

A GREAT SECRET,

OR,
SHALL IT BE DONE.

CHAPTER II.

Madeline was far too submissive by habit to think of disobeying any injunction of Louis's; therefore, as soon as he had left the room, she went to bed, and dutifully tried to go to sleep. But here her well-learned faculty of passive obedience broke down; that note that Louis had forced her to write puzzled and frightened her; her husband's explanation that he had made her do it for a trick seemed lame and unsatisfactory, as she thought over the incident with the terrible clearness with which night shows us all things evil. Yet the very suggestion that he could have had a serious purpose in dictating to her that urgent appeal to Mr. Staunton caused her to start up cold and shuddering, and to rush to the door, and, crouching beside it, listen intently for Louis's footsteps in wild longing for his presence to dispel a great fear.

But he did not come. All through the night she waited and watched, and the active business of the day was in full swing before she fell asleep, her last confused thought a presentiment of coming evil. Broad daylight brought a sharp knock at the door, and the sight of Louis's handwriting on the note, which the waiter handed her on the tray with her morning coffee, was so suggestive after the night's reflections, that she said to herself before she touched it: "He has deserted me." Then she tore the envelope, and red the letter twice through very quietly.

"My darling Madeline," the note ran, "I know you will be delighted to hear that I have most opportunely and unexpectedly found some employment which, though it is not of a kind to make our fortunes rapidly, will at least relieve me from the terrible trial I have suffered lately, of seeing my sweet queen deprived of the dainty luxuries which beauty has the right to demand. The nature of my employment I will explain to you on my return from Havre, where I shall be for the next three weeks; I need not tell you that it is nothing unworthy of a gentleman, yet my pride of birth made me hesitate to avow to you that for your sake I had condescended to do a clerk's work for a clerk's wage. I enclose you some money—all I have; I will send you more when I have earned it. Strange words for a De Breteuil to use! Do not mention my degradation—alas, my pride still calls out!—to any one. Bear up; I shall clasp my darling in my arms again before long. Adieu, my divine one—no, au revoir.—Your adoring and devoted Louis."

The letter was in English, which the accomplished De Breteuil spoke and wrote as easily as French; enclosed were two ten franc notes. Madeline felt, on reading this letter, as if all her love for her husband had suddenly disappeared, and given place to a very hearty disgust with his hypocrisy and selfishness. She was such a clever woman that the instincts of her passionate affection could not always stifle the conclusions of her reason; moreover, having already had one bad husband, the simple artifices by which a poor fellow tired of his wife tries to satisfy her and exonerate himself at the same time were not unknown to her. She did not shed one tear over the eloquent effusion which proved to her conclusively that her second venture had been little better than her first, and then she wondered how it was that luck in this matter of marriage was so strangely against her. She thought the matter over before her looking-glass, sitting down deliberately in front of it and criticising herself very dispassionately indeed; it was a review that could not be anything but favorable, for her beauty was almost faultless, of a well-known English type, that of the large, fair-skinned, brown-haired woman with gray eyes, dark eyebrows and lashes, and a nose just not straight enough to be severe.

"I am very handsome," was her conclusion while her face puckered up at last as if she would like to cry. I wonder why I can't keep a man fond of me, when I am so fond of him as I am—no, as I was of Louis! I wish I had a tu nel-up nose; women with turned up noses are talkative and amusing, while I am like nothing but a great silent, stupid doll."

She did herself injustice; she was not stupid. Her feelings were dull this morning, after the keen excitement of the night, and reflection on the subject of man's perfidy had already carried her as far as she could go so she looked at the two ten-franc notes, mentally added up the hotel bill she would have to pay at the end of the week, and considered her position. She was a middle class girl, an orphan, born to economy, trained to self-dependence; her recent prosperity had not lasted long enough to destroy certain valuable instincts of thrift and self-help, and a way out of her embarrassed financial position soon evolved itself out of her more sentimental reflections. She unlocked two large trunks which occupied a considerable space in the room, and took out two or three of the handsome dresses which formed their chief contents. For a very few moments she stood lost in the brilliant dreamlike life of love and idleness which the costumes which she had worn during that period recalled to her; then she rang the bell and asked if Madlle Rosalie could spare her a few minutes.

