

FRASER ALEXANDER

DAUGHTERS OF
BELGRAVIA; VOL 2 OF 3

Alexander Fraser
Daughters of Belgravia; vol 2 of 3

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Mrs. Alexander Fraser

Daughters of Belgravia; vol 2 of 3

CHAPTER I. LAST NIGHT

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

“Allow me to congratulate you, Zai,” Gabrielle says with a sneer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gabrielle attempts neither soothing nor scolding. To her such emotion is a display of childishness for which her hard nature has no sympathy. She rests calm and unmoved in her chair, languidly inhaling Eau de Cologne and occasionally sprinkling herself with a fragrant shower while she waits for the tears to subside.

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

“Gabrielle, you know I would sooner die than engage myself

to that man!" Zai exclaims impetuously, dashing away her tears and sitting bolt upright.

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

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

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

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

"How on earth should I know it?" Gabrielle says sarcastically. "In fact I quite differ with you on this point; you may possibly fancy that you dislike him, but actions always speak so much louder than words that I am certainly sceptical."

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

"Did your proceedings last night show any dislike? Instead of staying in the ball-room with the rest of the world, you prefer to remain outside. It was desperately dangerous and sentimental work that, Zai – only the Chinese lanterns and Lord Delaval's handsome eyes to keep you company, while you hung on his arm,

and probably arrived at the conclusion that Lord Delaval is not worse looking than most of his sex!”

“Don’t!”

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

The passionate looks Carlton Conway had given her have been her guiding star, and she believes that she would unhesitatingly follow their light into the deadly Styx itself, so it can be imagined how her very soul revolts as Gabrielle insinuates that she flung herself at Lord Delaval’s head.

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

“I don’t care about going into possibilities,” Gabrielle replies pettishly, “I prefer restraining myself to simple facts.”

“Perhaps you will be less sceptical of my feelings if I explain a little about last night, Gabrielle,” Zai murmurs deprecatingly. “You see I heard what Sir Everard said to you about Carl riding with Crystal Meredyth and looking ‘awful spoons.’ How those

vulgar horrid words cut me through and through, Gabrielle! Then when we arrived, the first thing I saw was Carl waltzing with her, and – and – as if he really enjoyed it! I could not bear the sight of that, so when Lord Delaval proposed to go and see the illuminated grounds, I was thankful to go. After we had been out a little while I was anxious to come in, but he told me that Carl was engaged to Crystal – that he was obliged to marry some one who was rich, Gabrielle,” and Zai flings herself down at her sister’s feet and lifts up great pitiful eyes. “Instead of bullying me you ought to feel for me! I am heart-broken!”

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

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

“Well?”

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

Gabrielle gives a short unpleasant laugh at this.

“It is true, Heaven knows. We returned and were just going into the house when you and Sir Everard spoke about us – we were not a stone’s throw from you, and of course every word you said fell out clear and distinct. I confess I was surprised at all

I heard, as you know you did not speak the truth. However we won't discuss that point now. What I did hear made me resolve on an explanation with Lord Delaval at once. So I just told him frankly that I did not care for him and would never marry him!"

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

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

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

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

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

"It never appears to strike you what people will say of last night. Society hasn't much romance in its composition. Society does not know, and would not credit that Zai Beranger wanders by day and night, blind to external influences, with a buckler girded on her heart on which is written 'Carlton Conway.' And

if Belgravia cannot comprehend such high-flown sentiment, is it strange that I, born and bred amongst the *canaille*, with unlimited faith in the practical and matter-of-fact, and with a contempt for the foolish and the sickly romance of women, cannot help doubting and blaming you?"

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

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

"It is mamma's fault, and not mine that it happened; she is always throwing Lord Delaval and me together, and the whole thing is hateful to me."

