Wingfield Lewis

The Maid of Honour: A Tale of the Dark Days of France. Volume 1 of 3

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CHAPTER I.
ON THE VOLCANO, 1789

Although there was no cash in silken fob or broidered pocket, the Elect denied themselves no luxury. Bejewelled Fashion was sumptuously clad: my ladies quarrelled and intrigued, danced and gambled-my lords slept off the fumes of wine, and mopped the wounds begot of midnight brawl; then drank and fought again.

Money? No credit even. Trade was at a standstill, yet the court was uproariously gay.

Money and credit-sinews of pleasure as well as business-having flitted from lively Paris, you might suppose that the wheels of Society would cease to turn-that the flower-decked car of gilded Juggernaut would come creeping to a standstill. Not yet. Impelled by the impulse of its own velocity, it continued to crush on awhile. Those who knew were numbed by the chill shadow of the inevitable, or rendered callous by the knowledge of their

helplessness. Those who were deaf and blind groped blissfully on in their lighthearted ignorance. Selfish all, depraved most, the blue-blooded sang in merry chorus, "Let us eat and drink that the worms may grow fat on us." Not so the gaunt crowds whose blood was but mud and water. As their long-suffering ancestors had monotonously done, they groaned in unison, crying to God for death, as the only release from misery.

What if whole villages were decimated by famine? What if plague and starvation stalked through the towns? My lords and my ladies cared not, for they were poised too high to see. Were the grovelling creatures slaves or insects? Slaves, for they delved patiently, with moans that were vain bleatings as of sheep; whereas outraged insects for the most part sting.

We all know that the first duty of serfs is to labour for their betters: their second, when the worn machinery is out of gear, to retire underground with promptitude. How unseemly-nay, revolting, therefore, is their conduct when, weary of groaning and of teeth-gnashing, they belabour with fists instead!

The scene we look upon is a tranquil and a pretty one, despite certain vague and ominous rumours which, intangible, permeate the air. The favourite saloon of Her Majesty, Marie Antoinette, in the Palace of the Tuileries, is a small, square chamber decorated with raised garlands, flutes, and tambourines in carved wood, painted a dead white, mellowed now by the glimmer of many candles, shaded. Curtains and furniture are yellow, embroidered with gold; the bare floor is waxed and polished, reflecting the

costly and varied rainbow garb of some forty assembled guests. Through open casements-it is a warm evening in July-we mark the majestic outline of the venerable Louvre cut black against the blue-a calm unclouded blue, loftily oblivious of angry curls of darkling smoke which two days since uprose from the ruins of the stormed Bastile. Doors as well as windows are spread wide to woo the air; a bevy of ladies, glittering with gems, are fanning themselves languidly. Through the portals on the right you obtain a glimpse of the remains of supper: a dainty repast, fit for fastidious fairies; such an ideal cosy feast as the queen loved to conjure for her familiars. Through the left door we may perceive an array of green tables with gilt legs, at which gentlemen clad in satins of delicate hue are squabbling over the devil's books. Their voices from time to time grow angry, their talk unduly loud. But for the adjacent presence of the queen, swords might be drawn and blood spilt. Young Monsieur de Castellane, officer in the Swiss Guard, has just lost his paternal acres to the Marquis de Gange, a fact which, in the latter, seems to evoke no sign of interest. With the usual luck of players who are quite indifferent, Fortune had befriended the marquis, and yet, as things were, the prize was an empty bauble-a mere meaningless array of lands with high-sounding names which looked vastly well-on paper.

The Marquis de Gange was an absentminded person, given to reverie and the contemplation of the infinite, and it is somewhat annoying to lose even paper property to one so utterly unappreciative.

Roused by the congratulations of the surrounding group of butterflies, the marquis descended for a moment to earth, and laughed lightly.

"A profitable stake to win, in sooth," he observed, with a yawn. "Castellane! I hereby resign your empty title-deeds, having quite enough such foolish lumber of my own. Your part of the country is a caldron, mine is a furnace. Thank heaven, my wife's estates are in a land of peace, or, like many more, we should be beggars."

"It is not given to everyone to mate with a great heiress," remarked rueful Castellane, feeling in his empty pocket.

"You should look out for one," said the marquis, serenely smiling, "for you know that since the Third Estate has raised its ugly head, you don't dare to show your nose at Castellane. The tenants would growl of rights of man, and prod your silk stockings with their pitchforks."

"That's true enough," sighed the young scapegrace, with a puzzled air. "Though they deserve the galleys for their temerity, they are patted on the back by our too lenient sovereign-a mob of insolent ragamuffins! Last time I travelled south, I was worried to fiddle-strings by deputations whom I declined to see-a parcel of unpractical idiots, who, when I demanded rents, babbled of redress of grievances. Really, de Gauge, you may keep the title-deeds, for, since no one will lend a louis on them, they are no better than a musty mockery."

The butterflies enjoyed the jest and laughed in chorus. There

was something delightfully whimsical about the fact that the acres for which heroes had bled, and which had been enjoyed in majestic fashion by a long line of noble ancestors, should-as in the fairy tale-be transmuted into heaps of dead and mouldy leaves.

After the laugh came silence, for were they not all in the same battered boat? No matter. Whate'er betide, they must sink or swim together.

"Awkward customers, the Third Estate," some one remarked presently. "That untoward matter of the Bastile may prove an evil precedent."

"Pooh!" yawned a stout old gentleman, whose weatherbeaten visage was round and of a bluish red. "A flash in the pan-a paltry riot-a piece of low impertinence which ministers, if they were not hopelessly idiotic, should have foreseen and smothered. Stick to the title-deeds, son-in-law. If you live long enough, they will be useful some day."

