

A GREAT SECRET;

OR,
SHALL IT BE DONE.

CHAPTER III.

The moment when Madeline de Breteuil's sense of her duty as a wife had triumphed over her loathing for a cowardly crime had been to Louis a revelation in his knowledge of women so astonishing, so complete, that a revival of her love for him might, perhaps, have worked in his hard yet not specially strong character some sort of repentance, some sort of temporary reformation. But that was beyond her power. Pity for his abject state after her discovery of his crime lent her manner a gentleness which he mistook at first for the old fondness; but he was too sharp sighted to be long deceived; and when he found that it was with difficulty that she schooled herself to receive his tardy advances passively, that she would talk, laugh, work, cook, do anything to keep him for a little while at a distance, his wretched pride took fire, and he kept aloof from her in sullen disdain which she could only make most faint-hearted efforts to break through.

There is a touch of nobility, a grace beyond the reach of commonplace humanity, in a nature which can bear the strain of a deep gratitude. When Louis de Breteuil discovered that Madeline would not break the monotony of his retirement from the world by returning his reviving passion, he soon found the burden of his debt to her extremely irksome. But he had no money, and for the moment seemed to be without the energy to make any, by fair means or foul; and Madeline, whom early training had taught to be frugal, could at least, with the proceeds of the sale of her dresses and with her small earnings, keep both him and herself from starving.

So they passed ten days of an uneasy domesticity: Madeline living in a fever of horrible imaginings, picturing the murder about which she dared not question him, fearing that the police might be on his track; while he, on the contrary, seemed to fall into a state of torpor, in which—as far as his wife could see—neither remorse nor apprehension had any share. She wondered how it was that, since robbery was his only possible motive, Louis seemed now to be worse off than ever; for, whatever his moral defects might be, he was far too keen of intellect to handicap himself with the dangerous responsibilities of an unnecessary crime. She knew also that the securities which Mr. Staunton had told her, in Louis's hearing, that he had with him, would be property so dangerous as to be almost valueless in the hands of a man unconnected with the Stock Exchange and ignorant of the course of affairs on it. At first De Breteuil spent all his time indoors, smoking and reading novels in stolid indifference to everything but the quality of the meals she provided. But at the end of a week he showed signs of awakening restlessness, and went regularly out by himself for twenty minutes at a time every morning and every night. He never brought home any newspapers and never asked to see any, but Madeline used to buy and read them with feverish haste on her way to and from the school where she now gave lessons in English for two hours every day.

Twice she read short paragraphs stating that nothing further had been heard of the missing Englishman; but the affair had evidently taken no hold upon public curiosity until the tenth day after Louis's return, when a long sensational article appeared in the "Figaro," containing copies of telegrams sent from London to Turin, from Turin to London, and from both these places to Marseilles and Lyons, all concerning an English stockbroker who had not been heard of for thirteen days, and who was supposed to have absconded with securities to the amount of between eighteen and twenty thousand pounds. The missing man had held the high character essential to a daring and successful coup of this kind, and the fact that for more than a week no letters or telegrams had been received from him had aroused no suspicion until the discovery was made that certain shares openly sold on the London Stock Exchange were the property of a client of Mr. Staunton, a gentleman residing in Turin. It was a clerk in Mr. Staunton's office who made this discovery and communicated it to the junior partner. The latter at once set inquiries on foot, and traced the sale of the shares, for the delivery of which in Turin Mr. Staunton had been responsible, to a young clerk on the Stock Exchange, who had disappeared on the morning after the fortnightly account, after cashing to the amount of several hundred pounds the checks he had received for the sale of shares and bonds which, on examination, proved to correspond, with the exception of some foreign bonds not easily negotiable which had disappeared, with the property Mr. Staunton had undertaken to deliver to his client at Turin. The "Figaro" gave the name of the absconding clerk, supposed to be in collusion with the defaulting Mr. Staunton, as, "Memdish."

