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THE SOUL OF COUNTESS ADRIAN.

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THE
SOUL OF COUNTESS ADRIAN:
A ROMANCE.

BY

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AUTHOR OF

“Romance of a Station,” “Nadine,” “Affinities,” “Policy and
Passion,” &c., &c.

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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. A MEETING ON THE SEA . . .	9
II. THE IMPROVISATRICE . . .	24
III. A MODERN MYSTIC . . .	47
IV. THE ACTRESS AT HOME . . .	64
V. TEA IN THE STUDIO . . .	74
VI. COUNTESS ADRIAN'S SKY-PARLOUR .	93
VII. COUNTESS ADRIAN'S PORTRAIT . .	112
VIII. THE GREAT NIGHT . . .	129
IX. MRS. WALCOT VALBRY'S BALL . .	147
X. THE AVATAR . . .	167
XI. THE EXORCISM . . .	180

THE SOUL OF COUNTESS ADRIAN.

CHAPTER I.

A MEETING ON THE SEA.

HE, She and Another—the triangle of the human drama! He was a rich, popular, unmarried artist, now on his return from a tour in the Western States. She was a young American actress, for whom her friends prophesied a great future. The “Other” was as yet unknown. He and She were fellow-passengers on board one of the North German Lloyd boats from New York to Southampton. They had been at sea several days, but had not so far made acquaintance. The early part of the voyage was rough; and though he was a good sailor, and ate, and smoked, and paced the deck with as much ease as the motion of the vessel would allow, she had neither his courage nor his hardihood, and did not even put in an appearance in the saloon or the reading-room.

It was on the sixth evening that he was struck at

dinner by the sight of a new face, and saw that the hitherto vacant chair on the left hand of the captain was filled at last. He was glad to find that its occupant was a young woman—hardly more than a girl—and, moreover, that she was very beautiful. There could not be two opinions as to her beauty, though he mentally decided that it was of a kind which would not appeal with equal force to all tastes; certainly, it would not appeal at all to admirers of the fleshly type, who prefer the charm of sense to that of soul.

It seemed to Lendon—so he was called—that this young lady's soul might be likened, as in Dryden's metaphor, to a rare and well-tempered blade fretting its too delicate scabbard, so frail was her physique, so ethereal her look. Her face was very pale, but its paleness was not that of ill health. It had no lines, and the shadows beneath her eyes and around the curve of her cheek melted into each other, so that there seemed perfect softness and no shadow. Her features were small and regular, the nose delicately curved, and the nostrils slightly distended, thus giving a look of quick sensibility. She had one of those mobile mouths—the shape of a strung bow, in which the under lip goes up to meet the curve of the upper—which are said to be a sign of histrionic genius. Her eyes were blue, very clear and wide open, with an innocent irresponsible expression; and her hair, profuse in quantity, was pale yellow, and had a sort of life of its own, each strand seeming to

stand apart and to reflect the light like a filament of spun glass.

All this Lendon took in by a succession of quick glances ; at last he asked his neighbour, "Who is that young lady ?" The gentleman he addressed pulled out of his pocket a list of the passengers and proceeded to mark off and identify the row of people opposite, then he appealed to a ship's officer on the other side of him for information, and finally turned to Lendon.

"Her name is Brett," he said, "Miss Beatrice Brett ; she's a singer or a performer of some sort, and she's going to join her relations in England and work the newspaper people over there, so that she can come back and make a boom with what they call a European reputation. As if an American reputation wasn't good enough ! But that's the way with all of them. She's travelling by herself, and she's under the captain's charge. Pretty, ain't she ?—but too like a ghost to suit my style."

Lendon continued to glance from time to time at Miss Brett, and, as was natural to him, theories concerning her began to shape themselves in his mind. He was quite certain that she did not want to "make a boom." He could imagine nothing more repugnant to her temperament than the vulgar process of "working the newspaper people." He was sure, too, that she was not a singer—she hadn't the sort of throat, he said to himself ; and certainly she was not one of those Western

lecturing women who can spout forth Art, Hygiene, or Free Love as commercial opportunities present themselves. Yet she had the expression of one absorbed in a purpose, whose mind was constantly dwelling upon her purpose, and who was determined at all labour to carry it through. He wondered what that purpose could be. The band was playing, as it always does at dinner on the German line of boats. He knew the music ; it was a dreamy dance in a popular ballet, which had been new and the rage when he left London. He watched the girl's face as she bent forward a little to listen. It gave him pleasure to see how her sensitive lip trembled, how her eyes gathered intensity, and her nervous fingers clasped and unclasped each other. He admired the way in which her hair grew, and wondered if it would be possible to make a sketch of her, which later he might work up into a fancy picture.

As soon as dinner was over, Miss Brett got up and went into her cabin. The next day the weather was very fine, and during the band promenade nearly all the sick people found their way up on deck. Among them was Miss Brett. She came up leaning on the arm of the captain, who, having seated her in her long armchair and covered her with her buffalo robe, left her to the company of her books. She had two, Lendon noticed—one, a new novel with the pages uncut, the other a worn-looking volume which, from its sober Russia leather binding and quiet lettering, might have been taken for

either the Bible or Shakespeare. Lendon jumped to the conclusion that it was Shakespeare, and, as it proved, was right.

For a German band, the music that morning was distinctly uninteresting. The noisy march, to which most of the promenaders kept time with a cheerful effort, seemed no more to Miss Brett's taste than it was to Lendon's. She lay back for a little while and listened impatiently. Then she tried Shakespeare: he had stolen along the bulwarks, and a furtive glance had told him that the play was *Macbeth*. Presently she closed the volume with a sigh, and began to turn over the leaves of the novel. The paper-cutter slipped from her lap, and was carried along the deck. This was Lendon's opportunity; he picked it up, and handed it back to her. She thanked him with a smile that was very sweet and childlike. She began to cut the leaves, but her muffings embarrassed her.

"Allow me," said Lendon, deferentially. He took the book from her, and began to cut it with great deliberation. As he did so, he made some observations on the weather and the aspect of the sea, which broke the ice between them. He ventured to inquire if she had suffered much during the rough weather.

"Oh! I am never ill," she answered. "I like the sea; I like it even when it is rough."

He remarked that he had not seen her in the saloon till yesterday.

"Oh," she answered, with a charming little blush, "I was very lazy. I had an interesting book, and felt a little shy. I have never crossed alone before. My people are to meet me at Southampton." She went on to say that she had enjoyed lying quiet in her cabin and being waited upon. "Before I left America I had scarcely a moment to myself; I had worked very hard."

He glanced at the book in the sober binding. "You are a student of Shakespeare, I see?"

"I am an actress," she answered, as though the one thing implied the other. "Of course I study Shakespeare; I study a great many dramatists."

"And?" . . . he asked, and added, "I wonder if theoretical knowledge is of much use?"

"Oh, well," she replied, laughing slightly, "I am bound to confess that my theories don't serve me at critical moments. It is something outside oneself that really helps. But I always remember what a great actress told me once. Inspiration is a capricious goddess, and it is well to have knowledge ready to take her place in case she should desert one in the hour of need."

"Does she ever desert in the hour of need? It always seemed to me that inspiration came with the desperate need."

"Ah, you know all about it," she said, and went on with the questioning air of a child. "The captain told me your name. You are the artist, are you not?"

He could not help being pleased at the indirect compliment which her use of the definite article conveyed.

"I know all about you," she went on. "My uncle, Professor Viall, bought one of your pictures two years ago from a dealer in England. It is a desolate little bit of landscape—an autumn evening, a wintry-looking pool, with sedges and rushes bending over it, and dying leaves floating upon its surface. I like the picture, but it always makes me melancholy."

"I think the picture is called 'A Pool of Melancholy,'" he said. "I remember it very well. I am glad that your uncle liked it, and still more glad that it pleases you; but I am sorry that it makes you sad."

"I like everything that is sad," she answered. "It is my temperament. I adore moonlight; I love grey skies, and wintry effects, and autumnal tints, and melancholy music—all that is flickering, vague, and suggestive. It is the temperament of the artist. You have it too."

"How do you know that?" he asked.

"By your face—your eyes—something—I can't tell you what. I have my intuitions: I can always tell beforehand whether I shall like people or things."

"Is it your intuition that you will like England and the English, might one ask? Or perhaps you have been there already?"

"No, I have never yet been there."

"Shall you like it?"

"Like it? I love it!"

"But you don't know England."

"Don't I? Yes, indeed I do. Why it's the home and the cradle of all my race—the old dead-and-gone ones I mean. I feel like a girl going home."

"I knew a scholar once," said Lendon gravely, "who said that when he first went to Greece—and he wasn't a young man then, far from it—he felt that he had long been an exile, and that now he had come home."

"Yes," she said, thoughtfully, "I think I can understand. I think I shall perhaps feel like that when I stand by some quiet English stream."

"What do you most wish to see in England?"

"A stream, a country churchyard—the churchyard in Stratford perhaps, or the Gray's Elegy one—and an old castle. And I want to hear the nightingale—Matthew Arnold's nightingale."

"Don't you want to see the Queen, and to be presented at Court?" he asked, with a smile.

"Oh no; I haven't thought about it. Why should I?"

"I thought that every American girl was like that."

"I am not every American girl. But you must not believe in the caricatures of American girls. You must not disparage my countrywomen."

"I greatly admire your countrywomen."

"I am glad," she said simply.

"Well, tell me what other things you want to see and hear in England."

"No ; we have got out of tune, I think." She sank back in her chair with a little sigh as if she were disappointed. He felt a pang of something like guilt. How had he jarred upon her ? He wondered if he ought to go away. In fact, he moved a few steps towards the bulwarks, and then came back. A movement of hers, an ineffectual effort to tuck her buffalo robe a little more closely round her, gave him an excuse for going to her aid. "Thank you," she said, and was silent again. He lingered. Presently she asked abruptly, "Do you know Miravoglia ?"

"Miravoglia ?" he repeated.

"The artist, the musician, the person who trains young actresses. I am going to him. He saw me act once, at Philadelphia, and he was impressed. He advised me. Now I am going to take his advice. Then I was not of age, and my guardian, Professor Viall, had an objection to my going on the stage ; but during these two years I have done my best to train myself."

"And your guardian has relented ?"

"Oh, he had no very rooted objection ; it was on psychological grounds. My uncle is a great psychologist. Lately he has been so much occupied with his new invention that he has not thought much of me."

"And what is the invention ?"

"You haven't heard of it ? But you soon will, and I won't forestall my uncle's pleasure in describing it to you. We are sure to meet in London."

"There are many eddies and currents in London society," said Lendon. "How can I be certain of such good fortune?"

"But you are an artist; and I—I am an artist, Miravoglia is an artist. All artists know each other in London—at least, so Mrs. Walcot Valbry tells me—"

"Ah, I know Mrs. Walcot Valbry," said Lendon.

"There. Did I not say? We shall meet at Mrs. Walcot Valbry's. I have known her in America, of course. She adores artists, and she is interested in everything that is mystic and out of the common. Therefore, naturally, she is interested in my uncle."

"And you?" asked Lendon. "Are you a mystic too?"

The girl seemed to consider for a moment, and looked at him seriously with a certain questioning in her eyes. It was clear to him, however, that she was not in doubt as to her own views on the subject, but rather as to the manner in which he might receive them.

"Everyone is a mystic," she answered gravely. "Everyone, that is, who feels and thinks, and analyzes feelings and thoughts—artists most peculiarly so. Surely you must often have been conscious of forces within you which have come from outside yourself?"

"Ah!" he said, "that is true; and more than once I have solved the mystery of some unaccountable impulse, some prompting to evil, by the exploded theory of ghostly possession. Ghosts! Do you know Ibsen's fine lines?"

"Yes ;" and she recited, with a dramatic intensity which took him by surprise, Mrs. Alving's speech to the Pastor.

"Well," he said, "it is the ghosts of dead faiths, dead conventions, dead traditions, which turn us this way and that, and more or less determine our lives."

"I did not mean such forces as those," she replied. "No, I would allow no dead faith to rule my life. I meant, Mr. Lendon, that you and I ought to be proud and happy that we are artists ; for Art is the door through which the undying dead ones can come into our lives and teach us how to move our world as they themselves once moved theirs. If ever I am a great actress, as indeed I think I shall be some day, it will not be I myself who have any power, but the ghosts who have given to me of theirs."

"That is a fanciful theory, Miss Brett," said Lendon. "Don't you think that it may be a morbid one?"

"Morbid ! Oh ! morbid !" she repeated with fine scorn. "I hate that word morbid. It is such a cant phrase. I suppose that all the people of genius, in the world or out of it, who ever moved souls to enthusiasm were told at some time or other, by some wise person or other, that they were—morbid. Pray Heaven give me morbidness ! That is all I say."

"No ! no !" he exclaimed ; "I won't say Amen to that impious supplication."

She laughed. "Well," she said, "I think I shall go down to my cabin, for I am feeling a little shivery ; and

if you will take me as far as the companion, I shall be grateful."

He gave her his arm, and took charge of her rug and various other belongings.

"But you will let me convince you, some time soon, that I meant no disrespect to genius by refusing to allow that it is morbid?"

She nodded and laughed again. "You don't mean it; you don't mean it!" she cried. "You mean just what I mean, only you call it by another name. You are just as bad as the worst of them, if you like to put it in that way. You're just as open to—to influences and impulses and misdirected enthusiasms as the people you pretend to despise. Why, you are utterly morbid, or you could never have painted 'The Pool of Melancholy.'"

"There's something in that," said Lendon to himself, as he paced the deck, after he had seen her to the door of her cabin. "The curse of the artist temperament is on me as fatally almost as upon Miss Beatrice Brett herself."

He watched for the young actress for the rest of the day, but she did not reappear. Nor was she on deck at promenade time the following morning. It irked him to remember that in forty-eight hours they were due at Southampton. He put artfully veiled questions to his communicative neighbour at *table-d'hôte*; and having set him on the trail, very soon elicited through him the information that Miss Brett had caught a slight cold, and was not likely to show herself above while the

weather continued stormy. It had come on to blow again, and Lendon began to think the Fates were against any practical outcome from his already strong interest in the young actress.

He found her at last, however, in the reading-room, where she was sitting very becomingly, muffled in furs and with a book in her hand. She smiled and bowed, and, in answer to his inquiries, told him she was better, and that she had caught cold, and was suffering from hoarseness. "And you know," she added, "an actress is bound to be careful of her voice, for it is the best part of her stock in trade."

She asked him when they should get in, and he told her that it would be late that night, and ventured to inquire whether any one would meet her, and if he might presume on his acquaintanceship with her friend Mrs. Walcot Valbry, and offer his help in the Custom House, which, as he put it, was an awkward business for a lady who was not very strong.

"Oh," she answered, "my people will be there to meet me, and they will arrange everything; but thank you all the same."

"I hope," he said, a little shyly, "that I may look forward to being presented to Professor Viall."

"Why, certainly," she answered: "if you know Mrs. Walcot Valbry, you will see a great deal of my uncle. She has a high opinion of the Professor and of his discovery."

“Don’t think me very ignorant,” said Lendon, “but will you tell me what is your uncle’s particular field of scientific investigation. I don’t go in much for that sort of thing,” he went on apologetically; “I think we painters are, of all people, the narrowest in our sympathies and interests; we shut ourselves up in our studios, or potter along through æsthetic by-ways, or else cut ourselves off from everything, as I have done this last year or so, and go off to the wilds in search of a new sensation.”

She looked at him a little wistfully. “I should have thought,” she said, “that you would have found plenty of sensations in London.”

He laughed. “Well, but your uncle, the Professor, what is his line?”

“Magnetic-Dynamics,” she answered seriously, and then suddenly laughed like a child at his puzzled look. “Oh, you will find out all about it soon enough. It is something very important, I assure you.”

“I have no doubt of that. May I call upon you in London? and perhaps,” he went on eagerly, “if you care for pictures and sights, and that sort of thing, I have friends who would be delighted—and I should like to show you my studio when it is in order again, if you would let me.”

“I am going to be dreadfully hard at work,” she answered; “but you are very kind, and, if there’s time,

"I should like it very much. I should like in any case to see your studio."

He was obliged to be content with this sort of indefinite promise; and just then the captain came up and began talking to Miss Brett in German—a language which she appeared to speak fluently. He had no further conversation with her before the arrival at Southampton, and in the hurry and confusion of landing he lost sight of her, and to his infinite regret had not even the satisfaction of bidding her good-by.

CHAPTER II.

THE IMPROVISATRICE.

ON the journey from Southampton to London, during which the image of the young actress obtruded itself somewhat disquietingly, Lendon assured himself that the serious business of home-coming and resettling himself in his ordinary routine of occupation would leave him but little leisure for romantic speculations about Miss Beatrice Brett. He was a little ashamed of the sudden interest with which she had inspired him, for he had been indulging of late in a lofty, philosophic indifference, not to say scorn of the charms of womanhood, and had made up his mind that for him emotional disturbance was a matter of the past. He had acted out his drama, had lived through his disillusionment, as he fancied, and it was humiliating to find himself as susceptible still to the light of a pair of bright eyes as ever he had been in the old days before the first had turned to ashes, and he had gone madly off to the New World to heal his heart's wound. It was this feeling which made him determine that he would not think of her, would not make any special effort to find out her

whereabouts, would not call upon Mrs. Walcot Valbry, would not search the papers for any mention of the Professor and his discovery in magnetic-dynamics (whatever that might mean), or of the trumpet praises which pique curiosity as to any forthcoming *débutante* on the London stage. As a matter of fact, he did think a good deal about her, nevertheless, and he never saw the turn of a particularly slender throat, the shape of an unusually delicate form, or the back of a golden head in front of him in a theatre-stall or in the street, without a sudden inward flutter and desperate, if momentary, wonderment whether at last kindly chance were about to throw them together. He never did come across her, however, nor had he any means of finding out where she lived. He plunged into business and pleasure, and tried to forget her. One morning it gave him an odd thrill to receive a note from her, enclosing a card of invitation from Mrs. Walcot Valbry, that American lady of whom they had spoken, and who was, indeed, well known in the upper Bohemia of London. The inscription on the card ran—

“Mrs. Walcot Valbry

At home

Wednesday, February 20th, at 9.30.

“Fleetwood House, West Kensington.

“To meet Professor Viall (Inventor of the Viall-Motor) and Miss Beatrice Brett (the celebrated American ‘Improvisatrice’).”

The note said—

“DEAR MR. LENDON,

“Do come ; though I warn you that I am not inclined to do the ‘*Improvisatrice*,’ consciously at any rate, for any one ; and I am not celebrated yet. But, as I told you, I mean to be by-and-by. We have gotten charming rooms, and I am preparing for my London *début*, and sometimes I don’t seem to know which is *me* and which is——. Never mind ; I’ll explain, perhaps, some day.

“Mrs. Cubison and Professor Viall send their kind regards ;

“And I am, yours sincerely,

“BEATRICE BRETT.”

Lendon despatched a prompt acceptance of Mrs. Walcot Valbry’s invitation. He would have liked to write also to Miss Brett, but with characteristic carelessness—or could it be intention ? she had omitted to name the locality of their charming rooms. And he did not venture upon addressing her at the house of Mrs. Valbry.

The cultivation of cheap celebrity is a disease in upper Bohemia, where patrons and patronised, inviters and invitees, have their very being, socially and commercially, in the easily bought advertisement which sells their wares and trumpets them into a third-rate notoriety. Mrs. Walcot Valbry was rich enough to despise para-

graphists; nevertheless, paragraphists abounded at her "at Home;" and representative Bohemia—mummers, novelists, poets, artists, dilettanti members of parliament, and sensation-hunting visitants from a more aristocratic sphere, made a brave show in the spacious drawing-rooms. Just outside the most prominent door, Mrs. Walcot Valbry herself, large, bediamonded, with the crisp, abundant white hair and yellow crumpled face familiar to the casual traveller in the parlours of New York hotels, stood, and in an absent manner received her guests.

As Lendon came on to the landing she was saying, "You are interested in the Viall-Motor?" to a young-old society man, with a tired expression and a neatly trimmed Vandyke beard, who counter-queried—

"What is the Viall-Motor?"

"Well, I did presume *you* knew that, Sir Donald!" replied the American lady, severely. "The Viall-Motor is—everything. It's science; it's religion; it's Bulwer Lytton's Vrill;" and she shook hands vaguely at the same time with Lendon, adding, "You know Professor Viall and Miss Beatrice Brett, don't you? I needn't present you."

"Is it the Viall-Motor or the Improvisatrice that brings you here, Lendon?" said the gentleman called Sir Donald, drawing Lendon back into a recess on the other side of the door.

"Both," returned Lendon, laconically.

"A combination of science and beauty!" Lendon's eyes roved. "You are looking for her. We are at the wrong door. She is in the inner room, which our hostess guards. By the way, you haven't forgotten that you sup with me at twelve to-night?"

"Ah!" Lendon had indeed forgotten.

"Would it be possible to transfer the attraction from here to my house in Eaton Square? Please present me by-and-by."

"At once if you wish it."

"No; I am glued to the door till Countess Adrian arrives."

"Countess Adrian! The lady of the lawsuit?"

"The lady who has been the victim of a cowardly and infamous husband—yes."

"But the marriage was declared invalid," said Lendon, thoughtlessly. "Wasn't it the general opinion that Countess Adrian—as she still seems to call herself—was playing a bold game?"

"Stop!" said Sir Donald, with scarcely a change of inflexion in his apathetic voice. "I had better tell you that Countess Adrian has honoured me by consenting to become my wife."

"Urquhart! A million pardons. I read the report of the trial in America, and you know what newspapers are there. I spoke as I had no right to speak—on the vaguest impression. How can I prove my regret?"

“By letting me present you to Countess Adrian when she comes, and by forgetting everything to her disadvantage that you have ever heard,” replied Urquhart graciously. “See, there is a rift in the crowd, and if I am not mistaken the Improvisatrice wishes you to pay your respects.”

“Lendon,” whispered Phil Bonhote, a young journalist, who at the moment pressed up against him, “if they grow them like this I shall take shares in the Viall-Motor.”

Lendon's heart gave a bound as he suddenly became aware that Beatrice Brett was close to him, that she was smiling seriously at him, and, by an almost unnoticeable movement of her small hand, was beckoning him to approach. His first feeling was a sort of surprise and dazzlement that she was so much more beautiful than even love's memory had painted her. Of course he had never before seen her in evening dress, and her throat and arms were finely formed and had the whiteness—not of marble, but of a stephanotis petal. There was about her a girlish radiance which he had not associated with her on the steamer. Her eyes were alight as if with some secret fire, her golden hair was dressed in a more elaborate fashion; she swayed nervously to and fro a great feather fan, and in the same hand, held with the fan, she carried a bunch of lilies of the valley tied loosely in the American manner with a knot of white ribbon. He found himself won-

dering seriously what young admirer had sent her the flowers, and then he realised suddenly that he was in love with her—in love with this girl to whom he had only spoken twice before in his life.

She was quite unembarrassed. She was not in love with him. Oh, no; she was not the sort of girl to fall of a sudden in love with anyone. She was devoted to her art for one thing. She was at the age, of the temperament, in the mood when art and ambition are consuming passions and allow but little play to any more strictly human emotion. Of course, as indeed he had hinted, she was inclined to be morbid, and she was self-analytical, and cold as a vestal, but yet she had a keen artistic curiosity and she was very sweet and very womanly, though she tried to persuade herself and others that she was an altogether abnormal creature. She was interested in his ardent admiration, and on the whole she was touched and excited and altogether glad to see him once more.

Somebody stepped up before Lendon and kept her for a moment or two in conversation. There appeared to be a sudden stir and excitement in her neighbourhood, and when Lendon moved eagerly forward, though she smiled again, she made a slight movement as if bidding him wait. He saw that Mrs. Walcot Valbry was holding her hand persuasively and speaking in a low tone as if urging her to comply with some request. Mrs. Valbry was struck by the expression of the girl's eyes and the

sweet smile of recognition directed towards some further object, and her look following that of Beatrice encountered Lendon.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "here's somebody who knows the people and will tell you it is all for your advantage. Mr. Lendon, we want the weight of your influence. Come along."