"No," replied de Gange, carelessly. "Thanks to you, maréchal, my nest's well feathered. Gabrielle has enough for both."

The wealthy old Maréchal de Brèze looked pleased. When you have hit on a suitable match for your heiress during an epidemic of impecuniosity, it is well to be assured that the fortunate spouse is not a greedy gold-seeker. "Clovis!" he cried heartily, "give me your hand. You are queer and dreamy, beyond my poor comprehension; but I believe-yes, I do! – that you are an upright and honest man!"

"Treason, maréchal! High treason! How dare you say rude things of ministers? Come and join the ladies. We affect learning, remember, nowadays, and can bandy wisdom with the best of you!"

It was the magical voice of Marie herself, whose silver tones had fluttered so many hearts to their undoing; whose radiant beauty and light spirits had given rise to such dark intrigues. The gentlemen, obeying the merry summons, streamed into the saloon, and were soon bowing, with bent spines and squared elbows, over the tiny cups of coffee, which, as her wont was, she distributed with her own hands. The king was not present, for he abhorred gambling and late hours, and on the *soirées intimes* of his consort invariably sought refuge in his study.

"Louise de Savoye," commanded the queen in mock tragic tones, "hand round the cakes. Perform your office of mistress of the household. From your fair fingers they will taste all the sweeter."

"Promise, then, not to talk of the horrid *tiers état*," replied the lady addressed, with a little shudder. "Those who saw the dreadful women dancing and shouting like fiends as they marched in triumph from the Bastile, will not forget the spectacle."

"Madame la Princesse de Lamballe was always nervous," laughed M. de Castellane.

"Yes," replied the princess, simply. "I don't know why, but I am desperately afraid of a mob."

"We were all a little frightened at first," observed the queen; "for when we heard the booming of artillery which sounded so terribly close, and beheld the infatuated madcaps carrying away their dead, we could not comprehend the freak. 'Tis a pity it was crowned with success, for it will put foolish ideas into ignorant minds. But it will lead to nothing, I am assured, and all's well that ends well. When the king announced this morning that he was going to the Assembly, without guards or escort, I thought he must have lost his wits; but events showed that he was wise, as he always is. His confidence in the loyalty of the deputies combined with his simple and touching address, excited the keenest enthusiasm. The shouting throng escorted him on foot all the way hither to the palace. I am not ashamed to say that as from a balcony Lamballe and I contemplated the affecting scene of warm devotion, we clasped each other and wept."

"For every precious tear," murmured de Castellane, "we'll have the life-drops of the canaille!"

"God forbid!" ejaculated the queen, with sudden pallor. "I wish them no ill if they would spare his majesty their vagaries. Love them I cannot, for I am not Christian enough to love my enemies. I wonder-I wonder-"

"What, dear mistress?" inquired a tall young lady plainly dressed in white, who was the most beautiful member even of that favoured circle. "What causes our queen to wonder?"

"I wonder what will be the end-that's all, dear Gabrielle," laughed the volatile Marie, recovering her spirits. "What will

happen to me; to our precious Lamballe; to you; to your shocking pedant of a husband there, who as usual is in cloudland?"

The beautiful lady whom she called Gabrielle, glanced at the abstracted Marquis de Gange, who was her husband, and shivered. There was an odd look upon his face sometimes which she had not the wit to decipher. What was he doing in cloudland so far removed from her? Then, when he dropped down to earth again, he would smile vaguely but pleasantly enough, and the strange impression would fade from her mind. Her wistful eyes were more often fixed on him than his on hers, which is curious, considering her beauty.

"The veil which hides the future is a precious boon," reflected the queen, "and yet we all burn to pierce it."

"That is because we should not," observed Madame de Lamballe, with conviction, "on the principle of Eve and the apple, you know. A fortune-teller once took my hand to read my fortune, and what she read on my palm was so appalling that she fainted. I have had the discretion never to inquire further."

"Pooh, I am not so prudent," mused her majesty. "Three times have I sought to pierce the veil, with the same result-repentance."

"I pray you in pity-hush!" implored the Marquise de Gange. "My husband dragged me once to see a horrible old hag who lived like a savage in a den somewhere-I know not where. She performed incantations and drew my horoscope. It makes my flesh creep to think of it!"

"Was it so ghastly?" inquired Marie Antoinette in a low tone

of awe. "So was mine. Horoscopes are nightmares. And so it seems was that of our beloved Louise. I wonder-how I wonder what will be the end of it?"

She glanced around at the company, and all looked sympathetically glum. If the gipsies had with one accord been so audaciously rude to the three beauties as to hint at unpleasant things in the future, what was to be done? Was a crusade to be preached, for the annihilation of the peccant race? Fat old de Brèze might pay expenses, and, like Peter the Hermit, rally the avenging force. Old de Brèze was a soldier who had won his spurs, yet instead of sounding a clarion and calling squires to arm him *cap-a-pie*, he only shuffled in his chair and snuffled uneasily while de Castellane snorted with ardour. Clearly the crusade was not likely to answer; it was a trifle out of date; and yet the fact remained that the fiat of the Fates had gone forth against the lovely trio. The Marquis de Gange was a mystic, well acquainted with the tortuous ways and spiteful tricks of the fatal three. Perhaps he would kindly elucidate the situation? No. His wife gazed wistfully at him. He looked furtively at her, then, smiling, lowered his eyes, and again sank into his accustomed reverie. The marquise sighed deeply, and concealed her face behind her fan.

The April visage of the queen was sombre; then the cloud cleared.

"Are we not silly," she exclaimed, "to sit trembling before a bogey? A fig for the gipsies! Despite their lugubrious hints here am I, after over fifteen years of prosperous wedded life, queen

of the land most favoured by nature in the world, adored by my husband and my children. What can woman desire more than complete domestic bliss? What say you, Gabrielle?"

