

FRASER ALEXANDER

DAUGHTERS OF
BELGRAVIA; VOL 3 OF 3

Alexander Fraser

Daughters of Belgravia; vol 3 of 3

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Mrs. Alexander Fraser

Daughters of Belgravia; vol 3 of 3

CHAPTER I.

“ARE YOU GOING TO MARRY ZAI?”

“If I could but know after all,
I might cease to hunger and ache,
Though your heart were ever so small,
If it were not a stone or a snake.”

It is the truth that Gabrielle is desperately in love with Lord Delaval, and it is equally true that, thrusting all maidenly reserve to the four winds, she does not hesitate to let him know it.

Last night – will she ever forget it? She was sitting in the twilight, shaded from view by the amber hangings of the music room. For an hour she had been singing the passionate French and Italian songs in which she could pour out her soul freely, but she had tired of it since he was not by for audience. So dashing her music aside she pulled a chair into the embrasure of the bay window, and with her chin resting on her hand, was soon lost in a waking dream, of which he, of course, was central figure.

How long she sat there she never knew. Anyway, the purple twilight had merged into grey gloom, through which myriads of twinkling stars peered down at her flushed cheeks and passionate black eyes, when suddenly a voice startled her, a voice whose accents bore such genuine feeling in them, that for a moment it seemed unfamiliar to her ears.

And this is what it said – while Gabrielle listened with beating heart and bated breath, rent with jealousy and rage.

“Tell me! when is my probation to end? Have you no mercy for me?”

“What for?” and Zai’s tone, in comparison with his, was strangely hard and cold.

“What for? Don’t you know that I want to claim you before all the world? Don’t you know that I am longing to take my darling in my arms and swear on her sweet lips how I love her?”

Whether Zai answered this phantasy tenderly or no, Gabrielle never knew, for the two passed the open door and were out of hearing.

The two!

Her faithless lover and her step-sister!

Gabrielle flew upstairs noiselessly, and reaching her own room, locked the door.

She was alone now – alone – thank God! alone! Here there were no mocking eyes to note her horrible folly, to laugh at her awful, awful anguish, here she could grind her white teeth in impotent rage, or grovel on the floor in humiliation and a futile passion. She flung off the pretty dress she had put on for dinner to please his eyes, a delicious *mélange* of white lace and vivid scarlet, the colour that suited best her soft creamy skin and coal-black hair, and matched the hue of her perfect lips, and she thrust impatiently aside the glittering bracelets and rings with which she loved to deck her rounded arms and tapering fingers.

What were these baubles worth now, that she had lost the jewel of Lord Delaval’s heart?

Vanitas Vanitatum!

Sackcloth and ashes are the garments she should wear, poor, passionate, reckless creature, a victim to a worldling’s fickleness. And Gabrielle, the cynical, the votary of Balzac and Georges Sand,

the unbeliever in true feeling, wept bitterly over the wreck that had been made of her life “for one man’s pleasure only.”

Her strictly worldly surroundings forbade her from giving way to an honest violent grief that would serve for sluice-gates to her heart. And she smothered back the sobs that broke from her with a rapidity of passion that she couldn’t restrain.

Poor soul, that a sojourn in Belgravia had starved, it could find no balm in Gilead, no physician, now that the one human creature she had placed on a pedestal to worship had tumbled down ignominiously, to her thinking the veriest lump of clay. And she writhed as she remembered that not only by words and looks, but even by kisses on her red lips, he had betrayed her.

She positively wailed out her misery and her wrath in a low deep wail, weird enough to be a cry from one of Dante’s lost souls. Yet —

“Is it worth a tear? is it worth an hour?
To think of things that are well outworn,
Of fruitless husk and fugitive flower,
The dreams foregone, and the deed forborne?”

Had she not lived long enough in her twenty-six years to know that man and fickleness are synonymous terms, and to be avoided?

Apparently not – for even while she groans and moans over his shortcomings, a mighty love fills her for the man whom she adores with a wild, unreasoning, selfish passion, and whose happiness she would immolate unscrupulously, if it pleased her to have it so. It must be owned that Lord Delaval is both a flirt and a butterfly, and that he has played fast and loose with mostly all the pretty women he has come across.

Flirting comes to him as to the manner born; it lurks in his ultramarine eyes, in the corners of his mouth, in his voice, in his manners, and in his actions, and he thinks nothing of it.