Madlle Rosalie was the head chambermaid, a shrewd shrewish-looking elderly person, a quick surface reader of character—especially bad character, and yet with a certain world-wise strength in her face at times which was not unattractive, and which justified Madeline's choice of her for a confidant. Her appearance on her entrance was not encouraging. She had mentally labelled "M. and Madame Louis" on their first arrival respectively "knave" and "fool," and there was a certain expression of cheerful and triumphant malignity on her face as she looked round the room, and said brightly: "Madame va bien?—et monsieur?"

"My husband has been called away suddenly from Paris on business, Rosalie," said Madeline, with some dignity. "And as he has gone away for my sake, to make money for me," she continued, repeating Louis's lie with lips which she could scarcely keep steady, "I want on my side to spend as little as I can during his absence; and as I have no friends in France, and I know you are a woman of experience who can help me if you will, I sent for you to ask if you would mind telling me how to set about it."

"And so monsieur has gone away!" cried Rosalie, raising her eyebrows in exaggerated

surprise. "And left madame behind him to economise by herself, which is dull work at the best of times." But just then madame's dignity began to show unmistakable signs of giving way, and the dry old Frenchwoman softened a little. "Ah, madame, these husbands who can't be content with one wife, however young and pretty she may be, they are people it is best to have nothing to do with. I never did," she added unnecessarily. "And how can I be of service to madame? I will most willingly if I can," she added, with some kindness.

"Thank you. Can you tell me where I ought to go to try to sell some dresses? I have some very handsome ones that I have only worn a few times, and that I shall not want again," she added, as Rosalie looked at her curiously.

As she finished speaking, Madeline raised the linen cover she had flung over the dresses she had taken out of one of her trunks, and displayed to the keenly-appreciative eyes of the old Frenchwoman a tempting pile of silk and satin, heavy brocade and delicate lace, at which they both gazed for some moments not without reverence.

"Ah, yes, that is the dress madame wore yesterday," said Rosalie, venturing to lay a diffident brown claw on one of them when her black eyes had taken note of every fold. "It is very beautiful."

Madeline opened the trunk again, and drew out another and more showy costume, with much red and gold, which had had a *succes d'originalite* at Anteuil. Rosalie's intelligent face lighted up suddenly at sight of it. "Ah?" escaped sharply from her lips.

Madeline looked up. "You have seen a toilette like this before?" she added, trying to speak carelessly.

"No, madame; I have only heard of one toilette like that," answered Rosalie, whose sharp eyes had noted every golden tassel, every embroidered flower, on the crimson velvet underskirt.

"Indeed! and what toilette was that?"

"It was one worn at the races three months ago by the mistress of the millionaire M. de Breteuil."

Madeline had been prepared for a recognition, and had stood trifling with the drape of a skirt, ready to parry a question or to listen to an exclamation. But there was one word in the chambermaid's speech that struck her dumb; she had sometimes wondered what was the position assigned to her by her husband's friends, but never before had she heard her degradation taken for granted. She remained silent for a few minutes, and Rosalie, whose respect for her had evidently risen much higher since the discovery that Madame Louis was the woman whose beauty and magnificent toilettes had been the talk of Paris, began to fear that she had been indiscreet.

"Madame may rely on my discretion," said she, with an elaborate air of mystery: "and if, indeed, madame wishes to dispose of these beautiful dresses, I can do so easily by saying that they came into my hands through your maid. I—I had heard," she continued, "that when M. de Breteuil started for India madame went with him; therefore I did not expect ever to have the honor—"

She paused. Madeline's face had suddenly changed. She had intended to correct the mistake into which Rosalie had fallen, by assuring her that she really was De Breteuil's wife; but these last words told her that Louis had not been recognized and after a moment's struggle she resolved to keep faithful to his wish to remain unknown.

"Did you ever see M. de Breteuil?" she asked.

"No, madame. I recognized your marvelous dress, because I had seen it at the modiste's. I have a cousin who is employed by Madame Euphrasie. But is Madame sure she will not need these dresses again? I know very well that ladies of Madame's position do not wear their costumes more than a few times; but still, it seems a pity to part with a dress like this—"

"I shall not want them again," said Madeline, shuddering. "I wish to sell them to realize all the money I can, to take some cheap and quiet rooms, and to live by teaching. If you cannot help me—"

"On the contrary," broke in Rosalie vivaciously, "I can help madame in all these things. I know Paris well. I can recommend madame to some charming apartments in the house of a friend of mine, and to a school where an English governess is required, if madame really means to condescend—"

"To earn an honest living," finished Madeline very quietly.