Lendon approached and took Beatrice's hand. "What is my influence required for?" he asked. "Miss Brett, I hope that your cold is quite well."

"Yes, thank you," she replied frankly. "I told you we should meet here; but you know you haven't got any influence; we don't think alike. If I do what they want, you'd say I am morbid."

"That unlucky word," said Lendon, "I take it back. I know what Mrs. Walcot Valbry means. Cosway Keele is here, and half-a-dozen of the principal critics. Don't recite unless you are quite sure of yourself, and unless you want to be the talk of the Garrick to-night, and to be in all the society papers of the week."

"That's what I've been saying to the Professor," said Mrs. Walcot Valbry, "he says she is sure of herself."

A tall lean gentleman standing by had poked his head forward and was scrutinizing Lendon with interest. "You hear Mr. Lendon's opinion," Mrs. Valbry said; "you see it is important."

"Very important," he assented, and added interrogatively, "Mr. Lendon?"

"Mr. Lendon is hand-and-glove with the critics. He writes plays himself sometimes, and he designs Cosway Keele's costumes. You two hav'nt met yet. Why, it's lovely for you to meet here. He's just lovely," she added vaguely, her eyes fixed upon a point halfway between the tall gentleman and the painter, so that it was not directly evident to which she referred.

"Professor Viall, Mr. Lendon. Professor Viall is Miss Brett's uncle."

Lendon bowed and shook hands, first with the Professor and then with a small lady beside him, whom the Professor introduced as "My sister, Mrs. Cubison."

Miss Brett's guardians presented a curious contrast to one another. The Professor was a man of about sixty, with straight iron-grey hair, a very long nose, and an even disproportionately long upper lip and chin. His forehead was high and narrow. His height could not have been less than six feet four or five inches, and with his narrow shoulders—one a little lower than the other—and his spare frame, he made one think somehow of an ill-balanced obelisk; whereas his sister, Mrs. Cubison, resembled nothing so much as a fat pouter pigeon, so short was she, so plump and so commonplace and comforting.

"Oh, she's always sure of herself," said Mrs. Cubison. "There's no fear of Beaty's breaking down. *They* always carry her through."

"Then why should there be so much fuss?" said

Mrs. Walcot Valbry. "You are going to do it, Beatrice?"

"Yes," replied the girl, composedly; "I am going to do it."

"That's right. Now you'll astonish us all. I'll leave you to look after her, Mr. Lendon—you and the Professor, for I see some new people coming," and she hurried off to her station at the door.

The Professor was not thinking just now of Beatrice. "Why, it's Maddox Challis," he said, craning his head.

"Maddox Challis!" repeated Lendon. "I thought he was in Palestine."

"I mean the Occultist," said the Professor, with the deepest interest. "Do you know him?"

"No—yes," Lendon answered. "Every one knows Maddox Challis—in one sense. In another, no one knows him."

"That is true," assented the Professor. "The ordinary London diner-out would not know Maddox Challis."

"Mr. Lendon is not the ordinary London diner-out," said Beatrice Brett.

"Thank you," he said. A glance of sympathy passed between them. "Did you mean," he asked, "that you are really going to play the Improvisatrice; and since Mr. Walcot Valbry put you in my charge, tell me what I am to do."

"Take me to some place where I can be quiet for a few minutes," she answered.

He gave her his arm, and piloted her across the room. "I may talk to you some time this evening?" he asked. "I have so much I want to say to you, and then there's the visit to my studio, we must arrange that."

She looked troubled and preoccupied and withdrew her arm, standing still before him. "I can't think of anything now, but what I am going to do. I don't know why I want to do it, but I can't help it; it's been in me all day, making me so restless."

Mrs. Walcot Valbry, who had rejoined the Professor, came up with him at that moment and put Beatrice's arm within hers as she whispered something in the girl's ear.

"Yes, I will come," said Beatrice. She turned to Lendon with a look he had never yet seen on her face—a hushed, breathless, awed look, and said in a very low voice:

"I made sure I wouldn't act to-night, but it's stronger than I am. Wait; I'll talk to you by and by."

She moved on, led by Mrs. Walcot Valbry, and passed between the heavy velvet curtains that divided a farther room from that in which most of the guests were assembled. The crowd was very dense; and on Mrs. Valbry's reappearance, there was a momentary silence, and presently the word went round that the Improvisatrice was about to do one of the inspirational scenes for

which she was already celebrated in America. The dramatic stars who were present looked at each other, at once interested and contemptuous. Two actor-managers simultaneously changed their positions and crossed to where they would be more advantageously placed for seeing the performance. Miravoglia, who had helped to train Aimée Deselées, said aloud, "I know her; she is my pupil. Inspiration! Dead spirits! Bah! I say that is living genius."

As the assemblage stood waiting, with eyes bent towards the closed curtain, there was a rustle of heavy brocade near the door, an announcement distinctly audible, "Countess Adrian," and then that sudden stir of heads and shoulders which tells of an instantly diverted curiosity. Lendon turned too, and for the first time saw the woman whom, somewhat less than a year ago, a *cause célèbre* had made famous.

Was she beautiful? No. He remembered vaguely to have heard her described as "La belle Laide." She was far too large, too tall, too bounteously made for beauty. But then, how perfectly she was proportioned, and what a graceful snake-like way she had of moving, and what a grand carriage of head and magnificence of bust! Her eyes were too close together. But the eyes! Surely they might have illustrated Professor Viall's theory of Magnetic Dynamics. They were all pupil and yellow light. When the pupil dilated, there was nothing else; when it contracted, the iris showed

queer golden gleams, like those in the eyes of some savage animal. Her features were too irregular. But what matter of that, when they were so full of power and passion? And who cared that the rich red lips, parted so as to show a double row of small glistening teeth, were so red and so ripe as to suggest sense rather than soul? Soul somehow was the last attribute one would associate with Countess Adrian. A glorious creature certainly—an intellectual creature—a creature with will, emotion, force of character, noble instinct it might be; but always of the flesh, and not of the spirit. Countess Adrian a disembodied thing! That splendid, glowing vitality quenched for ever! Impossible!

She was dressed peculiarly in a gown of some stiff, red, expensive fabric, that hung in massive folds about her. The jewels she wore were barbaric looking—a great uncut ruby at her breast, and valuable catseyes, set in diamonds, on her neck and in her black hair. She carried a big fan of deep yellow ostrich feathers, with glittering sticks.

“It isn’t really safe to come to houses like this, though they are amusing,” observed a thin woman in a tiara, on Lendon’s right. She was a great lady, to whom the Improvisatrice had acted as a “draw.” “I used to know her in Paris—every one did, till it was discovered that she was a fraud—no more married to Count Adrian than I am. Of course, nobody can know her now.”

Lendon murmured something about her being a victim to circumstances.

"Victim to fiddlesticks!" pursued the irate great lady. "Do you suppose she didn't know that sham ceremony meant nothing? Does she look as if a nincompoop like Adrian could bamboozle her?"

The argument seemed unanswerable. Just then there was a cry of "Silence, please!" and the drawn curtains disclosed Beatrice Brett.

Is this Beatrice Brett—this strange woman, cowering in the stillness of absolute misery, unconscious of herself, unconscious of her surroundings—blank despair in her eyes, blank despair on her white mask-like features, despair and doom in the rigid lips and the tense limbs? She is alone in the condemned cell. Death on the scaffold to-morrow, or death to-night by the poison which was her lover's last gift—which? And now she moves—memory awakes. The past comes back. The drama is re-enacted. She lives again through dead days—the convent, the marriage—a lamb led to slaughter—one more maiden sacrificed to the elderly debauchee. Then, love—white in its bud, red passion in its growth. Temptation. Crime. She secretly kills the loathed husband. And now there is no barrier between her and the man of her heart—the man who, honouring her, will not gain her through dishonour. . . . All this in broken soliloquy and gesture—quiet at first, girlishly tender, piteously human; and

then always repressed, reaching the climax of a tragedy, than which no tragedy could be more grim. It is the moment in which her lover's arms first clasp her as his promised bride. His kiss is on her lips. She trembles with a holy ecstasy. . . . Ah! . . . It is Hell, not Heaven! Rapture becomes horror unimaginable. The punishment is from beyond the grave. A ghost has come forth to be its own avenger. The arms which encircle her are *dead* arms. The lips that press hers are the lips of a corpse. It is her murdered husband who, embodied in her living lover, claims her for his wife. . . . She kneels. She cries for mercy. In her agony, the horrible confession is made. And now, silence . . .

A long breath of pent emotion heaved through the audience. Lendon became conscious of a movement behind him. A woman's voice whispered in an audible sibilant whisper, "She *shall* feel me." He turned involuntarily. Countess Adrian was standing with her head bent a little forward, and her eyes fixed in a gaze of the most extraordinary intensity on the young actress's face.

There was nothing malignant in the look. It expressed thoughtful curiosity and eager desire of dominance, such as might be seen in some wrestler, not certain of mastery, who, calculating his resources, calls will-force to his aid in a supreme effort for victory.

If Countess Adrian's object were to test her power by

quenching the girl's inspiration and forcing her soul back to the realm of commonplace, she succeeded in her attempt. No words came to break the pause. The actress gave a long shiver. Life and light went out of her face. The guilty woman, in her passion of love and terror and remorse, had vanished. There remained a shrinking child, dazed by some bewildering sight or sound, helpless and incapable. She tottered; a low moaning cry broke from her lips, and she fell forward insensible.

Lendon leaped to his feet and, forcing himself to the front, reached the prostrate girl just as Professor Viall, with quiet presence of mind, stepped within the arch and drew down the heavy curtains. Lendon knew nothing for a moment but that he was holding her in his arms, and that her golden hair brushed his face. People pressed into the room. There were confused inquiries and ejaculations, and a doctor proffered his services. But Professor Viall waved them all away with an authoritative air—all except one man, who held his place, also as if with authority, and who looked at the young actress as she lay in Lendon's arms with an expression of thoughtful interest.

"This is not an ordinary seizure," he said quietly. "If you will allow me to try some magnetic passes, I think I can do good. My name is Maddox Challis, and I am supposed to have some skill in the higher magnetism."

"The name and works of Maddox Challis are very

familiar to me," said the Professor. "It has long been my wish to meet one of whom I have read and heard so much, and with whose pursuits I am to a certain extent identified, for I also am a humble student of Occultism. I have been accustomed to use magnetism in the treatment of my niece, and I now readily yield to a higher power than mine."

Maddox Challis bowed only in reply to the Professor's elaborate address, and, opening the door of the tiny boudoir which led out of the room in which they were, motioned to Lendon to carry his burden thither. Presently the girl was lying upon a sofa, with Mrs. Cubison loosening her dress and Mr. Challis making passes over her, extending and drawing back his arms slowly every now and then with a jerky movement of his fingers, plucking, as it were, something invisible from her and throwing it away. She revived almost immediately. The deathly look left her face. She drew a deep sigh and opened her eyes. They rested on the stranger's face with a startled gaze: but he did not pause for an instant from his monotonous passes, and after a minute or two the look of bewilderment gave place to an expression of relief, and with another sigh she again closed her eyes. A faint flush crept into her cheek, and her breathing became soft and regular. Maddox Challis discontinued his passes. He laid his hand for a moment on the girl's forehead, then, without a word, left the room.

The Professor seemed disappointed. His eyes followed Challis till the door closed, then he turned and watched Beatrice.

"She will be all right now," he said. "I presume it was the mixed magnetism that upset her."

"No," said Mrs. Cubison, mysteriously; "it was the influences. She encourages them. I'm sure I don't wonder, considering what they do for her. It might have been Rachel who controlled her, you know. I never saw her finer than she was to-night."

"Influences?" repeated Lendon in a puzzled tone.

"You're not troubled with them?" remarked Mrs. Cubison, composedly.

"No," answered Lendon.

"Ah, perhaps you don't come of an inspirational family, as we do. It has its drawbacks. Beaty's mother used to suffer from influences. Hers weren't always satisfactory. They had a very bad effect on Beaty's mother," Mrs. Cubison added, and paused.

"They drove her out of her mind," said the Professor, drearily.

"But, good Heavens! you don't mean that there is any danger?" exclaimed Lendon.

"Well, I don't know that I can explain," began the Professor.

"Oh, you needn't mind Mr. Lendon," put in Mrs. Cubison. "He's inspirational himself—in a certain sense. All artists must be inspirational, you know, more or less,

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"Oh, you needn't mind Mr. Lendon," put in Mrs. Cubison. "He's inspirational himself—in a certain sense. All artists must be inspirational, you know, more or less,

and of course they attract artistic spirits into their sphere."

Lendon laughed. "Do you mean that the influences are dead people?" he asked.

Mrs. Cubison nodded. The Professor stroked his long upper lip.

"Why, certainly," he said. "Of course, there's danger; but what's the use of worrying over what is part of your temperament? We have the misfortune to be a family of mediums. It is a disease—hereditary, like consumption and other things. I've got over it. The Viall-Motor helped me through. Acting will be Beaty's safeguard. Her mother was an idle woman, and she fell in love and died in an asylum. Beaty is different. As long as she keeps real grip on her work she has nothing to be afraid of."

"Nothing to be afraid of!" Lendon repeated vaguely.

"Oh, yes, she'll come all right," pursued the Professor. "They won't hurt her while she sticks to Art. The danger is of her falling in with some living influence that might prove stronger than the dead ones."

"You mean—if she should marry?" timidly suggested Lendon.

"Well, I don't know that I meant that altogether. She'll have to take her chance anyhow. What is to be, will be, you know," answered the Professor, with cheerful fatalism. "It would be curious, wouldn't it, if one could know which of them it was to-night," he added,

as if an idea had struck him—"Rachel or Siddons, or perhaps poor Aimée Desclées?"

"Ah," said Lendon again, with his little laugh, which was half nervous, "I have no doubt any of our young actresses would gladly run some risk for the sake of being able to summon such distinguished persons as familiar spirits."

"Do you suppose they would be at the beck of *any* young actress? My dear sir," said the Professor solemnly, "perhaps you don't remember Schiller's description of certain exceptional natures for which 'too easily is ripped open the kingdom of the ghosts'—that's the literal translation, I believe. Those words are another phrase for genius. What is genius?" he went on fervidly. "*She* hasn't got it" (indicating Mrs. Cubison, who was preening herself in her pouter-pigeon fashion). "*I* haven't got it. *You* haven't got it—at least, I beg your pardon, but I should guess not. My niece has it, though; and it's nothing but the unconscious power of access to the highest influences of the past—a power as rare as are the Talmas and the Siddons themselves. It's the open door through which these bodiless beings from the other side can enter into our world again—the body by which they can vent their unsatisfied cravings and pent-up aspirations. Art is a passion as high and as low as other passions. I have no doubt it was a satisfaction to poor Desclées—if it was she—to hear again the applause that was once her nightly food." He paused,

for at this moment the girl stirred. "We'll talk of this some other time," he said.

Beatrice raised herself as he spoke, and looked at him with steady eyes. She seemed now to have quite recovered from her strange attack. "I will talk to Mr. Lendon," she said. "Uncle, I want you to go back to those people and tell them—oh, tell them anything. They've seen enough to show them I *can* act. They won't want me any more. Let us go home when you have explained why I fainted."

"Why *did* you faint, Beaty?" Mrs. Cubison questioned, when the Professor had, without further words, left the room.

She gave a shudder and looked at Lendon. "Who is that woman?" she asked, taking no notice of her aunt.

"Countess Adrian," he answered at once.

"I knew that you would know. Is she a friend of yours?"

"She is going to marry a friend of mine," he replied.

The girl was silent.

"But you haven't told us why you fainted, Beaty," said Mrs. Cubison.

"Nor ever shall, I fancy, Marmy dear, for that's one of the mysterious things in earth and heaven that are beyond my understanding." She got up from the sofa as she spoke, and, going to the mantel-piece by which Lendon was standing, leaned her elbow upon it and stood looking at him with a troubled, questioning ex-

pression. He uttered some anxious words about her health, but she stopped him.

"No, never mind. I'm quite well now. Mr. Lendon, would you do something for me?"

"I would do anything in this world for you," he answered fervently.

She blushed and drooped her eyes, and for the first time a delicious hope dawned within him.

"Will you ask Countess Adrian to leave me alone?"

"But you have strength to overcome this fancy," he began vehemently.

"It is no fancy ; it's something real." She shuddered again. "If Countess Adrian came to the theatre and looked at me like that when I was acting, I should break down—as I did to-night. And I think that would kill me. My art is all the world to me. I live for it ; I live in it. Mr. Lendon—no, don't speak, listen—I have a feeling that *you* could stand between me and—and Countess Adrian."

"Between you and everything that could vex or harm you, if you would only let me. I can—and I will. Miss Brett, trust me."

She put out her hand and let him hold it in his for a moment.

"Yes, I will trust you. I can't tell you now all that I want to say. You must go to the others, and we will go home. Good night !"

"But I may come to you?"

“Oh yes. Marmy will be glad, and so shall I. In the evenings, please. I’m working all day. Miravoglia is directing my lessons. Marmy will give you the address.”

Mrs. Cubison took out a card from her pocket-book and gave it to him. The young man received it as though it had been a key to the gates of Paradise—as indeed it seemed to his excited fancy just then. And then he bade them good night.

CHAPTER III.

A MODERN MYSTIC.

A STRONG impression had been created by Miss Beatrice Brett's performance, which its abrupt and somewhat tragic termination appeared to have strengthened rather than lessened. The party broke up very soon afterwards, and Mrs. Walcot Valbry had the agreeable conviction of having furnished Bohemia with a sensation. Later on, the subject was freely discussed at Sir Donald Urquhart's supper. A good many of Mrs. Walcot Valbry's guests had gone on to Eaton Place. Miravoglia was there, revelling in a peculiarly choice preparation of Neapolitan macaroni, which was one of the features of these repasts. Miravoglia would dine or sup at no house where there was not macaroni. A certain distinguished actor-manager was there—that same Cosway Keele of whom Mrs. Valbry had spoken. Cosway Keele's approval was highly coveted by young actors and actresses. Another actor-manager of lesser distinction was there also. So was the chief interviewer on the staff of an important weekly paper; and so, too, was the editor of a popular society journal—a gentleman versed in traditions of the drama, who did not scruple

to declare that he saw in the young American a coming Rachel. The secondary actor-manager plied Miravoglia with questions about the Improvisatrice in the intervals of macaroni and draughts of Chianti. Cosway Keele smiled to himself in a brooding manner. It was quite evident that managerial curiosity had been baited.

Among the guests less directly interested, conversation soon drifted off to other topics. Sir Donald Urquhart's suppers were always lively and unconventional. They had an agreeably mingled flavour of the chicory of Bohemia and the mocha of fashion. All the women were pretty, entertaining, and becomingly dressed. Most of the men were well bred; all had in some way or other made their mark. The talk was a finely distilled essence of art, science, politics, and society. Sir Donald was rich; the appointments of his house were in perfect taste. Softly shaded electric drops lighted the rooms. The pictures and bric-à-brac were historic. The supper-table, with its hothouse flowers, its Venetian glass and delicate equipments, was a harmony in colour which had been composed by a Royal Academician. Sir Donald had the reputation of being a confirmed bachelor, and though he announced his engagement to Countess Adrian, few of his friends took it seriously. She was seated at his right; but her attention seemed chiefly directed to an elderly gentleman next her, with a grey beard, piercing brown eyes, and an altogether odd and powerful face—the same person who had brought back

Beatrice Brett to consciousness ; no other, indeed, than the celebrated Maddox Challis, Socialist, mystic, novelist, and philosopher, who, an ascetic in the East, was in London one of the wittiest and most agreeable of diners out. Lendon, who knew him slightly in that phase of his curious personality, was seated on his other side, and exchanged a few words with him as Countess Adrian bent forward to speak to some one across the table.

"You will be glad to hear," he said, "that Miss Brett had quite recovered when I left her. She was going home with her aunt."

"Ah ! yes, I knew she would recover quickly. It was nothing serious, except in the sense of being an unhappy augury for her future. She is a very interesting young lady : I should like to see something more of her."

"I have no doubt that Professor Viall would be delighted to give you the opportunity," said Lendon.

"Unfortunately, it is impossible. I am on the eve of one of my pilgrimages to the East. If you know Miss Brett well enough, advise her to be careful. She will be a great actress, but it may be at the expense of what is more valuable even than fame."

"You mean that she is too nervous and highly wrought for the wear and tear of such a career ?"

"I mean that she is one of those strange and rarely endowed beings whose garment of flesh is but a thin and ineffectual shield against spiritual onslaughts, and who

under certain conditions would be almost defenceless against malignant influences, or even against a magnetism of a different and more dominant nature than her own. In the old days such beings were called Sibyls; they were isolated from contaminating currents, and were guarded by the priests, who made use of their peculiar gifts as something sacred. The fashion of Sibyls has gone out, as well as the knowledge that trained them. Nowadays they are called mediums, and are let loose upon society to be its destruction and their own."

Countess Adrian leaned back again, and, turning to Challis, interrupted the conversation.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Challis, but I have heard nothing so interesting for a long time as the account of those hypnotic experiments in Paris. Please go on."

Lendon strained his ears to listen, but at that moment the lady next him awoke to the fact of his existence, and began questioning him about his late tour, and the mystic's low-toned utterances lost themselves in a confused murmur. Countess Adrian appeared to find them absorbing; she sat forward with her elbow on the table, eating nothing, and with neither eyes nor ears for any other person. Presently the babble on Lendon's left set itself in another direction, and he made out that Mr. Challis and Countess Adrian were still discussing hypnotism, and the possibility of a strong vitality absorbing into itself a weaker nature than its own—a question in which Countess Adrian seemed intensely interested.

"You mean to say, then," Lendon heard her ask, "that I, for instance, who have any amount of animal spirits and energy, could, if I chose to use my will-power, take possession of some peculiarly sensitive organization and control it in whatever way I pleased?"

"Not exactly," answered Mr. Challis, "though that too is quite possible. This is what I meant. Suppose a person of enormous vitality—yourself, for example—suddenly killed by accident, or it might be by heart-disease?"

"No, no. Oh, don't suppose the one fate of which I have a terror." Countess Adrian bent eagerly forward, so that Lendon, who was leaning on the table, his face in her direction, caught her eyes full. Both drew back, but the conversation continued.

"Well," said Mr. Challis, "let us not suppose that, since it is disagreeable to you."

"But tell me the case you were going to put. I know that you have all sorts of queer ideas and experiences, if you could only be persuaded to make them public."

"In this instance nothing could give me greater pleasure, since you express a desire to hear them. The case in my mind was that of a strong person dying suddenly during a paroxysm of violent emotion, the object of the emotion being a woman of just that sensitive organization you describe."

"Well, and what then?"

"Don't you see that the intense emotion, the human clinging to life, would create a force which must be

inextinguishable. That strong individuality could not be blown out in a breath. There was a moment's physical contact with the weaker frame, and a magnetic connection was established. Nature works by material as well as by spiritual law. The stronger soul expelled the feebler, and lived out the drama in another body."

"Ah! And the poor spirit that was driven forth?"

"Who knows? Perhaps it went to the limbo of unborn souls to wait for a new garment of flesh."

"What a strange man you are! I understand you, though. See! you have made Mr. Lendon think us both crazy." She pointedly leaned forward again, and her eyes purposely met those of Lendon a second time, as she addressed him. Earlier in the evening Sir Donald had presented him to her.

"Many people think *me* crazy," composedly replied Mr. Challis. "But surely no one would venture to suggest anything so commonplace of the Countess Adrian. I am going to say good night," he added; "for I see that the smoking stage is reached, and to take one's leave with the second cigarette is like rising during a sermon before the exordium closes—a bad compliment to be avoided. We shall not meet for some time, Countess. I start for Palestine immediately.