Some women regret his love, some resign themselves to his fickle ways, but Gabrielle Beranger is not of the common herd. She is a law unto herself in all things. She can love well (in her fashion) and she can hate well, with her great black gleaming orbs, her white passion-tossed features, her tumultuous, unscrupulous spirit. She regrets now, bitterly, but she does not dream of growing resigned.

“Tout vient a celui qui sait attendre,” she mutters to herself.

Lord Delaval has laid a burthen on her which she cannot bear. She has but one stimulus left in life, but one object. It is to appeal to him – to his honour – to his love. If she fails – but she does not dream of failing.

One thing, she will separate the man she loves, and the man who has loved her, after the fashion of some men’s love, from her step-sister. If not now, she will some day, even if Zai marries him.

To her the words – “Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder,” are but idle prattle. A mere formula of the Church, a creed which her blind unbelief in all good things makes her mock at and fling aside like the voice of the wind.

Gabrielle is one part Belgravian and three parts French, and has the faults of both. Honour and loyalty are dead letters to such women. Strong and practical of nature, animal in instinct and passion, savage and cruel in greed of love, is it likely that women possessing such qualifications can wage war and be beaten?

Cunning, craftiness, deceit and falsity, ranged against truth, innocence, purity and simple mindedness, form a very uneven contest, my readers.

And, in spite of the pleasant doctrine that goodness rears its head over badness, it is a fact that human creatures of the Gabrielle Beranger type have often a better time of it in this world than their purer sisterhood.

Gabrielle is not going to leave Lord Delaval in ignorance of her sufferings, for she is not of the nature of a violet, or likely to let concealment like a worm, &c., &c.

“Are you going to marry Zai?” she asks abruptly. She has come face to face with him – accidentally on purpose – in a walk that is out of sight of the windows at Sandilands.

Lord Delaval, Greek almost in indolence and love of rest and luxury, has one habit to which most of our golden youth are not given – a habit of rising early and going out early.

So that Gabrielle has him all to herself this bright sunny morning, while the Beranger family are still enjoying their slumbers.

For an instant, surprise – and it must be confessed irritation at meeting her – keeps him silent, so she repeats —

“Are you going to marry Zai?”

He looks at her – to say that he quails would be perhaps going too far – but he is unmistakably nervous. There is more moral cowardice in men than in women as a rule.

She stands like an image of Nemesis, right in the centre of the path – immovable – a trifle formidable, her tall figure pulled well up to its fullest height, her features rigid and white as a sheet, and only her big black eyes burning with quite a hungry ferocious look as they rest on the handsome blond face of the man who has made love to her.

How remarkably sorry he is for it now! But there is no denying it; he has certainly made love to her, under the cover of some incomprehensible doctrine all about “affinities,” in which he believes no whit himself; he has beguiled her affections, or rather her passions, by the sweet words that are as sweet now as when Adam whispered them to his Eve in Paradise; he has beguiled her by soft treacherous kisses, in which the beak of the cruel vulture is hid beneath the tender touch of the dove, until this woman has paid him back by an enduring but terrible love that is not only a nuisance but may be worse.

Why Lord Delaval has made love to her, really not caring for her, is not difficult to tell. He adores beauty, and Gabrielle has plenty of it; her other attraction to him has been her intense contrast to the other women of the London world, with whom his flirtations have been as numerous as stars in a southern sky.

With her big black gipsy eyes, her demonstrative manner, her *bizarre* words and ways, and with the very vehemence and intensity of the passion that has repelled him even while it attracted him, his erratic fancy has been caught, but never enchained. He rather dislikes her now; and, after this, what breath can fill and re-inspire a dead fancy?

“Lord Delaval, is it true that you are going to marry Zai?” she asks for the third time, in a quiet hushed voice, that yet teems with a keen concentrated scorn that she means to cut like a whipcord, and from which he recoils angrily, for he is a thorough Epicurean in his liking for pleasantness, and a mental tussle disturbs his equanimity.

“It is quite true!” he says, rather haughtily, but when he sees her turn whiter than before, and her mouth quiver with pain, he relents. “I should have told you before, but Zai wished it kept quiet!”

“She did, did she? She knew she has acted a treacherous, deceitful part. Good Heavens! what are you marrying her for?”

“Because I love her!” he answers coolly, “and because she loves me!”

“Loves you – you! Why all London knows of her love for Carlton Conway!”

