showing her letter.

“Here goes!” he says at last, with a sigh of relief, as the torn fragments of Gabrielle’s last words scatter to the four winds, and he turns with a tender smile to meet his betrothed, who comes slowly and sadly, as it seems to him, up the garden walk.

"I thought you were never coming, darling," he whispers in his softest voice, while his ultramarine eyes look into her own longingly, yearningly.

But Zai's grey eyes do not respond, and her face is very grave as she falters:

"Gabrielle! oh, how shall I tell you, Gabrielle —?"

"Yes," he questions feverishly, staring at her in his bewilderment.

"*Poor Gabrielle is dead!*"

"Dead?"

"Yes! We thought she had gone to Southampton, but she hasn't—for—oh! *what* could have made her do it?" she cries, looking up with piteous eyes into his white face. "She has drowned herself in the river! *What* could have made her do such a terrible thing?"

"God knows!" he says.

It is quite true what Zai has told him.

Close to the brink of the Urling river that runs through the Sandilands estate they have found Gabrielle's hat. How well they know it, the dainty hat with its pompon of vivid scarlet and black!

For five days they drag the river without success, but on the sixth day a human form is brought and laid on the silvery bed of sand.

A woman's form, tall and slender like Gabrielle's yet so unlike, for it is terrible to look upon. The light summer dress she wore is tattered and draggled and discoloured beyond recognition, and the face—but none who have known her can look

twice on the fearful lineaments that the water have so cruelly caressed and changed.

Not even her own father can believe that this awful thing lying at his feet can be all that is left of his beautiful daughter, Gabrielle Beranger.

* * * * *

Again Lady Beranger has to mourn like her fellow "quality" in "deep kilts"—procured on credit—but this time she has a certain satisfaction in it, which she salves down her conscience with by saying:

"Gabrielle was such a queer girl that she *must* have come to an out-of-the-way end. She was so fast, so *bizarre*, so dreadfully indifferent to the *bienseances* and the *convenances*, you know, and, dear Marchioness, is it not far better to have drowned herself than to have gone to the bad?"

The Marchioness, who has had a *jeunesse orangeuse* herself, shakes her dyed curls solemnly and virtuously.

"Very true, dear Lady Beranger. Once a girl has got the bit between her teeth, she is *sure* to ride to the Devil, and poor dear Gabrielle always struck me as the sort that go the fastest. Well! well! we must console ourselves by the hope that the best thing possible has happened to her. And how long are the weddings put off for?"

"Till November. This is not the first time Gabrielle has inconvenienced me, but I suppose we *must* delay the marriages for two months, or people will talk. All these sort of things entail so much expense too; no sooner has one gone into

half-mourning for my dear lost Baby, but there's the deep black for Gabrielle again. It really seems to me that she only thought of herself, and did not care a bit for the annoyance and inconvenience she caused to others!"

CHAPTER XVII.

CARLTON CONWAY.

"But love so lightly plighted,
 Our love with torch unlighted,
 Paused near us unaffrighted,
 Who found and left him free.
 None seeing us cloven in sunder,
 Will weep, or laugh, or wonder,
 Light love stands clear of thunder,
 And safe from winds at sea."

NOVEMBER has set in with its yellow fogs and gloom, and the Berangers are back in Belgrave Square, for the dual weddings come off in another ten days, and the *trosseau* requires her ladyship's taste and personal supervision in the finishing touches.

Trixy, whose nature is made up of frivolity and bagatelles and to whom the colour of a dress or the shape of a bonnet are solemn subjects for reflection and consideration, is an enthusiastic shopper, but not so Zai.

It is seldom that she can call up courage enough to wade through Elise's and Worth's establishments, to devote her whole and sole attention to the important point as to whether her chemisette shall be edged with Valenciennes or Honiton.

Zai is studiously learning to care for the man she is going to marry in a few days, and this subject engrosses her to the expulsion of all extraneous matter.

Down on her knees beside her little white-curtained bed she prays that the gift of "loving" Lord Delaval may be given her. Downstairs, while he sits beside her, the same prayer goes on in her heart, for, born and bred in Belgravia, Zai is the best little thing that ever tried to do her duty towards God and man.

This much has been vouchsafed her, that Carlton Conway, who has been the stumbling block in her path to reaching the goal she desires, has never turned up on the scene to open, by his presence, the old wound, which Zai firmly believes now is closed for always.

Once she has heard him mentioned at an afternoon tea, but it was only to the effect that his marriage with Miss Meredyth was put off for a while.

Zai has never forgotten, never will forget perhaps, the days when Carl was all in all to her. She lived an enchanted life during the time, for all the love her girl's heart knew swept into one great channel and poured itself out at his feet. Paradise had opened for her out of the dull monotony of Belgravian life and moments—golden with the light of romance—had shone on her with a radiance like unto no other radiance of time. And she certainly had not stayed then to count the cost of the bitter desolation that followed.

After all Eve herself would hardly have surren-

dered the memory of Eden for all the joys to be found on earth, and she must have dreamed of it full many a time and waked to weep such tears of unavailing regret as have watered this sad planet of ours most plenteously.

The London world outside is full of fog and gloom, with a few feeble gas lamps struggling through it, but inside the drawing-room in Belgrave Square with its firelight and luxury is conducive enough to "dreaming."

So Zai gives herself up to this delicious pastime, and, strangely enough, Carl does not appear as central figure. Possibly her earnest prayers for oblivion of him and his falsity have been answered; anyway it is a blond face with deep blue eyes and hair that shines up like gold under the sunbeams, that her mind's eye sees, while her broad white lids are closed.

"Dreaming, my sweet! Is it of me?"

Some one bends over her. Some one's hand drops softly on her shoulder, and when she looks up, some one's handsome face is very close to her own. Suddenly—Zai blushed furiously afterwards when she thought of it—she slips her arm round his neck and draws down his head till his lips rest upon her own.

It is the first voluntary caress she has given him. To say that Lord Delaval is amazed, bewildered, enchanted, all in the same moment, would be to say very little indeed. A great joy and wonder take possession of him, and for a second he is almost an unresponsive party, but in the next instant he has her in his arms, close against his heart, and to in

demnify himself for loss of time, he rains down kisses on her charming face from brow to chin.

Kisses that come so fast—so fast, so eagerly, so fiercely even, that Zai stands almost stunned with all that her first demonstration of love for him has called down on her.

Then he sits down on the sofa beside her and, putting his arm round her, draws her near him.

He had felt that kiss she gave him go through him like an electric shock that sent the blood rushing through his veins, and made his pulses throb hard.

Scores of women had offered him kisses before, and he had accepted them or rejected them according to his mood, but this kiss, that the girl he is going to marry had volunteered of her own accord, seemed quite different to the rest. Then a sudden thought came like a stab.

“Zai,” he asks gravely, “are you sure—*quite* sure—that you are acting according to your feelings in marrying me?”

She looks up at him in surprise. His face is quite pale, but his eyes seem to burn strangely.

“Quite sure,” she answers quietly, convinced in her own mind that she *is* sure—perfectly sure of the fact.

“Darling Zai! You have never given me a chance before to tell you how I love you—love you with all my heart! to tell you that I will strain every nerve to make you care for me as I care for you! But there is one thing you must confess to me. Loving you as I do I shall be a

very lenient judge, my child. Do you love me enough to be true to me always?"

She knows she does not love him as she had loved Carl. That had been a mad phantom, filling her heart and brain. But she knows if she marries this man she will make him a good and true wife.

She is *sure* that, in deed and word, and even thought, she will be loyal and faithful to him always.

The fitful pink colour comes and goes on her cheeks, the big grey eyes droop as they have a habit of doing, but a smile—a little ghost of a smile hovers round her pretty red lips.

"I love you, and I shall be true to you always!" she says, and Lord Delaval, cynical as he is—sceptical of all things, *feels* that her words are genuine, and he starts and his face grows radiant.

"Zai!" he cries breathlessly.

And bending, he puts his hand under the rounded chin and lifts up the little drooping face towards him. Zai's eyes are still downcast, but he manages to read their language pretty well, and he sees the lips part in something between a quiver and a laugh.

"Is it so—say?" he whispers passionately, throwing his arms round her and gathering her close until her face rests against his. "Zai, for God's sake, is it so? Don't—*don't* take away my new-born hope, but tell me that you really love me and only me!"

"I love only you."

And when she says this Zai feels that her prayers

are answered, and the old love for Carlton Conway is conquered.

“Look at me, my darling child!”

She looks up, and in the soft grey eyes he reads honesty and truth, and on the impulse of the moment he stoops, and his lips cling feverishly, almost fiercely, to hers.

Zai starts away from him then, and for a second she seems scared, white, trembling.

His wild, fierce kiss has sent the blood back from her cheek to her heart, that throbs with a pain that makes her faint and sick. Then the pretty pink colour creeps slowly back, and of the passionate caress that has lingered on her mouth there is born a new feeling for her betrothed husband.

“Zai, you hated me once, I believe,” he says reproachfully. “I wonder why?”