Madeline crept home that afternoon almost stupefied by the weight of guilt which seemed to fall only on her. It was four o'clock when she reached her little sitting-room, and Louis was out. She sat for a few minutes staring stupidly at the white clouds in the sky; then, having long ago exhausted every feeling of suspicion, misery, and fear, she rose and wondered dully why her husband did not return. It was the first time he had been out at this hour, and the fear seized her that suspicion might have fallen on him, and that he might be already in the grasp of the law. She had not yet taken off her bonnet, so she ran down-stairs to watch and wait for him in the street. He never told her where he went during his daily absences, so that it was chance which made her turn to the left, stop at the first corner, and look up and down the street which crossed hers, until she saw, going into a cabaret some distance off, two men, one of whom she fancied she recognized as Louis. She went quickly up the street in that direction, and unnoticed in the crowd of foot-passengers, managed to peep into the little wine-shop. Sitting at a table close to the door were the two men whose entrance she had watched. One was De Breteuil, and she saw at once, that his sullen listlessness was erect, and he wore, for the first time since his downfall—not into crime, poverty—the expression of bold

and cynical recklessness which had been the most striking and the most admired characteristic of his face in the days when he was king of the boulevard.

Madeline noticed all this curiously, wondering what was the reason of the change in him; and then she saw him put his right hand—which was the one nearest to the window—carelessly into his coat-pocket and drew out a tight little roll of paper with an elastic band round it. He slipped off the elastic, and, smoothing out the paper, began to count them; and she saw that they were English bank-notes. "Whose money was that?" she asked herself, shivering and pressing closer to the window. She had been so fascinated as she watched every movement of Louis that her eyes had not turned for a second to his companion, whose back was towards her. She would have been able, had she left the window at that moment, to tell that he was short and broad and shabbily dressed, but no more. However, at that moment he sat back and moved his chair a few inches, so that the light might fall upon the glaze of wine he held in his hand; and by the movement, though she could not see his face, she knew him. It was her first husband, Robert Meredith!

The moment after her recognition of him, Madeline suddenly remembered where she was, suddenly became conscious of the hurrying crowd around her, and glanced from right to left with a hot blush in her face, under the impression that she had uttered a wild shriek; but no one was taking the least of her. So she looked again, shaking from head to foot, and trying to understand. One thing only in the confusion of her mind was clear to her: she was not the wife of a murderer. Her heart leapt up with passionate relief at the thought. But fast upon that followed the consciousness of the terrible position in which the perfidy of these two wretches had placed her; and then came the longing to be revenged upon them both, a longing fierce and hungry as the impulses of an enraged animal as she stood panting before the window, with her hands curved like claws, her great eyes luminous with passion, and her red lips parted in straight lines over teeth that looked hideous and dangerous in their gleaming whiteness. Again she had lost herself in intent savage contemplation of the two men, when a disagreeable croaking laugh close at her ear startled her. Turning her head sharply she saw Rosalie, the old chambermaid, whose lean leather-colored face was wrinkled up with most flattering interest in her neighbor's affairs. She glanced alternately at Madeline and at the pair in the wine-shop, and seemed to perceive enough significance in the situation to enjoy it most heartily. Still, she was evidently curious to understand it better, and she gently detained the young Englishwoman by the hand as she was turning abruptly away.

"Pardon, madame," croaked she softly. "I have not met you for a whole week, and I should so much like to know how you are getting on, if you would be so kind as to let me walk with you a little way."

Madeline assented with no very clear intention, but with the feeling that this shrewd Frenchwoman, with her world knowledge and her professed acquaintance with a secret in Louis's life, might be useful or might be dangerous, was not to be despised. She gave one last look into the wine-shop, where De Breteuil, still in high spirits was trying to raise those of his companion to the same level by liberal draughts of wine, which the other swallowed steadily, and cursed for "d-d French rubbish" at the same time. Then the two women moved away together, and Madeline told the other that she had some pupils and hoped to have more, and that she was getting on very well indeed. But Rosalie's information was ahead of all this.

"And monsieur has come back, I hear, so that madame is no longer dull," she suggested simply.

"Oh, no, I am not dull," said Madeline, with irrepressible bitterness.

"And monsieur looks gayer than he used to do while at the hotel; I never saw a man more changed in a short time. I used to think how hard it was for a devoted young wife to see her husband so miserable; but to-day—"

Madeline turned sharply toward her, with such a look of agony on her face that the woman's tongue stopped.