He shrinks a little from this, and the colour mounts hotly to his face, but soon recedes again, leaving him quite pallid.

“All London knows a good deal that does not exist!”

“*Il n’y a pas de fumée sans feu,*” she says sneeringly.

“Zai is too good, too pure, to deceive any man,” he answers quietly, but the remark about Carl rankles in his mind. “You don’t understand your sister, Miss Beranger, or you would not depreciate

your own judgment of human nature by believing her capable of deceit, or falsity, or evil of any kind! If all women were like her the world would be a paradise!”

“Fools’ paradise!” she cries contemptuously. “I certainly never gave *you* credit for being hoodwinked by a few babyish ways and innocent smiles! a man of *your* mind!” she goes on frankly – a frankness which is the very essence of consummate flattery – but he is not to be taken in.

“Thanks for the pretty compliment! it would turn my head if I was younger, coming from such fresh scarlet lips,” he replies with a Jesuitical smile; “but I am getting quite old, and as hard as adamant; not even *your* approbation can make my mind rise to the height of folly which would discover flaws in angels or paint a lily black.”

“I really think you have begun to hate me!” she says passionately, with tears welling up in her eyes; “Have you?”

He looks at her for a moment steadily. He has thought her face, in spite of its beauty, false, wicked, and meretricious. He sees it now lovely in its creamy tints, its superb eyes, its chiselled features, and its waves of dusky hair, and withal a soft and tender expression leavening the whole.

“No!” he answers slowly. “I don’t hate you at all. It depends on yourself, Gabrielle, if I hate you later!”

She marks at once the relenting in his features, and, like the busy bee, improves the shining hour.

“You’ll *never* hate me, for pity’s sake!” she cries, and flinging herself down on the path she wreathes her arms round his knees, while her fierce black eyes, with a good deal of the tiger-cat in their depths, seem to devour greedily his handsome face. “Delaval! who will love you as I do? who will hunger and thirst for your every word and look like me? Oh if you were ever so poor and humble, but still yourself, I would slave for you, *die* for you! only – only – I could not bear that any other woman should cling to you like this!” and with a sudden spring she throws herself on his breast, panting, breathless, quivering from head to foot. “Delaval, you have pretended to love me. You have kissed me, and you have made me love *you*, till I am mad with misery, till I lose sight of all that women hold dear – pride – reserve – delicacy! For mercy’s sake don’t give me up, and place an insuperable bar between us two!”

But he coolly puts her aside – not roughly, but very determinedly.

“So!” she says, standing tall and erect before him. “So! words are of no avail. Love is a theme you have heard so often that its name has an empty sound! You are an honourable man, Lord Delaval! Your conscience can never prick you. For you have never acted basely, cruelly, to anyone in your life!” she cries, with a sneer.

He feels quite an aversion to her as he answers: “Men may be dishonourable towards women, perhaps. But rely upon it, it is the woman’s fault if they are so! Men may act cruelly, basely, but I’ll be sworn baseness and cruelty have been forced from them in order to check a woman’s undisciplined feelings, in order to recall a woman to the decorum which belongs to her sex! I think, Miss Beranger, since I am not honoured by your good opinion, my best move will be to say ‘Good-bye!’ ”

She feels that she has played her game wretchedly. The man is a vain man; and instead of reaching his heart through fair means, she has lost her temper, wounded his *amour propre*, and placed a further barrier betwixt them. Once more she is down on her knees, her clasped hands lifted, her face quivering with emotion. Gabrielle is a born actress; but now her acting is supremely good, for there is a deal of genuine feeling in it.

“Delaval! Forgive! forgive! I was mad to speak as I did! Oh I could kill myself for it! Say you forgive me, Delaval!”

But he stands motionless and impassive still.

“You won’t? Have you grown utterly hard and cold and strange then to me? Have you no mercy, no pity, no compunction? Can you face me like a stock or a stone, and trample on my heart like this? Don’t you know that you gave me the right to love you – by your kisses, by the specious words that

have fallen from your lips? And I believed in them! I believed that some day I should be your wife! Oh Delaval! if I have showed an undisciplined mind, a want of decorum, it is your fault. You are a man, I but a poor weak loving woman. You are the stronger, I but the weaker vessel. It is you who should have saved me from myself. It is you who should have placed a dam against the sluice-gates of a love that is going to wreck my whole life! Delaval, dearest, say, have you *never* cared for me? Has it all been untrue, a hideous delusion, a chimera of my own brain? – a device of the Devil to lull me in a slumber of Paradise only to awake to a full sense of his tortures? Oh, if I could die! If I could die! For I have nothing to live for now – nothing! I *shall* die; for I could not live and see another come between my Heaven and me! I could curse her!”