“Never mind, since I love you now,” she replies.

“You hated me when you cared for Conway, Zai!”

He looks at her keenly as he deals what she thinks a random shot, but which is really a pre-meditated speech, for ever since Gabrielle’s words, Lord Delaval has been jealous for the very first time in his life.

Never before has he felt the pangs of the green-eyed monster. It may be because he has never before perhaps felt a true and pure love.

Zai laughs, but the laugh is a little forced.

“You see, Delaval, if you did not care about me you would not be jealous! The past belongs to me, you know, but the future is yours—won’t that

content you?" she asks softly. "Shall I promise that it is only you that I shall love for the rest of my life?"

"Suppose you couldn't keep your promise, Zai. Suppose an old influence was too strong for you—what then?"

"An old influence! No one could have any influence over me now but you, Delaval!"

"Will you swear that you will stick to me through thick and thin? Will you swear that no other man shall come between us ever?"

She does not answer.

A feeling a little rebellious creeps up in her heart. It is hard—so hard—to be doubted like this, when she has so bravely cast from her all sentiment for her old lover—when she is "really and earnestly caring" for this man.

"You can't answer for yourself, Zai!" he exclaims angrily. "Or perhaps you *won't* answer?"

Still she does not say a word, but hides her face against his arm.

So he moves away from her and faces her, his arms crossed over his chest, and speaks slowly and deliberately:

"Zai, when you know that a man is hungering and thirsting for a word of reassurance—when you *must* feel that it kills me to be in uncertainty of your *real* feeling you keep that word locked up in your bosom—you put a seal on your lips—you are thinking what a happier fate would have been yours as Conway's wife."

The suddenness of these last words sends a thrill through her, and involuntarily she starts.

"Delaval, Mr. Conway is probably a married man by this time, and I really think you forget that I am just going to be *your* wife."

"Will you always remember you are my wife?" he asks.

"I am not likely ever to let the fact escape my notice," she answers gravely. "Mr. Conway is nothing to me but an acquaintance; as far as *love* is concerned, he and I are as far removed from one another as if he or I were *dead*."

"Bah!" he says roughly, "don't think all that goody-goody sentiment is a safeguard for errant fancies. Morality now-a-days is at a very low ebb, and marital obligations go a precious little way against inclination—certainly where *men* are concerned. On your honour, Zai, if Conway was free and could marry you, would you still have me?"

"On my honour I would have you and no one else—if I *may*?" she asks with a deprecatory smile.

Whereupon he catches her once more in his arms.

"Now," he says, "while I hold you like this—heart to heart, hand in hand, and lip to lip—come, Zai! give me your lips—there!—I will put your love to a test! Zai, Zai!—for God's sake—don't you fail me now!"

"I shall never fail you," she answers in a low voice.

"Not if I tell you that——"

He pauses. He really dreads to see her start and shrink away from him perhaps—he dreads to see

the sweet lovelight in her grey eyes fade into coldness or hardness—he dreads to lose the delicious guerdon of these soft, delicious lips.

“Not if you tell me *anything*.”

“Zai, Conway *is* a free man. His marriage with Miss Meredyth is broken off entirely. Her people found out something about Flora Fitzallan, of the Bagatelle Theatre. I know for a fact that he will never be allowed to marry her. Well?”

“I think,” she says, and putting her arms around his neck she lifts up a pair of sweet, soft eyes, “I think it is a very bad thing for Mr. Conway to have lost a rich wife, and that his misfortune is my gain, for *now* you will believe that——”

“That what?” he asks eagerly.

“That who he marries is no concern of mine so long as I——”

“Well?”

“Marry—*you!*” she says, and as she clings to this man who is to be her husband, she thanks God that she can go down on her knees beside him and swear to love, honour, and obey him so long as they both shall live.

“My darling! my own, own darling!” he whispers, in his most melodious voice, and his voice can be not only melodious but *séduisante* when he likes. “Listen, Zai. I have never been a good man; but I swear that the day of our marriage I’ll commence a new life. You will never regret that you have taken me, Zai. So help me Heaven!”

The recording angel carried up this oath, but the other angels blotted it out with tears.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ANTEROS.

“ Shall we not laugh, shall we not weep ?
 Not we, though this be as it is ;
 For love awake or love asleep
 Ends in a laugh, a dream, a kiss ! ”

TWELVE months wedded, Lady Delaval yet leads a charmed life. Her cup of bliss overflows, and under its influence her lovely face is tenfold lovelier, with the sunshine of her soul illuminating it.

She has made her curtesy to the Queen on her marriage, and her train, her coiffure, and her beauty have been the talk of town. She looks so good and pure too, with no fast proclivities, and to the satiated eyes of town men these things have vast attraction.

Lord Delaval has shunned all his old haunts, turned the cold shoulder to his numerous loves, avoided even looking at the professional and other beauties, and evinced an utter devotion to one woman—his wife—a fact which has amazed Society, amongst whom his fickleness has been a by-word hitherto.

Prophecies as to the duration of such strange and praiseworthy conduct are rife.

Will he stick to it?

The "No's" preponderate considerably over the "Yes's" but time will reveal which of the gossips are the best judges of human nature.

When the season is over, they come down to Delaval Court—a magnificent place in Hampshire—and here among the beautiful sylvan shades, Zai discovers that she has really fallen over head and ears in love with her handsome husband, but with a graver, even tenderer, sentiment than mere being "in love." She is grown so fragile that she looks as if a breath of wind would blow her away, but her heart beats stronger than ever with two feelings—love for the man she has married, and love for the child which is to perfect her life; and Lord Delaval, about whom is a deal of indolent sybaritical self-indulgence, has his "mystic" summer too.

He really finds it quite delicious to talk of the future as he lies stretched at full length on the cool green velvety sward at his wife's feet, in the twilight and the starlight, with the subtle fragrance of a myriad flowers pervading their senses, and the Channel sweeping before them like a great phantom sea.

Somehow the stars seem to shine with a holier, tenderer radiance; the roses sigh out greater sweetness; the waters murmur more gladly to him than they have ever done before in his life.

True that in these charmed moments he talks principally of town topics; and she scarcely comprehends the gist of the gossip. Belgravian born and bred as she is, she has never in fact really

comprehended the world of London well, but she likes to hear her husband tell about it, simply because it is the world in which *he* has lived so much.

But somehow, to Zai, the theatres, the balls, Hurlingham, the fashionable resorts, the feverish dissipation among which she passed nineteen years seem distant and even myths now. She cares nothing for town, save the Park, and even that cannot vie, in her eyes, with the delightful green shades and sunlit bits that Delaval Court owns.

She does not feel the least interested in the new professional beauties or the American stars that crop up to make themselves nine days' wonders at the risk of a life-long reputation. Zai has, in fact, a foolish horror of women being held up to public view and subjected to public admiration and criticism. Her notions are a little obsolete, perhaps, for neither Lord nor Lady Beranger are good, simple folk, and have plenty of the "go-ahead" sentiments of their fellow aristocrats, and their daughters have certainly not been brought up as quietly and carefully as they might have been.

But, after all, Zai's goodness and purity to a certain extent is a disadvantage to her.

Men of the Lord Delaval type are not likely to be long attracted by rustic waxwork when passionate, demonstrative human nature comes in their way to appeal to their feelings or senses, and even in these palmy days, Lord Delaval, when he finds his wife uninterested in the talk that his lips are mostly accustomed to utter, feels rather injured and inclined

to be silent or sullen. But he is quite enough enamoured of her still, not to seek for other audiences, at any rate, just yet. So the summer flies quickly by, and autumn is waning, and Zai, as she opens her sweet grey eyes on a dull November morning, remembers to-day is the anniversary of her marriage, and thanks God for the happiness He has granted her. But the autumnal days are dark and dreary, and the presence of outsiders, which would have seemed a terrible nuisance to Lord Delaval a few weeks ago, would now be a blessing. He feels as if he would gladly welcome anybody, whose advent would put a little spice, a little zest into his daily routine. It is easier for an Ethiopian to change his skin and a leopard his spots than for a worldling to alter his nature.

Lord Delaval does not acknowledge to himself even, with that utter self-delusion that comes so easily to most men—that there was something in poor Gabrielle's feverish passion that appealed to him, gratified him, soothed him. He does not guess himself how deliciously sweet to his heart are the voice of flattery and the yield of worship. There are men and *men*.

To some, the self-abnegatory passion of women is no doubt distasteful, even repellant. To others—to those of Lord Delaval's temperament especially—it is a poisonous incense—intoxicating, subtle, pleasant, and nearly always irresistible.

Meanwhile, Zai has no wish ungratified, no desire unsatisfied. To her the world contains but one man, and this is—her husband. Now and then she re-

members the existence of Carlton Conway, but only with wonder filling her that she ever could have exalted him into a creature to adore, when he is so different—personally, mentally, in every way—to Delaval. She is flung, as it were, on her husband entirely for all the pleasure, enjoyment, and amusement of life. Gabrielle is drowned; Baby is dead; her father and mother, left to themselves, live in the London world and for the London world. There is no one, then, of her people, save Trixy, from whom she can hear of the old life, the old haunts, the old faces, and Trixy, with her grand house in Park Lane, her dresses, her jewels, her millions, is strangely silent. “She has no time, amid the pomps and vanities, to think of me, I suppose,” Zai says, after a couple of months have elapsed since Trixy’s last hurried scrawl. “Did you hear of her, Delaval, yesterday in town?”