"We will not talk of him," Madeline said, with difficulty "he is—not—my husband." And the shame of the woman, as she faltered out the terrible admission, with an effort to assume a tone of callous indifference, brought a blush into her face which burned like a brand. "Let us talk of Mr. Breteuil; he was a nobler man, he would not have treated me as this—this Louis, Monsieur Louis, is doing. I cannot bear it—I hate him, he neglects me; I—I think I am—tired of him."

But the affectation of flippant indifference with which she said this was far too transparent to deceive Rosalie, who shrugged her shoulders, but looked rather sorry for her.

"Ah, yes, M. de Breteuil, he would no doubt have treated madame differently," said she, in a tone from which it was impossible to tell whether or no she guessed M. Louis's identity. "He did everything en prince."

"Yet you told me once that you knew something which would change people's opinion of him? Will you tell me the secret, Rosalie?"

"I cannot, madame. I am getting old, I am nearly fifty, and I look upon that little secret as property which may some day increase my income—a retiring pension, perhaps, when my limbs grow too stiff for active service."

"I cannot afford to buy secrets now, but I have still, as you can see, some fondness left for M. de Breteuil, and I should not like to see him hurt without—"

can rule men—other men. But leave M. de Breteuil alone. He has resources you do not know of, which you had better not guess. If you are dissatisfied with his treatment of you, revenge yourself, but on other men. Believe me, it would be better for you to throw yourself into the Seine, or even to be scarred with smallpox, than to tempt Fate by defying M. de Breteuil."

"Thank you, Rosalie," said Madeline, more impressed by the unexpected earnestness of the hard-featured woman, with the lines of avarice and suspicion so strongly marked in her face, than by the warning, which she did not intend to heed.

They were at the corner of the street. The young Englishwoman held out her hand, which the other took with more than conventional respect.

"I shall not see you again, Rosalie, for I am going to leave Paris very soon."

"Good-bye, madame; wherever you may be going, I wish you all prosperity and happiness."

But even as she spoke this good wish, it was evident that the last part was only a conventional utterance, for in the face of the young Englishwoman as she thanked her and walked away there was a fixed, hard expression which told that faith and hope, the springs of happiness, were dried up in her forever.

Madeline, left alone, reached her rooms very quickly, unlocked one of her large trunks, and began to pack it for a journey. She collected the few things she wanted to take with her besides what it already contained, and felt pleased to find that the one trunk would hold everything she wanted. Then, when she had only the top tray left to fill, she remembered that she must pay her rent up to the end of the week, and going quickly down stairs to the little cigar-shop, she found her landlady, haggled with much spirit over the point of the next week's rent in lieu of notice which the ex-vivandiere wanted to exact, and came up-stairs again victorious, after having persuaded her to be content without it, and, moreover, to buy for a small sum her spare trunk and a few other things she could not take away with her. She was tossing on to the floor out of her writing-case a couple of notes and a dried flower out of a bouquet from Louis, when the sound of his footsteps on the stairs suddenly destroyed her busy calmness, and forced her to lean, trembling and cold with dread, upon the edge of the trunk she was filling.

She heard him enter the sitting-room, singing. He called her by name, and the sound of his voice, to which she did not reply, braced her for the meeting. When he flung open the bedroom door, she was still on her knees quietly packing.

"Madeline!" said he, in astonishment. "What on earth are you doing? Didn't you hear me call you?"

"Yes," said she quietly, "I heard you; but I am busy rearranging my trunks."

Her tone evidently surprised him. He had been used lately to tones in which duty predominated over love, but to-day even the duty seemed to fail. He stepped forward into the room, stooped down, and looked into her face. His own was bright with the same expression of gay triumph and content which it had worn in the wine-shop.

"You are dull, my princess," said he carelessly. "You have lived too long in these wretched little pigeon-holes; you must come back to the boulevards, and your spirit will come back with new dresses and new trinkets. No wonder you are pining; it is three months since you have worn diamonds."

"I don't want diamonds indeed, Louis, thank you."