He rose. His wiry grey beard touched her shoulder, as he said something in a low tone, at which she shook her head and smiled. Then he glided unobtrusively behind his host's chair, made his farewell and vanished.

"A remarkable man!" observed Lendon, taking the vacant place.

Countess Adrian merely nodded. There was a general stir just then. Chairs were being pushed back, couples were pairing, and they were drawing up lounges round the blazing fire in an inner smoking-room, separated from that in which they had supped by a screen of Eastern carving. Sir Donald was pressing upon his lady guests some especially choice Russian cigarettes. He noticed that Countess Adrian and Lendon had moved from the table together, and smiled in the indifferent way that with him expressed approval. It was difficult to realise that he was in love with the lady, but indifferentism is the hall-mark of a certain type of London man.

"You'll find it more comfortable in there," he said. "Let me recommend the liqueur."

Countess Adrian placed herself upon a divan, partially screened by draperies of Turkish brocade, and looked at Lendon above her yellow fan. He seated himself also.

"I have your permission?" he asked, fixing his cigarette in its holder.

"Of course. My own sky-parlour is often redolent of smoke, even at this hour. I live at the very top of Queen Anne's Mansions. Mr. Lendon, you'll come and see me, won't you? I've a particular reason for wanting to know more of you."

He expressed his gratification and at the same time his curiosity as to the reason she spoke of.

"I will tell you," she answered. "I know that you once did a very noble action to a woman who repaid you with base ingratitude. I have seen your portrait. I have read some of your letters. You will understand what I mean when I tell you that circumstances once brought me into contact with Jessie Harford."

Lendon winced. The episode in his life to which she alluded was one full of pain. When much younger, he had fallen romantically in love with his model—a young married woman deserted by her husband, and living a life of temptation that must have inevitably led to ruin. Lendon saved this woman, for a time at any rate, from her tempters, from herself, and, it must be added, from his own worst self also. He could not marry her, and he idealized her too much to offer her anything less than marriage. For five years he was her loyal friend. He asked from her no reward. He never spoke to her of his love, but honestly did his best to live it down. He found her a companion of her own sex, and placed her in a position to earn a safe and honourable livelihood. After five years she betrayed his trust in the basest and most ungrateful manner. Even still he saw in her the traces of a better nature; he sought her out, forgave her, and started her afresh. Again she deceived him, and this time sank beyond hope of redemption. It was, he afterwards learned, during the brief period of her reclamation that Countess Adrian became acquainted with her.

"And you thought," she said, with a dash of cynicism in her tone, "that women are to be won by generosity! You are mistaken, my friend. There are few women with whom a bad man has not a better chance than a good one; at all events, with whom tyranny hasn't a better chance than tender devotion."

"I cannot believe that, Countess," Lendon said sadly; "and anyhow a man can't turn himself into a tyrant, if nature has not turned him out one, to win the respect of a woman—of such a woman."

"Never mind," she said; "I respect and admire you all the same. I don't believe I should ever care much about a tyrant. I should rather do all the tyranny myself—if I could."

She looked sweetly at him, gave a little sigh, and then turned the conversation on to some other subject, merely reminding him that he had promised to come to see her in Queen Anne's Mansions.

Next day Lendon went to call on Miss Brett. Of course, he went in the evening. As she had told him, Beatrice lived with her guardian and his sister, not merely in charming rooms, as she had said in her letter to him, but in a charming house in the Regent's Park, which Professor Viall had first fallen in love with and then hired. It was a small ivy-covered house, or rather cottage, standing in the midst of a little garden and grounds of its own, just out of one of the avenues of the Park. One might pass and repass a score of times and

never observe that there was an isolated habitation behind that iron railing. Salisbury Plain could not give more solitude or more meditation than the dwellers in that little house could have when once they had got within its enclosure ; and yet they could hear the roar of the lions in the Zoological Gardens very distinctly every now and then.

Lendon was in luck ; Professor Viall and Mrs. Cubison both happened to be out at the moment of his calling, and he asked for Miss Brett, and was told she was at home. He was shown into a little sitting-room, evidently decorated and arranged by her own hand ; to his quick artistic eye there were manifest touches of her individuality and her poetic taste everywhere—and she received him with the free and cordial welcome of an American girl. Perhaps if Lendon had been a connoisseur in girls and love-making, he might have wished for just a little air of embarrassment in her manner of receiving him—a faint blush, a fall of the eyelid, a tremble of the hand.

They plunged into talk, real talk, at once.

“You have a great gift,” he said. “Do you know quite what your gift is ?”

“Tell me what you think it is. I don’t know much about it, or how it comes to me, or what it is, or how it is different from the gift of somebody else.”

“You have full possession of that rarest of all dramatic arts, the art of impersonation. See what most of the

men and women on the modern stage are. They are always just themselves—in different parts, in new dresses. Of course, we have some real actors, men and women who can impersonate. You are destined to a place with the very highest, for you can create a part utterly unlike your own individuality; and if you can create one, you can create twenty.”

“I don’t know,” she said thoughtfully. “My mind seems to work in two ways. An idea springs up at once, seems almost to spring at me from the outside, leaps at me like a tiger, and then I put it into acting; just as I did last night—until that terrible Countess Adrian spoiled my work. But at other times I get an idea suggested to me and I brood and brood over it—some part, some character, you know—and it seems gradually to grow into me, and I to grow into it, and at last it has full possession of me—and then I know I am right; at least, I know that that is how I must play the part. Some other woman might have her own reading, and that might be better for her; but my idea has grown to be—myself.”

“What do you think of doing in London? An improvisation or a play, or both?”

“Both, I think,” she answered, somewhat hesitatingly. “I want to do the improvisation because it is something new and peculiar in this country; but I don’t call it art in any high sense. Do you? It is something hysteric almost. I want to study a really great part in a great

play, and see if I can do it. But, oh, if I should fail!—here in this cold crowded London; if anything—any influence should chill me!”

A sudden impression was borne in upon him. “You are thinking of the Countess Adrian?” he said.

“Yes,” she replied.

In the simplest and most child-like way she put her hand upon his arm as if appealing to him for protection against some threatened danger. His pulses stirred at the touch; and then again the touch disheartened him—it was too purely friendly and appealing, and her eyes looked into his with all the frankness of an unspoiled and unconscious school-girl—if there is such a creature.

“You must conquer that odd fantasy,” he answered, after a moment’s pause, “and you’ll not fail; at least, it will not be your fault—the fault of your intellect and your genius and your soul—if you do fail. But I should be a little afraid about your nerves and your strength. Too much of such a performance as last night’s would soon wear you out. I fear it would take too much out of you. You are but a fragile girl, Miss Brett; you need looking after.”

“Yes, I feel very weak sometimes,” she said with a sigh—“both mentally and physically. I feel as if I should like to lean on some one. Oh, they are so kind, the Professor and Mrs. Cubison; but they are so strong and self-contained that they can’t either of them give

me just what I need. Am I talking nonsense and egotism?"

"You are not talking nonsense, and I specially wish to hear you talk about yourself. Yes; you do need to be looked after, you want some pillar to lean against. But," and here Lendon made a strong effort to master his emotions, to be not himself—an effort almost as strong as one of her own feats of impersonation, "you will find some one to love, and who will love you and understand you, and he will be the pillar to lean against."

She looked up to him without a gleam of surprise or a shadow of displeasure on her face; and she answered very quietly—

"Oh, no, Mr. Lendon; I don't think so at all. I am too fond of this calling of mine; I haven't room for any slighter affection. I couldn't love a man in that way, I am sure; and he would be jealous of my Art, I am certain. No, there would hardly be space enough in my life for him and for my Art."

She spoke with as unaffected a directness and simplicity as if they had only been talking of the fine weather.

"But you can't always lead this lonely kind of life," he said.

"I am never lonely—in that sense. Perhaps I could do better sometimes if I were more alone."

Lendon felt disappointed. It was clear that she cared nothing about him; never thought of him in any lover-

like sense—as yet. All the while he felt more and more in love with her, felt himself becoming almost painfully absorbed in her.

“Well,” he said resolutely, dropping that subject, “I want to see you create some part in a great play—something that is not familiar to our London audiences. That would be better than the Improvisation. The Improvisation takes too much out of you, I am sure. And then I feel, with you, that it is hardly Art. Am I too outspoken in my opinions?”

“Oh no! I delight to hear you tell me what I ought to do. I am sure you understand me better than—most people.”

Was she going to say, “Better than any one;” and did she check herself on the words? Yes, he thought so, and he felt a thrill of delight.

“I think I understand you better than most people,” he said; “and I think you have not yet got the secret of your own power—the talisman to summon it.”

“Oh no, I am sure I have not. I cannot tell why I am so strong and passionate and all aflame when I am possessed of some part, and why in my common life I am so weak and easily tired, and why I long to lean on some support. An odd notion comes into my mind sometimes. I feel as if I had not quite a soul of my own; and that when I get inspired with some part it is the soul of some one else which has come in to the help of mine, or has driven mine out for the moment. You

may laugh at me if you like, Mr. Lendon, I shan't be one bit angry ; but I do feel like that sometimes."

"You make me think," Lendon said, "of the Italian legend about Paganini. Have you ever heard of it?"

"No, I don't think I have."

"I forget the details of the story ; but the central idea was that Paganini had contrived, by some unearthly arts, to conjure the soul of his dying sweetheart into his violin, and that the marvellous music which the instrument gave out ever after was the wail of the soul eternally imprisoned within it."

"How strange !" she said, with a little shudder. "It is an uncanny story, and yet it fascinates me."

"I want to ask you a favour," he broke off abruptly. "I want you to let me paint you as you appear in your great character."

"Oh yes," she replied ; and for the first time during their talk a light flush came over her face. "But it shall be on condition, Mr. Lendon—yes, I must exact a condition."

"And the condition is ?"

"That you find the great part for me."

"That is the very thing I wanted to do ; I was going to ask you to let me look out a part for you."

"Oh, I shall be so delighted ! I never could find one for myself ; and I don't think there is any one who could find me a part that I should trust myself to—but only you."

"Then you will try the part I find for you?"

"I will play any part you find for me. I know that I shall make it my own; I know that it will grow into me, and that I shall grow into it. Yes, I shall feel absolute trust in your choice, Mr. Lendon. Why, this is exactly what I was saying, a short time ago, that I wanted above all other things."

"What is that?" he asked in an embarrassed tone.

"Why, don't you remember?—an influence to take care of me—a pillar to lean against. And now I have my wish granted all at once. You shall be the influence to take care of me and guide me; I shall lean against the pillar of your support."

The words were sweet, ineffably sweet, to his ears; although, most assuredly, they were not words of a girl's love: they told of trust, and even, perhaps, of affection; but Beatrice Brett was evidently not thinking of love. "Never mind," he said to himself, and his heart beat a triumphant measure, "that will come in time; I know it will."

"Is it not strange," she said softly, "how well I seem to know you already, and how sure I feel that you will put me in the right way in my Art and in everything?"

"So then," he said joyously, "this is a compact between us, Miss Brett?"

"Yes; I am so glad!—a compact of friendship."

“Of friendship now,” he said to his own heart; “of something better later on.”

“But I think I should like you to call me Beatrice,” she said; “it would sound more friendly; it would seem as if I were your pupil, and you had charge of me.”

“Very well,” Lendon replied; “Beatrice.”

Just then Professor Viall and Mrs. Cubison came in, and the illumination seemed to go out of the scene for Lendon.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ACTRESS AT HOME.

THE transcendent love-illumination went out ; but homelier lights shed themselves upon the Viall household, and made a little more clear to Lendon various things which had puzzled him. With an unconventional friendliness, which seemed to him very un-English, they insisted upon his staying for their evening meal—a sort of high tea of smoking cakes and scoloped oysters, and innocent beverages which reminded him of repasts in certain Puritan households in the smaller Massachusetts towns. Both the Professor and Mrs. Cubison drank many cups of tea ; and when the meal was over, as if to make up for their abstinence from alcoholic stimulant, they both smoked many cigarettes. It was over the cigarettes that their hearts expanded, and that they took Lendon freely into their confidence as to their plans, hopes, prospects, and family history. Beatrice did not smoke cigarettes, nor was she equally communicative. She went away for a little while, on the plea of preparing her morning's lesson for Miravoglia, and when she came back sat thoughtfully apart with a book which she did not read. The result of the Professor's and

Mrs. Cubison's confidences was that Lendon mentally decided they were "a queer lot." Perhaps a wholly unprejudiced observer might not have hesitated to include Miss Beatrice Brett herself in the sweeping summing up. Lendon, however, confined his criticism to the Professor, Mrs. Cubison, and the race of Transatlantic occultists in general, of whose peculiarities he quickly gleaned something in the conversation of his new friends. For one thing he learned that "Occultist," as opposed to "Spiritualist," was the proper term to apply to enlightened beings possessed of ideas of a supramundane order, and relating, broadly, to will-force, magnetic healing, inspirational gifts, and communion with beings from what Professor Viall and Mrs. Cubison called "the other side." The Professor was careful to impress upon his auditors that the commonplace wonders of professional mediums were not to be named in a breath with that higher spiritual science which had evolved the Viall-Motor, and that the vulgar sprites of the planchette and the tilted table were utterly beneath the contempt of one who had been admitted among the cultured aristocracy of the world of shades.

All this might have seemed less strange and absurd to Lendon, had he known anything of the mystical backwaters of London society; but when "Mr. Isaacs" and "The Occult World" had heralded in the new religion of Theosophy, he had been absorbed in the tragedy of Jessie Harford; and before the advent of

Madame Blavatsky he had taken ship to South America, and was shooting condors and making sketches on the lower slopes of the Andes. Thus he was somewhat behind his time as regards this latest development of modern thought.

He had read "The Undiscovered Country," however, and soon became of opinion that it would require the genius of Mr. Howells to do justice to the complexities of Professor Viall's personality. Perhaps it was a certain superficial similarity between Miss Brett and the innocent clairvoyant of that novel that made him at first look upon the Professor as a crack-brained charlatan exploiting a beautiful young victim, whose mental characteristics lent themselves readily to his fraudulent purposes. But before many days were past he had changed his views; for he discovered that, not only was the Professor's main and absorbing object the exploitation of his Viall-Motor, but that he was a rich man—rich enough, at any rate, to be an enthusiast without suspicion of base intentions. He discovered, too, that Miss Brett herself had an independent fortune, and that she, on her part, was absorbed by one dream and determination—that of succeeding in the dramatic profession, for which she had been carefully trained, and that she was merely taking advantage of her uncle and aunt's chaperonage for the furthering of her own particular scheme of life. No, if they were queer, they were certainly genuine; and if they were adventurers,

it was not with any notion of gulling the British public.

As in this evening's talk he learned more of the Professor's immediate plans and interests, Lendon began to resent in an odd way the very indifference he seemed to show for Miss Brett's lonely position, and the easy manner in which he appeared to take it for granted that Fate would steer her safely through the troubled waters of a theatrical career. He could not help saying, when the Professor spoke of his return to the States as imminent—

“But surely you will not leave Miss Brett here alone?”

“Why not?” said the Professor calmly. “She has been alone all her life. She studied by herself in New York and Paris, and I presume London is no worse a place for a young woman than they are. Oh, Beaty is very well able to get along, though she looks so fragile.”

“Suppose she should be ill?” said Lendon; “if she should have another fainting fit, like that of the other night, for instance?”

“That's true,” said the Professor. “I guess she must keep as clear as she can of mixed magnetism; and if she does get upset, why there's Mrs. Cubison to look after her. She says it was that Countess Adrian that affected her. I've given her a good talking to. I've shown her how she ought to train herself to resist cross-

magnetism: not that I ever knew Beaty affected like that before," he added thoughtfully.

Lendon glanced at Beatrice, who, while the others were talking, sat in front of the fire—for the evenings were very cold—her eyes fixed on the flames. By intuition, it seemed, they turned, as his sought hers, and she smiled a smile of frank, childlike confidence. His heart thrilled at the thought of this unspoken understanding. She counted on him to guard her against real and fancied evil—against the actual dangers of London, against the imaginary danger of Countess Adrian. This was what her look said; and then she turned back again to the contemplation of the fire.

"Yes, there's Mrs. Cubison," repeated the Professor; "she'll nurse her if she is ill, and do the housekeeping, and keep off the sharks. Marmy is not good for much social business, but she is good for that."

Mrs. Cubison gave a fat laugh. "I'll do my best," she said, nodding at Beatrice, who took no notice; "but Beaty is kinder wilful, and hard to drive."

"Yet, if Miss Brett intends seriously to go on the stage, there should be some one, should there not, to take care of her professional interests?" said Lendon.

"Pull the wires, you mean, butter up the critics, tackle the managers, and supply the newspapers with paragraphs. But *we* are independent of wire-pulling, Mr. Lendon. Beaty is a born genius, and genius don't need bolstering up. She ain't going to bind herself

down body and soul to any manager. She has gone through the drudgery, and now she means to produce herself. The London managers will be glad enough to take her on her own terms when they see what she can do. Her business man will do the dirty work for her; and as for other things, why I dare say you'll look in sometimes, Mr. Lendon, and give her and Marmy a bit of advice."

Lendon profited by the invitation, and during the next week or two made his way very often to the little house in Regent's Park. His visits were usually timed in the evening or late afternoon, and on most occasions he found Beatrice alone. Mrs. Cubison was a lady who evidently enjoyed and made the most of such society as was within her reach. She had a weakness for matinées at the theatres, and frequented drawing-room recitals and entertainments, for the most part got up by enterprising Americans who wanted to air their special views or to exhibit their special accomplishments. She had also an immense amount of shopping to do for herself and her friends, and accounted for her apparent extravagance on the plea that everything was so dear "on the other side." It must be owned that Lendon got sometimes a little bewildered among Mrs. Cubison's figures of speech, and was not always certain whether she meant the other side of the Atlantic or across the border of Infinity. Mrs. Cubison occupied herself a good deal, as well, in visiting her English or American-English

acquaintances. She had quite a large circle of friends, none of whom did Miss Beatrice appear to know, and who seemed for the greater number to live in the remoter parts of West Kensington and Notting Hill, or in Camden Town, or other distant regions. Thus it happened that, when she came home late and found Lendon talking to Beatrice, she seemed glad of the excuse to absent herself, declaring that Beaty couldn't be dull while he was there, and that she really must rest her poor head and legs, which were quite worn out. As for the Professor, he lived principally in his study when he was at home, and that was seldom: he seemed to be always flying over the country, to attend some mysterious meeting, or to consult some scientist, unknown to fame, on matters relating to the Viall-Motor. Lendon had a very imperfect comprehension of the properties of the Viall-Motor, shirking explanations with the Professor as one shirks discussing with its subject the details of harmless monomania, and amiably accepting it on the authority of Mrs. Walcot Valbry as something in the way of psychical electricity—so she called it—altogether wonderful and altogether indefinite, which, when it was completed, would supersede every other motive force in the world, but about which it would be time enough to think seriously when it *was* completed. His dominant feeling in regard to it at present was one of gratitude for the opportunities of unrestricted companionship with Beatrice which it afforded him.

Since the establishment of the compact between them, she seemed to take it for granted that he was to go and see her when he pleased ; and many times he did so please. She always received him in her own little sitting-room, where her piano lay open, with its odd-looking score of vocal exercises on the desk, and which was strewn with her own particular books — her Shakespeare (of course, she held the Baconian theory, and studied the plays by the light of Mr. Donnelly's Cryptogram, and many a long argument had she on the subject with London, who fought stoutly for the Bard of Avon), her dramatic critics, her Lessing, her Diderot, her Coleridge, her Charles Lamb, her Hazlitt, her George Henry Lewes. Sometimes they sat in the tiny walled garden, and sometimes they strolled into the Regent's Park, or even, when she was in a particularly frivolous mood, found their way to the Zoo.

He was careful not to speak to her of love ; he saw that the time was not yet ripe ; and then, too, her attitude towards him seemed as if intended to convey the impression that they met on a kind of neutral and shadowy ground, and that she did not belong to his world, nor he to hers. So far, indeed, he had not even been able to persuade her to visit his studio ; she always made an excuse for putting off a serious proposition that he ventured to put forward ; nor would she let him do guide-book for her, and show her the sights of London. She seemed to have an odd shrinking from glare and

society. She lived in her books and her work, and, though shut out from her in one sense, it was sweet to him to feel that she allowed him to identify himself with these interests, and that in the quiet region of Art their spirits might come together. It pleased her sometimes to play the pupil, and to appeal to him to direct her reading; and, in truth, he found that, well educated, even cultured as she was, she had roved in very desultory and discursive fashion through the field of dramatic literature. He discovered that she was but poorly acquainted with the Elizabethan dramatists, and it was he who introduced her to Massinger's sweet and tender *Camiola*, the *Maid of Honour*; to Dekker's wild, impulsive and altogether womanly *Roaring Girl*; to Webster's beautiful and tragic *Duchess of Malfi*—a play of which he was particularly fond, and of the revival of which before a London audience he cherished wild dreams: he had talked about it more than once to Cosway Keele, and had even attempted a somewhat modernised version of the great work, but so far nothing had come of it; and Cosway Keele had always shaken his head, and declared that there was not a living actress who could play the part of the *Duchess*. Lendon gave the play now to Beatrice to study, and was delighted to find that she shared his admiration, and took the same noble and sympathetic view of the character as he himself, for to him the *Duchess of Malfi* was one of the ideal women. So the weeks wore on in the little house in Regent's Park.

Never did actress lead simpler or more innocent life. She worked all the morning, practising elocution with Miravoglia, or gesture with an eminent lady-professor from the Paris Conservatoire, and then when she came home she studied her parts, and when Lendon was announced he often found her stretched in sheer fatigue on the sofa beneath the bulging casement-window and ready to yield herself, as a child might do, to a little deferential petting and sympathy.

CHAPTER V.

TEA IN THE STUDIO.

LONDON'S studio was situated in the artistic colony of Chelsea. He had built himself a low red-brick house after all the approved canons. His fortune was sufficiently large to enable him to gratify a mild passion for *bric-à-brac*. He had some very good china and a quantity of fine tapestry, and his collection of old prints was famous. The studio itself was a homelike place; he was fond of it, and, in the Jessie Harford days, work had been his passion. He had idealized her in every possible mood and attitude, and studies of her still hung in dim corners and stood on unused easels like mocking ghosts of the past. He put these away with something of an ironic pang on the day before that fixed for Beatrice Brett's first visit—such a pang as a sincere-minded person might feel in taking down the symbol of an outworn faith to make place for the sign visible of conversion to a new and more convincing creed. He took a good deal of pains in beautifying his studio for the reception of his American guests—Beatrice and Mrs. Cubison only; the Professor had been called away on other business. Never before had he fidgeted so over

the placing of his chairs, or examined his various properties with so critical an eye as to the effect they might produce on an outside observer, or altered and disposed anew so many times the fold of a piece of drapery or the arrangement of his curious collection of pots and pans ; not even on the occasion of a visit from a royal personage, or on that of the annual reception, a few days before Show Sunday, at which he was wont to entertain his especial circle of friends apart from the ordinary herd who trotted round the artists' quarter. The studio had a gallery at one end, hung with his rough sketches, and draped with odd bits of Oriental work. He wondered whether Beatrice would admire his hangings of Moorish tapestry and Persian embroidery, his Turkish tiles let into the fire-place, and his odd pieces of Oriental brass-work ; and he wondered whether she would be interested in hearing him tell of how he had come by his different treasures—for to nearly all some reminiscence of adventure or more or less romantic association was attached—and if her eyes would lighten, and her charming smile come into play ; and if she would poke about with that air of child-like interest which already he had begun to know and look for ; and if she would notice his collection of pipes, and remark his little jewelled liqueur-cups ; and if perhaps—audacious thought!—she would accept one of the pretty things in token that she had forgiven that unlucky speech in relation to the objectionable word “morbid,” which she was always in a half serious, half

laughing way, bringing up against him. And had she ever tasted Russian tea he wondered, and would she like it; and would she try his piano? He knew she was musical, for he had once called and been shown into her sitting-room in the course of a lesson from Miravoglia, and he had known by the way in which the fat little Italian put his finger to his lip with a deep-drawn S-sh. and had struck the chords of the accompaniment with a sign that she was to go on unmindful of the interruption, that the master was proud of his pupil and wished to show her off to the intruder. She had only been singing a sort of recitative exercise, but Miravoglia had patted her shoulder when she had finished with an air of benevolent commendation.