“Yes!” he answers rather gravely. Lax as he is in morals himself, he objects utterly to his wife’s ears being sullied with scandal. After all, though Zai’s innocence rather palls on him, he would not have it otherwise for all the world. But he has heard so much of Trixy from Percy Rayne that he feels it his bounden duty to do his best to keep the mire off the family he has married into.

“You did not tell me you had heard about her,” Zai says, rather reproachfully, “perhaps you even saw her!”

“No, I didn’t, my darling; but I am going to see her! and that to-morrow. Your sister is a giddy,

frivolous little woman, and poor old Stubbs hasn't much influence over her, I am afraid."

"Why, what has Trixy been doing, Delaval?" Zai asks hastily, lifting up a pair of anxious grey eyes, that are so pretty that he draws their owner down on his knee and kisses her.

"Never mind what she has been doing, my own! I'm not going to tell you all the naughty things women do, or you will be following their bad example!"

"Delaval!"

Zai flings her arm round her husband's neck, and kisses him in return. Like Cæsar's wife, she renders unto Cæsar all that is his due—with interest.

"Well?"

"You don't really believe I would ever do anything wrong, do you?" she whispers.

"I believe you are an angel!" he says truthfully, "and that is why I won't let anything of the earth—earthy, come near you!"

But Zai, angel though she may be, has some of Eve's curiosity in her.

"I know Trixy did not like Mr. Stubbs when she married him. But she always said she did not want love or affection so long as she had a fine house and lots of diamonds," she says, after a moment, and he reads in her face a longing to hear more.

"Fishing!" he laughs. "No use, little one, to fish in shallow water, you know! I'm *not* going to tell you anything about Trixy's shortcomings now, and I hope I shall not have anything to tell you later. Never mind about Trixy, darling. Think

about your husband. Will you miss him? I shall be away three or four days, I am afraid, for I have a lot of business to do. I have been living in Dreamland here so long that I have neglected everything—but you!”

“Going to London for three or four days, Delaval?” she asks, with positive tears in her eyes. “Oh! I am so sorry.”

“Nonsense, Zai. We can’t always be tied together, or we *may* get tired of one another, you know!” he replies, with a careless smile. The little change to Town is quite an event to him, and he would not give it up for the world.

“Tired of one another!” she says, with a little quiver of her lip. “You may be tired of me, but I shall *never* be tired of you—*never*, so long as I live!”

And he believes her. For loads of women have never tired of him, although he has treated them cruelly, and flung them aside, like old gloves or withered flowers.

“My little darling!” he murmurs, quite softly, pleased at her open adoration of his irresistible self, “I shall *never* be tired of you, as far as I can see. But you must not tax me too much. Men love variety, you know! This Darby and Joan sort of life is very delightful, my pet, but *ne quid nimis*—translated into English, ‘Too much of a good thing is as bad as nothing!’ We must not let our happiness pall on us, Zai!”

She turns away her head, and answers not a word. What can she say? If he could see her

face, it might bring him to a knowledge of the true and enduring love he has inspired in the soft, loving, girlish heart. But he doesn't trouble to see it. Perhaps he thinks it is best to ignore reproach or pathos, rather than let them prove hindrances to his pleasure and amusement.

And Zai neither asks him to curtail his visit to London, nor to speak differently to her. For his indifferent words have cut her to the heart. And for the first time since her marriage, directly his back is turned, she sheds a perfect torrent of tears, and during his absence wanders like a little ghost about the big house, with white cheeks, and great pitiful eyes, and a load on her spirits that she cannot shake off.

Meanwhile, Lord Delaval driving from Waterloo to his club, espies, standing at a shop, a brougham he knows; and stopping his hansom, walks up to it just as its occupant is getting in.

She is a lovely, golden-haired woman, but he scarcely recognises her. For all the delicious pink colour has left her cheeks, and she looks wan and haggard, and years older than she did two months ago.

"How do you do, Trixy?" he says, startling her evidently, for she drops a tiny parcel on the pavement. "I wanted to see you. In fact, I came up to Town on purpose."

"On purpose to see *me*, Delaval! What for?" she asks nervously. "I can't stay now to talk, anyhow. Piccadilly isn't exactly the place for a confab, you know. Especially as every one doesn't know you're my handsome brother-in-law!"

"And you are so very particular as to what people think—eh, Trixy?" he asks, drily.

"Of course, I wish to adhere to the *convenances!*" she answers rather sullenly.

"Well, we won't talk now. When may I call and see you?"

She hesitates, evidently. It may be that her time is not her own. Then suddenly she changes her mind.

"Come with me now, Delaval! I am sure you were only going for a prowl down Regent Street, and I am rather curious to hear what you want to talk about—come in."

He puts a foot on the step, then pauses.

"But how about the *convenances?* Every one doesn't know that I am not one of your lovers!"

"Bother the *convenances,*" she cries, impatiently, "and everyone knows I have *no* lovers."

He enters the brougham, and a few in the crowd, who know the lovely golden-haired woman by sight as one of the London belles, begin to chatter about her. Different versions and interpretations of the matter fly from lip to lip, the favourite rendition being a modified version of "Auld Robin Gray."

"She married old Peter Stubbs, the millionaire, against her will, you know," Bevan, a man in the Coldstreams, tells a pretty coquettish little woman who stands beside him on the steps of the Burlington Arcade. "She was over head and ears in love with Conway, the actor."

"I know Carlton Conway," little Mrs. De Clifford answers. "I met him last night at Flora

Fitzallan's supper. He was quite the host there. Flora has loved him slavishly for years, and though he spends all her money, he tyrannises over her awfully. I suppose that wonderful handsome fellow is another lover of Mrs. Stubbs," she adds, with a lingering look at Delaval's undeniable beauty.

"It happens to be her brother-in-law, Lord Delaval *this* time," the man replies, in a tone that flings away a woman's reputation in the twinkling of an eye.

"And is Lady Delaval alive?" Mrs. De Clifford asks carelessly, but with a mind to find out if Lord Delaval's agreeability equals his good looks.

Bevan, who has rather a weakness for his companion, awakens at once to a suspicious condition.

"Very much alive, I hope! Lady Delaval is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, and her husband adores her," he says, with *malice prepense*.

Meanwhile the brougham, "dark green, *very* dark green, and by Peters," as Trixy had ordained, has disgorged its occupants at a house which is as exquisite within as it is big and stately without, and even Lord Delaval, who is habituated to luxury, is struck forcibly by the judicious manner in which the ethereal inspiration of poets and painters, Trixy Stubbs, has so ably contrived to feather her nest.

"I am inclined to believe, after all, Trixy, that you made a very wise choice," he remarks, a little sardonically, as he follows her into a dim, flower-scented, rose-hung, mirror-embellished room, which

the Honourable Mrs. Stubbs calls her boudoir, and is told to sit down in a chair that might tempt an anchorite into a fondness for luxury and repose.

"Love sometimes flies out of the window, my dear Trixy; but statues, and mirrors, and French furniture are not disturbed by any such freaks of passion. One's heart might be in a fair way to break, but such a delicious chair as this would be a comfort all the same."

"I am not so sure of that," says Trixy, in her "Mary Anderson" voice, full of pathos and tragedy, as she flings her dainty bonnet of pale blue velvet, with its high silver aigrette, on the marqueterie floor, and sinks into a corresponding chair, with a wealth of bright amber hair crowning her like the halo of a saint.

"Sometimes I should not care if it *did* all fly through the window," she goes on, moodily. "Sometimes, Delaval, I cannot help thinking I have paid a little too dear for—for everything."

"What do you mean?" he asks, bluntly. "Did you not choose to marry Stubbs? That being the case, what right have you to complain because your bargain may not be exactly to your taste? If you had not married of your own free will, of course no one could have forced you into it."

"My own free will!" repeats Trixy, scornfully, curving down the corners of her red lips. "I wonder when a man—a man like you—ever comprehends that a woman's free will, from her very cradle to her grave, means just nothing. No right to complain, haven't I? Well, I am not complain-

ing. My husband is kind and good to me, better and kinder by far than I deserve; but none the less I suffer more than you would believe I do, if I were fool enough to tell you everything."

Tears rise up in her lovely blue eyes—hot, angry, scorching tears, but she chokes them back.

Life is beginning to teach even this little spoiled butterfly some self-control, and that wisdom which is learned only through sad experience. Lord Delaval, susceptible always, is touched even by the beauty and evident unhappiness of his sister-in-law. He leans forward, takes gently the white hand that has dashed away the rebellious tear drops.