Lord Delaval winces a little at this. Curses are hard words to come near the soft little tender girl he is going to marry, and whose words to him are as shy as the light of a star.

But, just for once, he is taken rather aback. Shoals of women have loved him, and reproached him, but never like this. It is the first time he has evoked such a fierce tornado, and for a moment it staggers him. Then he becomes conscious of a feeling of thankfulness that this woman, beautiful and adoring, is not going to be his *wife*!

“I can do nothing but regret!” he says gently. “My faith is pledged to your sister, and – and – forgive me if I say that I do not wish to recall it! It is kinder to you, and kinder to myself, to speak openly!”

After this, nothing can be said, she feels.

She rises slowly from her knees, and stands a little apart. After all, she is not bad, she is not lost to shame; and it dyes her cheek crimson, while her lids droop over the fire in her eyes, and her mouth trembles – as much perhaps with wrath as sorrow.

What man can look utterly unmoved on such a spectacle as this?

“I feel so much for you,” he says quite softly, “but Fate has decreed our paths to divide, and who can act against Fate? My faith, as I said, is pledged to Zai; but there is no reason that you and I, Gabrielle, should be foes. I shall always care for you, always take an interest in you, always be glad to be a *brother* to you!”

“A *brother*!” she mutters. “I am no hypocrite! I could never feel like a sister towards you, and I will not pretend it! But we’ll part in peace! Only – only – !”

She flings her arms round him, and lifts up wild wet eyes, their fire and wrath all quenched in the passion that floods her whole being, “Say that you *have* loved me, if you do not love me now!”

It takes not only a perfect man, but a strong one, to reject a pleading woman, especially if her prayer is for Love, and the lips with which she utters it are fresh and tempting; and Lord Delaval is an imperfect man, assuredly.

So he stoops; and while her flushed stormy face lies against his breast, he kisses her, but only on the cheek, with the comfortable conviction that he has preserved his loyalty to Zai intact by avoiding Gabrielle’s lips. Most men now a-days are so addicted to splitting hairs!

“Good-bye!” she whispers, “I cannot stay here and see you and her together!”

She says it so tragically, that he half smiles. He has always thought her an excellent actress, but now she excels herself.

“Nonsense, Gabrielle!” he answers carelessly. “For God’s sake don’t make a scandal whatever you do! If we *have* made love – how many men and women do the same – without one or the other bringing the house down about their ears. You are not the only girl I have kissed and vowed all sorts of things to, but no one else has made me repent my folly as you have done. Come, kiss me – a kiss of peace – and forget that a kiss of love has ever been exchanged between us. We must all bow to the inevitable, and you cannot expect to be exempt.”

“But the inevitable in this case does not come from the hand of Providence, but from the hand of the man who ought to be the last to hurt me!” she says, passionately. “I *will* kiss you – ay, kiss

you a dozen times; but, Delaval, they will be the kisses that one gives to the man one loves best, and upon whom one will never look again!”

She kisses him as she speaks – kisses him on his brow, and eyes, and lips, wildly, fiercely; then she almost pushes him from her.

“Good-bye!”

“Good-bye!” he answers quietly, “since you will have it so; and when we meet again – ”

“We shall *never* meet again!” she says, abruptly.

“What folly!” he exclaims, impatiently. “I hope we never shall, until you have regained your senses, and don’t act like a mad woman.”

“If I am a mad woman, you are the man who has made me so!” she retorts, impetuously.

“God forgive you for it, for I cannot!” and turning on her heel, she is soon out of view.

He shrugs his shoulders, and forgetting all about her, saunters back to the house whistling an opera bouffe air.

But though the opera bouffe air runs in his head, in his mind there is an unpleasant conviction that Gabrielle will make a scandal of some sort.

“These hot-headed, hot-hearted women are the very devil,” he mutters angrily to himself; “and I should not be surprised if she goes and peaches to old Beranger and her Ladyship – but no matter – a coronet, and a good-looking fellow like myself, to say nothing of the tin my dear miserly old dad hoarded up, are proof against any back-biters, and I’ll marry Zai yet, dear little thing. I do believe she is beginning to love me!”