"Zat is good, but it is not as good as you can do. You are weak. You do not eat." He turned round on his stool and gazed at her. "My gracious! how pale you are! What is ze matter?"

"I didn't sleep very well last night, Signor," said Beatrice, who had in the meantime nodded welcome to Lendon. "I have just finished," she added, motioning him to a seat.

"You not sleep last night," repeated Miravoglia. "What 'as 'e been doing? I kill 'im if 'e worry you."

"There's no 'he' in the question, Signor."

"Then why you worry?" and he made a gesture of sovereign contempt, as if to imply that nothing short of a lover could by any possibility be a legitimate cause for

uneasiness to a young woman. "You must eat much. To-morrow you take a good breakfast—not your leetle toast and tea of the fine ladies who lean back in their carriages in the Park—but a ver' good meal. You are a worker. Workers must eat."

"I know that, Signor," said Beatrice meekly. "Tell me, do you take such good care of all your pupils?"

"Not of all, not of all," and he looked at Lendon as he tapped himself knowingly on the chest; "but I have somesing 'ere to take care of—somesing zat will do great sings."

"The reason why Signor Miravoglia is so popular with his pupils is that he pays them all such nice sugary compliments," said Beatrice, teasingly, turning to Lendon.

"Compliments!" cried the Signor; "you shall 'ear. Zere was a young lady who came to me zis morning; she want to go on de stage. 'Mademoiselle,' I say to 'er, 'you have come to know if you can sing: you say you 'ave a lofely voice. Perhaps I may not sink you 'ave a lofely voice. No matter, I will tell you de truth.' So she sing—you shall 'ear if I compliment. 'Mademoiselle,' I say to 'er, 'it is *awful*! Nevare sing again, nevare sing one note.' And now, Mces Beatrice, we will have a leetle song. Begin."

She protested that her lesson was over. Miravoglia insisted. Lendon entreated. So she sang a German song after a fashion that called forth a "Brava!" from Miravoglia, and that touched Lendon to the very depths

of his heart. It was wonderful that so strong and rich a voice should come from that fragile frame. It was very sweet, too, and had a pathos which he thought he had never heard equalled.

When she had finished, Miravoglia swung himself round on the music-stool and cut short Lendon's thanks. "She will do," he cried; "but she is nervous. No matter!—zere never was an artist who was not nervous. I believe in 'er. Remember, Mees Beatrice, what I tell you. Sing from your big 'eart. Sing as if you was in lofe. Zere is no 'e!" he went on indignantly. "Zere must be one 'e, I tell you. You are in lofe?" he questioned insinuatingly.

A beautiful blush came over Beatrice's face. She laughed with a touch of embarrassment. "No, indced, Signor," she answered. "I haven't any time for that."

"No time? Ah! Bah! It is good for an artist to be in lofe. Make yourself in lofe, Mees Beatrice."

"But, Signor Miravoglia, I have tried and quite unsuccessfully. I have done my very best to fall in love with each of the heroes at each one of the plays which I have gone to see in London, and all in vain. There is not one among them who gives me an emotion—except, perhaps, Cosway Keele."

"Ah! Cosway Keele!" echoed Miravoglia, contemptuously. "He is not bad, but 'e is too old, and besides——No, Cosway Keele will not do. Never mind," he added, reflectively; and as he spoke his eyes were on

Lendon, and it seemed as if he were appraising Lendon's qualifications for a possible lover. "Wait; 'e will come. Zere never was an artist who did not lofe; and zen," he added, consolingly, "she will sing from the bottom of 'er very big 'eart." And with this prophecy Miravoglia bundled up his music and departed.

Lendon remembered the little scene, and Beatrice's flush, and her shy laugh when Miravoglia had gone and they were alone, and how she had abruptly turned the conversation and had there and then selected her visit to the studio this very day. He went off into a blissful dream, which was interrupted by the entrance of his servant with some flowers he had ordered. And then there were minute directions to be given as to the preparation of the tea and the purchase of an especial cake which was only to be procured in one particular shop in High Street, Kensington, and which he was certain Beatrice would like; and there was a box of Paris *bonbons* to be unpacked—did not all American girls adore bonbons!—and there were the flowers to be arranged—such glorious masses of Nice violets, and branches of mimosa, and bunches of red and purple and pink anemones, so that the dusky studio was fragrant and beautiful with blossom as the gardens and olive groves of the sunny South.

And how Lendon was rewarded for all his pains by Beatrice's exclamations of delight, and by the brightening of her serious face, and the girlish pleasure with

which she bent over the bowls of mimosa and violets and anemones, which last were new to her, and by her frank admiration of all his pretty things, and by her sweet and gracious acceptance of the tiny Moorish cup he shyly offered her ! The sun shone out, though it had been dark and foggy enough before, and made her golden hair glisten in its rays, and it seemed to him that she had brought the sunbeams with her. Oh ! it was a very pleasant afternoon. The cake and the *bonbons* were a success, and so was the Russian tea, not the least so because it absorbed Mrs. Cubison's attention for the time, and set her speculating as to how she could procure a samovar to send as a present to a New York lady of culture and taste who appreciated things out of the common. The samovar turned her off on a voyage of discovery among the relics, as she called them, and she begged that she might be allowed to prowl about among the cabinets and in the dark corners, in the hope that she might improve her taste and cultivate her eye to the capacity of discriminating between the genuine articles and the Birmingham imitations on exhibition in Regent Street and Oxford Circus. So Beatrice and Lendon were left more or less to themselves at the piano ; and a charming sympathetic talk they had, while she played dreamy little things by Hiller and Brahm, or he played and she listened, conversation rippling on to the measure of the music in an odd, fitful, fanciful fashion.

The sun went down ; the lamps were brought in, and

he fire danced up and deepened the tender glow on Beatrice's cheeks. Mrs. Cubison reminded her that they were going to the theatre that evening—Cosway Keele had sent them a box for the now waning attraction at the Dionysion, and though they had seen it once already they were happy to go again—and then, to Lendon's surprise and pleasure, Beatrice herself turned rather timidly to him and asked him if in the Professor's absence he would care to be their escort. Would he not? His fête day was not over yet, for there and then he devised a little plan by which Beatrice should see something more of London life, and he should have still a further taste of her society. What was to prevent them from dining with him at the Orpheus Club? And might he call at their house, say an hour hence, and take them thither? and that would give him just time to dress and to go round by the Orpheus and order a table and see that the champagne was put on ice. For Mrs. Cubison must throw aside her Puritan ways for that one evening; and indeed he was sure that she was not a Puritan at all, but a veritable Bohemian; and since, of course, she would not forego her after-dinner cigarette she would find the Orpheus supply quite reliable. They had a cosy meal, though Mrs. Cubison did not indulge in her usual cigarette, which she declared she only smoked to keep the Professor company, and though the consumption of champagne, as far as the ladies were concerned, was not large; and it was Cosway

Keele's own box which he had sent them, so that nothing could have been more agreeable or comfortable. There occurred, however, one curious drawback to the evening's enjoyment, and this was the discovery by Beatrice herself that Countess Adrian was in the house.

Lendon wondered why suddenly she drew back and gave a little shiver, and why she turned so pale.

"Are you cold?" he asked; "I am afraid there is a draught in that corner."

"No," she answered, "it is not that. Look down at the end of the third row, just below us."

He did so, and saw Sir Donald Urquhart's slightly bald head and bored impassive face raised upwards, and beside him Countess Adrian's sleek coils of hair and statuesque neck and shoulders.

"Don't you see that you are giving way to a fancy?" he said. "You were quite happy till they came in."

"Ah!" she answered; "that is just the thing. I seemed all of a sudden to know that she was near me, and then I saw them take their places there."

"Beatrice," he said, leaning towards her and speaking very low. "Do you remember our compact and your own words to me—your promise that I should be an influence to take care of you, a pillar against which you might lean for support?"

"Yes," she answered, "I remember."

"Then try to think that, unworthy as I am, my dearest longing in the whole world is to be your support,

our shield against this uncanny fancy which has taken possession of you. Put your hand in mine for a moment and gain strength and courage to fight against it, from the knowledge of my"—he paused for an instant and his voice trembled—"of my sympathy and affection."

She did put her hand in his—her little trembling hand whose touch thrilled him with a peculiar magnetism of its own. At that moment Countess Adrian looked up. Her dark eyes rested on the box for several seconds and she seemed to be taking in all its occupants; then she bowed to Lendon, and turning, whispered something in Sir Donald's ear.

"Are you stronger, Beatrice?" Lendon whispered. "Do you not feel that it is a fancy to be combated and conquered?"

"It is no fancy," she replied, "but I am stronger when you are with me. You don't know how I feel when she looks at me," the girl went on hurriedly; "I seem to lose all power, and even all sense of individuality. You can imagine nothing more horrible than the sensation of spiritual blankness and desolation and helplessness. It is like having the evil eye upon one."

"Then," he said, smiling at her in the effort to reassure her as though she were a little child, "I am going to give you a charm which an Arab woman gave me against the evil eye, and you must always wear it, and it will make you at least remember that there is one person who would give his life to help you." As he

spoke he detached from his watch-chain a little gold hand, such as one sees among the Mohammedans in the East, traced with certain mystic lines and a crescent on the palm.

She took it from him and examined it with deep interest and an air of comfort and confidence; then she unloosened from her arm a bangle of plain gold with a ring at the clasp, and asked him to fasten the charm upon it. "It shall be my talisman," she said, "to guard me from evil."

She made no further allusion to Countess Adrian, but sat back silent and thoughtful till the close of the last act but one. Then she rose suddenly. "Marmy," she said, "I must go home. I have a headache. I can't stay here any longer. Mr. Lendon will go behind and exp'ain to Cosway Keele, and thank him for us."

Mrs. Cubison got up obediently, and Lendon took them down and saw them into a cab. The mission entrusted to him obliged him to sit out the performance. As he went back to the theatre he met Sir Donald and Countess Adrian coming out. She stopped and spoke to him.

"So your Improvisatrice, like myself, is bored with Cosway Keele?"

"She is tired and not very well," replied Lendon, "and like yourself, probably, she has seen the play before."

"Oh! one has seen it half-a-dozen times; but like

Everything at the Dionysion, it is a perfect picture, at which one can look in a dreamy way and fancy oneself taken back to the times it represents. Has she quite recovered from her fainting fit of the other night?—your Improvisatrice, I mean.”

“I believe so,” Lendon answered guardedly; though had not Sir Donald been present he would have tried to ascertain if Countess Adrian were aware of the curious influence she exercised. At that moment the footman appeared and her carriage was called. She turned back to him with a smile as Sir Donald offered her his arm.

“Mr. Lendon,” she said, “I think you are almost the only person I have ever asked twice to come and see me. I assure you that many people find me interesting.”

He was taken aback by her frankness, but recovered himself sufficiently to frame an apology which might be accepted as a compliment.

“Well,” she said, “you shall prove your sincerity, but not just yet. I am going to Paris for a few weeks; when I come back again you shall hear from me.”

He was glad to be able to tell Beatrice that she need not, for the present at least, dread the evil eye of Countess Adrian. It seemed to him that for the first few days after the encounter at the theatre the girl drooped a little, and was less enthusiastic about her work, less sanguine about the future. Miravoglia mournfully reiterated his enquiry. “What ’as ’e been doing?” and would not be satisfied with Beatrice’s repeated

statement that there was no "he" in the case. Probably Miravoglia would not have believed her had she told him the truth, and would have scouted the idea that a woman whom she had seen only twice, and to whom she had never spoken, was the cause of the disturbance. But simultaneously with Countess Adrian's departure Beatrice revived, and shortly afterwards a great event occurred—one of those fateful accidents which turn the current of an existence, and present the opportunity which makes or mars a career.

For Beatrice's opportunity has come. Now, at last, she is very happy. The manager has been found and, better still, the great part. She is to play Webster's "Duchess of Malfi."

Lendon had from the first felt inspired by the conviction that this was the predestined part, and he rejoiced now to think that she had studied it in the first instance at his instigation. The piece had not been played in London for a generation, and at the time it was played had not ever had a fitting Duchess. Now the Duchess had come.

It had been partly Lendon's doing. This especial actor-manager under whom Beatrice was to make her great appearance—a man of genius with the untiring perseverance, the power of organizing, and the capacity for detail and stage arrangement which ensured success for any production he might put on the boards of the Dionysion—was an old friend of the painter's.

Cosway Keele—for he was this actor-manager—had, as has been told, seen Beatrice Brett's performance at Mrs. Walcot Valbry's, and had been much struck by its extraordinary power and originality. He had long contemplated the revival of Webster's tragedy, he himself playing the part of Bosola, but had declared over and over again to his intimates that he knew no living actress capable of personating the ill-fated Duchess. Beatrice had impressed him strangely. "I think I see my Duchess at last," he said to Lendon that very night at Mrs. Walcot Valbry's; and it was this remark which had caused Lendon to turn Beatrice's attention to the Elizabethan dramatists. "But," added the manager, "it is out of the question now; and though I am not sure that I would not risk such an actress, untried though she is in England, I must wait. We shall see, at any rate, how she proves herself."

Strange things came about, however. Just as the new Dionysion production had been decided upon—a Shakespearean comedy—and the scenic artists and the authorities on historic costume and furniture, whose services the theatre retained, were torturing their brains to produce an effect that should beat even the Dionysion record, the leading lady fell suddenly and dangerously ill and threw all the Dionysion arrangements into chaos. She was forbidden to act again for a year. In the meantime what was to be done? Who would take her place, and what play could be put on that would satisfy an

exacting public which had been trained to demand much from Cosway Keele? It was at this juncture that Lendon put in a word. "Why not try 'The Duchess of Malfi,'" he said, "and give the American Improvisatrice the part?"

Cosway Keele took a day to think over the scheme. He had already met Beatrice socially, now in a business capacity was introduced to her in her little study, and was delighted with her interpretation of the part. Before many hours all was settled. Beatrice was to play in the great tragedy. To Bernard Lendon was entrusted the task of some revisions and alterations in the text, and as soon as this was done "The Duchess of Malfi" was to be put into rehearsal.

Lendon set to his work with ardour. It gave him opportunities for consulting Beatrice, for studying her and for identifying himself with her aims and hopes, which were sweeter to him than any other pleasure that could at this time have been offered him. And the more her nature revealed itself to him, the more tender, true and womanly did it appear, the more did she seem to him not only an ideal to be worshipped, but a woman to be wholly loved. She had her little moods of despondency—nay, even of despair, when she declared herself incapable of realizing the creation, and prophesied for herself dire failure and for Cosway Keele disappointment and disaster. Then how he delighted to soothe and to encourage her and to buoy up the elastic artist spirit

till she was hopeful and self-confident once more. But she had, too, her times of artistic exaltation when the fire of genius burned, and, as Mrs. Cubison would have put it, the "influences" were propitious, when she astonished them at rehearsal and sent Cosway Keele away from the Dionysion under the conviction that he was about to introduce to the world a new Rachel. On the whole things went merrily at the Dionysion, and some doubts which had been felt as to the suitability of such a piece for the modern stage subsided. Lendon had cut out all the rough phraseology of a play which, but for the out-spoken language of the time, not then thought harm by woman or man, is pure as newly-congealed ice. He had shortened the play and made it end with the death of the sweet, sad, wronged heroic Duchess, the doomed victim of a brother's hate and treachery. Never was woman more truly moulded for happiness and joy and love, more sweetly, purely passionate in her love. Yes, and she finds a lover worthy—at least not unworthy—of her, though of lowlier rank than hers; and she stoops to him and lifts him to her heart, and they are married; and then her brother's hate, rapacity, and cruelty sends her to her death. And what a death, and how she meets it: prayerful, gentle, sublimely serene, absolutely undismayed by the coming death itself and by all its accompanying and artificial horrors.

"Whether the spirit of greatness or of woman

"Reigns most in her I know not."

"These," said Beatrice to Lendon, "are the very words that first taught me the part. See, I have scored and underscored them."

"Her waiting-woman's words?" Lendon said.

"Yes—she has so great a soul that she has lifted the very waiting-woman into a comprehension of it! Shall I ever be able to put all my full sense of her love and her nobleness and her courage into words? Oh, tell me!"

"You can, and you will, and all London will fall down before you," Lendon exclaimed in the full rapture of the sincerest conviction, already proud of the anticipated triumph.

"I don't think about that now—oh, hardly at all! I only think about *her*. I feel as if she would be looking down on me from that Heaven to which she has gone. I think of her as a real woman. I feel her reality. Do you know, Mr. Lendon, I sometimes fancy in a half-dreamy sort of way that I shall feel her soul possessing me; so that I shall make her live again in me? Do you think me extravagant, absurd?"

"I think you have the very soul of an artist," he said. "And see how the artist's ambition triumphs over everything lower! You don't care about the crowded houses and the applause any more?"

"They don't come into my thoughts. I dare say if I succeed I shall enjoy the success to the full by-and-by. I am ambitious. Oh, yes! I want to succeed. But,

Mr. Lendon, if I can only play that part as I see it—as I see it of nights when I lie awake—well, then, it couldn't be prevented—I must succeed!”

“Come,” Lendon said cheerily, “you have spoken those words with a brave conviction worthy of the Duchess herself. Only make her speak like *that*, and you must succeed.”

“But she has such wonderful lines to speak ; there is such variety in her, such high spirit, such gaiety, such chaff, even—yes, such downright merry womanish chaff ; and then the pathos, the passion, the fervid love, the agony, the anger, the pity, the forgiveness. Oh ! shall I ever be able to do it all ?”

“You have done it all—you are doing it all,” Lendon said, delighted and satisfied.

“Well, it will be your doing,” she answered, dropping her voice—“yours and hers ! We can think of the crowds and the applause some other time, if they come. *Now*, I cannot feel myself playing for *them*. I am playing for her, and, and,” she blushed a little and half turned her head away, “and for *you*.”

“Beatrice,” he exclaimed passionately ; “Is that really true ? Do you feel that you care more to please me than to please the crowds who will throng to see you, and who will admire you, and call you great—yes, you know they will—and you will smile serenely ; and you will turn to *me* ? At last, at last, you will learn to love me ?”

“Hush,” she said, blushing very red ; “we are talking

of the Duchess. We must only think of the Duchess now."

"I have been very patient," he urged. "Have I not thought of the Duchess? Have I not respected the Duchess' claims all these weeks? How can I help sometimes thinking of the woman, not of the artist? Do not ask me to be more than man."

"I ask you only to be yourself," she answered. "Come, hear me my lesson and tell me if I say it well."

CHAPTER VI.

COUNTRESS ADRIAN'S SKY-PARLOUR.

IN the excitement of the preparations for "The Duchess of Malfi" Lendon had almost forgotten Countess Adrian. It was with something of a feeling of guilt that he one day read the following note :—

"Queen Anne's Mansions, April

"DEAR MR. LENDON,

"I have come back from Paris, and am writing to remind you of your promise to visit me in my sky-parlour. I have something that I want particularly to ask you. Can you come to me to-morrow at five?

"Yours,

"AGNES ADRIAN."

The sky-parlour proved to be a very attractive domicile, though it was at the very top of Queen Anne's Mansions and two lifts were necessary to get to it. A Chinese boy, with a pig-tail and dressed in a sort of national costume of dark blue curiously embroidered, ushered Lendon along the inner corridor. It struck him that the Oriental attendant was quite in keeping with a certain Eastern luxuriance and semi-barbaric

magnificence peculiar to Countess Adrian herself, and his artistic sense was gratified by the due appearance of so judicious a touch of colour. The young Celestial retreated with all the gravity of his race to inform his mistress of her visitor, and Lendon had once again an opportunity to appreciate the harmony of effect arrived at between the lady and her surroundings. The boudoir was gorgeous, but it was a splendour in which, notwithstanding its audacity of combination, nothing jarred. Never were such vivid and bewildering pinks and greens and yellows so subtly interblended on wall and ceiling with deep crimson and burnished gold. The furniture was principally Japanese of the costliest description—inlaid work, lacquer and enamel, with here and there grotesque carvings, eccentric masks in old ivory, startling monsters in bronze and porcelain, exquisite pieces of old pottery and bits of drapery heavily wrought in silver and gold, such as might have come straight from the Mikado's palace. Everything about the room was fantastic and luxurious to the last degree. Almost everything might have fetched a price in an art collection. Lendon perceived with delight that the tea-service which stood in readiness before the fire was of rarest old Dutch, and that a casket lying open and filled with dainty French bonbons was of the most valuable *cinq-cento* workmanship. Amid all this congruous incongruity were different modern feminine trifles—Palais Royal knick-knacks—the latest thing in scent-bottles, photo-

graphs with the signatures of distinguished persons, lying heaped pell-mell, in a bowl of ancient Tokio ware. A soft enervating odour pervaded the place. It came, he discovered, from a curious preparation of *pot-pourri* that blended with the fresh perfume of forced roses and early lilac and Parma violets.

"You like my den?" said the Countess Adrian's deep musical voice beside him. He had not heard her enter. She was holding out both hands in frank welcome, and her splendid eyes, glowing with power, passion, and rich vitality, were looking into his. Again he had the sensation of being almost oppressed by that superabundance of life force which her whole presence conveyed. He could, indeed—remembering by a curious association of idea, the words of Maddox Challis in that respect—fancy it well might extinguish or absorb into itself any feebler spark. To-day she was positively beautiful, and, certainly, did not deserve her titular epithet of the "belle-Laide." There was a soft rose flush upon her smooth cheek. The turn of her neck was enchanting; so also were the curves of the ripe red lips and the gleam of white teeth between them; and so too was the shapeliness of her form, which seemed to undulate beneath the folds of an odd clinging sort of dress of some delicate Eastern fabric.

"A thousand pardons, Countess," Lendon began.

"We had the colour copied from one of the Japanese theatre-books," she went on, seating herself at the table

and pouring out a cup of tea as she talked. "It was very difficult to get the British workman to understand the scheme. All sense of colour seems to have been blotted out of you in your grey, grimy, foggy little island. For myself, since I cannot have the sunshine in which I was born I must try to make up for it by colour."

"You were born in a tropical country, Countess?" asked Lendon.

"I was born in Jamaica," she answered; "and I have Spanish and French as well as English blood in my veins. The cabinets and draperies and things," she went on as if pursuing a narrative, "I brought myself from Asia."

"I did not guess that you had been such a wanderer," he said.

"Yes. I have wandered all my life. I have never had a home. Sometimes," she added sadly, "I fancy that I never shall have one. Not that I regret my wanderings," she added hastily; "they have thrown me among strange people and have taught me some strange things, though I am not quite so learned in Eastern lore as Maddox Challis. Do you know, by the way, whether he has really started for Lebanon?"

Lendon answered in the negative.

"That man fascinates me," said the Countess. "He is the only person I have ever met who gives me the feeling that he could make me do what he pleased. I met him first at Peking. I spent a whole year in India,

China and Japan ; it was the year after my marriage with Count Adrian."

The idea crossed Lendon's mind that it was strange he should thus composedly allude to a ceremony which the law-courts had pronounced null and void. Clearly, also, as she retained the title to which it had been decreed he had no right, there was wisdom in the bold part of assuming her history to be above reproach or question.

He did not answer directly, but accepted the tea and sugar which she handed to him, with some commonplace complimentary remark upon the excellence and peculiarity of the brew.