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

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

"*Nous verrons!*"

"*Nous verrons!*" is the answer, and after a moment, Gabrielle goes on in studied accents: "I think it right to tell you, Zai, that I

am resolved not to persuade you any more to marry Lord Delaval. I am a soldier of fortune, you know, and have to make my own way in the world; Lady Beranger deserves no tolerance from me, so I warn you, that I am going to try and serve myself, and if my interest clashes with anyone else's I won't yield an inch."

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

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

"But," replies Zai, "why on earth should you consider it necessary to warn me of your project, I, who have no interest in the matter except to wish you happy?"

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

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

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

that I were a peeress, and rich!”

Zai looks at her wonderingly, then she says quietly:

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

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

“It would be a waste of time and breath to preach to Trixy. She has not a tenth part of your common sense, Gabrielle, and she cannot be held so accountable for her actions. Of course, mamma has literally coerced her into this awful match. She will endure the existence she has in prospect better than I should do, however. She won’t think of Mr. Stubbs and his vulgarity while she has fine dresses and jewels. Sometimes I believe these things constitute her ideas of real happiness, do you know! But you, Gabrielle, are so different; if you pretend to lack a heart, at any rate you don’t lack brains.”

“No, I certainly don’t,” Gabrielle answers conceitedly.

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

For a woman – and a young one – few could hanker more

greedily after the flesh-pots and the silken attire of the children of Heth than this girl does.

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

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

“By the way, Zai, I found out last night, that Baby has accepted old Archibald Hamilton! It was only by chance, as the little brat wants to keep the matter a secret from us for a while, I believe.”

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

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

“I can’t stay chattering any longer, Gabrielle,” she says hurriedly, and in the twinkling of an eye she is gone; and, as Gabrielle looks up surprised at her summary departure, she sees the tall figure of Lord Delaval slowly crossing the lawn towards

the house, and guesses at once why Zai has disappeared in such haste. She bends forward, and, with wildly beating heart and tightly clenched hands, eagerly watches him.

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

But he did not seem to deem it worth his while to study her at all, though indirectly, and at all favourable opportunities, he let her be fully aware through the medium of his handsome eyes and his voice that he *knew* she had a heart, and that it was one he read like an open book and found remarkably interesting.

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

And so it is with Gabrielle.

She has reached over a quarter of a century.

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

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

CHAPTER II. FLIRTATION

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

Gabrielle’s cheeks grow crimson and her eyes glitter with pleasure, that for a little while they two will be alone, with no stranger to intermeddle with their joy, as she watches Lord Delaval approach nearer and nearer and finally step over the sill of the casement.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Possibly," he answers coolly, "but hang the *convenances*. Don't you know that there are times in every fellow's life when he

comes into collision with the conventionalities, and either breaks them, or else risks being broken by keeping them? So long as I can run with my Juggernaut, alias 'Society,' I am content, but I cannot throw myself before it and get mangled. Do you know I rather fancied I had a chance of finding you alone here, and so I determined to make chance a certainty?"

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

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

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

Now she reddens like a rose, and feels a nervous tremor run through her, and yet his manner is scarcely like a lover's. There is, in fact, nothing in what he says that could not pass as the ordinary talk of Society, yet the conversation seems lifted out from an ordinary atmosphere. They two, Lord Delaval and herself, are alone, and he talks to her just as if they were disembodied spirits. There are men occasionally in this world who have the power of bringing a woman they approach into direct contact with their own natures. They have a special gift of penetration, and one feels that in whatever relation one meets them, it is sustained by one's *real* self towards an equally *real* individuality on the other side.

Lord Delaval always makes Gabrielle feel this, and his intense manner adds to the feeling, but, with the supreme wilfulness of

her nature, she refuses to yield to the magnetic influence he has over her without, at any rate, a struggle.

“You can have nothing to say to *me*, Lord Delaval, that all the world and the world’s wife cannot hear. Are you mistaking me by chance for Zai?” she asks, carelessly, but she has no control over her features, and the excitement of his presence lends them a flashing, bewildering beauty, that positively dazzles him —*pro tem*!

