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THE BEAUTIFUL COQUETTE.

By Laura Jean Libbey.

He laughed the bitterest laugh that was ever heard. "In the fairest of jewels why must there be flaws?" he asked, harshly. "In the most perfect fruit, the black speck that marks decay at the root? And in the women, whom men believe angels, deception at their heart's core? Is no woman true? Great God! the thought is horrible! Tell me the truth, Margaret," he went on, hoarsely—"has your heart gone out to this man? It is better to know before than after marriage—I want the plain truth—it is due me—I must have it!"

"My heart is warm with gratitude toward him, for I owe my life to him, Gerald," she moaned; "I love you that is only right; but I love you, Gerald, with a different love. If we were to part I—I should pray God in Heaven to let the moment in which you turned from me be my last! Trust me and believe me, dear! Oh, you must—you must!"

"Margaret," returned Gerald Romaine, gravely, "my faith in you has been terribly shaken. God help me! I cannot trust you!"

CHAPTER L.

Gerald saw a great shiver pass over Margaret. The cruel words had struck her as lightning strikes a fair flower. She swayed to and fro as a leaf sways in the wind, and if he had not put his arm out quickly and caught her, she would have fallen to the floor.

"She did not turn and cling to him with tears and sobs; she lay in his arms like a marble statue, her face turned toward his shoulder.

"Have I hurt you by my words, Margaret?" he cried, in alarm. "You have killed me, Gerald, that is all," she said, struggling with the sobs to keep them back. With arm hands she recoiled herself from his grasp, and stood looking at him with a look that haunted him for many a long, dark year afterwards.

"I shall never be the wife of a man who has not unbonded confidence in me. You asked me once in the past to release you from your vows, and I did so. I now ask the same request of you, and you must grant it."

"Do you mean that you want this engagement of ours broken?" he asked, catching his breath hard.

"I do," she answered firmly.

"Then if you could lose me as easily as this—see me pass out of your life without making one effort to keep me, then your love is indeed much shallower than I could have believed."

"I will not speak further of the depths of my love for you," she answered slowly. "I have given you too much proof of it already."

"To leave you now and forever, but I foresee that you will not die in the hour that we part, as you declared a moment since that you should; do you will nurse the handsome stranger back to health, marry him, and be happy ever after," as the story-books say. Well, as I cannot prevent it, I must endure it."

"Good-bye, Gerald," she said gravely, steadily.

He picked up his hat and walked slowly to the door, expecting every moment that she would call him back; but she did not, and the door opened slowly, and closed again after his retreating form.

A few moments later, Mrs. Denham, entering the sick room, found Margaret lying in a dead swoon upon the floor.

Thomas, one of the stalwart servants, was quickly summoned, and Margaret was carried at once to her own room.

But she was so long in regaining consciousness that Mrs. Denham was frightened, and sent for Gerald in post-haste, which, much to her surprise, he was slow in answering—he was usually so prompt where Margaret was concerned.

When he at length arrived at the house, and heard from Mrs. Denham how apparently ill Margaret was, he blamed himself greatly, believing that it was his abruptness in leaving her that had caused this.

"We have now two patients in the house instead of one," said Mrs. Denham, thoughtfully. "The stranger is better," she went on, "he is rational enough now. Had you not better see him, Mr. Romaine, and learn from him his friends' address, if he has any?"

Very mechanically Gerald com-

plained, thinking to himself that the stranger should be removed from beneath that roof as soon as he was able to be taken away.

He found the man rational as Mrs. Denham had said, but so remarkably weak that he could not speak above a whisper.

"Will you tell me what is the matter with me, where I am, and why I am here?" the stranger asked in a bewildered tone of voice, raising his eyes to the young man bending over him.

"Have you any friends you would like to send for?" asked Gerald, favorably impressed with the man, although he had sworn to himself that he should hate him until the day he died.

"Yes," replied the stranger. "I have a daughter—but for her I should have been all alone in the world now, with no one to care whether I lived or died."

"You would like your daughter sent for?" returned Gerald.

"If you will be so kind," returned the other, "I have a memorandum from his breast-pocket, and waited courteously.

"The address is No. — Lexington Avenue, city," he murmured, weakly.

"But the name?" said Gerald.

"You have forgotten to give me the most important part of the address."

"The name," replied the stranger in a low voice, "is Miss Aurelia Lancaster."

A thunderbolt from a clear sky—a volcano bursting beneath his feet—could not have shocked and startled Gerald Romaine more.