The Marquise de Gange, target for a circle of inquiring eyes, blushed crimson and turned away.

"This is too good!" cried the queen in glee, drawing her friend towards her to imprint a kiss upon her brow. "You naughty, wayward girl! You are wicked and tempt Providence. A blush and something like a tear-ay, and a sigh, from the bosom of Gabrielle, Marquise de Gange-the only woman in the country who has any money-the most beautiful girl in France, whose wonderful complexion has gained for her the sobriquet of 'the Lily.' Yes, you are, and I admit it without envy. Blessed with a passable husband and two lovely babes, and an admirable mother and a doting father! Fie! You are ungrateful, but we must not see you punished."

Marie Antoinette's enjoyment increased as she poured forth her raillery, and marked the confusion of the marquise.

"Monsieur de Gange. Descend to earth and come into court!" she cried. "Confess! What have you done to Gabrielle? Have you lost heavily at cards? No? You are jealous that her name should be the toast on every lip? No? You are put out because she understands nothing of the philosopher's stone? Not even that? I give it up. Fortune has spoiled you, child. As Figaro says, '*Qu'avez vous fait pour tants de biens? Vous vous êtes donnée la peine de naître-rien de plus!*'"

The marquis made a low bow and contemplated his fair wife with a moonlit kind of satisfaction, but answered nothing.

"He disdains to plead!" laughed Madame de Lamballe.

"Guilty or not guilty-say!" cried Marie Antoinette. "Dumb? Maréchal de Brèze! we surrender to you the prisoner that you may investigate and do your duty. We have respectful confidence in that strange phenomenon, a rich man, at a time when all others are paupers. Look after Gabrielle, Mr. Money-bag! Shield her from a designing husband who, I begin to believe, conceals the raffish vices of a rake under the mask of recondite erudition."

The Marquise de Gange was unnecessarily perturbed by the lively sally, and tapped her wooden heel upon the floor.

"Alack, madam!" declared the marquis, compelled to speak, "I regret to be so unmodish as to have few of the fashionable vices. Instead of pleading in my own behalf, I would, if I dared, take up the cudgels for another. Doctor Mesmer-"

"The arch charlatan!" exclaimed the queen, raising both hands in protest.

"Not so. Others have aped his ways; have draped themselves in tawdry frippery which bore some semblance to his robes. In spite of calumny, and persecution, and fraudulent imitation and roguish arts, the master remains the master still, although he be unjustly banished by those whom he has benefited."

"The statue has come to life!" tittered Madame de Lamballe. "Cagliostro was unmasked as a cheat, so the one who went before wisely shook off his dust at him. Let us all agree to be convinced

that Mesmer is a persecuted saint. We have the marquis's word for it. Let us have Mesmer back at once from banishment. Perchance he will employ his occult essences to calm the Parisian mob!"

"The king will not permit him to return to France," the queen said doubtfully; "yet as an empiric he was fascinating."

"When your majesty deigns to say I am in cloudland," remarked the marquis, with a high-bred courtesy, in which was a tinge of scorn, "you will understand that my spirit is on earth-at Spa-the refuge in exile of the master."

"I see it all!" said Madame de Lamballe, flourishing her fan. "It is Gabrielle who is jealous-and of Mesmer! What singular complications are produced by mystical alliances. A husband has a lovely wife, for whom everyone else is sighing, and is no whit jealous of *her* because he is an absorbed neophyte at the fount of wisdom. The prophet usurps his soul and his will. Where is the poor wife then?"

"What cruel things are said in jest!" Gabrielle cried hotly, breaking her silence at last. "I am not unhappy; and if I were, it would be no one's concern but mine. I care no sou for Mesmer or Cagliostro, or any of the conjuring rout. Jealous of such creatures-faugh!"

A shrunken dame who had been slumbering in a corner awoke with a start, and guiltily conscious of a nap, became garrulous in a weak piping treble like the irresponsible murmur of a rivulet.

"Your majesty is misinformed," she babbled plaintively.

"People will say such things, and go to mass o' Sundays. Our daughter Gabrielle is happy as the day is long-why not? Clovis isn't jealous one bit, and quite right too. He lets her do as she likes, go where she likes, doesn't care where she goes. Perfect trust is a fine thing, but I often tell him that it is rash to throw so fair a creature into temptation, for who knows what they'll do until they are tempted? Gabrielle, I must admit, though quite a saint, can be as provoking as saints often were. And they, the saints, were so dreadfully frail sometimes, and so easily forgiven, and then held up to us as patterns. I can't quite make it out. If I had ever dreamed of doing half the shocking things that the canonized saints did, I should- Eh? – oh!"

With that the rivulet ceased to flow as abruptly as it had begun, and the queen, who had with difficulty curbed her merriment, looked round for the cause of interruption. She beheld a little stout gentleman, with a round, blue-red face, in a state of imminent explosion. He whom she had declared to command the respect due to wealth, showed signs of choking from exasperation. His features had swelled till his bead-like eyes were scarcely visible; his finger nails were clenched into his palms. It was some seconds ere he could splutter out his spleen. Then with a deprecating look at her majesty, he gasped out-

"Majesté, pardon her. A fool! Always and for ever a fool-and my wife too."

Then, forgetting the presence in which he sat, he continued in white heat-

"I'll dash your stupid head against the wall when we get home. To dare to make your own daughter ridiculous before this company! To make your own flesh and blood absurd, through your incorrigible idiocy! Not that you can do it, for she's an angel straight from heaven. Provoking, forsooth! My darling-the idol of my heart! The Marquis de Gange knows better than to ill-treat his wife. If he did-well; old battered soldier though I am, I'd be even with him in a way he'd not forget."