"Don't be vexed, Trixy, if I spoke a little roughly just now," he says, in his pleasantest accents. "You used to like me years ago when you were a child, and although you have out-grown the fondness, I am sure you know that I like you awfully, if it is only for Zai's sake."

"Delaval, I want you to answer me a question—on your honour, you know. Does Zai love you?"

"Love me? My dear Trixy, your question makes me answer rather conceitedly, perhaps; but on my honour I don't believe any woman loves her husband better than my wife loves me."

"Thank God for that!" she exclaims, passionately.

He stares at her in surprise. Trixy is not of a devout nature, and it seems to him a little strange also that she should trouble herself earnestly about a sister with whom she has nothing in common, or

apparently much affection for. There must be an *arrière pensée* in her ejaculation.

"Why should you be so thankful that Zai cares for me?" he asks, carelessly, amazed to see her colour come and go swiftly, and the hand he still holds tremble in his.

But Trixy drags away her fingers and shrinks back into the furthest corner of her fauteuil.

"Oh! I don't know!" she says, nervously. "I just wanted to hear if she was happy and loved you only."

"Loved me *only!* Why, who *should* she love else?" he demands, gravely.

"No one, of course. You always make me nervous, Delaval, when you turn inquisitor. As a child I hated your questioning propensities."

"Yes; but you know you always found I was to be trusted; so tell me your troubles now. It will be a relief to you, and let us see—two heads, being better than one—if we cannot find a remedy for them."

"Don't bother me, Delaval, I cannot."

"You mean that you cannot speak of your troubles?"

"Yes! I mean just that. I can't talk of them, at least to *you*."

"It would be better to talk of them to me, Trixy, than to Lady Smiles. She is a chattering, double-faced woman."

"Lady Smiles! Why, what has she been saying? What *dare* she say of me?" Trixy asks feverishly, lifting up a flushed face.

"Only letting out a few foolish confidences. You see Lady Smiles may possibly fancy the same man as you may do; and women are horribly spiteful to one another when a man comes between them!"

"I don't understand what you mean?" she stammers, growing quite white; "and as for my troubles, you must not think that I have any complaint to make against Mr. Stubbs," she goes on with curious eagerness; "He is really devoted to me, anticipating my wants, lavishing costly things on me, caring for me ten times more than I merit, as I cannot help thinking when I recollect that I married him, hating and despising him!"

"But you care a little for him now, don't you?"

"Yes, I care for him a little more now," she replies very doubtfully. "It is true that I ought to care for him, for he is kindness itself, but——"

Here the blue eyes fill with large tears again, and Lord Delaval frowns as he realises that Lady Smiles—Trixy's bosom friend and *confidante*—has not been untruthful in her insinuations. Percy Rayne is one of her admirers, and it is to him, as a connection of the Berangers, that she has confided her fears that Trixy is a *leelle* imprudent in her conduct.

"Trixy! I know you once had a foolish fancy for—for——"

He hesitates at the name, he hates it so! struggles with himself, and at last wrenches the words out and almost flings them at her. "For—Carlton Conway! but it is of course impossible that you can still waste a thought or feeling on such an unmiti-

gated scoundrel, a fellow who plays fast and loose with every woman he comes across—a hypocrite, a scoundrel!”

But Trixy springs up from her chair and faces him; two scarlet spots burn in her cheeks, her eyes blaze, and she looks like a beautiful virago.

“How dare you speak of my friend like this, Lord Delaval! I forbid you to do it; I forbid you to say behind Mr. Conway’s back what you would not presume to do before him! Presume, I say it again, for though he is an actor and you are an Earl, there is more to be respected in his little finger than in your whole body! He would not lower himself to abuse a man, just because that man had been loved better than himself!”

“What do you mean?” Lord Delaval demands sternly. He is standing too now, with anger in his eyes, and wounded vanity in his breast.

“I mean that your spite towards Mr. Conway only emanates from the knowledge that your wife loved him as she will never care for any other man in her life!” Trixy says defiantly, though her blue eyes quail a little as they meet his. “And you may tell her from me, that the sooner she forgets him the better, for he does not care for her—*that*,” and she snaps her finger scornfully.

“He cares for *you*, no doubt!” Lord Delaval answers quietly, though his whole frame trembles with outraged pride and mortification. “But mark my words, his love will drag you down to the lowest depths, and——” he pauses, lays a hand on her shoulder, and speaks slowly and deliberately;

"when he has got hold of the money poor old Stubbs was fool enough to settle on you, my dear Trixy, he will fling you to the devil!"

And without another word he leaves the room.

But Trixy's words have raised up a feeling in his heart about his wife which cannot fail to build up a wall of reserve and suspicion.

It is in the dusk of the evening when he returns after two days' absence, but the firelight is bright enough to show him the gladness in Zai's face as he enters the room. Lavater himself could not find any guile in it, but jealousy and suspicion know no reason.

"My darling! my darling!" she cries, throwing herself into his arms, and holding up her sweet lips for his kiss, but he puts her aside quietly, and, amazed at his manner, she stands a little apart.

"What are you doing in the dark here?" he asks, in a cold, cutting voice. "Dreaming of the old days?"

"I don't understand what ails you!" she falters. "I was sitting here, wondering when you would come back, for it has been so dull, so miserable without you! but now you *have* come back, you are so strange, Delaval!"

"Light those candles," he orders abruptly.

She goes up to the mantel-piece and obeys him.

The tapers shine down full on her chesnut hair, her pure sweet face, her pathetic grey eyes.

"Now I can see you," he says curtly, inwardly moved by her exceeding fairness, but outwardly

cold and stern. "Well, why don't you ask for news of Trixy?"

"I forgot about her," she answers gently. "I was thinking about you."

"About *me!* as if you ever gave me a thought!" he sneers. "I hate to be fooled."

"Fooled!" she repeats. "Oh! Delaval, what have I done to make you say such things?"

"Done! why you have married me, loving that scoundrel, Conway!" he blurts furiously. "Nice thing it is for a man to know every day and night of his life that his wife is eating her heart out for a fellow like that!"

She has slid down on the floor by this time, and looks up at him with a blanched, scared face, and piteous eyes.

It seems to her that in this moment the love she has learned to look upon as her dearest, *dearest* possession is gone out of her grasp.

Delaval *must* hate her, or he could not glare at her like this, he could not say such awful, *awful* things.

"Well?" he asks, "have you nothing to answer in self-defence? How dared you come to an honest man's home with infidelity in your heart, lies on your lips. Don't you know that you are a wicked——"

"For God's sake, Delaval! For God's sake don't say such things to me!" she interrupts hastily. "If you believe me to be so false—so bad—send me away from you, but I cannot live with you and learn that I have lost your love!"

"Poor little woman!" he says, half relenting; "we cannot control our affections, so why should I blame you after all?"

"Won't you believe me if I swear, Delaval?"

"I thought you never took an oath?" he says harshly.

"I do not like to swear, but I will now, *now* that all I hold most precious on earth is in the balance!" she sobs through her tears.

"Swear then! Say, 'I love you and you only, so help me God!'"

"I love you, Delaval, and only you, so help me God!" she says solemnly. "Oh! you believe me now, don't you?"

He looks at her. As has been said before in the olden days Phryne's face and form moved her judges to mercy—so this fair face and form move him to belief.

It is not possible that deceit can lurk behind her candid brow, her limpid eyes.

"Come to me, little one!"

In a moment she is in his arms, her white face pillowed on his breast, her lips smiling. "Ah! you believe me, Delaval, or you would not take me in your arms! you know I love you—darling—my own, own darling!—love you with *all* my heart. I never, never think of anyone else."

"Not even of—Conway?"

But she does not shrink or blush at the name.

"I do—sometimes," she whispers, "but only to wonder how I could ever have cared about him at all."

Truth is stamped on every feature of her face. Truth shines in her glance. He would be more than man if he could resist this evidence.

So, though he will not humiliate himself to his wife by acknowledging himself in the wrong, he gathers her closer to him and kisses her with the ardour of their honeymoon days.

And she is content, she wants no more than this.

"You have not asked about Trixy?" he says presently; and I have something to tell you that will grieve you, my pet."

But she is nestling in his clasp, and it seems to her that nothing can grieve her very much now.

"Is Trixy ill?"

"No!"

"Is she—but no—Delaval! it can't be that Trixy is—dead!" she cries.

"Dead to you—Zai—but not really dead, unfortunately for herself. Trixy left her husband yesterday and has gone away,"—he hesitates.

"Where?"

"With—*Carlton Conway!*"

Gone away with Carlton Conway!

For a second Zai looks at her husband as if she was stunned, and does not even realise the fact that he is watching her face with a keen searching glance.

"Poor Trixy!" she says at last, but beyond an expression of pity on her mobile features, Lord Delaval fails to discover any regret. Still he remarks perversely, "*Lucky!* you mean!"

"Oh, Delaval! isn't it terrible?" Zai says, as if his last words had fallen unheard. "Trixy *must* awake some day to the consciousness of her conduct to her husband. He isn't lovable or lovely of course, but he was awfully kind to her, you know. What will become of her, for I am afraid Mr. Conway is not a good man, and unless she had money, he wouldn't care to be tied to her, I think?"