"Am I mad—or—dreaming!" he cried, excitedly. "Did I understand you to name Aurelia Lancaster?"

"Yes," replied the count, whom we may as well call by his correct name—Paul Lancaster—now, "you heard it right. She is—my—daughter. Send for her."

"Then Margaret is your daughter, too?" cried Gerald, joyfully.

"Great God! what a weight is now lifted from my mind!"

Paul Lancaster looked at him in bewilderment.

"I—I had a little daughter named Margaret—but she died in her infancy when I—I was not with the children, so her sister Aurelia told me. The—the young lady whom I saw in the park looked so much like the dear young wife I had lost in youth, that it seemed to me, for the first time in my life, my feelings carried me away beyond my control, and I—I kissed her. I did not mean any harm, Heaven knows."

How Aurelia had found her father, Gerald could form no idea—but he was astounded beyond all words to hear that she had told him that Margaret—her sister—was dead.

There was something back of it he could not fathom.

All these thoughts passed through Paul's mind with lightning-like rapidity, but he drew up a chair and, sinking into it, asked, without betraying his intense excitement: "Did you ever hear of your daughter Aurelia speak of the Romaines? They were the people who brought her up from infancy. They were farmers down in Virginia."

"Yes, yes," said Paul Lancaster, huskily. "My wife died under their roof—and my little child Margaret—who are you, young man, that you ask me these personal questions?"

"I am Gerald Romaine—the farmer's son," was the quiet answer.

"God bless you and yours," returned Paul Lancaster, with great emotion. "I intended to search for you, and make it all up to you."

He sunk back exhausted on the pillow, too weak to finish the sentence, and Gerald dared not tell him in his weak state, the great news he had in store for him.

But Margaret—he could tell her—but then all the story of Aurelia's perjury, which he had kept so carefully guarded from her, would come out.

Hastily quitting the sick-room, he went to the library, and sent one of the servants to Margaret's room, begging her to come down to see him, as he had something particular to say to her.

A few moments later Mrs. Denham entered the room looking very pale, and walked up to him, laying a trembling hand on his arm.

"Mr. Romaine, can you bear a great shock?" she said, gently.

"Yes," he answered, hoarsely; "but don't keep me in suspense."

"Margaret—has gone," she said, slowly; "she left a note for me saying she was going where no one whom she had ever known should look upon her face again."

CHAPTER LI.

When Margaret left Mrs. Denham's house her head was in such a whirl that she paid little heed whether her footsteps turned.

Finding herself opposite a cafe, and feeling greatly in need of refreshments, Margaret entered it and sank into the nearest chair.

Margaret drank only the tea, pushing back the food untasted after he had brought it. Suddenly she was startled by the sound of a sharp, stifled cry, proceeding from a small table directly opposite her.

A young girl had risen from her chair and was hurrying toward the door.

One glance at that face—that was like no other face, and Margaret, springing to her feet, calling loudly: "Aurelia! Aurelia!"

But the girl only hurried the faster to reach the door.

In that moment Margaret paid no heed to aught else

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save that she had found Aurelia, and, in the midst of the fashionable crush there was every possibility of losing her, for Aurelia had evidently not heard her voice.

She saw her enter a carriage; it was the same grand equipage with the coal-black horses she had seen once before.

Frantically Margaret signalled the nearest cab.

"Do you see the carriage turning around the corner?" she cried, excitedly.

The man nodded.

"Follow and overtake it," she said, "and I will give you double your fare."

The next instant the cab was whirling at a break-neck speed in the direction the coach had taken, and as the cabman turned the first corner, he saw the vehicle just ahead of him.

At length the cab came to a sudden halt.

"It is stopping at the corner house miss," said the man, "and don't you see, a young lady has alighted and gone up the stone steps."

Margaret looked.

Yes, Aurelia had alighted, and was just ringing the bell, but the greatest surprise of all to Margaret was, she saw that it was Mrs. Denham's house which her sister had entered.

Hastily alighting from the cab, Margaret paid the driver and dismissed him, and, all unmindful of the note she had written and left behind her for Mrs. Denham, hurried up the broad marble steps after Aurelia.

Margaret glided into the house and down the corridor, where she heard the sound of voices. They were from the direction of the conservatory, and thither Margaret hurried. The door was ajar, and noiselessly she entered.

The sight that greeted her eyes, as she parted the pink blossoms and looked at them, remained before her until the day she died.