He fixes his deep blue eyes on her with an expression of fervid admiration, and her lids fall beneath the passion of his glance, but she lifts them bravely, and meets his gaze full.

“You really look as if you thought I did not mean what I say!”

“And no more you do, *ma belle*,” he answers quietly. Outside the sun shines down furiously; the air is warm as an Indian summer. Up and down, up and down, the butterflies skim over the flowers, and a lazy rose-twigg gives an inert tap on the window pane. Gabrielle does not reply. She feels shy, and as shyness is foreign to her, it is not only an uncomfortable, but a painful sensation.

“You snubbed Aylmer last evening,” he says.

“Yes!” she answers laconically.

“But why? Did you forget how many good things he has to offer you? Most women would jump at such a match.”

“*Soit!* but *I* don’t,” she answers indifferently.

“Of course not,” he tells her. “I know you better than you know yourself – no one will ever know you as well as I do – and, still

more, Gabrielle, no one will ever love you as *I* love you! No, don't start!"

For she rises from her seat, feelings of various kinds surge over her, and she clasps her fingers tightly together.

"Gabrielle, I have been longing to tell you this," he goes on, in a concentrated voice, which has a deal of suppressed passion in it; "I see no reason for denying myself the expression of what is strong within me. I don't want you to tell me that you love me, for I should hate to evoke from your sweet lips words that your *heart* doesn't force through them, in spite of *convenances*! I only want you to listen to me when, instead of dilating on the beauty of the weather, and so forth, I lay bare *my* heart to you."

Gabrielle believes he is laughing at her, and the belief lashes her into fury.

"Please, Lord Delaval, reserve your amusement for some one else. I am not of sufficiently elevated position for you to waste your breath on. Do you forget that Lady Beranger looks on me as a sort of social pariah, and almost a gutter-girl!" she flares out scornfully, her lips trembling, and looking doubly tempting in their wrath.

Perhaps Lord Delaval, with his worship for pretty things, feels their increased attraction, for as his eyes fall on them, his manner grows really more impassioned. He moves closer to her side on the sofa, but she averts her head, and piques him by a feigned coldness.

"I can't see your face, Gabrielle! And I *want* to see it while I

talk to you," he pleads quite tenderly.

The tone touches her, not because she credits its sincerity, but because she has never dreamed that *he* could ever speak to her thus.

"Gabrielle, do you believe in affinities?"

"I believe in sympathy," she answers, wondering what he is going to say now.

"I am a firm believer in affinities, and don't believe in the possibility of love existing between two persons devoid of affinity. Tell me, Gabrielle! do you follow me at all?"

She makes a slight gesture of assent, but she doesn't in the slightest comprehend what he is driving at. No matter, he is close besides her. If she likes, she can touch him, and this is enough to put this impassioned child of Eve into a fever of delight.

"I don't believe that anyone can give another anything that does not belong to that other. He may withhold it to a certain degree, but it *must* be given in the end. Perfect love is when one meets someone to whom one can give all, and from whom one desires all."

"Imperfect affinities are all that most people in *our* world know of love, and, Gabrielle, Belgravia is horribly ignorant, do you know? Being so, they call a part of such and such a thing the whole, and demand allegiance of one's whole nature to a feeling that belongs to, and feeds but a small part of it! Now, Gabrielle – my beautiful, tempting Gabrielle! you and I have this in common, that we hate sham, and never pretend to fine sentimental feelings

unless we possess them. Isn't it true?"

Lord Delaval bends over her till his face nearly touches hers, and he smiles conceitedly as he notices how rosy red the cheek near him grows by his proximity.

"I knew when I first saw you that you and I were exactly alike in our ideas and feelings. Somehow I felt it directly we spoke. I knew that you would never give to any man that which was not his – for you are dreadfully proud and cold and hard at the core, and when I found out, a day or two ago, that unconsciously I had learned to love you – do you hear me? – to love you with my whole being – when I found out that nothing short of an entire surrender of your soul —*of yourself*— would satisfy me, I trembled at the vision of bliss or torture that possibly lies before me – look at me, Gabrielle!"