"Ah, well, the taste will come back with the means of satisfying it. You want change, you want excitement, Madeline: thank Heaven I have at last the means of supplying you with them. To-night we will dine together at Brestant's; and champagne shall bring the color to your cheeks, and the light to your eyes, and the love to your heart too; even that has run a little dry of late for want of its proper food of presents and playthings."

Madeline looked up suddenly: it was impossible that he did not know the absurdity of his accusation. Yet he stood there playing with his purse, as light-hearted, as full of happy excitement, as a schoolboy who had just been "tipped" by his maiden aunt with a five-pound note.

"Look here," he went on, without noticing her expression or without heeding it. And he took her left hand, and poured into it a dozen or so of twenty-franc pieces. He felt her hand twitch and tremble as if the coins had been red-hot, but he closed her fingers upon them and laughed into her face.

"These will ease the burden of life a little, I think, Madeline."

Again she looked up at him, her face pale and damp, her great eyes glistening.

"Where did you get this money?" she asked slowly, in a voice so hoarse, so hard, so unlike her own, that he dropped her hand, and stepped back from her impatiently.

"Who has put it into your hand to catechise me?" he asked coldly, "and to treat me to an unrehearsed tragedy when I offer you the pleasures you used to delight in? You should not ask questions, especially when you know that you would not be satisfied with the answers. The best thing you can do now, Madeline, is to forget as quickly as possible the disagreeable interlude of poverty and wretchedness which I would have spared you if I could, come back with me to the bright life you enjoyed so much, and rely upon me not to let such an unfortunate accident disturb your peace again."

"Unfortunate accident!" she repeated stupidly.

"Yes; and take care, you are dropping your money. You will find it slip through your fingers quite fast enough; and, then, for all your contempt for it, you will come asking me for more."

"More! More of this money!" she whispered huskily, as opening her hand she let the gold fall on the floor, and drew her dress away from it. Then she cleared her throat, and, attempting to go on with the work of arranging the contents of her trunk, she added quietly, with strong constraint upon herself: "You have misunderstood me, Louis; I have never cared much for your money."

"Perhaps I have misunderstood you less than you think, Madeline," said he, with some tenderness, as he drew a little nearer to her; and she grew suddenly still, fearing least he should touch her again, knowing as she did that she should not be able to bear the horror of it the second time. She wanted to repress herself until he should leave her, so that she might escape quietly and without disturbance out of his sight, out of his reach. But he continued in tones that grew warmer as he proceeded: "You

think, perhaps, that because I have been too much cast down of late either to cheer you for to be cheered by you, I have not noticed your devotion, or been touched by it. But I have. And though the weight of anxiety upon me has made me morose and bearish to you, I have said to myself all the time, 'When the cloud has passed, she will have her reward.' It has passed now, and my ill-humor has melted as your coldness must melt, and we will have the old times, and better times still, Madeline, and to-night we must seal the new bond with champagne and laughter."

He flung his arm around her as she cowered on the floor. But she wrenched herself shivering away from him, and rose, white and panting, to her feet. For one moment he paused, drawing himself up with a frown which frightened her; then he threw the end of his cigar out of the window, and crossed the room to her.

"Is this the congratulation I am to receive from my wife?" And he laid his hand heavily on her shoulder. "Come, be reasonable. Kiss me—say you're sorry."

Madeline was tall and broad and strong—in physical strength almost his equal; moved by an overpowering impulse of rage, terror, and disgust, she pushed him away from her with such force that he fell staggering back against the door of the small room.

"Don't touch me," she hissed as he recovered himself; "I am not your wife!"

De Breteuil steadied himself, and made no further attempt to approach her; but the horrible pallor of his dark face as he looked across at her, and the lurid light that seemed to shoot out of his black eyes, for an instant made him appear less than human. Whether he had seen her at the window of the wine-shop that afternoon she did not know, but he said quietly:

"That is true, and if you are anxious to go back to the husband who got over your loss so easily you are quite at liberty to do so. But if you are wise you will stay with me, and thank Heaven I am still willing to have you. I may be as great a villain as he, but at any rate I am a more successful one. No woman has ever had for me the charm you have had since I found you ready to stick to me through everything, in spite of circumstances which I own would have frightened off a nobby-pamby woman. I will forgive you this little outburst of this afternoon, I will love you the more; and if you will stay with me I will give you everything in the world you can wish for, provided only that you will have the sense to be content with your own happiness, and not pry into the means used to procure it. Will you love me on those terms?"