"She *has* money, old Stubbs settled £40,000 on her, and so long as it lasts Conway will stick to her like a leech, you may be sure; but when it's gone, then Trixy will be sent to the devil!"

"But he'll marry her of course, directly the divorce is given! I hope and pray he will! for after all she has given up for him, it will be dreadful for Trixy to find out what he is. Papa can *make* him marry her, can't he, Delaval?"

"No one can *make* him marry her—except his conscience—but I doubt his having one. I say, Zai, don't you feel a little sorry that he has gone over to your sister? Women hate defection in men you know."

"I *am* sorry for Trixy! I don't understand what you mean by women hating defection in men, but if you think that it matters to me who Mr. Conway runs away with, you are quite wrong! I would rather it was anyone though but my sister, for of course I wish her to be happy."

"Which Mr. Conway's noble presence ought to make her."

"Which it won't make her. If I thought you

would not call me spiteful—Delaval—I would tell you what I think.”

“Tell away—child.”

“Well, mamma said he was a cad, and though I don’t quite know the exact meaning of the word, I am afraid he is something of the sort.”

CHAPTER XIX.

LA BLONDE AUX YEUX NOIRS.

“Your lithe hands draw me—your face burns through me,
I am swift to follow you—keen to see,
But love lacks might to redeem or undo me,
As I have been—I shall surely be.”

So, while all London talks of Trixy’s elopement with Carlton Conway, Lord Delaval carries his wife off to Monte Carlo, and in sumptuous apartments little Lord Vereker makes his appearance on the arena of life.

Zai adores her first-born to absurd adoration, but she has not the very faintest idea how to take care of him, or the smallest conception what to do with him. She loves to hear as well as to know that God has given her a living child, and little Vereker does not disappoint her for he screams away the first weeks with a pertinacity which is fortunately rare. He seems to have not only the germ of a lachrymose disposition, but is in actual fright at the new world in which he finds himself.

Nevertheless, mother and child make such a charming Madonna-like picture that Lord Delaval,

who has always gone in for lust of the eye, likes to gaze upon it.

Never has Zai had him so completely to herself, never has he been so gentle, so unselfish, so loving, and no matter what happens, she has this period to look back upon with unmarred sensation of content. But when a couple of months have gone by Monte Carlo has begun its season, and it is at Zai's own solicitation that her husband begins to go and look about him a little.

"You'll get quite ill, darling, unless you have a little distraction," she says, tenderly, as her white fingers caress his fair hair, "and you need not mind leaving me, for I shan't be dull now I have got Baby."

So as he is not loth at all for a little distraction he takes her advice.

The next evening he finds himself in the glittering Casino.

The room is crowded as usual, and he has already run against several Town acquaintances, and amongst them a man called Severn whom he knows intimately.

"Have you seen *her*?" Severn asks, excitedly. He is an inflammable young fellow, with a habit of falling head over ears at first sight, and almost going mad over a woman that takes his fancy.

"Seen *who*?" Delaval asks, carelessly. "There are plenty of 'shes' about, but no particular *rara avis* to my thinking."

"Ah! you *haven't* seen her, if you can say that. Come this way," and Severn, catching his arm,

almost drags him to where there is a small gap in the gaping crowd.

Delaval looks across the table.

A woman sits there, cynosure of all eyes, but so absorbed in the game that she never lifts a pair of snow-white lids heavily fringed by the longest and darkest of lashes.

She has a perfect face. Her pure creamy skin is flushed now with the softest pink like the bloom of a rosebud petal. Her features are slightly aquiline, her mouth distractingly beautiful, and she has a wealth of lovely golden hair, brought low on the brow and gathered into a sort of diadem on her thorough-bred head.

She is dressed in a peculiar style, which in any other woman would look *bizarre*. A mass of exquisite and priceless black lace seems to swathe her magnificent form in clinging graceful folds, fastened together at the throat by a star of small but splendid brilliants. Brilliants scintillate in her ears, and on her arms, which her loose lace sleeves leave bare almost to the elbow.

She has put a pile of notes on the red, and as the croupier deals she leans forward, forgetful of everything, and anxiously watches the fatal cards as if money to her was the dearest thing in life.

“*Quarante!*”

She sinks back in her seat now, with a gratified smile on her mouth. Her expression alters into languor. It is not money that she wants, it is the excitement of “winning” that she craves for with a fierceness that only true gamblers know.

"*Quarante apres!*"

She starts, bends eagerly forward once more. Her cheeks flushed crimson, her little white teeth pressed down on her red under-lip.

"*Un! Quarante! Rouge perds et la couleur!*"

The woman drops back again in her chair. Now that the tussle with luck is over for the present—her features grow perfectly serene, the crimson dies away from her cheek, and she slowly lifts up a pair of immense eyes, black as midnight and of a velvety softness which are a queer contrast to her golden tresses. Delaval standing opposite her—but shielded from her view by Severn, who in his excitement has pushed himself through the crowd—remarks this peculiarity. Strangely enough, the more he looks at her the more he is reminded of someone he has seen, but he is quite in a fog, and searches vainly in the caverns of memory for an elucidation of the mystery. Presently she looks into her purse—it is not quite empty—and with a curious half-mocking smile, she takes it up, and rising quietly makes her way towards the roulette room.

Severn and Delaval follow her, the former from admiration, the latter from curiosity. She goes up behind the man at the wheel—standing motionless for full ten minutes while the game goes on. Then she puts out a slender, perfectly-gloved hand, and places ten louis on Zero.

"Zero!"

They pay her 7,000 francs in notes and in gold,

and she places ten louis again of her pile on the lucky number.

"Zero!"

The woman's face is positively radiant now, the intense pleasure of winning makes her huge eyes flash like splendid meteors and lends an animation to her face that increases its attraction tenfold.

Quietly putting her nice little haul of 14,000 francs into her purse, she moves slowly—looking neither to the right nor to the left on her way to the door.

"I shall go and make her acquaintance," Delaval says

"Not for worlds," cries Severn. "Why, man, she is a—lady."

"A lady! Pshaw!" he answers with a laugh. "She is a tout of this place—that's what she is! What countrywoman is she? And do you know her name, Severn? Come, tell us all about it, and as I'm not struck myself, I'll go and make the running for you, old chap."

"She is Mademoiselle Belleville, a Frenchwoman," Severn answers rather sulkily. "I know it's no good not telling you. I never saw such a fellow as you are for hunting up your game."

Delaval laughs again, and with long strides reaches the corridor.

Play being at its height the corridor is partially deserted, as walking straight up to the beautiful *joueuse*, Delaval coolly puts his hand on her shoulder.

"Mademoiselle Belleville, I wish to make your acquaintance," he says in excellent French.

She starts away from his touch and raises her head with a haughty gesture, that makes her look imperial.

"Monsieur!" she begins without looking at him, then suddenly she lifts her eyes to his face. For a moment she stands gazing at him dumb, motionless as a statue, only her lips quivering and a strange fire creeping into her gaze—stands with her two hands pressed down on her heart as if to stay its beating.

"Monsieur! I give you permission to do so," she answers in true Parisian accents, "but not to-night. You see that path winding through the trees, I will be there to-morrow evening at seven, waiting for you." She bends her head in adieu, and is gone before he recovers from his surprise.

"By Jove! an easy conquest," he laughs, "too easy to be worth anything. The thought of my little Zai will make me a second Joseph—so why shouldn't I go?"

He saunters back to the Casino, and finds Severn punting away recklessly at *rouge et noir*.

"She was quite agreeable to making my acquaintance," Delaval says, "but I am not quite sure if I care about it."

"Then don't," Severn answers eagerly. "I have just been asking old St. Jerome about her. He is an *habitué* of Paris and knows everybody and everything. He says young Valentin de Bressac blew his brains out about her, last month, and not long

ago Jules de Grammont Charlemont—a capital fellow, one of the Faubourg St. Germain Charlemonts—went to the bad—took to drinking like a madman—tried to shoot her, and has got five years for it.”

Delaval shrugs his shoulders.

“I am going home,” he says. “My wife will be wondering what has become of me. I am a model husband, you know.”

Severn looks at him incredulously, then begins trying his luck again.

It is a lovely night.

There is no moon, but myriads of stars cluster overhead and somehow the quiet and stillness are pleasant to Delaval. He has quite made up his mind to see Mademoiselle Belleville again. She is not the style of woman he admires, so there is no danger for him, but he *will* see her and speak to her, simply because it is his habit never to deny himself anything he wishes for.

Presently he reaches his hotel and enters the room where Zai lies fast asleep. How pretty she looks to the eyes that have just feasted off meretricious charms. The purity and sweetness of his wife's face come like a glimpse of blue sky after a storm. She is happy, too, for her red lips part in a smile as she clasps her child to her heart.

Lord Delaval stoops down and kisses her so softly that she never stirs. He is a worshipper of female beauty, and here before him, within his grasp, lies as fair a woman as ever was made to please the

eyes of man. His wife—his own—a legitimate object for love, and passion, and admiration.