There is a quiet command in his voice which she never attempts to resist. To everyone else sharp, caustic, cold, and full of sneers, to this man she is the humblest of slaves; his, to do with as he wills. A daughter of Belgravia, with Lady Beranger's worldly-wise notions dinned into her ears, and with worldly, ambitious women examples for her in daily life – of this man she wants nothing, only *himself*; to gain his love, and above all, to be let to love him, she would fling all other considerations to the four winds without a murmur or a regret.

In a sort of maze, she lifts up a pair of big, incredulous black eyes to him now – eyes so soft and wistful – so filled with newborn light that no one would believe they belonged to

Gabrielle Beranger.

She forgets everything but him and the giant fact that he is hers. In spite of her peculiar nature and practical turn, she has pictured, like most of her sex, a paradise of love about this man, and lost in the golden vision of Love's paradise gained, she lets her usual scepticism slip out of her mind, and only knows that Lord Delaval, whom she has worshipped for three years with the feverish fierceness of her Bedouin nature, *is* wooing her – strangely and abruptly, but in the sweetest, subtlest way that a man can woo. Gabrielle is sharp as a needle, yet it never crosses her brain in her lovesick frenzy that *real* feeling is *not* eloquent in expression, and that when a man *really* craves anything and trembles lest he should not grasp it, flowers of rhetoric are usually denied to his tongue.

She sits spellbound, with drooping lids. Literally *nothing* seems to live in her, save a vivid sense of his words, and the intensity of their meaning. Her keen intelligence is lulled to sleep, her habit of doubting is dead, *pro tem*. She does not try to subject his protestations to any analytical process; they only seem to float through her mind in a kind of soft mist, and she sits white now and silent, and feeling, as she thinks she can never feel again, content, almost in a dream, and yet full, awfully full, of an intensified vitality.

“I want to tell you, Gabrielle,” Lord Delaval says very low, while his audacious arm steals round her magnificent shoulders and her crimson cheek is pillowed on his breast, “that I love

you as no one has ever loved you, and that I am *determined* to win from you all that I wish! I have *never* been baulked yet, if I determined to reach anything. If I preserve my will intact, I shall not accept anything but the *whole* from you, the *whole*, sweetheart – do you hear? Of your heart and soul and body I will have all —*all!* or die unsatisfied. My hope to gain all this is by knowledge of your nature. It is you —*you* that I love, not a part of you, not an ideal being of you, not what you represent to other men's eyes, but what you are with your thousand imperfections, even blots. Nothing, Gabrielle, will change me towards you, for I have only given you what is yours by the law of affinity, and you, Gabrielle – well, I *defy* you to say that you are not wholly and solely *mine*.”

It is masterful wooing this, insolent in fact, and it would revolt most women. Zai and even Baby, with her fast proclivities, would not understand it, and it would jar on their thoroughbred natures, but Gabrielle likes it.

The whole thing fascinates her – a visible shiver runs over her. Lord Delaval feels the shiver, and his arm draws her more closely to him, while the ghost of a cynical smile crosses his mouth. He stoops his head and looks full into her eyes, and then his lips rest upon hers, long and passionately, while her heart beats as wildly as a bird in the grasp of a fowler.

Luckily for her she *has* been partially imbued with a respect for Lady Beranger's beloved *convenances* and *bienséances*. Luckily for her, Belgravian morals, though they may be lax, are

too worldly-wise not to know a limit.

Even while Lord Delaval's kiss lingers on her mouth she pulls herself away from him, angry with herself that she has allowed that long passionate caress, and yet feeling that she would have been more than mortal if she had resisted it. But she resolves to sift him, *au fond*, to find out at once if in truth the man is only laughing at her or whether, oh blessed thought, she has caught his errant fancy or "love" as she calls it.