"Oh-so harsh-always so harsh!" whimpered the rivulet in choking gasps. "Quite like dear M. Montgolfier's fire-balloon! I did not mean-"

"Hold your tongue!" snorted the maréchal in a menacing whisper-"and wait till we get home."

The situation, like many born of jesting, grew embarrassing. Old soldiers, especially when rich, may be allowed a certain freedom. But the ways of the barrack-yard may not be introduced into palaces. Marie Antoinette was not averse to a certain licence, which should banish for the time being the buckramed etiquette that she so loathed. But a family skeleton suddenly popping out of ambush to shake all its joints and grin with all its teeth! How uncomely a spectacle at the Tuileries! The assembled company, too, evidently enjoyed the fun, and would surely spread the story all over Paris on the morrow as the style of repartée that obtained at the queen's gatherings. If the episode, harmless in itself, were to reach the king's ears, he would be annoyed, and justly in such times as these, when everybody's hand was beginning to

clutch his neighbour's throat. How many an innocent jest of Marie Antoinette's had already been built by malice into the proportions of a mountain? Unwittingly, she had, as it appeared, set fire to a mine. Gabrielle looked sorely distressed; her husband sullen, in that his pleading had failed, and that he could do nothing on behalf of the *savant* whom he worshipped. Her mother hazily perceived that it would be well to cork down the ebullient effervescence of her prattle, while the beady eyes of the maréchal, moving from the husband to the wife and back again, seemed to have detected the trace of something that was new, the discovery of which was disconcerting.

CHAPTER II.
HUSBAND AND WIFE

When it is so plain to lookers-on that people ought to be happy, how perverse it is of them to be miserable! As the queen had declared, Gabrielle Marquise de Gange had no ostensible excuse for wretchedness. The specks on the sun of her good fortune were so tiny as to be well-nigh invisible. Upon the background of her portrait by Madame le Brun, that ingenious artist had inscribed in a hand so clear that all who ran might read, "The fairest woman of her time."

Mademoiselle Gabrielle de Brèze, when she appeared at court in the capacity of maid of honour, took the town by storm. Veteran lady-killers withdrew gold toothpicks from their gums to vow that so brilliant a complexion, such melting eyes that changed like the moody sea, from blue to deepest violet, such a bewitching little nose, and such deliciously fresh lips, had never been seen before; "and her figure! and her ankle!! and her arm and shoulder!!!" chimed in the younger swains whose hearts were already in their hands to be flung down as a palpitating carpet for her dainty little shoes.

The queen was enchanted with the success of her *protégée*, who was speedily surrounded by an increasing circle of danglers who minced with toes turned out, shook back their costly ruffles,

and lisped the most honeyed compliments from morn to dewy eve. She enjoyed her new position vastly, was blithe as a young bird, and gazed fearlessly on into a future, which seemed an interminable vista paved with roses. Nor was she the least spoilt by adulation. She liked flattery, as every pretty woman does, but looked forward at no very distant period to the sober, substantial enjoyment of calm domestic happiness. When it pleased her parents to provide a spouse, she was prepared to take him to her heart as a dutiful daughter should, and lavish on him all the treasures of a young and guileless affection.

The king was glad of her success, because she was the child of the Maréchal de Brèze, a veteran of the good old school, whose body had been improved and beautified by honourable scars won in his country's battles. As for Madame de Brèze, people endured her existence. She was a fool and a chatterbox, and wrinkled to boot, with an extraordinary capacity for seeing things awry, and sagely commenting on them after the fashion of a Greek chorus. No one took heed of her, but all liked and respected the red-visaged old soldier whose rough rind covered a generous nature, and whose purse-strings were always slack.

For the Maréchal de Brèze was no mere soldier of fortune with naught in his valise except a bâton. He was rich in moneys safely banked with Necker at Geneva; possessed estates in smiling Touraine; and, moreover, was afflicted with the possession of an ancient and dismal chateau on the Loire, whose waters mirrored a labyrinth of high-pitched roofs, gaunt turrets, and

grim gargoyles.

Of noble birth, entrancingly lovely, and an heiress. Heavens! what a combination; and at a time, too, as the queen had remarked, when everyone was out at elbows. It was evident that such a phenomenon must be snapped up at once; and straightway-helter-skelter up the wide stairs of the Hotel de Brèze rushed a mob of needy suitors-a hungry pack, yelling in full cry, whose ravenous ardour so scared madame that she forgot to improve the occasion. They had never loved till now, they cried in unison. Their quarterings were legion, their rent-rolls were miles long. The tenants never paid, and the ermine was somewhat mud-stained, but these were trifling details. They all adored the divine Gabrielle for herself-her angel form alone; that she should happen to be an heiress was another detail, and of course rather a drawback than otherwise.

The maréchal laughed till his round red face was blue, for these disinterested persons oozed with ravening greed. The queen looked grave. To save her favourite from the maw of vultures was a responsibility she would not shirk. A spouse must be found for Gabrielle who might be trusted not to be outrageously bad to her. In these days a good husband of fitting rank was an extinct animal. Warily scanning the horizon, Marie Antoinette fixed, as the fitting swain, on Clovis, Marquis de Gange, and de Brèze agreed with her majesty that Clovis was just the man.