But men are perverse creatures.

Noiselessly, as he entered, he steals away again to the adjoining room, and, without undressing, flings himself into an armchair.

Here the break of day finds him, still sleepless. He does not admire Mademoiselle Belleville, but where has he seen her before?

CHAPTER XX.

DRIFTING.

“A year divides us—love from love,
 Though you love now—though I loved then,
 The gulf is straight, but deep enough.
 Who shall recross—who among men
 Shall cross again?”

“You came in very late last night, darling,” Zai says, rather reproachfully, as she sits *en peignoir*, but a *peignoir* daintily got up with Valenciennes and pink ribbon, and looks divinely fair at the head of the breakfast table.

“There was a row at the rooms, last night, and I stayed to help the weaker side,” he answers.

It is the first falsehood he has uttered to his wife and a tinge of red sweeps over his fair skin, to hide which he buries his face in his coffee cup.

“Was the weaker side—*ladies*?” Zai asks, forgetting Lindley Murray in her incipient jealousy.

"Yes, ladies—very old ladies, who had been dropping their money at roulette and reviled the croupier," he says coolly.

"And how did you amuse yourself, darling? did you talk to anyone?"

"Why you've grown into the Grand Inquisitor, my pet! I talked to several men; among them—Severn."

"That man?" she says with a little *moue*. "Was his wife there?"

"No. Severn's doing Monte Carlo *en garçon*."

"How very horrid of him," she decides. "Now, you wouldn't care to go about *en garçon*, when I am well and strong again, would you, my own?"

"Certainly not!" he answers fervently.

But he has made up his mind to go out *en garçon* all the same.

"And how's baby?" he enquires solicitously, anxious to turn the subject.

"He's very well. I am sure he has grown quite a quarter of an inch in the last few days, and I really think he tried to say 'Pa—pa,' this morning, Delaval."

"No! did he *really*? Dear little chap!"

"Yes! Madame Le Blanc tells me that she has been a monthly nurse for thirty years, and this is the first time she has heard a child of two months pronounce so plainly."

"Why the little chap must be the infant phenomenon. Pity he's so beastly red."

"Red, Delaval! Why, he is exactly like Dresden china," she replies, mortified.

He gives a forced laugh, then he pushes his plate away with a devilled kidney untouched, for he has no appetite, and leaning back in his chair, looks across at his wife.

And he comes to the conclusion that he ought to be thoroughly ashamed of himself.

There she is facing him. Could any creature of mortal mould be sweeter, lovelier, purer, more adorable?

And yet!

These are two little words that carry more meaning in them than all the long grandiose phrases in the Queen's English. These two little words, indefinite as they seem, show exactly what a man's mind is when it oscillates 'twixt right and wrong. Zai is charming, but she is not *la blonde avec yeux noirs*.

She lacks the power to inflame the heart of the million. Her soft, dovelike eyes cannot burn into men's brains and souls, like those dangerous but glorious black ones of the gambling woman.

"Did you play last night, Delaval?"

"No."

"Weren't you tempted—just a little bit, even?"

He answers after a moment's deliberation to this:

"I am not sure whether there *was* any temptation for me or not?"

"Were there many high players?"

"Yes. One especially. An actress I think."

"I hope you won't get to know *her*, darling. Actresses are such bad, dangerous women, I have heard."

"And how about *actors*?"

The shot goes home, for she flinches and flushes a little, and he is rather sorry he has said this. On the whole it was slightly snobbish of him.

But when a man wants to stop a wife's tongue, he must do it the best way he can.

Zai flushes more from a wounded feeling at his tone than from the reference to her old lover, for whom she has the most profound indifference.

"Have you heard anything about Trixy, Delaval?" she asks in a low, humble voice.

She is very much ashamed of this sister of hers, and scarcely mentions her name before the man whom she not only loves but honours.

"Yes. Stubbs has got a divorce. Poor old boy—he was awfully cut up—had a fit and nearly died. He wanted her to go back to him and promised not to say one word of recrimination, but when she said she wouldn't he got a divorce, and gave that rascal Conway a bill at six months for ten thousand pounds, provided he married her. Of course the money was too much for the fellow, so the marriage will come off by-and-bye."

"And where is Trixy now?"

"Living at Hammersmith, dining at Richmond and the Orleans with all the fast men, dressing to the nine and making herself the talk of the town. She has quite forgotten the word more familiar to her youth than the Bible—*convénances*—but what can be expected? If a girl is inately bad no power on earth can keep her straight!"

"But Trixy is not inately bad," Zai murmurs.

"She married a man she could not love, and then she yielded to——"

"The irresistible Conway! Joy go with her. Men are not fair judges of their own sex—but if I was a woman—I should prefer old Stubbs to a dozen Conways."

"And so should I—*now*," Zai confesses meekly. "What a pity women have not the gift of clairvoyance!"

"Thank God, they haven't," he says to himself as he rises and walking up to the mantel looks at himself.

"I wonder what Mademoiselle Belleville thought of me! She certainly jumped at making my acquaintance!" he thinks as the glass reflects back his handsome face, a face which he *knows* is handsome and irresistible for most women.

Then he turns away carelessly—for he is not a vain man—and going up to his wife kisses her on the top of her chestnut head.

But Zai is not going to be satisfied with this.

"Won't you kiss me properly, darling?" she asks, holding up two fresh lips ruddier than a cherry.

And her darling kisses her "properly," though all the while he is wronging her in his heart, on the principle that sins of omission are as bad as sins of commission!

CHAPTER XXI.

IN THE MESHES.

We twain shall not re-measure
The ways that left us twain,
Or crush the lees of pleasure
From sanguine grapes of pain."

SEVEN of the clock.

The purple twilight has merged into a neutral tint, through which a thousand stars peep down on the earth, and there, just beyond that tall tree that spreads its giant branches round, rises a three-quarter old moon, clear and bright and yellow as a blubber ball.

Mademoiselle Belleville is already at the trysting place when Delaval saunters slowly up the shaded path.

His feelings on this occasion are perplexing. His pulse throbs a little, and there is a mingling of perturbation in his breast; yet if his *real* feelings were analysed, it would be found that Mademoiselle's beauty repels him even while it attracts him to the point of making her acquaintance.

"Her sort are not very particular about the convenances," he says to himself as he holds out his hand to her; and a slim white hand comes to meet his halfway, and clasps it so eagerly that a funny sort of thrill goes through his frame.

"Do you know I had an instinct when I saw you last night, monsieur? I believed you were my fate," she says, in a dreamy sort of voice that sounds like faint music.

As she stands before him, a sort of abandon in her lovely figure, the stars shower down a richer glow on her hair, the soft folds of her dark dress fall round her magnificent form like imperial purple, and she lifts up to him a face of such dazzling beauty as he has never looked on before.

"I wish I had stayed at home" he thinks. "She is far better looking than I fancied!"

"Why do you desire to know me, monsieur? Men like you do not care to know one like me!"

"Men like me!" he says laughing. "Why you don't even know who I am."

"Yes, I do. You are Lord Delaval," she answers in a low voice, that lingers over his name, "and you have a wife—is she pretty—Monsieur?" she questions with a fierceness that amazes him.

"Lady Delaval is lovely, mademoiselle, but we will not talk about her, let us talk about yourself. Do you know that your face haunted me all night long?"

"Was it because it is beautiful?" she asks eagerly.

He hesitates, but his hesitation lives only one instant while he looks at her and confesses that her face is one to haunt a man waking or dreaming.

"Yes! because it is beautiful," he answers impetuously.

She clasps her hands rapturously, while a radiant smile breaks on her mouth.

"If you *only* knew what Heaven your words are!" she whispers softly. "True, we only met last night, but it was enough, *for me!* I too laid awake last night wondering, but I dare not tell you the folly of my thoughts."

"Tell me!"

"Wondering—if—if—you would ever feel for me more than you do now! Wondering if there is any obstacle between us that we cannot surmount!"

Her lips quiver. Her heart beats so fast that he can almost count its throbs. Truly there is no acting in this. Mademoiselle Belleville has fallen in love with him at first sight, there is no doubt of this.

"There is no obstacle between us," he answers, forgetting all about his wife. "I want to know you, I want to find out if you are as good as you are lovely!"

"Then we shall meet again, and often?"

"If you will it!"

"If *I* will it! *Mon Dieu!* if you only knew how much!"

She holds out her hands to him, and as he clasps them closely, he bends his head, and his lips are very near to her flushed cheek.

But he does not kiss it. He has not lost his head yet, and the woman, as she looks up at him hastily, sees nothing but a smile on his face.

When she is alone, she passionately kisses the hands he held.

"He is not a man to stop at anything if inclination leads him! I shall win him! *I know I shall!*" she says aloud.

CHAPTER XXII.

DEEPER AND DEEPER STILL.

"Curled lips, long since half kissed away,
Still sweet and keen.
You'd give him poison, shall we say,
Or what—Faustine?"

It is the tenth time that Delaval and Mademoiselle Belleville have met.