"It's Asiatic too," she said. "I know what you are thinking of," she added abruptly. "You are wondering that I should speak of my husband with so little embarrassment—after all that you have heard and read in the newspapers. Now confess—isn't it so ?"

"I have heard—of course," he said, not denying the inference. "As for the newspapers, I am more in the dark than you think, for I was out of England at the time of the trial to which, I suppose, you refer."

"At any rate you know the circumstances. I have no doubt they were in a hundred mouths at Mrs. Walcot Valbry's the other night. I have no doubt, too, that not a few of the great ladies were indignant at meeting me, though they were glad enough to accept the hospitality of my hotel in Paris, in the old days. I dare say, too, that people in general think I am trying to

brazen it out, and take my appearance in society as a proof of my utter heartlessness. That is of very little consequence, but *you* will know that after a great storm, when the waters have been lashed to foam and the billows torn to their very depths, by-and-by the tumult subsides as though it had never been, and the surface of the sea is scarcely stirred by so much as a ripple."

"There was a great storm?" said Lendon questioning.
"I am speaking of the storm in your own nature—not of the outside world—the newspapers and the gossip of scandal-mongers. That is all only a cyclone of straws."

She paused an instant with her eyes on his face. "I like to hear you say that," she replied. "It gives me a kind of key to your character. I like a man to look upon the society-sensation part of the affair—the notoriety and all that kind of thing, you know—as a cyclone of straws. Here is where the real tempest rages." And she laid her hand lightly upon her breast. "A storm? Yes; a hurricane, a tornado, a cataclysm! Great Heavens! How I suffered!"

"Ah, I can understand the suffering you may have gone through—the pain of a trust betrayed—of a noble love hurt to the death by the discovery that it had spent itself upon an unworthy object."

"Yes—*you* know. That I suppose was how you felt about Jessie Harford. You *did* love that woman, Mr. Lendon. If some one had only loved *me* like that!"

"Surely there must be many"—he began.

“Oh many!” she interrupted. “You think I am a man to inspire love. Well, I suppose I can count my lovers by the score—perhaps I can’t count them at all—would be a bore to try. But that’s not the kind of love I mean—love that loves on through ingratitude and senility, and reverences itself too much to make a mere nothing of what, after all, was only in its very nature created for the lower uses. I wonder”—she added slowly—“that you were not tempted to revenge yourself in that way, after you had found out how she deceived you, and when you loved the woman still.”

“I *was* tempted—for a little while,” he answered. “I thank Heaven for the strength which enabled me to overcome the temptation. Don’t let us talk of that, Countess.”

“Why, since it is all dead? It *is* dead, isn’t it?”

“My love for Jessie Harford is dead,” he said, quietly.

He rose as he spoke and stood by the fire-place, absently fingering a quaint little porcelain figure which stood upon it.

“And that is what comes even of *such* love!” she said, looking at him intently.

“Of *such* love!” he repeated. “No! the love never dies, it lives again in another form. But, talk to me about yourself—if you will.”

“Oh, yes, I am an egotist; I always talk about myself. But haven’t you noticed that nobody ever finds fault with a judicious egotism in the case of a man or woman who

is in the nature of things interesting? I suppose, without bad taste, I may assume that I *am* interesting; at any rate some misguided people have found me so. You were wrong, Mr. Lendon," she went on, without waiting for his reply. It was a peculiarity of Countess Adrian that she never allowed time for a reply that must necessarily be a compliment. "Wrong, in your interpretation of what I said about my husband. There was no trust betrayed, in one sense. There was no discovery of the kind you mean. I always knew that he was ignoble. There was no love hurt to the death."

"You mean that you did not love him?"

She shook her head. "It is my misfortune perhaps—perhaps my good fortune, that I have never loved anyone, except myself. Tell me, what do you say to that?"

"I can hardly venture, Countess. Anything I might say would be either impertinent or ridiculous."

"Oh! I'm a woman who has got past conventionalities. That is part of my wretched position; one of the cruellest of the wrongs he has done me. He has given the world permission to insult me."

"No!" exclaimed Lendon, eagerly. "You do injustice to yourself, as well as to the world."

"*You* are not likely to insult me, you mean. If you were, I should not be talking to you now, in this fashion. I have a fine scent for possibilities of disrespect. No, Mr. Lendon, I value your consideration and I value your opinion also. I should like you to understand me."

She rose too, and stood beside him, one elbow resting on the mantel-piece, her face turned towards him as she leaned slightly backward. Her eyes looked at him with a wistful expression. Her whole attitude—the tilt of her small head, the exquisite modelling of her chin and throat, the droop of her eye-lids—were indescribably alluring. She affected him as some strong perfume or heady wine might do. It occurred to him, in a whimsical manner, that were he not in love with Beatrice Brett, he would certainly fall in love with Countess Adrian.

“Come and sit down,” she said; “you look so uncomfortable standing there.” She motioned him to a chair, and sank herself upon a low cushioned sort of lounge, beside the fireplace.

“I want you to understand that I was never in love with my husband,” she went on. “I was a wild ignorant Creole girl, hungering to see the world, and I married him because he was rich and had a title, and would open any oyster for me. I did really marry him, or at least I believe so. You don’t suppose that at sixteen I was so worldly wise as they tried to make out.”

“Sixteen!” he repeated pitifully—“only sixteen!”

“Yes, I am younger than you fancied perhaps; I am twenty-five—twenty-five,” she said again—“no great age; and what have I not gone through! I lived with him for nearly seven years, then he got tired of me and cast me off, but I did not choose to be flung aside like a—shall I say a Jessie Harford?”

"No!" he exclaimed savagely; "you must not speak of her in that way."

"Ah, I *can* hurt you. I wanted to. I said that on purpose. When I can make a man look as you did at that moment, I know that he is not quite indifferent to me. Forgive me. I don't want you to be indifferent to me." She put out her hand to him and let it fall again, as her tones fell also in a caressing cadence.

"You know that would be impossible" he said.

"Would it? Well, we shall see. I took my claim into the law courts, and they decided against me—as law courts have a way of deciding against an unfriended woman. In spite of them he is my husband in deed and in fact, and I am his wife, yet we are both at liberty to marry again whenever we please."

"Report says, doesn't it? that Count Adrian is about to avail himself of that liberty."

"He is going to marry the daughter of one of your English peers. You see there are mothers even in your pious England who don't hesitate to give their young daughters to a man of known profligacy, and who has a wife already living. There will be a grand wedding and columns in the *Morning Post*, which you may be sure will not be so ill-bred as to mention the fact of my existence. I have no doubt that if Count Adrian had been an Englishman and a politician, a great deal of political capital would have been made out of that—misadventure, shall we call it? I should have had

champions by the thousand. They might even, had I the misfortune now to be poor, have got up a public subscription for me. But as it is, he is not an Englishman, he has nothing to do with politics, and so the papers ignore his past, and Society opens its doors to him, and mothers welcome him as a suitor to their daughters. In *my* case everything would be different ; there is not a mother in England who would not think her son polluted by a marriage with me. Isn't it so ? Tell me ! ”

Lendon felt at a loss to reply ; all he could say was, “ You are very hard. ”

She laughed. “ I knew you would make some banal remark. I hoped you would be more original. Of course I am hard ; and of course, too, it is as I say : even Sir Donald Urquhart is obliged to confess it. ”

“ Sir Donald, at any rate, proudly announced the probability of your bearing his name. ”

“ He is too devoted. He thinks it advisable I should change one which is a subject of disagreeable notoriety. He is willing to sacrifice himself on the altar of his infatuation : I may say that without vanity. His love isn't the kind of love I spoke of to you. ”

“ You don't love him, then ? ” Lendon blurted.

“ Love him ! My friend—I may call you my friend, may I not ?—it doesn't imply anything compromising—do you think I have lived twenty-five years in the world, and during nine of them have been in familiar acquaintance with some of the wittiest and best-bred and

altogether most fascinating men in the world, to succumb now to the attractions of Sir Donald Urquhart?"

"Yet you have consented to marry him."

"Not quite. It was agreed between us that he should announce the fact of our engagement: it doesn't follow that the engagement is a binding reality. He believed that the announcement would improve my position. Of course he was right; a future Lady Urquhart may be no very great personage, but at least people are less eager to be unpleasant to her than to notorious, by courtesy Countess Adrian. Do you see? And when any one offers me something good I never hesitate to take it, always provided that the extent of the obligation is clearly defined."

"And is that the case with Sir Donald? I should hardly have thought so."

"I think it is. At any rate, if he is under any rosy delusion, that is not from any want of candour on my part. I have no doubt he would tell you so, if you pressed him."

"I! What right have I to question his or your arrangements?"

"None, I suppose; but it is the right of a friend to be interested in one's welfare. You never answered my question. May I count on your friendship?"

"Most certainly, Countess. On my warm admiration and my humble services, if they can be of any use to you."

"I shall fasten you to your word presently: Mr.

London, does it seem strange to you that I, being what I am, don't jump at the prospect of marrying Sir Donald Urquhart?"

"It seems to me that perhaps you hardly appreciate his devotion at its true value."

"You mean that, on the face of things, there is a sort of heroism in his willingness to give his name to a woman whose own has been so smirched and bespattered. I don't know, though that it is such a very ancient and honourable name. His grandfather was a nobody, who made money and voted steadfastly with the Government; but let that pass. No, I don't think it is altogether heroism. You see, Sir Donald is not a very young man, and so has less to lose. He has no one to please but himself, and so can't hurt anybody's feelings of consequence to him. Then he is an art-collector and *dilettante*, and has a reputation for eccentricity, so can do with impunity many things that in anybody else would set Mrs. Grundy rampant. Added to all this, he is a man about town of no very exalted moral standard. He has never in his life denied himself a thing he wanted; and he is rich enough to pay a long price for the article he fancies. He is going to pay a long price for me. He wouldn't do it if he were not infatuated. Now, is that heroism?"

"As you put it, no."

"I put it after the way of a woman of the world. Now-for my side of the question."

"Ah ! your side of the question, about which I confess to feeling the deepest interest."

"Well, why do I hold back ? Why have I stipulated for a year in which to make up my mind—a year in which, though we are bound before the world, I am free as air to give myself to any one I like better ? For the simple reason I have already told you : I have never been in love."

"Forgive me for saying that this seems to me the most curious and interesting fact in your most remarkable and interesting personality."

"You wouldn't take me for a woman of ice ? Well, I'm not. I'm a pent volcano. I could love with all my heart and soul and strength, if—if the right man came along. But he has never come. My Prince Charming has never stepped within the enchanted palace to awake the sleeping princess by his kiss."

An odd little exclamation broke involuntarily from London. It was half of pity, half of amusement. There did indeed seem something almost bordering on comedy in this picture Countess Adrian drew of herself as the innocent slumbering beauty who had never thrilled to passion. Countess Adrian, of whom the world said—he was too chivalrous to finish the sentence, even in thought. She seemed to have read what was passing in his mind : a deep blush overspread her face.

"You judge me like the typical man of the world," she said, with a sadness which touched him infinitely;

“and no man of the world can ever conceive it possible that a woman may be dragged in the mire and yet through all keep the heart of a girl. Well, no matter.”

“Countess,” said Lendon hastily, fearing he had wounded her, “I want to think of you only as you would have me think. You puzzle me ; you interest me. Teach me to understand you.”

“Then,” she said, “we must agree, once for all, to drop conventional standards. Think of me—of this outer husk of me”—and again she laid her two hands upon her bosom—“as what the conditions of my life have made me. Think of the inner woman as still untouched with cynicism, still with the capacity for enthusiasm—for devotion. The outer experiences are only as garments to be worn or thrown aside. I am twenty-five, and I have had a rich wardrobe. Everything has happened to me except—Death and Love.”

“Why do you put death first ?” he said.

“Because it might come to me at any moment. My mother died suddenly of heart-disease. I, too, have disease of the heart. Don’t speak of that : it is a subject I can’t bear to dwell upon.”

He could not help a shudder. “It is inconceivable !” he exclaimed.

“Yes, I look splendidly well : I feel life thrilling in every pulse of me. But never mind. I am going to tell you something which will partly explain my conduct in regard to Sir Donald. It is this : I am intensely

superstitious. No, that is not the right expression. It would be more correct to say that I believe in occult forces."

"You, too!" he exclaimed.

"Why do you say 'you, too?' Have you been meeting anyone lately who goes in seriously for that sort of thing?"

"It seems to me that everyone goes in for that sort of thing more or less seriously," he answered evasively; "and 'occult' is the fashionable adjective."

"Perhaps so. At any rate this superstition of mine is the reason of Maddox Challis's influence over me," she went on. "I have learnt enough to know that he is an Initiate of the lower grade. He doesn't choose to exert his powers—indeed, I believe it is a rule of the Brotherhood that they are not to be lightly displayed—but he could teach you and me some strange secrets of Nature, if he would. He won't talk to me; he doesn't like me; but he knows that *I know*."

"And where did you get your knowledge, Countess?" Lendon asked.

"Oh, mine is only a smattering. I knew a man in the East—he was a Parsee—an astrologer—a sort of Mr. Isaacs and Ram-Lal combined. It was he who told me that this year would be the most fateful in my life. Now you know why I don't choose to bind myself. I stake my all on this year—Death or Love."

She got up from her chair and held out her hand as if

she would have dismissed him. He took her hand, and some impulse for which he could not account prompted him to raise it to his lips.

"You play a strange game, Countess," he said ; "and one in which it is you yourself who incur the least danger. To a man who accepted your challenge—Death or Love—the game might well prove fatal."

"Why ?"

"Surely, to know you is to love you—but the Prince Charming fortunate enough to touch your heart must be a rare and exceptionally endowed person."

"You think so ?" she said.

"Isn't it proved, since, as you say, you have never loved ? And yet, how many there must be who have loved you."

"There is a fatality in that sort of thing. It is destiny—not temperament. Or, as the poets tell us, a wandering soul finding its twin."

"Oh, the twin soul theory is a hackneyed solution of the problem why some two people love each other, and some other two do not. My theory is that certain forces in oneself reach their climax, and at the same given time certain outside currents converge and bring about a convulsion, and then it is, when one's nature and one's surroundings are ripe, that love comes. It is the 'psychological moment,' in short. And given the psychological moment, there is bound to be a Prince Charming hanging round. Where, then, is the question of hazard ?"

Countess Adrian looked at him steadily for a moment or two before she replied. "Suppose," she said, "that the man I loved, the man whom I knew would satisfy all the requirements of my being, for whom I had poured forth all that I had to give—what could never be taken back and given to another—suppose that he had no love to give me in return?"

"Impossible, Countess," said Lendon, "unless"——

"Unless?" she repeated.

"Unless he were devoted heart and soul to another woman."

"There is the hazard of the game," she said calmly. "He might be—married—or he might be, as you say, devoted heart and soul to another woman."

"Heaven grant, Countess, that it may be happy love which awaits you!"

"Good-bye," she said abruptly. "Our talk this afternoon has interested me. You must come again. But I have said nothing that I intended to say, and I have said everything that I meant not to say. I don't mean to flatter you; but I am naturally a reserved person, and I dislike the after taste of indiscreet confidences."

"Oh, I beg you not to regret having given me a glimpse of your true self," he exclaimed warmly. "Surely what you have said could only heighten my admiration—my esteem."

"That will be for you to show me," she answered, smiling.

"At least," he said, "you will allow me to hear what it is that you intended to say?"

"My object, in short, for asking you to call to-day. I had been thinking of sending for you for several days. I have really been back from Paris for some time, but I had a notion that you were otherwise engaged, and I felt a most unaccountable and unusual timidity. However, as you see, I took my courage in both hands and sent for you."

"Well? Is it anything I can do? If so, command me."

"Yes, it is something I want you to do. Oh, it's not a thing that you will dislike—at least, I hope not. But let that stand over for to-day. I don't feel in the mood to ask favours."

"I assure you, Countess, whatever the favour may be, it is granted. For you to ask a favour from me is to confer one."

"We shall see. I will write. And now that you know your way to my sky parlour, I am always at home after five o'clock."

He took his leave, and made his journey down; and it was not till he had reached the dark little court outside the Mansions, that he remembered the fact that Beatrice Brett's name had never once been mentioned during the long afternoon talk.

CHAPTER VII.

COUNTESS ADRIAN'S PORTRAIT.

BERNARD LENDON was in his studio the morning after his visit to Countess Adrian. He was by way of having taken up work again, and the place was littered with sketches and unfinished landscapes, the result of his American trip. There was also on the stocks a portrait of a very handsome and fashionable woman, newly married, whose husband was a friend of his and had commissioned him to paint his bride. He was expecting its original for a sitting when a carriage drove up to the door. He waited in the full anticipation that she and no other was his visitor. He was mistaken, however. The door leading on to the gallery was opened, and the *portière* held aside for a lady to pass through and descend, but the lady was Countess Adrian.

She came down the stairs with composed undulating grace, raising her veil as he advanced to meet her, and she smiled as if there appeared to herself something odd and amusing in this impromptu call.

"You see, I have taken upon myself to return your visit—and very soon," she said, when the first greetings were over. "I was going to write to you as I said, but

the impulse seized me to come and see you instead. I always act on impulse ; so I am here to tell my business in person."

He offered her a chair, and she unwound some of her furs.

"Isn't that a dangerous creed, Countess?"

"Very likely ; it has certainly not answered as a whole in my case. Let us hope that it may turn out better in detail. Well, I told you I meant to ask you to do something for me. Briefly, I am going to give you a commission, if you will accept it."

"A commission, Countess!"

"There's nothing odd in that. You take commissions to paint portraits," and she glanced at the one on the easel. "I want you to paint mine. Does that please you, or the reverse?"

"Of course, it pleases me."

"Then you will do it?"

"With the utmost pleasure."

"But I want it done quickly—a half-length. I shall sit to you every day."

"So much the better."

"Really, you are delightfully accommodating. I don't know why I imagined that you would make all manner of difficulties, but I did. I assure you I was quite nervous about making my request. But now to business, please. I am quite in serious earnest—about my dress, and the time, and everything else. "It is to be given to

Sir Donald Urquhart on his birthday, three weeks hence; so you see there is no time for delay."

When the preliminaries were settled, she got up and roved about the room, examining the tapestry, and making little discursive remarks as she went along. "You think he will like the portrait? It is so dreadfully difficult to find a present for a man like Sir Donald. That's the worst of being so rich. But you think it's a good idea?"

"If only I can do you justice."

"Oh! I am sure you will do me far more than justice: I shall be at my very best. I am certain that it is quite as necessary for the sitter to be on the alert—sympathetic, you understand—as the artist himself. And I like your portraits. Looking at that"—she stopped before the easel on which his latest work was placed—"one would almost fancy that Mrs. Jarvis had a soul. Tell me," she added, turning to him as if a new idea had struck her, "did Maddox Challis ever talk to you about the possibility of forcing one person's soul into another person's body?"

"I have a distinct recollection of hearing him speak on that subject at Sir Donald's supper-table, the first time I met you."

"Yes, I remember. Well, do you believe in it?"

"As much as I believe in this." He took up a yellow-covered French novel which was lying on a small table beside his own particular lounging-chair, and held it towards her.

She read the title—"Théophile Gautier's '*Avatar*.' I know it. Odd that you should have been reading that book just before the thought came uppermost in my mind. I always say what is uppermost; that's another article of my dangerous creed. I don't know why you should be so sceptical. The theory of the *Avatar* is as old as the oldest religion. Haven't you ever felt, when you took laughing-gas or chloroform," she went on, "that your soul left your body?"

"Yes, I have," he answered, laughing; "and it must have gone on some pleasant excursion, for I remember, on awaking, that I felt confoundedly sorry that it had come back again."

"Oh! I think it is a frightful sensation. I can imagine nothing more horrible than the sudden knowledge that one must die—to go forth cold, naked, and grey, into blank space—to have no body, no soft warm flesh. I love my downy skin." She held out her arm as she spoke, and pushed back her sleeve and looked tenderly on the delicate velvety surface. "To have no power of animal enjoyment; to lose the pleasure of basking in sunshine, the joy of physical sense, and to be conscious all the while of one's craving and one's nothingness! Ghastly! No; give me life—life—long life!"

"Yet," said Lendon, "I have been told that death brings with it the strangest sense of peace and content."

"Not for me. It would be a very tearing apart of spirit and flesh. I should be one of those vampire-

spirits one reads of—you know Sheridan Le Fanu's story?—and renew my life with human blood; or should I be strong enough, I wonder, to carry out Mr. Challis's idea, and usurp a body at the expense of some weak unfortunate soul? Mr. Lendon, how would one feel, I wonder, encased in some one else's body? Would one keep its consciousness of identity? and, if so, what an amusing sense of paradox would run through all experience; or would it be a mere confused blending of personalities—a bewildering jumble of past and present impressions—a sort of battle between spirit and flesh—a mystery without a clue? What do you think?"

"How can I form an idea of what is absolutely outside experience?"

"Oh! but it need not be. Did you not hear Maddox Challis say that such an *Avatar* was quite possible?"

"Ah, then, we want Maddox Challis here to explain the process."

"He is quite capable of coming—in his astral form. I know that once, when his real body was in Palestine, his astral shape appeared to a friend of his in London, and warned him of a coming danger."

"In time to avert it?"

"Yes. He never plays those pranks without a sufficient motive; but he cannot bear any allusion to that story, and will answer no questions about it. The man to whom he appeared was a changed person from that day. He had been a materialist before; now he

has entered the Roman Catholic Church, and joins mortification of the flesh to the highest mysticism."

"Are you a Catholic?" asked Lendon, abruptly.

"No. Frankly, I am nothing. I own no God but nature, and I want nothing higher." There was a short silence, during which Countess Adrian examined a sketch lying on an easel near her. "I wish I knew whether I should lose my identity," she went on, reflectively, as if she were again seriously considering the possibilities of such a transformation as that to which she had alluded. "I don't respect myself in the least, Mr. Lendon. I know that there are hundreds of millions of more estimable persons; but I am not uninteresting, even to myself. I shouldn't like to give up my own identity. With all my faults and follies, and God knows they are numerous enough to wreck a dozen lives, I find myself *bon camarade*. We have gone through a good deal together, this Agnes Adrian and I; we should not like to part company. Mr. Lendon," she added suddenly, not waiting for him to reply; "why do we always get upon horrors? Good-by, till to-morrow!" As she went up the stairs, she stopped, and, looking down upon him, asked, "By the way, have you seen the Improvisatrice lately?"

The suddenness of the question startled Lendon. He felt that his face changed. He answered lamely that he had called upon her a few days before.

The Countess' penetrating gaze was confusing.

"She is going to play the Duchess of Malfi, I hear. Can she do it?"

"Mr. Cosway Keele at any rate thinks so."

"I know the play; it is one of the parts I have always thought I should like to act. Did you know that after my—my *bouleversement*"—she gave her shoulders a little shrug—"I thought of going on the stage?"

"I had never heard it," he answered; "but that goes for nothing."

"No! You were oddly ignorant about me; and I thought I was famous! Yes, I actually went to a manager. One had to do something. I was poor, with the habits and tastes of the Second Empire. I couldn't be a governess. No one would hire me as a servant. There was nothing but to be a barmaid or an actress. Well, luckily for me, an old man who had been in love with me died and left me a fortune, and so I was spared the necessity of earning my bread. But the Duchess! You came over from America with her, did you not?"

He replied that they had travelled in the same steamer.

"And you are altering the play? You see her very often, of course," she went on. Then, without waiting for his answer, said, "Shall you marry her?"

"Wouldn't it be more to the purpose to say, 'Will she marry me?'" he returned, with an awkward attempt at pleasantry. "Miss Brett is wedded to her art."

"Oh! That is nonsense. All women who do any-

thing are wedded to their art, till the art of love proves more attractive. But *are* you going to marry her?"

"I have never asked her," he replied.

She was thoughtful for a moment. "Are you going to paint her then?"