So far as family went, the De Ganges could compete with the

noblest. Acres had dwindled; tenants were recalcitrant; Clovis's income was little more than nominal, but nowadays poverty was modish in the highest circles; and, besides, it is well that the husband of a great heiress should be kept under due control. The cunning old soldier had settled long ago that the spouse of his daughter should not make ducks and drakes of her broad pieces, at least without her full consent. He had arranged in his own mind that he would bind up the money tight, and place it in her hands, hedged about with safeguards when called to another world. Till then he would himself dispense his fortune as his darling should wish and dictate. To this arrangement de Gange was quite agreeable, knowing that the maréchal was no skin-flint who would need abject suing. The old gentleman, who flattered himself that he was a judge of character, scanned the young man's features with keen scrutiny, and on the smooth surface could detect nothing of the ravenous wolf. The marquis was a tall, well-built, handsome fellow, dreamy and absent in manner, pedantic in his ways, a trifle too much enamoured of the crotchets of his day.

In the waning eighteenth century, while ladies were hopelessly frivolous or else weighed down with pedantry, the gentlemen came for the most part under three categories. There was the debauched voluptuary, ruined alike in health, purse, and reputation, whose honour was perforce upon his sleeve, since there was no room in his body for aught but selfishness. Then there was a feeble imitator who was as artistically unsatisfactory

as nondescripts always are, for his fragment of conscience pulled him one way, and his envious admiration of stupendous wickedness another. He was always on the see-saw between vice and virtue, barely within touch of either. The third class was the most interesting, for it was clothed in mystery and draped in paradox. The dark and uncanny and incomprehensible engrossed the minds of this set. Revealed religion having been voted out of date by the encyclopædists and others, it was necessary to replace the broken idol with another. It was affirmed that Nature was moved by secret springs, governed by a world of spirits whom it was possible to coerce and bring under man's dominion. It was discovered that talismans, astrology, magic sciences, were not the vulgar impostures denounced by a jealous priestcraft; that the *genus homo* was composed of two distinct organisms, one visible and one invisible, the latter of which was privileged to roam freely about the universe, paying morning calls in remote planets, communing with angelic hosts. This was a fascinating theory for many reasons. The spirits who pulled our world-strings were good and bad, and alike vulnerable. Clearly, then, it was the distinct duty of philanthropists to fight and conquer those who were responsible for human ills. How delightful a sensation to seize a naughty spirit by the hair and administer a sound drubbing! To wrestle with the one, for instance, who is responsible for gout, and return him tweak for tweak! The yoke of the evil ones must be thrown off, that humanity, comfortably free from pain and sorrow, might sit down and enjoy millennium.

Hence, the dreamy people who vaguely wished well to their fellows, joined the train of mystics, laid claim to superior virtue, and titillated their petty vanity by posing cheaply as philanthropists.

Then think of the refreshing variety which might be introduced into one's amours! A weariful succession of mundane mistresses is so palling to a jaded palate. But according to the new creed, as your earthly tenement was occupied, *faute de mieux*, by commonplace lovemaking and intrigue, your more fortunate other self was blessed by an ethereal Affinity. While, in the flesh, you dallied, for want of something more amusing to do, at the feet of Phryne, your soul was flirting with a seraph somewhere in rarified space. It is gravely and seriously related of the visionary Swedenborg that while he resided in London, his fleshly frame was continually being refreshed. And how? His ethereal essence was in constant communion with that of a noble lady in Gutemburg. Their entwined spirits sat on a satin sofa in a boudoir illumined by wax candles-which candles were punctually lighted by respectful footmen at the accustomed hour of the rendezvous.

The high priest of the new creed was Mesmer, a Swabian doctor, who was conspicuously successful in waging war against the envious elves who undermine the health. As to his career of victory there was no doubt whatever, for by hocus-pocus and laying on of hands, he succeeded in curing a variety of nervous complaints which the enemy said were due to diseased

imagination. It was idle to deny that somehow or other he did work miracles. Even St. Thomas, arch-doubter, could believe what he saw and felt. Under Mesmer's influence the sick took up their beds and walked, the halt flung away their crutches. The streets about his dwelling were choked with blazoned coaches. The frivolous and the earnest alike lost their heads. Considering the peculiarities of his temperament-too timid and too lazy to act, and therefore easily satisfied with theory-it was in the nature of things that Clovis, Marquis de Gange, should be Mesmer's most fervent pupil.

At a period when the peccadilloes of high-born aspirants to eligible maidens were apt to be somewhat deep-dyed, it would have been absurd to object to a suitor on the frivolous score of mysticism. The most exacting of wives could hardly be jealous of a passing flirtation with the crystal ball of Doctor Dee. Nor could she fairly take umbrage at delicate attentions to a crucible. Clovis and Gabrielle were married in the royal chapel, the bride being given away by the most amiable and unsinning of hard-used monarchs, and the world (who ought to know) said that the future of the happy pair could not be otherwise than rosy. They were a model couple, for Clovis was serious and reflective beyond his years, with a graceful turn for music, while the lovely face of Gabrielle beamed with affectionate pride. She was quiet, steady, and domestic, quite smothered under a heap of virtues.

Unfortunately, there were spirits at work who should have been detected at once in their mischievous game if Mesmer had

not been napping, and duly routed by that prophet for the behoof of his dear pupil. They should have been carefully exorcised by the Master for his benefit, and sent packing into space to worry some one else; but as ill-luck would have it, the prophet was no longer present. All the medicos of the French capital uprose with one accord, like one large man, and sent the great Mesmer flying. If the new creed was to be accepted, where would all the doctors be? It was altogether a pestilent affair. Bread must not be snatched out of the mouths of doctors by designing quacks. Deputations of furious physicians rushed to the Tuileries, charging the luckless Swabian with egregious misdemeanours, and the king, as was his wont, gave way on the wrong occasion. Mesmer fell a victim to professional jealousy and ignorance, and was banished from France. He paid clandestine visits to Paris between 1785 and 1793, and to the end his following was great, but for all that, like many another illustrious pioneer, he was kicked and buffeted by ignorance.