But even with this comforting reflection, he gives a little start at luncheon when he sees one chair empty, and hears Trixy whisper to her sister, “Gabrielle is so queer to-day, queerer than usual. I really think she’s going off her head.”

Later on, at dinner, come Miss Beranger’s excuses.

“Gabrielle is not very well, and cannot come down,” Lady Beranger remarks indifferently, going on with her *potage à la Reine*, and Lord Delaval makes a tolerable meal – drinks a little more than usual, but not too much (wine bibbing is not one of his faults), laughs and talks a little nervously, and even is slightly *distract*, while Zai sings in her fresh sweet soprano a bit of Swinburne, set to pathetic music —

“If I could but know after all,
I might cease to hunger and ache,
Though your heart were ever so small,
If it were not a stone or a snake.”

He seems to look past her dainty chesnut-crowned head, as he listens to these words, at Gabrielle – Gabrielle, with her wild wet eyes, her white passion-tossed features, her clinging arms and bitter reproach.

All night long, through his sleep, they come back to him, and will not be thrust away.

Once more, at breakfast, the empty chair faces him, and in spite of himself he says to his hostess, “I hope Miss Beranger is better to-day?”

“Yes! I think so,” Lady Beranger answers; “at any rate, well enough to travel. Gabrielle went off by the early train to Southampton, I believe, didn’t she, Trixy?”

“I think so, mamma; at least, Fanchette told me. She has gone, but she never said good-bye.”

“Ah! just like her,” Lady Beranger observes, carelessly. “Gabrielle is so queer, so *bizarre*, you know.” And she takes another help of *fillet de sole*, and gives no further thought to her stepdaughter.

“Will you come out on the lawn, the morning is perfect?” Lord Delaval says to Zai, when they make a move from the table, and she, who has determined to love him and obey him, turns up a fair sweet face, and smiling, runs away for her hat.

He looks after her slender figure with visible admiration in his eyes. Zai is his beau ideal, *pro tem.* of womankind.

“Don’t be long away,” he calls, softly; and he longs to have her with him, where, sending the *convenances au diable*, he can gaze his fill on her beauty, and kiss her to his heart’s content.

“A letter for you! my lord.”

He starts and stammers as he asks:

“For me?”

And, as he takes the sealed missive in his hand, a sort of foreboding makes him pale and shrink from opening it.

He even forgets to wait for Zai, but walks out of the house, and down towards the far end of the grounds, before he breaks the seal.

“When you read this, Delaval, I shall be dead. ‘What folly!’ I hear you say. But folly or not, it is the truth. Oh, Delaval, I wonder I did not die yesterday! when you killed me with your hard words and looks. I cannot, I say, live and know that the love and caresses that are all the world to me are given to another woman. I have no home, no friends, no money. What then is left to me but death! Good-bye! my love! my love! My last prayer will be that some day you will say to yourself, ‘She loved me best of all.’ Good-bye!”

“*Gabrielle.*”

When he has read it all, his first thought is, “What a very unpleasant state of affairs.”

He cannot show the letter to his future wife or her people. He cannot give a hint that Gabrielle may have committed the atrocious folly of putting an end to herself. True, the uncertainty of her fate does not conduce to his comfort or his equanimity of mind, but it is not to be thought of that he should cut his own throat by showing her letter.

“Here goes!” he says, at last, with a sigh of relief, as the torn fragments of Gabrielle’s last words scatter to the four winds, and he turns with a tender smile to meet his betrothed, who comes slowly and sadly, as it seems to him, up the garden walk.

“I thought you were never coming, darling,” he whispers in his softest voice, while his ultramarine eyes look into her own longingly, yearningly.

But Zai’s grey eyes do not respond, and her face is very grave as she falters:

“Gabrielle! oh, how shall I tell you Gabrielle – ?”

“Yes,” he questions feverishly, staring at her in his bewilderment.

“*Poor Gabrielle is dead!*”

“Dead?”

“Yes! We thought she had gone to Southampton, but she hasn’t – for – oh! *what* could have made her do it?” she cries, looking up with piteous eyes into his white face. “She has drowned herself in the river! *What* could have made her do such a terrible thing?”

“God knows!” he says.

It is quite true what Zai has told him.

Close to the brink of the Urling river that runs through the Sandilands estate they have found Gabrielle’s hat. How well they know it, the dainty hat with its pompon of vivid scarlet and black!