"Stay a little longer."

This is always her cry, and he stays, but in his mind's eye he sees his wife's face, and, man of the world that he is—flirt, *vaurien*, lax to the last degree—his deep blue eyes actually glisten with genuine remorse.

"Poor little woman!" he thinks. "By Jove! what an awful fool I was to let myself into this sort of thing!"

He calls himself a fool, but fool is a mild term to apply to a man who has deliberately sought temptation, knowing himself to be uncommonly weak in the flesh.

Mademoiselle Belleville leans against a tree in a pose that would drive a sculptor into a frenzy of delight. The fragrance of her golden hair goes out to him, and her charming red lips tempt him dreadfully.

"It is growing very late, I am afraid," he says presently, after a little silence.

"If it is—what matters?"

"I am afraid."

"Afraid! Afraid of whom?"

"Afraid of—*myself!*"

"Is that really true?" and she looks up into his face with her passionate bewildering eyes with a glance that makes him feel hot and cold.

"Quite true, so help me Heaven!" he answers hastily. "Don't you know what your face can do to a man?"

She shakes her head, until each tress seems to turn to living gold.

"It can send honour to the devil, and drive a man into a lunatic asylum. I believe I shall go mad if I don't say good-bye to you soon!"

"Good-bye—to me?"

She stares at him aghast one moment; in the next, she flings her arms round him, clinging to him as if she would never let him go again.

"Good-bye! You didn't mean *that*, did you?" she demands. "You don't mean *ever* to say good-bye to me?"

He lets her cling to him for a few moments. The beautiful white arms are too tempting to be flung off as they ought to be. His ultramarine eyes kindle into great fires, and two red spots glow on his cheeks. It is a temptation straight from Satan. But though he breaks his vows to Zai in the spirit, he determines to keep them in the letter.

He puts her away from him gently, almost caressingly, and averts his face.

To look at her may undo him, he thinks.

"Listen, Louise. I have been married only two years, and I married for—*love*. My wife loves me with all her soul, and it would break her heart to lose me, and yet—God forgive me—I feel to-night as if I *hated* her—because she rises up between you and me!"

She bows her head a little, and a smile passes quickly over her mouth—a smile that has triumph in it—a smile that is absolutely wicked.

"When I came to-night, something told me of this end. It seems idiotic for a fellow to go mad over a woman's face, but, Louise, I have done so. I *have* gone mad, I believe, for, strangers as we were but a few short days ago, I love you desperately—love you a thousand times more than I have loved before!"

"Is this really true?" she asks in feverish eagerness that makes her lips and voice tremble.

"I swear it!"

"Then do not let us say good-bye! Let us go away—no matter where—so long as we can be together while we live! True, you are married, but what if you are? Marriage is only an earthly institution—Heaven recognises but one tie between man and woman—the tie of love, a love faithful and enduring, a love that keeps both man and woman sacred to each other by sheer force of its intensity—a love that comes but rarely to man or woman, but when it does, steps with inexpressible rapture

to the very lips. Say! Could you not be content with me? Could I not fill your heart, your soul, your brain?"

She has thrown herself into his arms, her lovely face lies on his breast, her hands clasp his.

And as he looks down on her his head goes round.

"And yet we *must* part, Louise," he says, after a moment, "as much for your sake as for mine!"

"Not for *my* sake!" she flashes. "When you leave me I shall sink lower and lower—I am not too good now, you know!" she laughs bitterly. "But since you have come I am better, purer—already! Won't you sacrifice a paltry scruple to save a fellow-creature from perdition? Will it not bring remorse to you later on to know that if you had stretched out your hand, a woman's soul, scarlet with sin, would have become as white as wool! Ah! for God's sake, think, before you cast me away, and fling me into that gulf which a woman can never re-cross! For I warn you that the loss of you will leave me reckless of all things, even of my salvation!"

"But how can you feel all this for a man whom you have known so short a time?"

"Love cannot be measured by time! It springs up like a gourd in the night, and even if it were not so, I have known you—*years!*"

He starts as she says this. Dazed, almost stunned, he stares at her aghast, while his face grows ashy white even to his lips from which no sound issues.

Only—only—as he gazes, in his mind dawns a misty memory, a doubt, a repulsion, and he moves off a few paces from her.

“I love you—I love you, Delaval! I love you!—but *you!* Is there so little of love’s instinct in your heart that a mask of pink and white—a little golden wash—has hidden from you that I am——”

“*Gabrielle!*”

He almost shouts in a voice that has a sharp ring of pain and horror in it, and shrinking back from her, the warmth and tenderness his face had worn fade right away and in their place comes a cold, hard, pitiless, passionless look that stings her to the very core.

She shivers from head to foot, with a dumb agony in her eyes that might touch a heart of granite; but it does not touch this man, who only cries:

“Thank God!—Thank God! I have been saved in time!”

She falls upon her knees once more, grovelling at his feet.

“Oh, Delaval—my love—my love! For Heaven’s sake have mercy on me! Give me one loving look!”

But he spurns her from him with a rough gesture, and rising, she stands a little apart.

“No!” he says, in a hard, metallic tone. “I have no loving look for you, *not one!* If there are things I hate, they are lies and deceit. If there is a thing I never forgive, it is being made a fool of! Thank Heaven you have told me now who you are. *What* you are I do not care to know. Under the mask of

youth and guilelessness you had nearly made me your slave, you had nearly fired the train that was to bring me to everlasting shame and disgrace. I could kill myself for my cursed folly, my credulity, my utter blindness. But I am saved—saved from being the dupe of a base woman who scruples at nothing, not even the ruin of her sister's home and life, just to salve a paltry wound to her own vanity, to hold in her chains a man who had set her aside long ago, knowing her to be—*what she is!*”

Clear and cutting like a knife his words fall on the silent greenwood path—silent for one moment only, as without one backward glance he walks quickly away.

But he has not gone far before a sharp click breaks the silence, and Lord Delaval lies prone on the ground—

Shot!

Gabrielle Beranger stoops down and gazes at the face of the man who has insulted her, and she kisses his lips. Then she takes his purse and watch from him, and steals noiselessly away.

“They will think robbery was the object for killing him,” she mutters.

Later on in the evening she sits in her usual place at the Rouge-et-Noir table, putting down the gold with a steady hand.

The same hand that dealt a death blow to the only man whom she has ever loved with the love that such a woman can feel.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THROUGH THE SHADOWS.

"It is not much that a man can save
 On the sands of life—in the straits of Time,
 Who swims in sight of the third great wave,
 That never a swimmer shall cross or climb.
 Some waif washed up with the strays and spars
 That ebb-tide throws to the shore and the stars.
 Weed from the water—grass from a grave—
 A broken blossom—a ruined rhyme!"

THROUGH the mantle of dusk the lights shine brightly outside, but the room in the hotel looks dark and dreary, save for the fitful flame of the fire, when Zai, who has grown tired of her own society, hears footsteps on the stairs.

All the long afternoon she has been alone; even "Baby," her resource on most occasions, has slept through the hours as sound as the Seven Sleepers.

So, when a human tread falls welcome on her ear, she forgets that it is not quite the thing for a countess to rush out on the landing of a hotel.

"Is that you, Delaval?" she cries in a bright ringing voice, for she is longing to see him again, longing with a great longing that will not allow her to study the *convenances*. But she draws back as the figure of a stranger, a tall, handsome man, with a face after Velasquez, confronts her.

"Pardonne, Madame!" he says in a very low voice—and there is a gentle sympathetic ring in it, for the chief of the Police is a thorough gentleman

by nature. "I have a mission to fulfil, a mission which pains me more than I can say," he adds earnestly, as he looks on the fair sweet young face.

But Zai does not speak, something—a dreadful instinct—seems to gather round her heart, like an iron band. She stands as white as an image of marble and as motionless as if she were rooted to the ground—with the glad laugh on her pretty lips hushed into an awful silence, and with a terrible fear filling her big grey eyes, as, slowly passing her, they bear their burden into the room, and place it upon the very couch where she had lain this afternoon full of hope and happiness and with the sunshine of life dancing in her eyes and breaking into smiles on her mouth, for Zai is young and lovely and rich, and she adores her husband and the child that God has given her.

Not a word falls from her now, and she never stirs from the spot where she stands, but all the while she vigilantly watches the movements of the men, and follows them with great piteous looks, and her little hands clench and twist together in terror and despair.

"He is not dead!" the Frenchman whispers, "but—*dying*, I fear."

"*Not dead!*" The words break from her almost in a shout of joy, and she springs past him and crouches down beside what they have brought her—beside all that is left of *him*. Her eyes are quite dry, and glitter, undimmed by a single tear, as she sways backwards and forwards in the plenitude and abjectness of her suffering.

Then she raises a white, forlorn face, and falters:
"Is no one coming to him?"

The man, who feels himself moved to a great compassion for this slender bit of a girl, stricken down in the very beginning and flush of her life, bows his head in answer.