The spirits, whom he was too busy in his absence and his anxieties to exorcise, played havoc in the new *ménage*. Clovis, who took very kindly to the fleshpots, was proud of his wife's beauty and success, and in no wise jealous of the danglers. In truth, she was no more to him than the *chef-d'œuvre* of a great painter, which we admire as our own until we weary of it; while we take pleasure in listening to the praises of the critics thereanent, because it chances to be our property; a noble work whose beauties we appreciate for a time with the eye of the

connoisseur, then-since it is always with us-cease to contemplate at all. She was perfect, of course; every one knew that. Her husband, however, found little enjoyment in her society, and soon came to prefer the contemplation of the over-vaunted charms from a respectful distance.

Accustomed as the spoilt beauty was to lavish showers of admiration from morning till night, the unexpected coldness of Clovis surprised and offended Gabrielle. Had she not in her artless way said, as it were, "You are my partner, chosen by the wise ones. I am pure, and true, and full of love, and you shall have it all?" It was not within her experience to suppose that the chosen partner would care nothing for her. How could she suppose that the angel direct from heaven (which she was assured that she was at least a dozen times a day) was no more to the bone of her bone than a statue to be dusted and approved? Gabrielle was extremely proud; had been pampered much. She was-alas, that so fair a jewel should be flawed-quite ignorant of female wiles. So distressing and blunt an innocence was probably her mother's gift. Uncompromisingly straightforward, the young bride, who, from the first, was genuinely fond of the handsome marquis, roundly accused him of indifference. What had she done to deserve it? As she complained, she cried a little, which was tiresome. Men abhor feminine whimpering, which always reddens the nose.

She insisted on knowing in what she had offended. Her listening lord came down from an excursion in some upper

sphere, somewhat irritably disposed by the interruption, and abruptly assured the weeping lady that she was mistaken. He admired and liked her very much, and would like her still better if she would abstain from making scenes. He had never been in love, he tranquilly confessed, and never would be; had never been in the meshes of any siren. Perhaps his invisible twin-self was so devoted somewhere to an "Affinity" as to have engrossed the love-capacity of both.

Such an explanation did not mend matters. An Affinity, forsooth-in space! More likely one of flesh and blood in hiding round the corner. It is humiliating to be calmly told that the man to whom one has given oneself till death brings parting, has never been in love-ay-and never will be! Stung by a feeling that was half-suspicious jealousy, half-outraged pride, the young wife said cutting things which had better been left unspoken. The face of the marquis darkened. "It depends on yourself," he remarked, coldly, "whether we dwell together in peace and amity or not. I have already said that I like and admire you very much. You must be content to take people as you find them, for it is manifest that no one can give that which he does not possess."

It is a grievous thing for a domestically inclined and affectionate woman to be rudely exhorted to feed on her own tissues; to discover that, as regards herself and the chosen one, affection is all on one side. With burning tears of mortification, Gabrielle realised that though Clovis was as cold as a corpse, she loved him. Perchance the unconscious fear engendered by

contact with so unusual and unexpected a type, gave birth to a surprised fascination. She set him down as a very clever and extremely learned man, and, had he so willed it, would have worshipped at his shrine with the unreasoning satisfaction of those who are not mentally gifted. She would have whispered with arms about his neck, "Dear Clovis! I am not clever enough to rise to your level, but I believe all you say because you say it. So kiss me, for I am yours for all in all, and so delighted to be lovely and an heiress for your dear darling sake!" But how to coo forth such pretty prattle to a figure made of wood? How rest content with being coldly liked, when you are burning to be beloved? Scathing disappointment and disillusion! The beautiful and pampered Gabrielle, fortune's favoured child, moped and fretted, and was miserable.

As years went on matters did not improve, for the unseen fingers of the naughty spirits were tearing the pair asunder. When she would fain have pouted out her lips to kiss, he stretched a surface of cheek that was aggressively passive. He was kind according to his lights-intended to be quite a model husband, but then wives and husbands differ as to the way that leads to perfection. Since there could be no sympathy between them, he interfered with her in no wise. A man often deems that negative condition of freedom the *summum bonum*; not so an affectionate woman. It is said that *mariages de convenance* are in the long run the most satisfactory unions, because neither party expects anything, and whatever pleasure may casually arise from friendly

intercourse is to the good, whereas love-matches are built upon the sand, made up of vague yearnings and unpractical desires. The inevitable discovery is reached with lamentable rapidity that dolls are stuffed with bran, and that in a sadly imperfect world "things are not what they seem." But if sympathy is nil-never existed at all-what flowers of joy can spring from utter barrenness? Clovis adored music, and could discourse prettily enough on the 'cello. Alack! Gabrielle had no ear, could not tell Glück from Lulli; the droning of the 'cello set her nerves a tingling; and when the unappreciated player put down the bow to prate of animal magnetism, as expounded by the immortal Mesmer, his beautiful wife grew peevish. Oh, foolish Gabrielle! why could you not be affectionately deceitful since you loved the man. Is the better sex gifted for nothing with peculiar attributes? Why not have compelled yourself, with pardonable falsehood, to ask tenderly after the favourite 'cello, have begged to be told more of Mesmer? You would, doubtless, have had to listen to much that would have profoundly bored you; but is not sweet woman's mission self-effacement-the daily swallowing of a large dose of boredom? Would you not have been well repaid, if you could have taught your husband by cunning degrees to seek your society instead of gadding after science; to prefer to all others a seat in your bower, with the partner who has become necessary to his comfort?