Rosalie heaved a deep sigh, and looked at the young Englishwoman with puzzled pity. "Ah, what a man!" she murmured enthusiastically, after a moment's pause. "What stories one hears about him, his magnificence his devilry! And all the while I know one little thing about him which would make people speak of him so differently."

"And what is that?" asked Madeline quickly.

"Ah! madame must excuse me. A secret about a person in the great world is valuable property sometimes; and when M. de Breteuil returns from his travels, and settles in Paris again, I may perhaps make use of it. Most of these great gentlemen have a leaf turned down in their history, they say, which they would willingly tear out altogether. However, that is not our affair at present. I will serve you to the best of my power, madame, and charge you but a reasonable commission."

Madeline had no choice but to trust her; and finding that the woman did, as far as she could tell, keep her secret and deal fairly by her, she took two humble rooms in the course of the next few days over the cigar-shop of an ex-*vivandiere*, who was the friend Rosalie had recommended, and set about obtaining employment as a teacher of English.

She was surprised to find how easily she had got over the wrench of parting from Louis; a few weeks ago, the mere thought of a temporary separation, such as he had told her those mysteriously altered fortunes of his might render necessary, had seemed to her only less horrible than a living tomb. She could not understand herself. Was she cold, after all, she wondered, as her first husband had said, that she could take so coldly the desertion of the man she had loved so much! Her calmness, if she had but known it, was the clue to the puzzle. The excitement of her passionate de-

vation to her husband, the torments of repressed jealousy she had suffered as his ambition for popularity seemed to take him further and further away from her, the culminating madness of her devotion when reverse of fortune gave him again to her and her only, and carking disappointment at the discovery that her love could not make him happy, had worn the woman out until nothing but the embers of emotion seemed left in her. The necessity of work gave her passionate heart rest; and she devoted herself to the details of the sale of her dresses, of her installation in her two shabby rooms, and to the search for pupils with a sort of pleasure which amazed her. The remembrance of Mr. Staunton's kindness, the letter Louis had made her write, the strange fear she had had about it, scarcely occupied her any longer except as a vague dream-like incident that had passed and had no connection with that life which at present seemed so very narrow to her. She would work very hard, and she would do all the good she could; for she had a *bourgeois* feeling that the luxurious life she led for the first ten months of her second marriage needed some sort of expiation.

But the calm did not last long. On the fourth evening after Louis's departure, she was passing by the hotel where she had stayed with him, when she saw him standing in the *porte cochere*. She stopped short, the blood rushing to her head, and making it throb, and dimming her sight. She was on the other side of the road, and he did not look up; but she knew that he saw her, for Louis saw everything and everybody and it was one of his amiable characteristics to let his friends pass him to save himself the trouble of a salutation. Madeline's love had flashed into full life at the first sight of him; but even as impulse urged her to rush across the road to him, reason, waking too, told her that to do so would be to put herself at the mercy of a cold and selfish tyrant, who did not want her, and who would make her pay a heavy price for his toleration of the infirmity of her affection. After a struggle with herself so short and so sharp that it was only like one agonizing pang, she stepped forward to continue her walk; then Louis looked at her with an expression which was in reality simply one of astonishment, but to her dazzled, blinded, remorseful eyes it seemed eloquent with reproach and wounded feeling.

In the same moment it struck her that she looked ill, and pale, anxious; and as she reached his side she whispered humbly, slipping her hand into his, and looking into his eyes with the simple devotion of a dog, who does not concern himself with the faults of his manner:

"Forgive me."

Louis nodded at her magnanimously, though he had not the slightest idea for what she asked his forgiveness. She put her arm through his, and led him in the direction of her new abode.

"I have had to take two cheaper rooms, Louis. I am afraid you won't like them, for they are rather small and not very well furnished," she said with some anxiety.

"O, well, you know I am not particular," said he heroically. And she assented to this with inward doubt.

"Where have you been, Louis?" she asked, looking up at him affectionately.

"You have been disappointed in the work you went away for."

She felt his arm tremble for a second, and he said sharply, "What do you mean? What makes you say that?"

"Why, you said in your letter you would be in Havre three weeks, and you are back already."

"Too soon, I suppose?"