"Really, Countess, I have not thought of that either."

"I always believed that was a painter's first thought when he saw a beautiful woman. And she *is* beautiful. Why did she faint so suddenly the other night?"

"She has a strange fancy that it was because *you* looked at her?"

Countess Adrian bent forward quite eagerly. "That is a curious idea."

"It is an idea which has taken possession of her. She dreads you with a superstitious and unreasoning dread. She believes that you have the evil eye. She thinks that if you chose to exert your power you could make her fail in a great part."

"Oh, I am not so wicked as that," Countess Adrian laughed softly. "She has all my good wishes for success in the Duchess of Malfi. She will succeed, I am sure of it."

"Yes, I am sure of it also," answered Lendon.

"But, tell me," the Countess went on, "for this to me is deeply interesting. Is that exactly how she feels? She was really conscious the other night that it was *my* influence which affected her and made her unable to go on acting?"

"Don't you know it?" answered Lendon, almost roughly. He was jarred inexpressibly by the cool manner in which Countess Adrian appeared to weigh poor Beatrice's agonies. It reminded him somehow of the scientific interest of a vivisector. "You know that you *meant* to make her feel your influence that evening. Was it quite kind to experimentalize upon one so delicate, and at a moment too when she was necessarily more emotionally susceptible than at other times?"

Her face seemed to pale a little and her eyes gathered fire as they fixed themselves upon him while he spoke. "On the contrary, she ought not to have been at a disadvantage. One might have supposed her so absorbed in, and identified with, the character she was representing as to be quite impervious to any outside impressions. Come, there's an interesting and instructive problem for dramatic psychologists to squabble over. I commend it to you in your new capacity of playwright and dramatic critic."

"It is a problem that does not interest me," he answered coldly.

"But I know what *does* interest you; and that is—Miss Beatrice Brett. I don't know what you mean by asking if it was kind of me to experimentalize in that way. I never thought of it. I won't admit anything as to my motives. In the first place you have no right to assume that I had any malevolent intention."

"I don't assume it. I only ask you to be merciful

in future. Of course, Miss Brett's dread of you is only an imagination. It seems almost absurd to discuss it seriously, but imagination may work great havoc with a nervous system so highly wrought as hers."

Countess Adrian had reached the gallery and was standing a little above him, as leaning against the balustrade she looked down on him with a grave and yet satisfied smile.

"Yes," she said, "it does seem absurd to discuss seriously a merely elementary experiment in occultism. I am rather ashamed of it. It was an experiment. I wanted to see what it was possible to do when one concentrated one's will-power upon a person susceptible to magnetism."

Lendon could have imagined that she was experimenting at this moment upon himself, so deep and steady was her gaze. Nevertheless, he felt curiously unaffected by it.

"Why did you choose Miss Brett as a subject?" he asked.

"Because I thought she seemed a likely one; and then everyone's attention was drawn to her. Tell her though that she need not be afraid, I will not do it again."

"Thank you." He laughed a little awkwardly. "Apart from any interest I may feel in Miss Brett, I have very strong interest in the fate of the Duchess of Malfi. But tell me, Countess, do you go about the world

choosing like another 'She' whom you will 'blast' with your eyes? Oughtn't I to take this as a warning to a rash artist who is so venturesome as to try and paint those same dangerous orbs?"

She dropped her gaze at once and flushed again as rosily as a girl.

"You know quite well that my eyes are not dangerous to you. It annoys me when you take that sneering cynical tone. I shall not tell you any more of my occult experiments."

With these words she left him.

It must be owned that, during those mornings in the week which were devoted to the portrait, Lendon found Countess Adrian a very agreeable companion. She was certainly a delightful object of contemplation; and she had not walked the world so freely without acquiring ideas sufficiently bold and varied to keep a listener's mind pleasantly on the stretch. Her frankness was amazing. She seemed to want to convey to Lendon that he of all beings was the one whom she most desired should know her in her heights and depths and with all possible extenuating explanations. She appeared to wish to disarm any outside criticism which might reach him, by giving him first her own version of various episodes in her somewhat adventurous career. She had a pictorial way of relating things, and put into her accounts of herself a richness of colour and a mysterious suggestiveness of complex motive that threw a rosy glow of

poetry and romance over all that she told of her actions and moods.

He was more than ever impressed by the tropical luxuriance of her temperament. Her audacity had something of the unconsciousness of childhood, and there seemed truth in her remark upon herself that, in spite of her many experiences, she was at bottom absolutely natural.

She had the ways of a woman at war with society ; but her manner clearly indicated that she considered the challenge had not been laid down on her part. "Do circumstances make temperament, or does temperament make circumstances?" was one of the riddles she propounded. Her moods were quite incalculable. Sometimes she would come to the studio and pose with an air of chastened sweetness worthy of a Madonna, while her speech was gentle and tender as the murmurs of a cooing dove. At other times she paced the room like a caged lioness, as if she needed some vent for her fiery and impetuous energy ; and as under these conditions serious work was out of the question, she would propose that he should walk with her along the Embankment, or cross the bridge to the Battersea region, and tramp the Park till she was subdued and conventional again. Sometimes she had all the dignity of a great lady pure and simple ; sometimes she would smoke a cigarette, and toss off her little glass of cognac with the unrestraint of a *cocotte*. Yet through all these chameleon changes she was always herself, racy, original, daring, refined, and

altogether brilliant, with that nameless shadow of sadness, that not too obtrusive touch of the sensuous, which increased her bewildering charm.

It struck him as curious that her talk so often touched on mystic subjects. He wondered where she had got her curious lore. She told him once that, if he had ever lived in Paris, he would not be surprised that her taste ran in that direction; for that not only were Professor Charcot's experiments carried on in private life in certain sections of society, but that the modern medical school numbered many an aspiring dabbler in black magic. She laughed off his questions as to whether she had tampered with the forbidden knowledge, and said that she had always gone on the principle of putting out feelers in every direction. What was life worth if you must be bound down to one narrow groove of experience? She liked to sip every variety of beverage, and this was only one phase of her character. When he knew her better, he would discover that she was equally at home as a sportswoman, a woman of letters, and a butterfly of society. Still he noticed that there were two subjects which were always obtruding themselves in her conversation—so-called occultism and Maddox Challis. "He is the only person in the world that I am afraid of," she said once, "and I am afraid of him because he knows me too well. Don't misunderstand me," she added laughing, as Lendon looked at her, perplexed as to her meaning; "I don't want to convey in a roundabout

fashion that I am a secret murderess, and that I have a mysterious crime on my conscience of which Maddox Challis only possesses the key. I have never done anything half as bad as the evil deeds for which the world already gives me the credit."

"Why, then?" he asked.

"Why? I am going to tell you something. There's a little old lady in London whom I know, and who has clairvoyant eyes—the clearest, most penetrating blue eyes, which seem to be looking far, far into space. So, in fact, they are. They have a terrible power, those eyes; and I always avoid that old lady. The odd thing is that she is quite simple and unsophisticated, and doesn't seem in the least to realise what a terror she might be to some people, and what a help to others. If she were here now, she could tell you that you were surrounded by a crowd of bodiless beings, and she would describe them to you. Perhaps they might be good spirits who prompt you to good actions and sweet and gracious thoughts, or they might be very evil ones—and then she would turn very pale and shudder, and go away from you as soon as she could without actual rudeness. Once she paid a visit to Monte Carlo, and she described the *galerie* behind the rows of players invisible to everybody but herself. These people were the spirits of suicides mostly; and some had their throats gaping, and some had part of their faces and heads blown away, and were bespattered with blood, and some had the marks of strangulation, and others

were only greedy and excited with the passion for play. They hung on the croupier's call as eager and as fascinated as the living themselves, and would stretch out their hands gloatingly over the gold. They would whisper in the ear of some player, and the player seemed to be obeying the invisible prompters, who would often laugh with the most execrable grimaces when the stake was raked in, as though they were glad of the ill-fortune, and they would stoop and whisper again and again, till the player, goaded to desperation, doubled and doubled, and lost and lost. Well, who would play at Monte Carlo if they could see what that little old lady saw? Maddox Challis is like that. He sees within and without, but he is not simple and unsophisticated like the little old lady. He knows the power he possesses, and he says nothing. He bides his time. He only looks at you, and pays courtly compliments, and lets you know by his eyes that he *knows*. I dare say that, while he is smoking cigarettes, at this present moment, in the courtyard of his house at Damascus, he is perfectly well aware that you and I are talking about him here."

Lendon felt an odd reluctance to tell Beatrice of that conversation with Countess Adrian which had reference to herself, and of Countess Adrian's promise that she would not again experimentalize, as she had done, upon the memorable occasion at Mrs. Walcot Valbry's. There were several reasons for his disinclination to open up the subject. The rehearsals of "The Duchess of Malfi" were

in their full swing. Brain, nerves, and energies of every one in the theatre were concentrated upon what was felt would be either an enormous success or an ignominious failure. Cosway Keele was terribly anxious. The tragic atmosphere of mediæval Italy seemed to pervade the Dionysion. The actors were frightfully nervous, and among themselves prophesied disaster. Theatrical people are famous for superstitions, and the fact was commented upon direfully that the stage cat—that friendly familiar, without which it is supposed that no theatre can be lucky—had died during the first week of the rehearsals. There were other minor portents of ill. Even the scene-shifters moved about as if overwhelmed by a weight of care. As for Beatrice herself, she lived in her part. She was no longer Beatrice Brett ; she was the Duchess of Malfi. She was not the young American actress about to make an ambitious venture which should raise her to giddy heights of success, or send her tottering down to join the crowd of failures. She was not the Beatrice who lay on the sofa in her little study, and looked out on the trees in Regent's Park. She was not the Beatrice who paced the boards of the Dionysion, or waited at the wings for her cue, or stood patiently under the hands of designer and dressmaker. This was not Regent's Park. This was not the Dionysion. It was a stately Italian palace, and outside, the roses and the orange-trees were in bloom, and the poor Princess of court etiquette, impatient of her brother's jealous surveillance, waited

and watched for the hour when she should steal forth to meet her lowly-born husband-lover. She had no thought for the common things of London life. She had forgotten even her terror of Countess Adrian, since for the time Countess Adrian had disappeared from her horizon. And why should Lendon rouse the morbid fancy, and even, in reassuring her, remind her anew of the slumbering dread, and perhaps revive all her superstitious fancies? And then, again, he had a feeling of suppressed irritation at the mere notion that she was so far in Countess Adrian's power. It annoyed him to think that this girl, who was his ideal of all that was pure and perfect, should be at the mercy, as it were, of a woman of whom the world spoke slightly. It was only in association with Beatrice that the thought of Countess Adrian's antecedents vexed him. He would have taken her part loyally against her traducers as he would that of a trusted comrade. In his own mind, and even hitherto in speaking of her to Beatrice, he had maintained that she was a wronged and maligned woman. But a man may entertain all these sentiments about a certain woman and yet be unwilling that she should exercise an unaccountable influence over the one woman dearest to him.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GREAT NIGHT.

It was a mixture of these feelings which made Lendon, when he was with Beatrice, avoid mentioning that Countess Adrian was sitting to him for her portrait. The discovery came about by accident, though it must not be supposed that he made any special point of concealment. In truth his mind, except during the sittings, was too much occupied with Beatrice herself and with the fate of the play, to concern itself deeply about Countess Adrian. He was working at the background one afternoon when, to his great surprise, Mrs. Cubison and Miss Brett were announced.

They had come to consult him upon a matter in the Duchess' costume, about which Cosway Keele and the Dionysion authorities found themselves in sudden perplexity. An impulse had seized Beatrice to drive along the embankment to Chelsea. They had got into a hansom at the door of the Dionysion, where they were. So Mrs. Cubison explained. The matter of the costume could be settled at once by reference to a volume in the library, and Lendon at once proposed an adjournment thither. Mrs. Cubison declared her intention of waiting

for them in the studio, thus taking an opportunity of resting her poor legs and head, and forthwith proceeded to repose herself on the sofa. As she passed the easel at which Lendon had been working, Beatrice stopped with a startled exclamation and stood motionless before the portrait.

"Ah ! I forgot," said Lendon a little awkwardly. "I am painting Countess Adrian. It is a curious sort of commission, and I am bound to secrecy, for it is to be a birthday present to Sir Donald Urquhart, and till the day comes he is to know nothing about it."

Beatrice said not a word for a minute, but looked intently at the picture.

"Is that why you did not tell me ?" she asked.

"In good truth," he answered, "when I am with you I can think of nothing but you and the Duchess of Malfi. And then I did not want to revive an unpleasant association."

Beatrice touched the little charm at her wrist. "You need not have been afraid ; she has been away. And besides, I have been relying on my talisman."

"Or rather work has driven away the foolish fancy—sober, serious, earnest work—for it was a foolish fancy, Beatrice, you will admit it now."

She shook her head. "It was no fancy ; and even as I look at her portrait, the eyes seem to follow me and make me shiver with that strange horrible dread. I shall never get over it—never. But I am stronger and better

able to face it when I have you to help me." She paused a moment. As if with an effort she turned away from the portrait. Presently she said to him in a tone of alarm—"She is back again from Paris? And she will be at the Dionysion first-night. Oh! what shall I do?"

"My dear child," he said soothingly. "It makes me miserable to see how this thing unnerves you. I have got a message for you from Countess Adrian herself, which I had not meant to give you until you yourself should bring up the subject. Perhaps it may comfort you."

"You told her that I was afraid?"

"I told her that you were delicate, nervous and overwrought, and that imagination is apt to run riot with such an organization as yours. Well, she bade me tell you that she would never experimentalize, as she called it, on you again, and that you had her heartiest wishes for success as the Duchess of Malfi. You will find her one of the most sympathetic of your first-night audience."

She gave another little shiver. "Tell me," she said, "you are painting her picture, you have many opportunities of hearing her talk. You should be in some sort of position to know whether this instinctive dread of mine has any foundation in fact. Do you think she is a good woman?"

He hesitated. With the girl's large clear eyes full upon him, it seemed to him impossible to answer from his heart that he believed Countess Adrian to be a good

woman. "I don't know ; I cannot tell," he answered. "Don't let us talk of Countess Adrian any more. Come to the book-room and we will look up the Duchess' sleeve."

She went up the stairs silently, and followed him as he led the way to a quaint bow-windowed room, which contained the celebrated Stothard prints, and a collection of volumes rare enough to satisfy a most fastidious collector. It was some time before they settled the vexed question of the pattern of the Duchess' sleeve. Then the prints had to be examined. And then some curious Moorish brass work took her fancy. He thought she had quite forgotten Countess Adrian ; but after she had said that they must go down and wake up Marmy, she paused, and returned again to the subject.

"It is humiliating to confess that I am relieved at Countess Adrian's promise to spare me," she said, "but it is true. And I am almost glad to know that she was consciously exerting her will against me. Perhaps now that I am warned and on my guard, I might have some strength to resist. But I feel that I could not act if that power was working against me. It was like a sort of death that night. Everything seemed to go out of me, and there came the most appalling sensation of absolute loneliness and terror. Then I fainted. But I will be strong," she added feverishly. "I *can* be strong, for now I have you to help me."

"Oh Beatrice," Lendon cried. "You don't know how

happy those words of yours make me. They give me hope and courage. They lift me nearer to you. Don't let us talk of Countess Adrian, dear. Let us talk of ourselves. Oh, if only I could be certain that you would let me help you always—in everything. If only I might be close to you always to protect you from all trouble, to take the burden of all that perplexes and alarms you. These imaginary terrors would vanish away into the night from which they had sprung, and my love would be like a wall encompassing you and guarding you from every hurtful influence."

"Your love!" she replied, in a subdued half-wondering tone.

"You know that I love you," he exclaimed passionately. "I have loved you from the first moment that I saw you on the steamer. I love you as I have never loved any other woman in the world—purely, wholly, devotedly. I don't want to hide from you that I have loved before. I cared once for a woman who—who was unworthy. That love is dead—a thing of the past; and deep as it was, it seems nothing—nothing in comparison with the love I feel for you."

It was the first time he had declared his love so unreservedly, though over and over again, in every word and look he had implied it. She drew back a little, as if he had pained her.

"Hush," she said, "you mustn't say that. You mustn't talk to me of love—now."

"How can I keep silence, when your voice, your look, something in your eyes, in your manner when we are together half implies that you do care for me a little? Oh! Beatrice, you know it is so. You know that there is sympathy between us. You are happy in my companionship."

"Oh, yes!" she answered simply. "But Mr. Lendon—that is not love."

"It would soon grow to be love," he urged, "if only you would give your heart full play, if only it might not be a forbidden subject between us."

"It must be so still," she answered. "I cannot think of love yet."

"But a little later," he pleaded, "when you know me better, and trust me more."

"I don't need to do that," she said; "I have trusted you always. I trusted you not to be like other men who have wanted to make love to me. I trusted you to be my friend and to have my career at heart."

There was a note of reproach in her tone which touched him keenly.

"Oh! Beatrice," he said, "you expect too much of me—you expect me to be more than human; how can I help loving you? And have I not your career at heart? There is no one who thinks so much of it as I do—yes, not even you yourself—for you don't see the dangers as I see them. You don't see that you need some one to lean upon. Some one to stand between you and the jars

and shocks your sensitive nature must inevitably suffer. You don't see that, however brilliant your life may be—and it will be that, for you will certainly succeed—the more brilliant indeed that it is, more lonely it will be.”

“I do know that,” she answered sadly; “you can little guess how lonely I have felt, even here in London. Do I not know how lonely I shall feel on the first night of the ‘Duchess of Malfi,’ more lonely if it is success than if—if it be failure.”

“No, Beatrice,” he said, taking her hands in his; “you will not be lonely, for I shall be there, and my whole heart will be with you.”

She did not answer. They stood thus with hands clasped, both looking out on the little garden gay with its spring bulbs.

“We ought to go to Marmy,” she said at last, withdrawing her hands.

“Will you not give me one word of hope? I will wait as long as you please. Only give me the right to stand by you before the world as your affianced husband. I know that I could understand you, and that I could make you happy. I know that I could win your love.”

“Does that seem to you so very difficult?” she said, looking at him with the first gleam of coquetry he had ever seen in her eyes.

He took her hand again in his and kissed it. “Say

that it may be so, Beatrice. Give me the right to guard you. Give me the right to prove to you how tenderly and passionately I love you."

"No," she answered seriously, "not now. I am going to tell you exactly how I feel, and you mustn't think me ungrateful or unwomanly. I do value your love. I do feel proud of the honour you have done me. Perhaps some day, if you would be patient—some day I might be able to tell you that I care for you in the way you wish; but now"—a smile played on her face—"Mr. Lendon, the truth is that I am devoted heart and soul to some one else."

"Some one else!" Lendon exclaimed, thrilling with doubt and dread.

"Yes; some one worthy of my devotion. I have been constantly in his company during the past weeks. I have studied his character in many phases. He has his faults, but he is greater than his faults; and I admire him in spite of them—nay, because of them. That is how one ought to love, is it not, Mr. Lendon?"

"Beatrice! it is not like you to play with a man's heart in this way."

She smiled again. "But I want you to hear all about my hero, Bernard. He is a brave, loyal, devoted gentleman. He is very proud, but he is an odd mixture, too, of modesty and pride—too modest to speak of love until he is told that he may love—but then, when lifted so high, brave enough for any woman's heart—resolute to hold to

her, to defend her, to fight for her, to die for her, to do anything but give her up ! ”

She was becoming melodramatic ; Lendon was becoming sullen.

“ Any man would be like that, I suppose,” he said ; “ any man who cared for a woman—we have all of us pluck enough for that.”

“ Oh, but all men are not like my hero, and my champion, and my lover ! ”

The last word revived him.

“ Come, now,” he said, “ I know you are talking nonsense when you talk like that. May I hear that wonderful hero’s name ? ”

“ Oh, yes ! his name is Antonio.”

A thrill of relief passed through Lendon’s heart.

“ Treacherous Antonio,” he said with a smile. “ I introduced him to you, and he has supplanted me ! Antonio is the lover and husband of the Duchess of Malfi.”

Beatrice smiled a sweet, half-pathetic smile. “ Antonio must have his day,” she answered. “ But the curtain must fall upon him. Then—perhaps ! ”

* * * * *

There was an all pervading thrill of excitement in the closely packed rows of seats at the Dionysion on the first night of “ The Duchess of Malfi.” This was always, more or less, the case. A Dionysion first-night was one of the events of the year. Seats were taken months

beforehand, and the life of Cosway Keele's manager was made a burden to him, because of the number of applications and entreaties from acquaintances who thought they had a right to be present on this important occasion. The world of London showed itself in miniature—aristocracy, art, and letters, sent their representatives. Every face in the stalls and boxes was the face of a man or woman known and talked about, and not to be at the first night of the Dionysion was to proclaim oneself out of the swim, at least in Bohemia.

To-night, the excitement was intensified. Beatrice Brett had been much trumpeted, much cried down. The members of the profession were jealous of her notoriety, furious at what they called her audacity. She had been much written about. For weeks the paragraphists had been busy gleaning details as to the new production. The pessimists declared it to be a mad venture; the optimists maintained that a great actress was going to astonish the world. The sick leading lady, who was of course too ill to be present, cursed fate in having been forced to give an opening to a formidable rival. The friends of that same leading lady gathered in somewhat gloomy force, prepared to report and condemn. The audience was what the newspapers called a more than usually brilliant assemblage, but as the house filled there were evidences of almost painful tension. Friends looked anxious and alert. Critics gathered in knots, after having deposited their opera hats, and talked together as gravely

as though the fate of a nation were at stake. The pit and gallery were noisy and exuberant. Cosway Keele was a favourite. He had never failed them yet, and they were prepared to back his judgment now. Every now and then, as some recognized celebrity took his seat, a cheer would float down from the ranks above. Lendon was one of those thus greeted. It was freely announced that he was principally responsible for the modernised version of Webster's play, and also for the costumes of the performers ; and then, too, thanks to Mrs. Walcot Valbry, rumour already credited him with more than a professional interest in the new actress. He himself was strung to the extremest pitch of nervousness. Mrs. Walcot Valbry, resplendent in diamonds, bent over the edge of her box and nodded and beckoned him to come to her. She had one of the large boxes on the ground tier so that it was easy for an occupant of the stalls to go to her without any troublesome ceremony of knocking at doors. A great many of the dramatic critics availed themselves of the privilege, and she had the satisfaction of feeling that she was putting in a good word for her *protégée*. As she sat in the corner seat facing the house, she bowed till the diamonds on her white head twinkled like a rain of dewdrops, and she looked like a benign fairy who felt herself more or less responsible for the whole occasion, for did not everyone know that it was at her house Cosway Keele had first seen the American Improvisatrice ? She was not the only attraction of the box, which in truth drew towards it many

pairs of eyes. Countess Adrian sat looking towards the stage, and somewhat shielded by a curtain from general observation, but Sir Donald Urquhart, in the centre, was fully visible, and it was easy to guess who was the lady monopolizing his attention. She, too, bent over and smiled and nodded at Lendon, and when he came to speak to her, whispered—

“Don’t be uneasy, your Improvisatrice shall not have to dread my evil eye to-night—all my influence, all my wishes, will spur her on to success.”

And the overture began, and the play opened, and went on, it seemed to Lendon, like the drama of a dream. And at last the curtain did fall upon Antonio—or it would be more correct to say, upon the Duchess—amid such a tempest of applause as perhaps, in spite of all its famous revivals, had never been heard within the walls of the Dionysion.