"No. I loathe you from the very depth of my soul. I bore with you, sheltered you in spite of my horror at your crime, because I believed you to be my husband; now my joy at finding I am not bound to you is stronger than the sense of my own degradation. You have tricked me shamefully—"

"Nonsense!" he interrupted sharply. "You were lonely, poor, deserted by a scoundrel; I gave you—you acknowledge it—love and fortune and happiness. I respected you enough to know that you would not come with me except as my wife; therefore I had to prove to you that your husband was dead. Now that you have found out that he is alive, the best thing you can do is to forget it again."

"Unfortunately I cannot, for I have found out more than that," said she slowly.

There was a pause, during which they looked at each other steadily. Madeline had cast off all restraint, and the hatred that shone out of her gray eyes and made lines in her beautiful face was no less strong and scarcely less terrible than the fiendish malignity that from time to time flashed out from his when her fierce words stung him.

"What have you found out?"

"I have found out that you and my dear husband have entered into a partnership which ought to be a most successful one—for a time. You are hard and daring, he is clever and easily led; he has a conscience it is easy to stifle, you have no conscience at all. Don't scowl at me—I am not afraid of you; I know you both well, though I have only learnt the lesson this afternoon. But some day success in crime, for I suppose you will hardly stop at one robbery and one murder—yes, murder!—Touch me if you dare!"

as he started menacingly, with scowling, livid face, staring at her in the dusk over the open trunk and the scattered unpacked trifles that strewed the disordered room.

"Some day success will make you careless, and one of you will make some little slip—my husband most likely in a fit of drunken pleasure or drunken remorse," said she, with biting contempt; "and that little mistake, whatever it may be, will be forgotten, and you will think yourselves safe. But where ever and whenever you make it, I shall find it out—I, the woman whom you both have conspired to ruin and degrade as no loving woman, as I was, ever was degraded yet. And I will work and wait and watch, wherever you are and whatever you are doing, until I have made a net about your feet which will bring you both down."

It was not a pleasant discourse to have to listen to from the white lips of a woman whose eyes seemed to shoot fire, and whose voice grew lower and lower, until the last words were hissed into the ears of the man before her with a venom which left its mark. As she ended, De Breteuil sprang at her; but she was prepared for this, and, evading him, she ran around her trunk to the bell-rope, and pulled it twice violently. This movement brought her to the door of the sitting-room, which she pushed open.

"What did you do that for?" asked he savagely.

"To call up Madame Despland."

"What do you want her for?"

"I wish to declare before a witness that you are the murderer of Mr. Staunton; that you are in collusion with Robert Meredith, who disposed of the stock stolen from Mr. Staunton by you; that—"

"Are you mad?"

"No. If you wish to avoid exposure, leave me this instant; if you remain, I swear—"

She had said enough—she had looked enough. De Breteuil opened the outer door, against which he was standing, and treated her to one last scowl, which would have frightened any one but an enraged woman. Nothing more impressive than the ordinary threat of the wife-beating costermonger occurred to him, but he said it with more than the costermonger's significance: "I've not done with you yet!"

As footsteps were heard upon the stairs, he slipped out of the room.

When De Breteuil rejoined his accomplice his spirits had fallen a good deal, and in ex-

planation he had Meredith of the scene which had just taken place. He made light of Madeline's threats, but the other was really alarmed.

"Fancy her turning so nasty!" he said plaintively. "I don't half like it, that I don't; she always was a woman for keeping her word."

"All infernal bravado; she can prove nothing," said De Breteuil shortly.

"But won't you keep her in sight? I think it would be safer."

"Not so easy, and not worth while. Before the week is out she will have found some one able to make her forget you and me."

"And a good thing too! For she was a lot too good for either of us," said the other with maudlin compunction. "Couldn't you—couldn't you at least find out what she's going to do, and if—if she's got money, and is—is all right?"

He insisted until De Breteuil, moved also by another motive, went round to the house that evening, crept up-stairs, and tried to open the doors of the rooms Madeline had occupied. But they were locked. He went down stairs to make inquiries, and found that she had left Paris two hours before, alone.