"O, yes, of course."

The joy that thrilled the woman's low voice as she uttered these words with a lazy laugh full of intense unspeakable happiness made it plain that she wanted no explanations, that the fact of his return was enough for her. Still he explained, with great care, deliberation and clearness.

"I learnt on arriving at Havre," he said, "that the correspondent whose place I had gone to take was able to return much sooner than he had expected, so that, finding my occupation gone, I came back at once, eager to see my darling; but found, to my surprise, that you had left the hotel."

Madeline said nothing; she was in a passion of self-reproach at her suspicions of him; she could only press his arm silently, and, as they had now reached the house where she lodged, she hurried him affectionately upstairs to her little sitting-room on the top floor, lit the lamp, for evening was closing in, and took up a basket with which she always did her marketing.

"Now," said she, as she put a chair to the table for him, "I will leave you to enjoy your paper, while I go and get something nice for supper in honor of your return."

She kissed his forehead tenderly, and left him. But away from the enchantment of his actual presence, doubts crowded again thickly in her mind. She began to perceive that it was not love which had brought him back to her; that even in his reception of her enthusiastic welcome his toleration of her was even colder than it had been before; perhaps it was poverty, perhaps it was custom, but it was not affection which had restored him to her; and she knew Louis too well to suppose that it was duty. The thought of Mr. Staunton flashed again across her mind, but then—Thank Heaven! Louis had come back poor, so her fear that he would work upon the Englishman's kindness was proved groundless. And again the old hope that her devotion might win the whole of Louis's heart woke up in her, and she rejoiced in the power her early training had given her of working for him now that reverse of fortune had dulled for a time his energy and his spirits. Inspired by the proud feeling of being able to do a little toward repaying her husband for the happiness he had been the first to make her taste, she indulged in an extravagant outlay for supper, and returning home, went up-stairs with a soft tread, thinking she would surprise Louis by her speedy return. So she stole on tiptoe into her bedroom, took off her bonnet, and crept up to the looking-glass to arrange her hair by the very little daylight there was left.

In the midst of the flutter of bright excitement into which her little trick had thrown her, she was startled by hearing a sound like a deep groan from the next room. For a few moments she stood still, comb in hand, listening; but she heard nothing further more alarming than the noise of a chair being pushed back a little way. But the fright, slight though it was, had damped her spirits, and it was with a slower hand that she took off her walking-dress and felt under the dressing-table for her slippers. She could not at

first find them, and as she stretched her arm out further in the search she touched something close against the wall. Drawing it out, she saw in the faint light that it looked like a man's shirt, rolled up and fastened with a pin. Her first impression was that it had been forgotten under the dressing-table by a former occupant of the room; but just at the moment that she instinctively took the pin out, the door opened so suddenly that she uttered a little cry of surprise as Louis burst into the room.

"Who's there!" he called, in a loud, harsh voice.

"It's all right, Louis; it's only I—Madeline," she said, astonished by the sharpness of his tone, and by a wild, soiled look on his face as his eyes seemed to flash round the darkening room.

His glance then fell upon her as she sat on the floor in deep shadow.

"Get up, then; get up. What are you hiding away there for?" he asked sharply.

"I am not hiding, Louis," she answered gently, and was moving to get up when he caught sight of the object in her hand.

"What have you got there?" said he, and, stooping, he snatched it from her.

As he did so, with grasp not quite steady the shirt unrolled itself; and with horror which seemed to stop her breath, Madeline saw that on the cuffs, the front of the collar, and far up one of the sleeves, were great dark stains.

"What is it? What is it?" she asked, in a broken, guttural whisper, after a minute's silence, during which, with a curse, De Breteuil had rolled it up again and tried to thrust it into one of his pockets.

"It is nothing—nothing. At least, if you must know—But no, it would only frighten you."

"Tell me, tell me!"

"Well, don't be frightened. As I was walking by myself the day before yesterday in a lonely place, near a wood, I was attacked—"

"Attacked! By a man?"

"No, no; by a wolf."

"At Havre?"

"No. The fact is I have deceived you. My reverse of fortune, my inability to provide for you, had driven me half mad, and I resolved to commit suicide. I drove to St. Lazare, took the first train that started, found myself in the morning at Nevers; I took another train to Autun, which I know well, where there are woods, where I thought I would shoot myself quietly. I was attacked, as I tell you, by a wolf, and in defending myself my instinctive clinging to life woke again. I came back to Paris, not intending to inflict my wretched presence upon you."