"Lord Delaval!" she says, in a voice in which pride and shame mingle strangely together, "because I am a woman, with a woman's weak nature, do you believe me to be a fool? Do you think for a moment I deceive myself or let your words deceive me? Only last night you flirted horribly with Zai. Before, it was in Baby's ear you whispered your soft nothings. It was Baby's hand I have seen you furtively clasp. I know therefore that the love you profess for me is all stuff and nonsense! that playing with women's feelings is delicious food for your vanity. But *why* you should pick me out, why *I* should be a butt for you, I am sure I can't guess! I don't care to believe that because I am what Lady Beranger thinks me, that *you* want to insult me!"

A look of pain crosses her brow, and an appeal for forbearance, dumb but very taking, goes up from her eyes. Lord Delaval seizes her hands and holds them fast while his gaze bears steadily down on her.

"You should not doubt, Gabrielle! I have told you the truth, upon my soul! No woman's face can tempt me from you now.

Whatever the past may have been, I swear I belong to you now and for ever! While I wait to claim you as my wife before the world, and I *must* wait, for reasons which will be satisfactory when I tell you them, you will go on doing as you do, draining men dry to the one drop of their souls that you can assimilate. But that is not love, though they may lay their lives and fortunes at your feet. Aylmer would never satisfy your heart, Gabrielle, but you may flirt with him if you like, and drive him mad by these sweet eyes, these soft red lips," and he lifts up her face and studies it for a moment, "so long as when *I* want you, you come to me at once. It will be no sacrifice on your part, for you will only be obeying the law of your nature in loving me and I – I shall take you not as a gift, but as a right, my Gabrielle!"

Before she can answer him, he has taken her into his arms, and rained down kisses on her brow and cheeks and lips and is gone, with the conviction in his mind that, if he wishes it at any time, it will not require much pressing on his part to mould *this* girl's future to his will.

True he does not care a snap of his fingers for her, but any woman, beautiful of face and form, is not an object to be disdained or rejected, and Lord Delaval is not the only voluptuary among the Upper Ten.

Alone with the gathering shadows, and still wrapped in the presence that has left her, Gabrielle sits for an hour undisturbed. In the latter days she has thought several times that Lord Delaval had begun to recognise her claims to admiration, in spite of his

flirtations with Baby and Zai, and alas! for Belgravian nurturing, it is a truth that the consciousness that her attraction for the man is *only a physical one*, in which her brains and soul bear no perceptible part, is far from being an unpleasant sensation.

“How very shocking!” a few prim spinsters may exclaim, but it is nevertheless the truth and nothing but the truth. It may be that most women love to conquer with the legitimate weapon, *beauty*, of the sex.

Poor plain Madame de Staël would willingly have exchanged all the laurels men laid at her feet for the tiniest, meanest blossom offered in a spirit of “*love*” or “*passion*” by them to women whom she justly regarded as her inferiors.

Gabrielle forgets her cross, her mother’s low birth, Lady Beranger’s taunts and everything else unpleasant, as she positively revels in a sense of Lord Delaval’s admiration.

Rising from the lounge, she walks to the mantelpiece, and placing her elbows on it stares in a fixed, almost fierce way, into the mirror.

The shadows that flit over the room are broken here and there by a few last dying sunbeams, and her beauty is improved by the flickering light. The sweet eyes and soft red lips to which he had alluded, gain fresh merit since they are decoys to his erratic fancy, and have fanned the spark she has tried to ignite into a flame that has at last burst into words.

Then between her and the mirror the superb face of her lover rises up, and the cheek that has just been pressed

against his breast glows a lovely carmine, that is wasted on the unappreciative dusk, as she clenches her little fist, and swears in true and forcible Bohemian fashion to bring all her woman's wit to aid in winning this man for her husband.

Just at this moment Lady Beranger walks in, and without noticing her stepdaughter by word or look, throws herself a little wearily into an arm-chair.