And as he lit a fresh cigar he drew out of his pocket with his match-box a little case that looked as if it contained a pipe, and, opening it, looked affectionately at a beautiful little revolver which lay in it, and congratulated himself that Madeline's abrupt disappearance had saved him from a dangerous temptation.

"But if we should ever cross each other's path again—" he said to himself aloud. And without finishing his sentence, he blew out the match with which he had lit his cigar, and tossed it away.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

No Joke on Her.

A woman came down town the other day with a "yearling" in a baby carriage, and when she reached a certain dry goods store she left the cab at the door and went in to trade. The youngster was good natured over being left alone, and one of the clerks in this store who knew the mother well thought to play a trick on her. While she was busy trading he slipped out and wheeled the carriage into an adjoining store. A rush of customers prevented him from seeing the woman as she went out. She stood at the door for a moment, as if wondering if she had forgotten something, and then started off and went straight home.

By that time "bub" had become uneasy and was raising a row, and they sent in for the clerk to come and get him. The mother having departed for home, he was obliged to follow her with cart and baby, the latter howling at the top of his voice and attracting general attention. The clerk had reached the gate when the woman came out, and as she saw baby and carts she threw up both hands and exclaimed:

"Dear me, but I thought it was a spool of twist I had forgotten!"

Bald-Headedness.

There is much wearisome and needless discussion about bald-headed American men. Wash your head thoroughly once a week with a lather of soap and water rinse all the soap out, and rub the scalp lively till it is entirely dry. Never wear an unventilated hat, or any hat at all when you can avoid it. Wear a straw hat, instead of felt, when ever possible. Give your scalp plenty of sunlight, also plenty of air. Don't smoke too much. Follow these directions, and you never will be bald-headed. Even if your hair has begun to get thin, it will revive. Canadians are bald because they wear fur caps. It is the wearing of hot and unnatural head-coverings that makes the hair fall out. If a quite bald man should go bare-headed in the sun and air a year, it is likely that his hair would come in again, and he would never take cold. Remember this: Nature meant your hair to keep your head warm, not fur caps or felt hats. Felt hats and silk hats are an abomination. These are the wretches that make American men bald-headed. It is not their mighty intellects or their excessively fine nervous system.

The Panama Canal.

The project of damming up the Chagres with 26,000,000 cubic meters of earthwork, accompanied by a culvert large enough to admit the issue of a stream gaging 400 cubic meters per second, and needing for its course a cutting nearly as wide and deep as that required for navigation, depends, among other things, for its accomplishment on the forbearance of earthquakes. One tremor of the ground will bring down with whole mighty structure. Altogether, M. de Lesseps and his shareholders are in a terribly awkward plight. They cannot very well abandon works which have cost over fifty millions of money, and yet they cannot with prudence go forward. They have two alternatives, and only two, before them. One of them is to sell the whole thing for, say twenty millions to the Americans—who are quite willing to buy the concern—and the other is to suspend M. De Lesseps, and to put in somebody who will personally superintend the works. Who that somebody ought to be we have, we confess, no idea.

A Home-Made Telephone.

To make a serviceable telephone from one farm house to another only requires enough wire and two cigar boxes. First select your boxes and make a hole half an inch in diameter in the centre of the bottom of each, and then place one in each of the houses you wish to connect; then get five pounds of common iron stovepipe wire, make a loop in one end and put it through the hole in your cigar box and fasten it with a nail; then draw it tight to the other box, supporting it when necessary with a stout cord. You can easily run your line into the house by boring a hole through the glass. Support your boxes with slats nailed across the window, and your telephone is complete. The writer has one that is two hundred yards long and cost forty-five cents that will carry music when the organ is playing forty feet away in another room.

The Moon's Influence

Upon the weather is accepted by some as real, by others it is disputed. The moon never attracts corns from the tender, aching spot. Putnam's Painless Corn Extractor removes the most painful corns in three days. This great remedy makes no sore spots, doesn't go fooling around a man's foot, but gets to business at once, and effects a cure. Don't be imposed upon by substitutes and imitations. Get "Putnam's," and no other.