Needless to say that the play was mounted with all the splendour and dramatic effect and strict attention to historic detail which could make mediæval Italy live again in modern London; needless to say that Cosway Keele as Bosola, the finished villian, surpassed all his previous impersonations, and that a new name was written on the list of stage successes. All this was taken for granted and melted into comparative insignificance before the stupendous impression created by the new Duchess of Malfi. Beatrice had verified all her admirers’ most sanguine predictions, and in one night had lifted

herself to the rank of the Immortals. Her grace and dignity, her exquisite pathos, her womanly passion, and, at the last, her sublime and saint-like courage, literally took the house by storm. There was an audible sob through the theatre when, just before her cruel death, the Duchess begs that her little children may be cared for—

*“I pray thee, look thou giv’st my little boy
Some syrup for his cold, and let the girl
Say her prayers ere she sleep.”*

And again, as the strangling cords are round her—

*“Pull, and pull strongly, for your able strength
Must pull down heaven upon me;—
Yet stay, heaven gates are not so highly arch’d
As princes’ palaces; they that enter there
Must go upon their knees—Come, violent death,
Serve for mandragora to make me sleep!”*—

London felt his whole being torn with wonder and emotion, and a strange sweet despair. How could he ever hope to win this dazzling creature, whose look, and word, and gesture could thrill and hold spell-bound a vast assemblage such as this which watched her to-night! And how pure womanly she was! In very soul and essence the type of wife and mother! There lay the secret of her power! She was almost fainting when Cosway Keele brought her forward. Her eye turned to the upper box in which London sat beside Mrs. Cubison. He felt that they were lifted in yearning for sympathy,

and, oh ! with what wild passionate love his heart went out to her ! Mrs. Cubison hurried down the narrow staircase and along the stone passage that led behind. The word had gone round that, as usual on first nights, Cosway Keele would hold a reception on the stage when all was over, and half the occupants of the stalls and boxes were crowding round. Lendon held back. It would have been agony to him that night to join in the commonplace criticisms and the effusive ejaculations of wonder and delight. Beatrice's triumph was to him too sacred a thing for this. Mrs. Cubison bade him wait while she went into Beatrice's dressing-room. Presently her dresser came out to say that Miss Brett and Mrs. Cubison were going straight home and wished Mr. Lendon to go with them.

It was not long before Beatrice herself, leaning shyly on Mrs. Cubison's arm, stole down the passage so closely cloaked and hooded as to be scarcely recognizable. At the same moment Cosway Keele rushed out through the green-room door.

"Miss Brett, we are waiting for you. You will come on ? All London is longing to congratulate you."

"Not to-night," she answered. "Indeed, Mr. Keele, I cannot. Indeed, I must go home. Tell me that you are pleased. That's all I care about."

The manager took her two hands in his and pressed them warmly.

"I have told you already what I think," he said.

"You are finer than the finest. God bless you, my dear, and thank you. Go home, child," he added with feeling, "and sleep sweetly and dream of the glorious future that is yours from to-night." He turned to Mrs. Cubison, partly to conceal his emotion; he, too, was overwrought. "You must have telegrams you want to send; I have arranged at the office. You had better write them here."

"Why, certainly, there must go a cablegram to the Professor," cried Mrs. Cubison, and ran into the green-room. Cosway Keele once more clasped Beatrice's hand. The low roar of voices and laughter from the stage reached them distinctly. "I must go to my guests," he said. "We shall see you round, I suppose, presently, London?"

"He is coming with me," said Beatrice, and slipped her hand within his arm.

Cosway Keele gave a quick look at both—a look which seemed to take in the situation, and left them.

They stood in the narrow passage, her hand was on his arm, and her sweet face was turned up to his.

"Beatrice—my love," he whispered wildly. "How can I dare ask you to stoop to me—after to-night?"

"The curtain has fallen," she said softly. "Antonio has had his day."

Not one word more was spoken then. They understood each other. Surely for the space of three minutes that narrow stone-paved corridor was transformed into

Elysium. Scene-shifters and supers and dressers passed on their way out into the street, and looked curiously at the young heroine of the evening cowering here in the half-darkness, when not many paces distant champagne corks were popping and glasses were passing, and some hundreds of the best-known people in London were celebrating her triumph. Mrs. Cubison came back having written and dispatched a little sheaf of telegrams, and Lendon went to find the brougham and put them into it and took his seat beside them. It was so strange driving through the streets after all that had happened on that wondrous evening. Beatrice leaned back like a broken lily; but her eyes glowed soft and bright as stars. She did not speak. Fortunately for Lendon, Mrs. Cubison rattled on, delivering a pæan of joy and thanksgiving. The little house was all astir, and supper was laid in the dining-room. Mrs. Cubison, intent on some domestic arrangement, preceded them thither. She wanted to be certain that the champagne had been iced. Lendon drew Beatrice into her own little study where they had sat so often together.

She threw off her cloak and stood before him, her face very pale and tremulous, with a strange, sweet, inviting smile on her lips, and her golden hair shining round her.

“Beatrice—my darling!” Lendon cried; and he would have taken her in his arms then and there; but something in her clear, pure eyes, in her strange bright

smile, that was so sweet and yet so cold, something in her statuesque attitude rebuked his lover's ardour. He let his hands fall upon her dress, but attempted no closer embrace; then he lifted her cloak and then laid it down, and wheeled forward a chair to the fire.

"Sit down," he said gently, "you must be very cold and very tired."

"I am not cold," she answered, "and I am too happy to be tired. I never was so happy in all my life."

"Are you lonely, Beatrice, as you feared?" he said.

"No," she answered. "I am not lonely. You are sharing my joy with me."

He knelt on the ground beside her, and took her hand and kissed it.

"Beatrice, did you mean what you said in the theatre? Has Antonio had his day, and is it my turn now? Oh! my love, be true and frank. Don't keep me in suspense. I love you with my whole heart and soul. Tell me that you will be my wife."

"If you will take me, Bernard," she answered; "I will try to be a true and loving wife; and I know that you will be good to me. You won't expect too much from me, dear. I want you to be very gentle; I want you to be very patient."

He took her in his arms and kissed her with tenderness, but with no passion. It was not passion that she

needed from him, but protecting love. He had felt this from the first.

When they went out to the lighted supper-room, Beatrice shyly took Bernard's hand and led him to Mrs. Cubison. "Marmy," she said, "I have promised to be Mr. Lendon's wife."

CHAPTER IX.

MRS. WALCOT VALBRY'S BALL.

MRS. WALCOT VALBRY'S balls were always amusing functions, and one that she gave in the July following the revival of the Duchess of Malfi was more than usually crowded and more than usually talked about.

In the first place she had a large detached house which had once belonged to a famous Academician, and where the studio, built out beyond the reception-rooms, made an ideal ball-room—it was used as the supper-room at her ordinary “At Homes.” Indeed, secondly, Mrs. Walcot Valbry had a reputation for suppers. Her champagne was beyond praise, and her guests were not obliged to file down in relays to a long, narrow board and a sort of *table d'hôte* collation, at which people ate in fear of their neighbours' elbows. They were provided with a number of small tables, with special waiters for each, and abundance of room in which to take a leisurely repast, and to feast their minds as well as their bodies with sallies of wit and genial conversation. Then, too, she was a kind of purveyor of American beauty, and more than one lovely lady celebrated in higher circles had made her *début* in London society under Mrs. Walcot Valbry's wing. More-

over, everyone knew that she went in for stars of the theatrical profession, and everyone remembered the performance of the Improvisatrice that spring—much quoted since the Dionysion revival—and everyone took it for granted that the Duchess of Malfi—as they called Beatrice—would be present.

For the Duchess of Malfi was the rage, and when London sets up an idol she certainly does not stint her incense. Beatrice's photographs were everywhere—in shop windows and on drawing-room tables. Certain great ladies dropped cards of invitation at the little house in Regent's Park, and certain distinguished gentlemen made requests for her presence at their supper-parties. Newspaper people interviewed her, painters begged for permission to take her portrait; she was pestered with entreaties to hold stalls at fancy fairs, and to assist at charitable entertainments. The lesser crowd of lion-hunters besieged her, and love-letters from the mashers of the stalls rained upon her. Mrs. Cubison's position as sheep-dog was just now no sinecure.

The play at the Dionysion was never over till past eleven, and Lendon knew that Beatrice could not arrive at Mrs. Walcot Valbry's till long after the dancing had begun. He was at the theatre as usual; indeed he had made himself rather conspicuous by his constant attendance, which was hardly now to be excused on the plea of his part in the revival. Again he had delighted eyes and heart, and had followed line by line, mood by

mood, the exhibition of that rare and spiritual passion, that absolute self-surrender of the actress to her ecstasy of love which yet seemed all a madness of soul with no part of sense. It was to him a foretaste of almost unrealizable bliss to watch this beautiful creature as she thrilled with the emotion of her part, and to know that he alone had a lover's right to the exquisite lips, that for his own secret delight were reserved all those graces of womanhood, and that for his ear was destined love-talk tenderly intimate and heavenly sweet as, in those short days of wedded bliss, the ill-fated Duchess whispered in the ears of Antonio.

Strangely enough, he had never during the love-scenes—some of them emotional and impassioned enough, between the Duchess and Antonio—felt any thrill of jealousy on account of the smoothly locutionary lover.

To-night it seemed to him that Beatrice was finer than usual. The interest had risen to enthusiasm. Stalls and boxes were full, and the pit and galleries were densely packed. The curtain was raised several times at the end of each act ; and at the close of the performance the calls and shouts of "Brava !" were deafening, till Beatrice appeared once more before the curtain, and, pale and overwrought, bowed her acknowledgments of the applause. Lendon went round to the stage entrance and waited till the actress came out. He was in the habit of seeing her and Mrs. Cubison, who usually accompanied her, into their brougham ; but he had never, since the first night of

"The Duchess," gone behind the scenes. The management at the Dionysion was despotic, and not even to the leading lady might note or message be conveyed till her part for the evening was over. To-night Beatrice came out alone. Mrs. Cubison, she explained afterwards, had a headache and was resting in preparation for her labours of chaperone at the ball later on. The girl looked white and weary, and he fancied a little distraught, as though the emotion of those harrowing scenes was still racking her. She gave him to hold, as was her custom, the little bag in which nightly she carried home the jewels she had worn, and put her hand through his arm with an air of gladness and relief.

"Oh, Bernard," she whispered, "it was nice of you to come round. I wanted you to-night."

"Why to-night?" he asked anxiously. "Darling, are you ill?"

"No, not ill. But I have a strange feeling—I have had it all day—a feeling of sadness and dread, a sort of presentiment of coming evil. Don't laugh at me, Bernard. You know I am not made of the same sort of stuff as your practical matter-of-fact people. I believe in these things."

"Indeed, I am too anxious and unhappy about you to feel inclined to smile at your presentiments," he said.

"Did you not see to-night how *real* it all was?" she went on. "I was not acting. I was not the Duchess of Malfi. I was Beatrice Brett parting for ever from the

man she loves. Bernard"—and as they stood outside the little paved lane she clung to him almost wildly—"something is going to part us. I know it ; I feel it. Oh ! fight against it. Don't let it happen. Keep me safe."

"My dearest," he said gravely, his voice trembling with emotion, "nothing shall part us on this side of the grave—nothing, except your own will, Beatrice. Don't be frightened, dear. See, you are trembling with nervousness and exhaustion. That play takes too much out of you. If you weren't overdone, you couldn't have fancies like this."

"Ever since I was a child I have had fancies, as you call them. I have always had a foreshadowing presentiment before any great event in my life. Something will happen to me soon, and it will not be for good. But I'm not going to give way to morbidness, Bernard. I shall go home now and dress for my ball, and try to put dark thoughts aside."

He put her into the carriage and let her take the bag with her trinkets from him. Then, instead of closing the door, he got in after her.

"No, no," she exclaimed, "I have alarmed you quite needlessly. I assure you I am perfectly well."

His only answer was to take her in his arms and kiss her passionately. He rarely allowed his love for her to have its full vent. Perhaps it was something impersonal and cold in her which checked its overflow. She never

seemed to him so much an ordinary woman as an ideal to be revered. But to-night he could not restrain himself, and she yielded herself with a little sigh of content to his embrace. They scarcely spoke; but she let her head rest upon his shoulder, and his arm was round her, and his lips brushed her hair as he rapturously pictured to himself the time when she would be all his own. They drove quickly on. He had never driven with her alone so at night before. The lights of the hansoms flashing by, the clusters of lamps, the intoxication of the caress—all seemed part of some wonderful dream. The carriage stopped at last. She raised herself with a little laugh.

“Now you must get into a hansom and drive quickly to Mrs. Walcot Valbry’s, and tell her that as soon as I am dressed I am coming along.”

“Dearest,” he said, “are you well enough for a ball to-night?”

“Why, Mrs. Walcot Valbry would be just mad if I disappointed her, and all her grand people who want to stare at the poor little American actress! I had a frantic note from her this morning, begging me not to be late. And, besides, I have never danced with you, Bernard; and I’m so fond of dancing, and we are going to waltz together to-night.”

She jumped from the carriage while she spoke, waving him back as she ran along the paved causeway to the house. “Quick,” she cried, “tell them I am coming,”

and disappeared within the hall-door which Mrs. Cubison, on the watch, threw open.

Lendon remembered, as he drove along, that Countess Adrian had that morning laughingly engaged him to dance the first waltz after midnight. She had insisted upon his coming up to her, no matter with whom she might be talking, exactly as the clock struck. "It will be the first time that I shall have danced," she said, "for five years."

"Why is that?" he asked.

"Because the doctor, who found out that my heart was affected, told me to avoid any violent exercise or excitement. That was in the days of the whirling *deux temps*," she added with a laugh; "but you and I to-night will dance a slow and graceful measure to celebrate the completion of the portrait, and the happy course of our friendship."

Remorsefully he reflected now that midnight was passed.

She was the first person who greeted him after he had paid his respects and delivered Beatrice's message to Mrs. Walcot Valbry. She was coming towards him on Sir Donald Urquhart's arm, which she relinquished as he approached. "You are too late," she said.

"Countess, a thousand apologies. The fact is that——"

She stopped him with a gesture, at the same moment taking his arm, and dismissing Sir Donald with a smile and a nod. "Don't tell me that you forgot me. That

would be a sore wound to my vanity, and I am in the mood to enjoy myself to-night."

"Forgive me, Countess. I was unavoidably detained by the illness—of a friend."

"A friend!" she repeated.

"They are playing another waltz now," he rejoined hastily, as the band broke into a prelude that he knew. "Will you give it to me instead?"

"No, we will not dance this one," she answered. "I am tired. I want to talk. Take me to the conservatory, and let us wait there for the next waltz."

They threaded their way through the long room. The dream-like feeling was upon him still. The reflection of the electric lights on the parquet floor reminded him of the lamps shining on the asphalte as he had driven with Beatrice from the theatre, and the thrill of Beatrice's touch stirred him yet.

Strange how a mood inspired by one woman reacts again upon another woman! It was as though Countess Adrian were touched with something of the same dream-like magic. It seemed to him that her voice had a note of ineffable tenderness, as she said—

"I have so looked forward to to-night, since we parted."

"This morning, Countess;" Lendon answered.

"Yes, only this morning; but does not one sometimes live years in a day? I have sat alone—alone, thinking, dreaming, wondering, during the hours that have passed since I left you."

“Has anything happened—tell me—in those hours?”

“Nothing, my friend, except perhaps the end of a friendship.”

“You speak of *our* friendship?” he said eagerly.

She bowed her head.

“Surely,” he added, “that need not end because the portrait is finished?”

“I think it will,” she answered. “There are more ways than one of ending a friendship. Are you sorry the portrait is finished?” she asked suddenly.

“Yes,” he answered unhesitatingly. There was in his mind no shadow of falsity to Beatrice. If some faint doubt of Countess Adrian’s feeling for himself had ever glanced across it, he had dismissed the fancy with a smile at his own vanity. Remembering what she had told him, taking her at her own showing as a trusty comrade—a woman in need of friends and not finding them readily among her own sex, believing that she was world-worn, satiated with admiration, hard to please, with indeed a heart that could only be roused by some glittering prince of romance who would appeal to that element of the dramatic, the luxurious, and the splendid which formed so large a part of her nature, it would have appeared to him absolutely impossible that she could fall seriously in love with a work-a-day artist in prosaic London, who professed nothing more for her than friendship. He liked her; she interested him intensely, speaking in the abstract, in her way, perhaps, quite as much as Beatrice.

He delighted in her beauty, her curious grace, the charm of her conversation, and the frank audacity with which she laid herself bare before him. But love! That belonged to a secret inner chamber of which Countess Adrian could never possess the key.

"I have had a pleasant task, Countess," he went on. "To watch you, to paint you would have been almost pleasure enough to an artist; but when the charm of hearing you talk is added, and the privilege of being admitted to a certain extent into your confidence, why then the artist is a favoured mortal, indeed."

"We won't talk the language of compliments to-night," she said, with a melancholy that deeply touched him; "I have had too much of that; I should like something different from you."

"If mine is the language of compliment, at least you will believe it is sincere," he said.

They were standing in the conservatory which was a fairy-land of palms and blossom, cushioned lounges and pale electric stars. At the furthest end was an archway draped with Moorish curtains. "Have you seen Mrs. Walcot Valbry's Eastern room?" she asked. "Come; we shall be quiet there." She drew aside the curtains which fell behind them as they passed through. They found themselves in a wonderful "Liberty" apartment—draperies, divans, canopied ceiling, soft shaded lamps of quaint designs, idols, and orchids, the whole pervaded by a delicate Oriental perfume—a "flirtation corner" which

did not appear as yet to have attracted the attention of Mrs. Walcot Valbry's guests. Countess Adrian sank upon a divan. "Sit here," she said.

Lendon did not at once comply with the invitation, but stood looking at her, his artist eye taking in and enjoying the beauty of the picture she presented. "I wish," he said, "that I seen you before in that dress. I should have liked to paint you in it."

The soft amber stuff, with its shining embroidery, was certainly well suited to her clear ivory skin and dark eyes and hair, and was made in a fashion that showed to peculiar advantage the magnificent lines of her throat and bust. Her arms were bare to the shoulders and clasped with barbaric looking armlets of gold set with uncut stones. Her breast heaved beneath its transparent drapery, as if with some pent emotion. Her lips parted in a dreamy smile; the expression of her eyes as they gazed into his was indescribably alluring, and the dark brown shade beneath the lower lid enhanced their penetrating lustre. There was about her a conscious witchery and abandon which, in spite of himself, in spite of the image enshrined in his heart, set his blood coursing faster. She might indeed at that moment have postured as the embodiment of sensuous charm.

"Tell me——" she began, still looking at him with that curious intentness, then stopped.

He seated himself beside her. "What is it that you wish me to tell you?"

"No!" she answered. "*I* will tell *you* something. Do you remember what I once said to you about my superstition in regard to this year?"

"Perfectly," he replied.

"The astrologer, who foretold that this year would be fateful to me, fixed the very time at which the crisis would take place. That time is now."

"Now!" he repeated, startled.

"Yes, *now*! The first and second hours of the morning. These are the hours which will decide my destiny. That is why I begged you to come to me when midnight struck. I wanted to see your face—to feel that you were near me. I wanted you to share the ordeal with me." She laid her ungloved hand softly upon his. It was dry and hot, and he felt the fingers quivering as they touched his flesh.

"Countess, what do you mean?"

"Do you think I am working up a melodramatic effect for your especial amusement? Ah! I assure you that I am too serious to be melodramatic. My whole life is at stake, and I am tortured by anxiety—hope—doubt—dread. I watched for you. I waited. You were late. The clock struck. You did not come. It was an ill portent."

"Countess Adrian, you bewilder me. This is a modern London ball; and you and I were engaged to dance a waltz together. Surely, the days of astrologers and magic and portents are passed; and my experience of destiny

is, that she works in common-place fashion and does not usually prepare so elaborate a *mise-en-scène*, when she deals out her crushing calamities, or her most precious benefits."

"You are right. Destiny is a poor stage-manager as a rule, and for to-night I would have chosen a different *mise-en-scène*. But destiny only knows whether the curtain is to fall on a tragedy, or on wedding bells—and perhaps for either, a ball-room is the most appropriate background."

"Tell me, Countess, since we are friends—what is it that you hope for? What is it that you dread?"

"Shall I tell you—Bernard?" She lingered with musical cadence on his name; it was the first time she had ever called him by it. "I said to you the second time we met, that everything had happened to me—everything—except death and love. Suppose that the one supreme experience for which I have longed, and that yet has filled me with terror, has come to me at last—slowly, silently, overpoweringly. Suppose that for the first time in my life—I—love."

"To suppose that, Countess," he said, with a forced lightness that seemed to him at the moment a mockery of himself, "is to suppose that at least there is one happy man in the world."

"You think," she said slowly, "that I could make any man love me?"

"Would he not be curiously insensible if *you* could not touch his heart?"

"But if," she said, "if the man whom I love had once been sorely wounded by a woman's treachery, and had hardened himself against all other women—if he were of a self-contained nature, slow to believe that he could inspire love——"

"Surely in that case only time and opportunity are needed. Love has a way of breaking down such barriers."

"But if he had been given an opportunity—if all that a woman could say had been said, and if he had never by word or look conveyed that he cared for her in any way other than as a friend——"

She broke off agitatedly ; but she had said too much. Her full meaning flashed upon him. He gave a startled exclamation, and drew slightly back. Her throbbing fingers tightened on his hand. She bent over towards him, her head thrown back, her breath coming quickly, her glowing eyes burning upon his, every pulse in her quivering with emotion.

"Would he be strong enough—cruel enough to repulse such a woman as I am, Bernard?" she went on in low tremulous terms—"if for his sake she, this woman, were to cast away her womanly pride—she to whom so many have poured out love, and who has accepted it so disdainfully—if she were to say to him with all the fulness of her soul, 'I love you. Take me. Do with me what you will. Make me your slave——only love me.'"

“And if that were impossible,” Bernard answered, no less agitated than she herself. “If, while admiring her above all women, valuing her friendship, honouring her for her noble frankness, he were yet unable to give back the love she offered him, and which under other conditions would have made his happiness—if this were so—because his heart had been given before he knew her, and another woman claimed all his devotion——”

She interrupted him with a little inarticulate cry ; but only the more closely did she cling to him. “Love me, Bernard,” she murmured, and all the passion of her being seemed concentrated in the appeal. “Love me. Let the other woman go. *She* does not love you as *I* love you. She cannot charm you as I would charm you. She cannot give you what I could give you.” As Countess Adrian spoke she raised herself closer to him. Her arm stole round his neck, her palpitating form pressed against his, and her lips met his in an impassioned kiss. Thus for a moment they remained locked in each other’s embrace. For that moment he was like a man giddy and overcome by some subtle magnetism, which enervated his will and robbed him of all power of resistance. For a moment he gave himself up to the intoxication of the contact—of her perfumed breath, of her warm soft lips. He would have been more than man had he kept his senses. “Agnes,” he whispered, as he strained her closer. Then with a sudden shock of revulsion came the thought of Beatrice and of her

pure love. It steeled him and gave him new strength. He rose from the divan and put Agnes gently from him. She seemed instinctively to realise that his mood had changed; her arms relaxed and the flame in her sank.

"Agnes," he said, "forgive me this moment of madness. Let us forget it. Let us keep our friendship. I could not bear to forfeit that."

"You!" she cried wildly. "What have you done? I offered you my love, it is I who am shamed."

"There is no shame in love." He bent his head and with great respect kissed her hand. "I am not worthy that you should do me this honour. Six months ago I could have loved you with all the ardour that you could wish. Yes, there's no treason to *her* in saying that. But now, it is she who has all my heart, and this is impossible."

Countess Adrian moved away from him as he spoke. She drew a deep long breath like the moan of a wounded animal. The sound cut his very heart. All the glow and transport had gone from her face, leaving an ashy pallor and strange stillness. She stood for a second or two perfectly silent, her hand pressed against her side as if she were suffering. Presently she said, in a voice that had utterly changed,

"It is all over then—I want to know—who is it that you love?"

"I am engaged to marry Miss Beatrice Brett," he answered.

"The actress! I might have known that." Again she paused. "Mr. Lendon, you are right. This has been a moment of madness, and there is nothing for us but to try and forget it. Spare me now, and do not let word or look in the future remind me of my humiliation."