"Then those marks—those stains—are—blood?" she interrupted fearfully.

"Yes, yes; but only my wrists—nothing serious. Don't be alarmed."

But she was not reassured; some horrible thought had taken possession of her. She got up, and without a word more walked with undecided, staggering steps, a d with the fumbling slowness of a half-witted person through the door which led into the sitting-room. De Breteuil half called to her; and as she paid no heed he began humming an air with hard forced liveliness and did not immediately follow her. When he did so, she was sitting with her back to him at the table, poring over the newspaper as he had done.

"Well," said he cheerfully, "any news?"

But as he laid his hand on her shoulder she felt the touch of it grow suddenly heavy; for he saw what it was she was reading, and knew what significance she gave to it. It was a paragraph which ran as follows:

"The name of the English gentleman who so suddenly and mysteriously disappeared from the Hotel Collet, Lyons, on Tuesday after leaving word that he should return in time for dinner, has been ascertained to be Staunton or Stanton. He is said to have had property of value with him, and it is conjectured he may have met with foul play. He was last seen at five minutes past two on Tuesday afternoon at the railway station of Neuville—"

Neuville! Madeline read no further; it was the name Louis had scrawled on the top of the note he had made her write to Mr. Staunton. In a moment she understood the horrible share he had forced her to take in a scheme of appalling cowardice, treachery, and ingratitude. There was complete silence in the room for a few leaden moments; then she raised her head and met De Breteuil's shifting, sidelong look, and he read the terrible indictment in her eyes.

For all the man's audacity, the opinion of others floated or sank him; now that this woman knew his ghastly secret, and showed her abhorrence in her face, his features wore the hunted, degraded look of the coward and the out-throat. He could not meet her wild eyes, and after standing for a few moments restlessly before her, he suddenly turned, snatched up his hat, and slunk out of the room toward the staircase. He had gone some steps down when a hoarse whisper from above stopped him.

"Louis, where are you going?"

"I don't know. And what is that to you, as long as you get rid of me?"

His voice was low, hard, reckless, the voice of a man in the lowest stage of abject hopelessness. A pause, and then he went down another stair.

"Louis!"

"Well?"

"You will let me know where you go?"

"No."

"Why? why?"

"The woman who can turn a man off just when the whole world is against him does not deserve that he should remember her."

Her apparent reluctance to part with him, even now, was causing his self-esteem to revive, and his voice was not without grandiloquent sonority.

"Louis, I did not turn you off—I don't turn you off. Come back. I am your wife; I will comfort you, save you. It was only that—that—I was so happy—to have you back; and then the change was so sudden and so dreadful! Come."

For an instant he tried to assume a dignified attitude of hesitation, but the offer was too evidently one not to be refused. He turned, slunk up the stairs; and shuffled back into the sitting-room. There at last a spark of gratitude was struck out of the cavern nature, and he fell, sobbing and mourning incoherent thanks, on to the neck of the woman who had stood every test, caressing her and calling her his comfort, his salvation.

But the sound of his voice was changed in her ears, and the touch of his hand thrilled her not now with tenderness, but with horror. For her love was dead. It

had died in the moment that she learnt that he was a traitor and a coward; and as he buried his head on her shoulder, and poured out the passionate words for which she had longed as the desert-parched traveler for water, only the resolution that straightened her lips, and the sense of duty that shone in her cold eyes, enabled her to force down her disgust, and to bear like a lifeless statue the kisses of the husband for whom a week ago she would have died.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

A Prominent Merchant in Trouble.

Old moneybags mopes in his office all day. As he strolls and crosses the street: The clerks know enough to keep out of his way. Lest the merchant should grumble and swear. Even Tabby, the cat, is in fear of a cuff. Or a kick, if she ventures too near; They all know the master is apt to be rough, And his freaks unexpected and queer.

What makes the old fellow so surly and grim, And behave so confoundingly mean? There's certainly something the matter with him. Is it stomach, or liver, or spleen? We've guessed it—his liver is sluggish and bad. His blood is disordered and foul. It's enough to make any one hopelessly mad. And greet his best friend with a growl.

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The gambler's favorite hymn is "There's a land that is Farro than Day."

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