For five days they drag the river without success, but on the sixth day a human form is brought and laid on the silvery bed of sand.

A woman’s form, tall and slender like Gabrielle’s, yet so unlike, for it is terrible to look upon. The light summer dress she wore is tattered and draggled and discoloured beyond recognition, and the face, – but none who have known her can look twice on the fearful lineaments that the water have so cruelly caressed and changed.

Not even her own father can believe that this awful thing lying at his feet can be all that is left of his beautiful daughter, Gabrielle Beranger.

* * * * *

Again Lady Beranger has to mourn like her fellow “quality” in “deep kilts” – procured on credit – but this time she has a certain satisfaction in it, which she salves down her conscience with by saying:

“Gabrielle was such a queer girl that she *must* have come to an out-of-the-way end. She was so fast, so *bizarre*, so dreadfully indifferent to the *bienséances* and the *convenances*, you know, and, dear Marchioness, is it not far better to have drowned herself than to have gone to the bad?”

The Marchioness, who has had a *jeunesse orageuse* herself, shakes her dyed curls solemnly and virtuously.

“Very true, dear Lady Beranger. Once a girl has got the bit between her teeth, she is *sure* to ride to the Devil, and poor dear Gabrielle always struck me as the sort that go the fastest. Well! well! we must console ourselves by the hope that the best thing possible has happened to her. And how long are the weddings put off for?”

“Till November. This is not the first time Gabrielle has inconvenienced me, but I suppose we *must* delay the marriages for two months, or people will talk. All these sort of things entail so much expense too; no sooner has one gone into half-mourning for my dear lost Baby, but there’s the deep black for Gabrielle again. It really seems to me that she only thought of herself, and did not care a bit for the annoyance and inconvenience she caused to others!”

CHAPTER II. CARLTON CONWAY

“But love so lightly plighted,
Our love with torch unlighted,
Paused near us unaffrighted,
Who found and left him free.
None seeing us cloven in sunder,
Will weep, or laugh, or wonder,
Light love stands clear of thunder,
And safe from winds at sea.”

November has set in with its yellow fogs and gloom, and the Berangers are back in Belgrave Square, for the dual weddings come off in another ten days, and the *trousseau* requires her ladyship's taste and personal supervision in the finishing touches.

Trixy, whose nature is made up of frivolity and bagatelles, and to whom the colour of a dress or the shape of a bonnet are solemn subjects for reflection and consideration, is an enthusiastic shopper, but not so Zai.

It is seldom that she can call up courage enough to wade through Elise's and Worth's establishments, to devote her whole and sole attention to the important point as to whether her chemisette shall be edged with Valenciennes or Honiton.

Zai is studiously learning to care for the man she is going to marry in a few days, and this subject engrosses her to the expulsion of all extraneous matter.

Down on her knees beside her little white curtained bed she prays that the gift of “loving” Lord Delaval may be given her. Downstairs, while he sits beside her, the same prayer goes on in her heart, for, born and bred in Belgravia, Zai is the best little thing that ever tried to do her duty towards God and man.

This much has been vouchsafed her, that Carlton Conway, who has been the stumbling block in her path to reaching the goal she desires, has never turned up on the scene to open by his presence the old wound, which Zai firmly believes now is closed for always.

Once she has heard him mentioned at an afternoon tea, but it was only to the effect that his marriage with Miss Meredyth was put off for a while.

Zai has never forgotten, never will forget perhaps, the days when Carl was all in all to her. She lived an enchanted life during the time, for all the love her girl's heart knew swept into one great channel and poured itself out at his feet. Paradise had opened for her out of the dull monotony of Belgravian life and moments – golden with the light of romance – had shone on her with a radiance like unto no other radiance of time. And she certainly had not stayed then to count the cost of the bitter desolation that followed.

After all Eve herself would hardly have surrendered the memory of Eden for all the joys to be found on earth, and she must have dreamed of it full many a time and waked to weep such tears of unavailing regret as have watered this sad planet of ours most plenteously.

The London world outside is full of fog and gloom, with a few feeble gas lamps struggling through it, but inside the drawing-room in Belgrave Square with its firelight and luxury is conducive enough to “dreaming.”