"What are you thinking of, *belle mere*?" Gabrielle asks after a little.

"Thinking of! There is plenty to think of I am sure," Lady Beranger retorts curtly. "I shall never be at rest till the girls are safely off my hands; unmarried daughters are the greatest responsibility breathing."

"I will try and lessen your burden," Gabrielle says, in a bland voice, but with a curl of her lip which the dusk hides, "I'll promise not to say 'no' if anyone asks me to marry him."

Lady Beranger laughs a sharp unpleasant laugh.

"It is not likely *you* will lessen my burden!" she says sharply. "Everard Aylmer, who was my forlorn hope for you, told me he was off directly for a tour in India, so *he* is not going to ask you."

"May be, but then you see, there are other fools beside Sir Everard Aylmer, in this world, Lady Beranger," Gabrielle answers flippantly, as she saunters out of the room.

"Hateful girl!"

And having relieved herself of this, Lady Beranger settles herself more comfortably, and begins to build castles in which

Zai and Lord Delaval, Trixy and the fascinating Stubbs, and Baby with her elderly *inamorato* figure.

“That actor fellow showed his cards well last night,” she soliloquises. “He is after the Meredyth filthy lucre of course, so now there’s every chance of Zai catching Delaval. Trixy is thrown away on that dreadful cub, but after all, it doesn’t much matter who one marries. After a month or so, now-a-days, the women think twice as much of other people’s husbands as of their own. Baby will be all right in Archibald Hamilton’s keeping. That child really frightens me by her defiance of everything, and I shall be truly thankful to wash my hands of her before she goes to the furthest end of her tether. As for Gabrielle,” a frown puckers her ladyship’s patrician brow, “I wonder who she has got running in her head? I *hope* it is not Delaval; a neck to neck race between her and Zai would end in her winning by several lengths. Zai, though she is my own child, is the biggest little fool, with the primitive notions of the year One, and I *can’t* alter her, worse luck!”

CHAPTER III.

“FROGGY WOULD A WOONG GO.”

*“Gold, gold, gold, gold,
Bright and yellow, hard and cold;
Molten, graven, hammered and roll’d,
Heavy to get, and light to hold,
Price of many a crime untold.”*

“Poor Mr. Stubbs,” sneers Gabrielle.

“Poor Mr. Stubbs,” says Zai.

“Poor Mr. Stubbs,” laughs Baby.

And with very good reason.

It is his eighth visit.

Trixy has deserted her downy nest among her cerulean cushions, and sits bolt upright on a tall-backed chair. To-day is devoted by her to the personification of “Mary Anderson.”

Her attire is of virgin white, not flowing in undulating waves of Indian muslin, or ornamented by tucks *à l’enfant*, but falling in severe satin-like folds round her beautifully moulded figure; her wealth of yellow hair is gathered at the back of her dainty head in a classical knot, traversed by a long gold arrow. She wears no bracelets or rings to mar the perfect whiteness of her

arm and fingers, and while one hand toys lazily with a mother o' pearl paper-knife, the other rests on a well-thumbed copy of "The Lady of Lyons."

Opposite her, but at a discreet distance, her Claude perches nervously on the edge of his chair; his face has acquired more flesh and blood with his increased importance as the *fiancé* of the beautiful Miss Beranger, and his puffy cheeks glow like holly-berries under her glance.

Not that her glance by any means shows the odalisque softness, of which mention has been made; on the contrary, there is an incipient loathing in it, that she tries to conceal under the shelter of her long golden lashes.

But everything nearly has two sides, and the white drooping lids find favour in her adorer's sight, for he attributes them to the delicate shyness peculiar to the *china* beings of the Upper Ten, and unknown to the coarse delf of his own class.

Once, and once only, has he ventured to lift the lissom white fingers to his hungry lips very respectfully, *bien entendu*.

It was the day when, Lady Beranger standing by, Trixy agreed to barter her youth and beauty for:

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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