Certain it is that some of us have a dismal knack of turning our least comely side to those whom we like best. Whilst inwardly

longing to fling herself prone in the mire and embrace his dear, lovely legs, the marquise grew nervous in her husband's presence; was fatally impelled somehow to play the somnambule, and close up like a sleeping flower.

And so it came about that as time wore on the husband sought his wife's society less and less; grew daily more indifferent.

The Marquise de Gange was not one of those who could find distraction among danglers. Both education and temperament forbade so improper but modish a proceeding. To her the circle of admirers were wired dolls, and tiresome puppets, too. Eating her heart in solitude, she might have been goaded in time to fly the empty world, and seek the consolation of a cloister. But she was saved from such grim comfort by the arrival of a pair of cherubs. A boy and a girl were born unto her, and thanking God for the saving boon, she arose and felt brave again.

Gabrielle's nature, which had been hardening, though she knew it not, softened. For the sake of the pink mites she could consent to live on in a world that was no longer empty. By some magical metamorphosis the ugly cracks that had yawned across the stony plain had been filled up. The dun hideousness which by its drear monotony made the eyes ache was masked by blossom and verdure. Crooning over the silver cradle in which both treasures slumbered (an extravagance of the enchanted maréchal) she built airy palaces of amazing gorgeousness for them to dwell in. They were to be shielded by triple walls from care and sorrow. To money all, we are told, is possible. Then fell

the palaces like piles of cards. Had she not herself been shielded? Had not gold been freely squandered that not one of her rose leaves should be crumpled? Yet-but for the advent of the cherubs, and despite the watchful affection of the doting maréchal-had she not been very near fleeing from the tinsel grandeur of a squalid globe to take refuge at the altar-foot?

The castles insisted on being built, however. Patience and long-suffering would reap their reward some day. The cherubs would grow up and weave an indissoluble link with their young fingers which should draw the estranged parents together and bind them tight at last. Their mother would fondly teach them to adore their father, to see none but his best side. They would learn to respect his crotchets. And at this point she would herself be lost in dreamy reverie. Could his tenets with regard to the prophet be aught but midsummer madness? There was no doubt that he cured the sick. What if it were really possible to rout the wicked demons and produce millennium? To her practical but limited intelligence the creed was a farrago of folly. But then, Clovis, who was so clever, believed in it. Was she more stupid and ignorant even than humility confessed? Then she would rise suddenly and go about some household business, with the head-shake of the antlered stag that scatters dewdrops. The new creed was blasphemy, and she would have naught to do with it. The holy angels would guard herself and the dear innocents, if angelic suffrages could be secured by never-ceasing fervent prayer.

Sages do not care for babies, though mothers generally do.

Clovis, when exhorted to that effect, contemplated his offspring once a day as some curious product from a distant land, gave each cherub a finger to suck, then retired with unseemly alacrity to his 'cello and his books.

The ramifications of secret societies in the metropolis were spreading in all directions-societies which deliberated with closed doors to escape vulgar ribaldry-bands of philanthropists urged by pure benevolence, in search now of a universal panacea. Humanity was a vast brotherhood to be united for mutual defence against the machinations of the devils. Exhorted by Mesmer from a distance, the faithful toiled quietly on, that the name of their master might be exalted.

So matters progressed in humdrum fashion for several years, and Clovis was placidly content; but as the procession of the months went by, a gradual change came over the societies, which, when he became aware of it, filled the unmilitant soul of the marquis with dread. Bold philanthropists, at midnight meetings, would sometimes give vent to new and startling views, affecting not health, but politics. A few presumed openly to declare that the evil spirits had got into the ministers, from whom they must be quickly expelled. Considering that ministries fell and rose just now at brief intervals, it was shocking to think how many bad spirits must be at work. M. Necker and Turgot, and brilliantly fertile Calonne, were all occupied by fiends who entered in and made themselves comfortable, as the hermit-crab invades the shell of the creature he has devoured. This theorem

being established, it became the duty of the philanthropists to busy themselves on behalf of their country, which needed special as well as prompt doctoring. Then uprose speakers whose discourse smacked little of philanthropy, but savoured rather of iconoclasm. The Marquis de Gange, noble and wealthy, would make a splendid figure-head for the budding movement. Ere he could recover breath, or gather the scattered strands of his scared wits, Clovis found himself on the point of becoming an important political personage, and at a moment when prominence and personal peril marched hand in hand abreast. He prudently took to shunning the places of meeting, which but the other day had been his favourite resorts, for he had a horror of politics, and objected to being made a hero; but the agitators declined to let him escape so easily. They pursued him to his home, strove to convince him that he was a patriot; by turns threatened and cajoled, till the dreamer in an agony beheld no safety but in flight. A pretty state of things! Was not his wife the favourite of the queen; his father-in-law esteemed by the king? What would the verdict of his class be, were he to turn round and bite the hands that had caressed him? He would be ostracised, undone, held up to merited obloquy. He had no ambition to become another Lafayette, and declined to be convinced by argument. To avoid being mixed in complications fraught with danger, it would be prudent to vanish for a time, but whither to retire was the rub. He wished to stay and yet to go, and bit his nails in indecision. Concealed anxiety made calm Clovis querulous and snappish,

and Gabrielle was not slow to perceive that he was suffering, though the cause she could not guess. He had got himself into some mess. Was it money? If only he would let her share his worries! Her timid overtures were promptly nipped; terror made him absolutely harsh. Sighing, she fell back upon herself, as usual, and kissed the cherubs in their bed.