So Zai gives herself up to this delicious pastime, and, strangely enough, Carl does not appear as central figure. Possibly her earnest prayers for oblivion of him and his falsity have been answered;

anyway it is a blond face with deep blue eyes and hair that shines up like gold under the sunbeams, that her mind's eye sees, while her broad white lids are closed.

“Dreaming, my sweet! Is it of me?”

Some one bends over her. Some one's hand drops softly on her shoulder, and when she looks up, some one's handsome face is very close to her own. Suddenly – Zai blushed furiously afterwards when she thought of it – she slips her arm round his neck and draws down his head till his lips rest upon her own.

It is the first voluntary caress she has given him.

To say that Lord Delaval is amazed, bewildered, enchanted, all in the same moment, would be to say very little indeed. A great joy and wonder take possession of him, and for a second he is almost an unresponsive party, but in the next instant he has her in his arms, close against his heart, and to indemnify himself for loss of time, he rains down kisses on her charming face from brow to chin.

Kisses that come so fast – so fast, so eagerly, so fiercely even, that Zai stands almost stunned with all that her first demonstration of love for him has called down on her.

Then he sits down on the sofa beside her and, putting his arm round her, draws her near him.

He had felt that kiss she gave him go through him like an electric shock that sent the blood rushing through his veins, and made his pulses throb hard.

Scores of women had offered him kisses before, and he had accepted them or rejected them according to his mood, but this kiss, that the girl he is going to marry had volunteered of her own accord, seemed quite different to the rest. Then a sudden thought came like a stab.

“Zai,” he asks gravely, “are you sure —*quite* sure – that you are acting according to your feelings in marrying me?”

She looks up at him in surprise. His face is quite pale, but his eyes seem to burn strangely.

“Quite sure,” she answers quietly, convinced in her own mind that she *is* sure – perfectly sure of the fact.

“Darling Zai! You have never given me a chance before to tell you how I love you – love you with all my heart! to tell you that I will strain every nerve to make you care for me as I care for you! But there is one thing you must confess to me. Loving you as I do I shall be a very lenient judge, my child. Do you love me enough to be true to me always?”

She knows she does not love him as she had loved Carl. That had been a mad phantom, possessing her heart and her brain. But she knows if she marries this man she will make him a good and true wife.

She is *sure* that, in deed and word, and even thought, she will be loyal and faithful to him always.

The fitful pink colour comes and goes on her cheek, the big grey eyes droop as they have a habit of doing, but a smile – a little ghost of a smile, hovers round her pretty red lips.

“I love you, and I shall be true to you always!” she says, and Lord Delaval, cynical as he is – sceptical of all things, *feels* that her words are genuine, and he starts and his face grows radiant.

“Zai!” he cries breathlessly.

And bending, he puts his hand under the rounded chin and lifts up the little drooping face towards him. Zai's eyes are still downcast, but he manages to read their language pretty well, and he sees the lips part in something between a quiver and a laugh.

“Is it so – say?” he whispers passionately, throwing his arms round her and gathering her close until her face rests against his. “Zai, for God's sake, is it so? Don't —*don't* take away my new-born hope, but tell me that you really love me and only me!”

“I love only you.”

And when she says this Zai feels that her prayers are answered, and the old love for Carlton Conway is conquered.

“Look at me, my darling child!”

She looks up, and in the soft grey eyes he reads honesty and truth, and on the impulse of the moment he stoops, and his lips cling feverishly, almost fiercely, to hers.

Zai starts away from him then, and for a second she seems scared, white, trembling.

His wild, fierce kiss has sent the blood back from her cheek to her heart, that throbs with a pain that makes her faint and sick. Then the pretty pink colour creeps slowly back, and of the passionate caress that has lingered on her mouth there is born a new feeling for her betrothed husband.

“Zai, you hated me once, I believe,” he says reproachfully. “I wonder why?”

“Never mind, since I love you now,” she replies.

“You hated me when you cared for Conway, Zai!”

He looks at her keenly as he deals what she thinks a random shot, but which is really a premeditated speech, for ever since Gabrielle’s words, Lord Delaval has been jealous for the very first time in his life.

Never before has he felt the pangs of the green-eyed monster. It may be because he has never before perhaps felt a true and pure love.

Zai laughs, but the laugh is a little forced.

“You see, Delaval, if you did not care about me you would not be jealous! The past belongs to me, you know, but the future is yours – won’t that content you?” she asks softly. “Shall I promise that it is only you that I shall love for the rest of my life?”

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