Gerald was sitting in one of the rustic chairs near the fountain, his face hidden in one hand, Aurelia, half kneeling at his feet, had grasped the other hand, and held it tightly.

"You tell me to rise, Gerald, my love," she said, in her musical voice—"you tell me that no woman ought to kneel. I shall kneel to you, for my prayer is to you, and you must hear me, dearest."

"It is madness, Aurelia," said Gerald, distressedly; "you will not give me time to explain. I sent for you, not on my own account, but on your father's, as I told you in my note, which explained to you that I know all. The past is past between us; other ties have been formed. I am now, as I was once before, in that part which it pains me to recall—the betrothed husband of Margaret."

The beauty pushed her dark curls back from her face and looked at him, with a low, passionate cry.

"The betrothed husband of Margaret—weak, docile Margaret, as you once used to call her? I cannot believe that you have been so foolish as to renew those old ties with her, dearest; but, even were it so, they can be as easily broken now as then! What does a weak, insipid creature like Margaret know of love! Nothing, I tell you! Oh, Gerald, do not let her deceive you and our love!"

"You loved me once, Gerald, better than life, and such a love cannot die out of your heart so soon, as you would have me believe. You betrothed yourself to Margaret through pique; but now that she has gone away from you voluntarily, do not seek to find her—let her go where she will. You and I will not grieve if we never see her face again. We shall have love and each other."

The very heartlessness of the remark struck Gerald. How could Aurelia, whom Margaret loved so well, speak so sneeringly, so harshly of her? he thought to himself in wonder; and she Margaret's own sister.

Perhaps she read the thought in his face, for she went on eagerly: "Margaret Lancaster has not so much of a claim on me as you imagine, Gerald—Margaret is but my half-sister, the daughter of a pretty peasant girl whom my father wedded and—deserted soon after the child was born. I heard the whole story from papa's lips."

Then followed an accurate account from Aurelia of how she had met her father, and where; and she also rehearsed to Gerald the story of the money the old doctor had willed, and, as before, she substituted her own name instead of Margaret's.

It actually staggered Gerald to hear how innocently she could tell that glaring falsehood.

"It is a wonder you and your father, both being so rich, did not attempt to find Margaret," said Ger-

ald, calmly, looking straight into her face.

For the first time in her life Aurelia's cool, daring courage forsok her. She saw in an instant that she was driven at bay.

CHAPTER LII.

What pen could portray the feelings of Margaret Lancaster as she listened, with breathless attention, to the wonderful revelation that fell from Aurelia's lips, and it dawned upon her dazed senses that the stranger who had been so irresistibly attracted to her at the park entrance, and to whom her heart had gone out so strangely, was her own father!

And she heard Gerald tell Aurelia how, on awakening to consciousness a few hours later, he had caught upon the strangers about him to send for his daughter, Aurelia, naming where they would find her, and Gerald had sent for her at once.

"But why," thought Margaret, "did my father not make some effort to find me, too, even though Aurelia, who seems to think so little of me, did not?"

And the thought had hardly shaped itself in her mind ere Gerald asked, and, looking through the oleander branches, she saw Aurelia turn as pale as death.

How little Margaret imagined what the answering of that question would mean for the treacherous girl! But Margaret's thoughts were in too much of a whirl to pay much heed to this.

With fleet footsteps she turned, and would have fled from the conservatory to her father's side had not the hand of a strange fate held her back. At the first step the darkness of death seemed to enfold her; she threw out her hands with a little cry, and fell, face downward, among the roses in a deep swoon.

Both Gerald and Aurelia, hearing the crash of the breaking vines, and falling body, sprang forward.

"It is—Margaret!" cried Aurelia, excitedly, and in a voice that sounded like nothing human, she gasped, out, hoarsely.

"Do you think she heard all?"

"I have every reason to believe so," said Gerald, raising the inanimate figure in his strong arms and laying her down on the rustic bench near the fountain, from which he loved her face with cold water with his handkerchief to revive her, and too thankful in finding her to think of much else.

Aurelia stood beside him, looking down at the death-white face, but no wave of tender feeling stirred her hard heart.

"You said Margaret had fled from you, Gerald," she whispered, hoarsely. "Are you glad that she has had some back, or—are you—sorry?"

For answer he bent his fair, handsome head and passionately kissed Margaret's pale lips.

"If I had lost her," he murmured, brokenly, "life would have been nothing to me. I would have searched the world over to find her; and, having found her, pleaded with her, on my knees, not to break the sweet bond of love between us. My prayer

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