

FRASER ALEXANDER

DAUGHTERS OF
BELGRAVIA; VOL 1 OF 3

Alexander Fraser
Daughters of Belgravia; vol 1 of 3

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Mrs. Alexander Fraser

Daughters of Belgravia; vol 1 of 3

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 pasteboard 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 ruin themselves to satisfy its claims – but *revenons à 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 *Salmis 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, not understanding 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 whispers, 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 veriest 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 stab 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 afterwards, 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 as 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 stoney 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 well-known 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 Delaval 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 as 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 convenances.”

“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 under-gardener 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 her 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 unlady-like,” 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-sisters' 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 ne fas*— 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 promising 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.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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