She forgets his presence then. Bending over her husband, she touches his closed lids and his cold cheeks very softly and caressingly, as if her little fingers loved to linger in their task. She puts her hand on his heart, which beats, but so faintly as if each throb were its last, and she keeps on murmuring tender words to the ears which do not hear them.

"Delaval, darling, speak to me, only one word— one little word, Delaval, that I may just hear your voice. Oh, God! won't he speak to me again? shall I never hear him speak kind, dear words as he did to-day—before he went away to—die? Die! Oh! you won't die, Delaval, darling, my own darling, you have not left me—left me—*for ever!*"

The last words go out from her in a wail loud enough, and piteous enough, to reach the sky.

Faint and dizzy with fear, she stretches out her trembling hands, like a blind woman, towards the form lying before her with the rigidity of death, but, before they reach it, she falls back and drops senseless on the floor.

* * * * *

Maybe her piteous cry has reached beyond the sky, for he has not left her "for ever."

The shot of a vengeful woman, wounded in her terrible love, driven to the phrensy of a wild beast,

has grazed the right lung, and for a long time he hovers between life and death, while his wife nurses him unwearingly night and day with a devoted unselfish love that is not often to be found in the worldly daughters of Belgravia.

Then, after a little, when they tell him he has crept slowly—slowly, but surely—out of the shadows—and that life (not the old life, but one twin with suffering perchance) yet lies before him, he feels that he will regain health and strength sooner, if the burden of a secret is removed from him.

It is very hard to face Zai as he makes a clean breast of it, but he does it.

“My pet,” he murmurs, in a low weak voice which is very unlike his old accents, and the sound of which goes right to her heart, “I have something to say to you.”

So she kneels down beside him. It is the place she likes best now in the world.

“Do you love me very much, Zai?” he asks her, while his thin white hand rests on her shining chestnut hair, and, looking up, she sees that there is an actual mist of tears in his handsome ultramarine eyes.

“Ah, don’t I?” she whispers, catching hold of his hand and kissing it passionately, and he reads plainly enough the love that is patent on her face.

“But would you love me so much, Zai, if you knew that I had been unfaithful—that I had forgotten you just for a little while?” he asks, his lips quivering and his heart beating very fast. For somehow he holds on to her love with a strange

tenacity. It seems, in truth, to be the only—only—thing worth living for.

She does not answer for a moment, but she has his hand still clasped close in her own, while her face grows deathly white, and there is a startled, stricken look in her grey eyes that cuts him to the heart.

“It is *quite* true, Zai. For a little while I *did* forget you. Another woman’s face came between us, and for the life of me I *couldn’t* shake off its power over me, though I tried. Upon my soul I *tried!*”

He pauses, breathless, and a pallor creeps over his face—a face as handsome as Apollo’s, in spite of suffering.

“Well, Zai, I saw her, not more than a dozen times, perhaps, but each time she seemed to draw me closer and closer to her, and further—from—you—till the—*last time.*”

Zai listens to it all—to this confession of sin and wrong—her gaze never swerving from his face, and her heart full to bursting.

“Did you *kiss* her, Delaval?” she whispers at last in a faint, scared voice, and on the impulse of the moment she puts up her little fingers to stop her ears, in dread of his saying “Yes.” Then she drops them desolately.

“No! thank God I never did!” he says quite heartily, and Zai breathes more freely. And, the tension gone, she lays her head down on his arm and cries like a child, but the tears are more of relief than of bitterness, and the world does not look half as dreary to her as it did a few minutes ago.

“No! I thank God, that you have nothing to

forgive on that score, though I am bound to say that both the spirit was willing and the flesh was weak; but a lucky fate prevented it, No! it was only my *heart*, Zai! Pshaw! fancy my calling it my *heart*. It was only my senses, Zai!"

She ponders a moment. It is dreadful to know that he has been caring for another woman; but still it is a great comfort—a very, very great comfort—to know that he has not *kissed* her. So she lifts up her face with a smile, half-piteous, half-glad, on her mouth, and her arm steals round his neck.

Poor fellow, he looks so thin and white and haggard, she could not be angry with him for the world.

"Well, my little one?" he says, but he knows quite well that she loves him so much she will never be hard on him, and, after all, it was only a venial sin, he thinks with the self-indulgent complacency so common to the style of man he is.

"I forgive you!" she whispers between fond fervent kisses on his lips, for you know, darling, that 'to err is human.'"

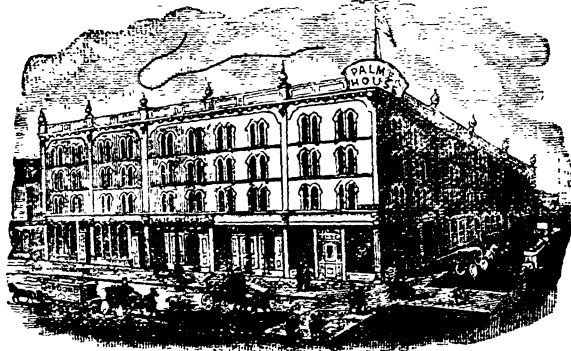
"Yes! my own, own love! And 'to forgive—divine!'"

But there is one secret yet that Lord Delaval keeps religiously from his wife's innocent ears. It is, that the woman who tempted him was—*Gabrielle!*

THE END.

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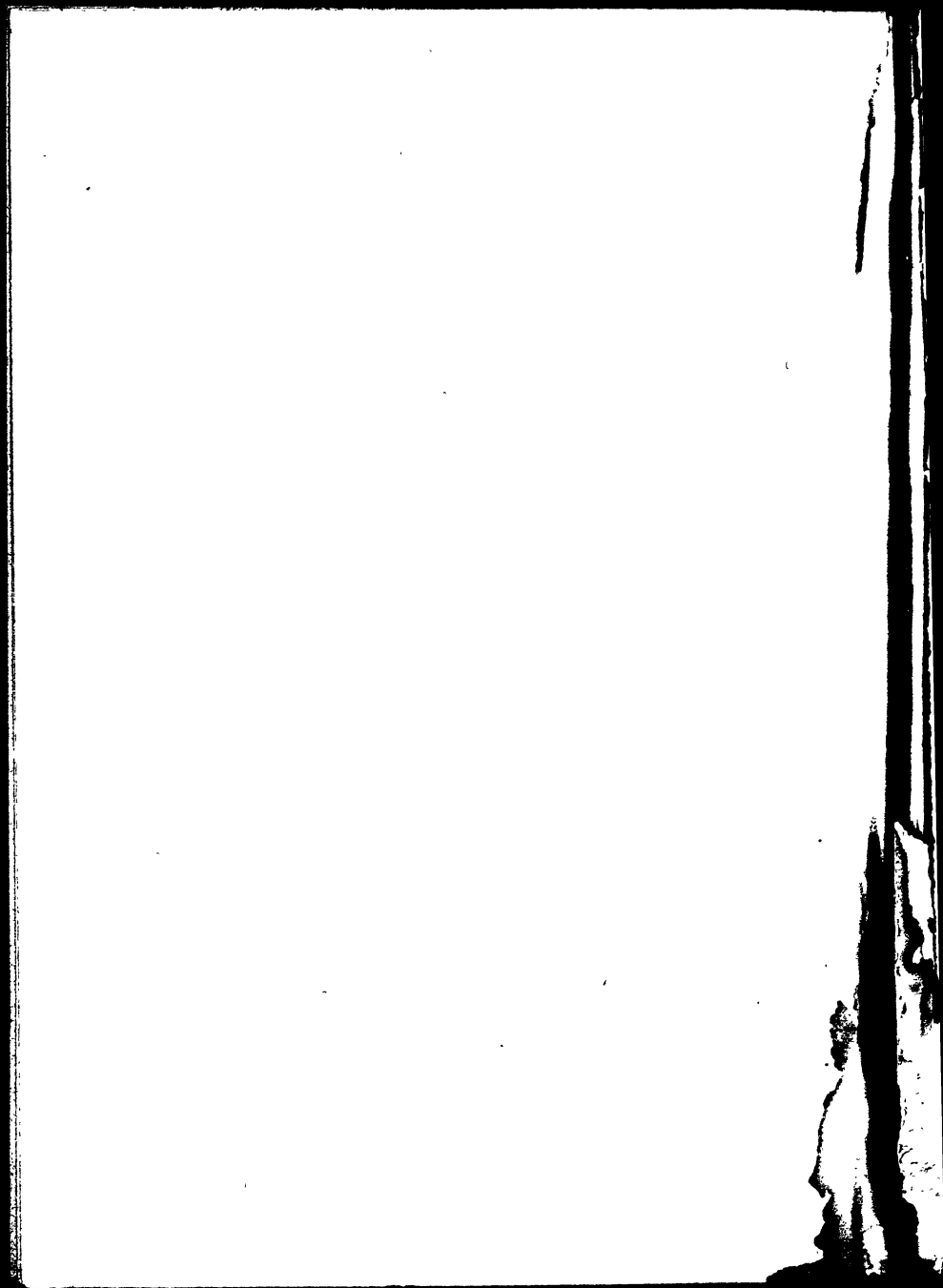
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