At the time when this story opens, July, 1789, the marquis and his wife had been married six years. The latter, though easily led by kindness, could fitfully display sometimes symptoms of independence. As a loving and self-respecting woman, she had kept with infinite care her catalogue of troubles from her parents. They, content with constant assurances that all was well, desired no further information. Madame de Brèze had settled, to her complete satisfaction, that her son-in-law was a harmless lunatic. When she obliged him with her views, he looked through her at something beyond. But then, who had ever appreciated her sagacity? Well, well. Have not some of our brightest lights been misunderstood while alive, to be tardily canonized afterwards? As for M. de Brèze, he was perfectly satisfied with Clovis, who, if eccentric and somewhat fish-like, was delightfully free from vices. If a man is perfect in manners and deportment, always civil and obliging, surely you may forgive the small drawbacks which go with the visionary and the bookworm. The bluff soldier would have had him drink and gamble more, just to show that he was human and a man, and be less fond of mysterious societies. But as Clovis had himself remarked, we must take people as

we find them, and be content with mercies vouchsafed. Why! The marquis might have turned out an incorrigible rake; have squandered large sums coaxed from his wife on low theatrical hussies. Thank goodness, he showed no signs of breaking out in that direction; and it was not until the *soirée intime* at the palace that it came home to the doting father that there might be something amiss in the *ménage*.

Gabrielle had looked so unaccountably distressed and confused. She was concealing something-what? Was the placid marquis an ogre in private? Of course not. As he strolled home the maréchal made up his mind to pump Toinon on the morrow, and, from hints ingeniously extracted from that astute damsel, severely catechise his daughter.

CHAPTER III.
INVESTIGATION

Who was Toinon? A very important personage. Foster-sister and confidential abigail to the Marquise de Gange, the two were as united as if they had indeed been sisters.

Of pretty dark-eyed roguish Toinon, neither the lacqueys, nor pages, nor hairdressers could make anything. When they exposed their flame for her edification she was irreverent enough to laugh. Tapping the swelling bosom, of whose outline she was justly proud, she would declare with a merry peal, that it was an empty casket. The organ which they professed to covet was no longer there, having been surrendered to the safe custody of a certain young man at Lorge. She had left it behind on purpose, lest some of these enterprising kitchen-beaux should steal it unawares. Whereabouts was Lorge, one gibed, that he might run and fetch the treasure?

Lorge, she replied, with mock seriousness, was a gloomy chateau on the Loire, home of rats and bats, of which the less one saw the better. He who would venture thither in search of that missing organ of hers would have to break a lance with Jean Boulot, a stalwart, honest gamekeeper, who would thrust the invader down an *oubliette* without compunction, to vanish for evermore.

When the worthy maréchal called at the Hotel de Gange, as was his daily wont, and, instead of making at once for his daughter's boudoir, turned aside into the tiny chamber where Toinon sat and worked, that damsel started and turned red. Brought up side by side with Gabrielle, she entertained a deep veneration for the old soldier. For him as for the marquise, she would have worked her fingers to the bone; have cheerfully submitted to any penance; and now her conscience tingled guiltily, for she knew that she deserved a lecture.

Doubtless it had come to the ears of de Brèze that when last the family was at Lorge, she and big Jean Boulot had plighted troth together. The maréchal would, of course, rate her soundly for her folly, since with her advantages she might have done much better than throw herself away upon a peasant.

Jean was a fine fellow, blunt and obstinate, but sincere, given to thinking for himself, but he was only a servant, half-gamekeeper, half-bailiff, and many a well-to-do farmer would have been too glad to place pretty Toinon at the head of his table. This was bad enough; but worse remained behind. Since it had been imprudently encouraged by the king, that plaguy Third Estate had been giving itself airs, flaunting its arrogant pretensions and propounding its ridiculous demands from every country cabaret. The absurd ant stood erect upon its hill with threatening mandibles. Mere yokels were presuming to chatter in village market-places, to discuss matters which concerned their betters, to express opinions of their own which were sadly

lacking in respect; and somehow they escaped the lash. Such impudence caused proper-minded and cultured persons to shiver in dismay. If we turn swine into lap-dogs, we shall certainly regret our foolishness. The old maréchal, who hated Lorge, detested it more than ever, when he found that the evil leaven had penetrated into far Touraine, and was not slow in expressing his views with regard to the ant upon the hill. "Life is a game of give and take," he said, "in which the unscrupulous always take too much, unless kept well in hand. Peasants should have no individual opinions, but humbly follow their masters."

Now, was it not a shocking thing that Jean Boulot, who ought to have meekly bowed his head at the very mention of aristocracy, should be insolent enough to make rude remarks about the upper class under the shadow of ancestral Lorge? It was reported to the maréchal that his paid servant had harangued his cronies under the village tree, and had used pestilent expressions anent the local magnates. He received prompt warning that on a repetition of the offence he would lose his place, whereupon he was said to have remarked, with a broad grin, that soon there would be no place to lose. And Toinon, foster-sister and confidential abigail, had absolutely betrothed herself in secret to this abandoned wretch!

It was awful; but when we give ourselves away, how shall we recover the gift? She determined to bring her lover to a proper frame of mind before confessing what she had done. She wrote commenting sharply on the escapade, imploring her betrothed to

reform, lest haply he should share the gruesome fate which she was informed awaited democrats. To this he had replied in an independent and flippant manner, which foreshadowed a thorny future. "My darling," he had the assurance to write, "never fear for me. If all masters were like ours, instead of being selfish tyrants, we should all be peaceable and happy; but, alas, the innocent minority must, for the general good, submit to suffer for the guilty. France, asleep too long, is slowly waking. National sovereignty, spell-bound for centuries, has yawned and stretched itself, and fools would oppose, to combat the champions of Liberty, the flickering will of a weak king! War, my dearest, it will have to be, for we must wade to the goal through blood. God gives justice to men only at the price of battles!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.