"Ah! do not misjudge me. Should I not value you more and not less for this? Surely, you and I can stand—soul to soul—outside conventions."

"That was the agreement we made," she said, with a wan smile. "Very well, let it be so. You are great enough for a woman to be safe with you. But—it is not so certain that I can be safe with myself. After to-night I shall never willingly see you again. But I shall not misjudge you, and I shall wish you happiness. Come, let us go into the ball-room."

He led her out in silence. The waltz was still going on. As they stood at the entrance of the conservatory he saw Beatrice enter. She was all in white, flushed and radiant, with a bouquet of lilies in her hand. So beautiful was she, so pure, and so ethereal, that her presence, following on that strange scene, seemed to him like that of some rebuking heavenly visitant. She recognized him and smiled. Countess Adrian also was watching her. Again he heard that low curious moan and looked at her in alarm. Her deathly paleness struck him. He saw that she was commanding all the force of her will to sustain her strength.

"Countess," he exclaimed, pierced with remorse, "you are not well."

She looked up bravely. "I am quite well—well enough to keep our engagement. This waltz is mine, remember. We will dance—for the first and last time."

He put his arm around her, and they glided out among the dancers. Presently the waltz changed its strain. It had been a plaintive and dreamy air. Now it clashed out in wild, fast rhythm that had something uncanny in its discords. His partner's form undulated with the music. Tall and magnificently framed as she was, so lightly did she dance, so entirely was her every movement in harmony with the measure, so rapid was the gliding pace she kept, that it seemed to him as though he were guiding a being possessed. Three mad whirls they made, then there was a rush, a shrieking of the violins, a long-drawn closing chord, and the waltz was at an end.

They paused at the spot where Beatrice was standing. She was leaning against a crimson-draped pillar, fanning herself slowly, and talking to Sir Donald Urquhart, who was by her side. The two women faced each other. At the sight of Countess Adrian, the light went out of Beatrice's eyes. The motion of her fan ceased. She shrank back a little and cast a look at Lendon as if imploring his support. The Countess took her hand away from his arm, and he moved a step, ranging himself, as it were, on the side of the woman he loved. Countess Adrian advanced. "Miss Brett," she said, "I am Mr. Lendon's

friend. Will you let me offer my congratulations to his future wife?" Lendon watched Beatrice's face. He saw the same dazed expression creep over it as upon that occasion when her performance had been interrupted by Countess Adrian's malign influence. The fan dropped from her hand. With an effort she appeared to try and brace herself, staggering a little as she moved forward. She looked wildly around, and half extended her hand, then her limbs drooped flaccidly again. She tottered against the pillar, and every drop of blood seemed to leave her cheeks. The Countess took her hand and stood tall and erect before the shrinking girl. Her bosom dilated as if she were drawing in strength. For a moment she did not speak. It was a strange scene. Lendon felt his heart throb with fear and suspense. He looked from Beatrice to Countess Adrian. Never had he seen so sudden and curious a change in the face of any human being. It was like the contrast between dead grey ashes and living fire. The impression she gave him was one of demoniac power. Her eyes glowed with an unearthly lustre from her white face. Her features were rigid, her frame tense as though she were concentrating all her force in one superhuman effort of will. It only lasted for a second, and Beatrice's eyes, large, blank, cowed, were drawn as by a magnet into that terrible compelling gaze. The girl trembled and yet looked fascinated, like a helpless victim before the snake makes its fatal spring. Countess Adrian went nearer. She spoke with a low, intense

utterance words that burned like fire into Lendon's heart.

"You are going to be his wife," she said. "To you is given all that has been denied to me. I will give you more and yet more. I will give you the desire with which I have desired him, the yearning, the doubt, the agony with which I have striven for his love. I will give you the passion with which he has filled my heart, to be my torment and my heaven. I will give you of my strength and of my life. I will give you of my spirit and of my sense, till my soul itself shall live in you, and in loving you he shall love me whom he has scorned. This shall be my bridal gift to you, and with my kiss I seal it."

The red ripe lips of Countess Adrian bent down to Beatrice's lips and clung to them in a vampire kiss which seemed to drain the very life-breath from the girl's body. She uttered no sound, but as Countess Adrian moved from her she sank white and limp into Lendon's arms. Countess Adrian stood for a moment, rigid, and with staring glassy eyes. Then, with a sudden piercing cry, she pressed her hands to her heart, her body swayed, and she fell dead upon the floor.

CHAPTER X.

THE AVATAR.

ON the next morning all London rang with the tragic event which had taken place at Mrs. Walcot Valbry's ball.

Countess Adrian was dead. The cause of her death was clear enough. Her doctors knew that she had been long suffering from heart disease, and they had warned her that any violent exertion must prove fatal. She had danced a waltz, and a few minutes afterwards her heart had ceased to beat. This was what science declared. Science was more puzzled by the simultaneous and prolonged fainting-fit of the young American actress who was the last person to whom Countess Adrian had spoken. Countess Adrian had drawn her last breath in the giving of that kiss of fate ; and Beatrice Brett, stricken by the horror of the shock, had lain unconscious ever since the dead woman's lips touched hers.

They took the girl home and laid her upon her bed. All night and all the next day London watched below. Every effort to restore her proved unavailing. Doctors came and went. Mrs. Cubison wept and bemoaned Professor's Viall's absence. Cosway Keele drove down in an agony of anxiety. Newspaper people called to get

the latest intelligence for the evening papers. The Duchess of Malfi's mysterious swoon was the talk of the hour. The next day, the tragedy of Countess Adrian, as one of the papers had it, in sensational type, had become a secondary affair. London could do without Countess Adrian, but it could not calmly contemplate the loss of its Duchess of Malfi. Placards were posted at the theatre. Hurried rehearsals were called, and Beatrice's understudy stepped into prominence and exulted in secret over the calamity which had given her her great opportunity. The doctors agreed that the long trance was cataleptic, and that nothing could be done but to watch and wait. The two women lay, each cold and motionless, the living, to all outward semblance, as lifeless as the dead. But there were no wreaths and crosses round Beatrice's still body, and the summer sun threw gleams through the half-drawn blinds, while Countess Adrian rested in state in a darkened chamber, with watchers and tapers at her head and feet, and the room was heavy with the scent of funeral flowers. She was very lonely in her death. No one cared much—except, indeed, Sir Donald Urquhart. She had no relations. She had very few friends. She had had many lovers, but only one was faithful to her at the last. The wreaths which heaped her bier were sent by acquaintances who shed not one tear because she was dead. Lendon brought a cluster of white roses with faint pink hearts and laid them himself between the cold hands.

From Queen Anne's Mansions he went to the house in Regent's Park. It was now the third day since Beatrice's strange seizure. As Mrs. Cubison came towards him, he asked, hoarsely : " Is there any change ? "

" She has moved," answered Mrs. Cubison ; " her eyes look natural again. It's Inskip's doing. The Professor telegraphed us to send for Inskip. He is a professional magnetizer, you know. I tried him once for neuralgia, but being a positive myself and he being another positive, nothing came of it. He's not like the Professor—quite a common man and on a different plane altogether ; but he has done Beaty good."

" And what does he think is the cause of her illness ? " asked Lendon, anxiously.

" Oh ! he doesn't know—they none of them do. There's no knowing how influences will affect a person that's subject to them," said Mrs. Cubison, vaguely ; " and for my part I'm only thankful that Beaty doesn't take them in the same way as her mother. Inskip says that she'll soon be right again."

The relief was inexpressible. Lendon could almost have wept tears of joy. Mrs. Cubison sent him away. Inskip and the doctors had agreed that sleep was the best restorer, and she wanted to keep the house as quiet as possible. She promised to telegraph, and told him that he might come back in the evening. He went to his studio and occupied himself feverishly during the intervals of the hourly bulletins which announced Beatrice's progress.

The portrait of Countess Adrian, glowing with beauty and with all the appearance of inextinguishable life, stood in mockery upon its easel, and oppressed him like a living presence. He removed the canvas and turned it with its face to the wall. The place seemed steeped in associations of the dead woman. He wandered up and down the studio. The telegrams came regularly. Beatrice breathed naturally. She had recognized her Aunt. The last bulletin told that she was sleeping a sweet healthful sleep.

The summer dusk crept up. The room was full of shadows. He could almost fancy, as he leaned back in his chair, that Countess Adrian's ghost was sitting in the place where she had been accustomed to sit, or was standing on the gallery steps as she had stood and looked down on him that day that she had questioned him so abruptly about Beatrice. The yellow-covered French novel—"The Avatar"—reminded him afresh of her. He tried to shake off the memory and walked to the window and gazed out into the twilight. As he stood, an awesome eerie feeling came over him. Suddenly he became conscious of another presence. Some one was standing beside him. He knew that it was Beatrice. He seemed to feel her soft breathing. He recognized a faint familiar perfume. He gazed—there was nothing; and yet she was there. "Beatrice," he whispered; and a voice answered in low mysterious tones, thrilling with tenderness, "Bernard." Then the presence melted, and though he saw no vanish-

ing vision, heard no parting sound, he knew that she was gone.

He remained for some moments transfixed, dazed, the one thought only possessing him. She was dead, and her spirit had come to bid him farewell. He ran out into the street, hailed a hansom, and bade the driver go with all possible speed to Regent's Park. Lights were moving in the windows. The sight confirmed his despair. There was no motive now for keeping stillness. The doctor's brougham was before the house. As Lendon rushed to the door it was opened from within; the doctor came out. Lendon's lips could scarcely frame the enquiry. The physician was a friend of his and guessed the state of affairs.

"Don't distress yourself, Lendon," he said kindly. "She will do well enough now. Magnetism—charlatanism, one might say—has succeeded where our science was helpless. The passes threw her into a natural sleep of three hours. She has awakened and seems herself again. In a night or two we shall have our Duchess of Malfi on the boards once more. Let me have a form, by the way, and I'll telegraph to let Cosway Keele know the good news."

"She is not dead?" cried Lendon, confused by the sudden revulsion.

"Not dead! I should think not. She has spoken; she has eaten. In a few days, perhaps, you may see her. For the present, I have ordered absolute quiet. I am afraid of her asking questions about Countess Adrian and

reviving that terrible impression. What an extraordinary thing that was! Poor woman! She had such an intense terror of death."

Lendon shuddered as he remembered her passionate cry, "Give me life; oh, long life."

"And what a magnificent woman!" the doctor went on. "It is almost impossible to imagine so brilliant a flame could be put out in an instant—for ever. Has it ever occurred to you, Lendon, that the one great force on which the very world depends—that of human existence—falsifies all the laws of science and vanishes, leaving no trace?"

"Don't you believe in the soul, doctor?"

"The soul!" Doctor Sheriff—so he was called—shrugged his shoulders. "I believe in the vital principle; and I want to know into what sort of ethereal gas it is transmuted. Does it exhaust itself in the atmosphere? Does it enrich another organization, or does it simply go out?"

"Ah," said Lendon, "we want Maddox Challis to tell us that."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders again. "Are you one of his disciples? Did you see in the paper yesterday that he had left Damascus, and was gone to his hermit's cave in the mountains? On second thoughts, I'll call round by Cosway Keele's rooms, they are in my way. Good by." And the doctor stepped into his brougham and drove off.

.

It was the day after Countess Adrian's funeral, and Lendon, with heart beating like that of the most timid undeclared lover, stood for the first time since her illness on the threshold of Beatrice's sitting-room.

He had expected some change in her. He had expected to find her with wasted body, and nerves strained by the illness and the shock she had undergone. He had expected her to be shy and silent, and to shrink perhaps a little from his too frank ebullition of feeling. He had pictured her as even more reticent, more virginal, than was her wont. He had determined that no demonstration on his part should jar or frighten her. He had imagined her submitting at first a little constrainedly to his caresses, and then gradually gaining confidence and satisfaction in them from their very gentleness, and at last yielding herself sweetly to his embrace, and resting contentedly in his arms like a fluttering bird in its mother's nest.

But the Beatrice who met him was not the Beatrice of his imaginings. He could not, at the first glance, tell wherein lay the subtle change, and yet from the first glance he was conscious of it. She was not resting on her sofa beneath the window, with her books around her, as he had been accustomed to see her. She was pacing the little room restlessly ; her cheeks were flushed ; there was an alertness in her air and gestures, and a feverish expectancy in her eyes, which seemed at once brighter, more dreamy, and less limpidly serene. She gave him

an odd indefinable impression of greater physical vigour than he had ever associated with the fragile, sensitive creature, whose slender frame seemed worn by the fire of genius that burned within it. She made a glad movement towards him, and was in his arms, and he was pressing his lips on hers, and returning hot, eager, lovers' kisses. All his vague doubts and scruples fled. There was only the rapture of reunion. He was not afraid now of frightening her. She drew him to the sofa beside her, and leaned against him and looked up at him, her eyes beaming with emotion.

"Bernard," she said, "you love me—you love me! *me—me—only me!*"

He kissed her again and again. Never were lovers' protestations fonder.

"It is so sweet to hear those words—so sweet to feel your arms about me, to know that you are mine—all mine," she whispered. "Oh! Bernard, it has been such a long night—such a long dark night."

"You have been very ill, dearest."

She shuddered. "What happened? I don't know; I can't remember. I remember nothing except those eyes—flames that seemed to burn into my very being; and then sudden pain and darkness, intense black darkness. It seemed to me as if my body lay helpless and bound, that my soul was hovering above the earth, utterly cold, lonely, desolate. I knew that I was dead, and I hungered for the joy of life. I hungered for the

joy of love. I felt that I had lost you, Bernard—that you were living and that I was wandering in black space, and oh, so cold—so cold! I craved to be with you. I yearned for you with the wildest yearning. And then it seemed to me that my soul willed with all its might and strength that it might live, and that you might love me—as I love you. And then I awoke. Say that you love me, Bernard.”

“My darling, is there any need for that? Do you not know that I love you?”

“But not as I love you. I cannot live without you. Your touch thrills me like some strange electric current. I want to be near you. Your presence seems to warm and vivify me and fill me with all kinds of wild delicious fancies. I shall think of you to-night, and you only, when I am playing the Duchess of Malfi.”

“You are going to play to-night?” he asked in surprise.

“Yes, of course—and in my love scene with Antonio I shall see you—only you—and when I tell him of my love, I shall speak to *you*. And when I say these words, take them to your heart, for they will be for *you*. Don’t you remember them?”

‘*You do tremble.*

Make not your heart so dead a piece of flesh

To fear more than to love me. Sir, be confident;

What is’t distracts you? This is flesh and blood, sir’” . . .

She drew him down to her with a seductive gesture,

and her arms interlaced his neck in an impassioned embrace. But though he held her close, and kissed back the red warm lips, there ran through him a strange shiver of recoil. A feeling of trouble and terror came over him. An indescribable sort of magnetism seemed to emanate from her that excited and pained him, and turned him giddy. What did it mean? Was it possible that any show of affection from the woman he idolized could for an instant shock and repel him? And yet this fervid passion did repel him, though a moment afterwards he hated himself for the involuntary treason. Was it not she herself, his Beatrice, with the violet eyes and the golden hair and the sweet drooping mouth? and had he not welcomed so gladly any sign of effusiveness from her in the earlier days when it was he who had pleaded for her love, and it had been his lips which had timidly sought hers, and her kisses had been rare as pearls, and fresh and pure as morning dewdrops? He told himself that she was overwrought, that she had passed through a dangerous crisis, and that the joy of being restored to him sufficiently accounted for these unaccustomed transports.

Then he gave himself up to the moment's happiness, which was so strange a blending of rapture and suffering. For a little while existence seemed narrowed to a lover's dream, and then came again the throb of revulsion. He roused himself and shook his brain free of the fumes which had mounted to it. "It is time that I should go,"

he said. But she clung to him and drew down his lips to hers. "I love you so, I love you so," she whispered in passionate accents. "I have never known what it is to live till now ; and in my love for you is my life."

Was this his Beatrice whose form trembled in his embrace, whose eyes gazed into his so strangely, whose hot arms entwined his neck so that he used gentle force to unloose their clasp ? "Good-by," he said. He loosened the arms which entwined him.

"Till to-night," she murmured ; "to-night you will come back with me from the theatre. Marmy is ill—worn out, and I shall be alone. Stay for a little while with me, and let us be happy again."

"Till to-night," he answered, and left her, his whole being a tumult of misery, joy, longing, and repugnance. He walked all the way back to the studio. He felt like a man who has taken haschish and has still self-control enough left to despise himself for his weakness. His own sensations were an enigma to him. It seemed impossible that Beatrice—his tender, dignified girlish Beatrice, could have inspired him with feelings so wild and contradictory. What did it mean ? he asked himself over and over again, and there was no answer to the riddle.

It was late when he got to the theatre. The excitement outside was great. Placards announcing that all available space was occupied were out over the box-office, and disappointed pleasure-seekers were turning

away in little crowds. "Reappearance of Miss Beatrice Brett after her serious illness" was announced in large letters. Many of the critics had assembled. It was supposed that Cosway Keele might hold one of his receptions "behind," to celebrate the event. Lendon pushed his way in and reached his stall. The first act was more than half over. It seemed to him that even then there was in the theatre an atmosphere of excitement and wonder. A pair of critics were whispering together over the backs of their chairs. "It is simply extraordinary," he heard one of them say as he brushed past. "The whole nature of the woman is changed." Behind him there was the same echo, "What does she mean? Is it a new reading?" muttered a man whom he knew, in the ear of his companion.

He had arrived during the Duchess' scene with Cariola in the first act, and she was saying the concluding words which Beatrice had been accustomed to deliver with an appealing pathos that was irresistible—the pathos of a proud spirit forced by the accident of birth to woo instead of being wooed, and shrinking from the sacrifice of her womanly dignity, yet daring even misconception for the sake of a pure absorbing love.

How strange! She gave those words now with a half-defiant unsexed air as of a coquette who knows the power of her wiles, and is determined, even at the cost of her fair fame, to bring the man to her feet. Then followed the scene with Antonio, in which Beatrice had

always before been so tender, sweet, and womanly—so pure, that in the very faith and fortitude of her own purity she was free to come down and to defy conventionality, and bid her lover come up to her. Now—what had come over her? It was not a Duchess of Malfi, but a Catherine of Russia. It was not the unconventionality of purity, but the recklessness of passion. It was not the sister of Ferdinand, but Ferdinand's own vile and brutal reading of his sister's character. The tone and manner in which she spoke some of the lines made Lendon start and shudder.

“——Awake, awake, man!

I do here put off all vain ceremony,

And only do appear to you a young widow

That claims you for her husband, and, like a widow,

I use but half a blush in't!”

With her eyes and her voice and her gesture, she stood the embodied lust of the flesh.

CHAPTER XI.

THE EXORCISM.

THE buzz of applause was over. This strange new Duchess, bold, self-indulgent, cynical, who had thrown the world away for the gratification of her passion and had met her doom with the courage of a nature that fears neither God nor man, had come before the curtain and had curtsied to the cheers and clappings which her remarkable performance deserved. Shocked, miserable and sick at heart, Lendon was preparing to leave the theatre. His mind vividly recalled the last occasion on which Beatrice had played the part, when her acting had been wrought to so refined a pitch of spiritual passion that there was scarcely a dry eye in the house as the curtain fell to Ferdinand's remorseful ejaculation,

"Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young."

This Duchess had called forth no tears, no emotion, save that of almost involuntary admiration of her dauntless bravery. The prevailing sentiment was one of bewilderment. From a saint the Duchess of Malfi had been transformed into an evil enchantress. There were people who declared that her very physique had changed,

that her form seemed more luxuriantly moulded than before her illness, and that her lips and eyes had acquired a peculiar and voluptuous expression. A good many of the Dionysion clique stood in knots about the stalls and lower boxes, and discussed the phenomenon.

As had been anticipated the word went round that Cosway Keele expected his immediate friends "behind," and these hundred and one intimates were waiting till the ordinary crowd had departed, and till the stage was cleared and the drop curtain once more raised. It was with a little difficulty that Lendon steered his way through. At each turn someone accosted him.

"Mr. Lendon, what do you think of it? . . . It is extraordinary! . . . It is disgusting! . . . It is too horrible! But how could she have done it? . . . When could she have thought out such a reading? . . . Do tell me, is she really not quite a proper person? . . . It is impossible that she can be nice and yet act *so*!"

Such were the confused remarks and murmurs. And again, from a young lady artist, who delighted in the drama, "I think it is simply utterly uncanny; but I never saw anything so powerful. I loved the other Duchess of Malfi, I hate this one."

A bearded critic, given to rather straight language, pulled Lendon aside. "Good God! Lendon, what does she mean by this? You know more of the girl than most of us. Why, in the name of Heaven, has she started on that tack? Does she propose to rival Violet

Belavon?"—he named an actress whose name was uttered in horror by even the more lax members of her profession—"I never saw anything more damnably suggestive."

"But what a genius!" put in another critic, who had joined them. "There has never been anything the least like it since Lucca changed her first reading of *Marguerite*—only that was the other way. And there's no doubt the character lends itself to the coarser interpretation. It's much more likely the Duchess was a sinner than a saint—much more in the spirit of mediæval Italy. It's audacious; but as I say, it's genius."

"Are you coming behind, Mr. Lendon?" somebody asked.

"No!" he returned, savagely. He could almost have throttled the critic who had first spoken. That Beatrice—his Beatrice, should be the subject of ribald remark! He heard in anticipation the gossip of club suppers. That she, whom he had so loved and so revered, should have dragged herself down to this! It was too horrible!

He passed a night of intense misery. Part of it was spent in roaming the streets, and then he went home and paced his room till morning. He almost persuaded himself that he was a victim of his own diseased imagination, but the morning paper confirmed too surely his impression of the night. He sent out for other papers. All, in more or less suggestive language, gave the same verdict. All expressed amazement at the singular genius

which could transform an impersonation of the purest, most womanly, poetry into that of a high-born courtesan.

To a nature refined, sensitive, as that of Lendon, these criticisms were torture. In his quieter moments, when he was not writhing under the pain and shock which her presence caused him, he thought, with the deepest pity, of the agony she must suffer when she read the papers, and realized the feelings that her acting had produced. She would recover from this temporary madness, for such he felt certain was the cause of the change in her ; and then, what need of him she would have to comfort and console her ! He thought of Mrs. Cubison's dark hints. He thought of cases he had read about, in which the most refined women had shown the first signs of insanity by a coarseness in their demeanour that had shocked and puzzled their friends. This was the clue to the mystery. He blamed himself for his own passion of revolt. What was his love worth if it could not bear this strain ! It should be his part to tend and cherish her in her sickness, and to help reawaken her own pure exquisite nature. He was thinking thus when the curtain that covered the gallery door was drawn aside and, unannounced, Beatrice herself descended the steps and came towards him. She was alone. Never before had Beatrice come to him in this manner. Involuntarily his mind leaped to the memory of Countess Adrian and of her first visit to the studio.

“ Beatrice ! ” he cried.

She had thrown back her veil and caught both his hands in hers, which were hot and feverish. "I have come to you," she said ; " because you would not come to me, and I long for you. You are my magnet, Bernard ; and if you were at the other end of the world I should fly to you. Why did you not keep your promise last night ? I watched, and watched. The night was so beautiful ; and the moon was shining, and I sat at my window, and my heart called to you, 'Love ; Love—come.' Where were you ? I left the theatre early ; I would not wait for the supper and the congratulations. Tell me. Did I please you ? Did you think me beautiful ? Was I sweet to you—my Antonio—my lover—my husband ?"

"Beatrice," he said gravely, "have you read the papers? Do you know what they say of your performance last night ?"

She laughed lightly. "Oh ! the critics. I have set them a riddle. What does it matter about them ? I was not acting to them, but to *you*. I wanted to show you that I could love well. You saw how the Duchess loved Antonio. That is how I love *you*."

Lendon drew back, half unconsciously.

"Why, my Antonio," she said, "how cold and constrained you are ! Where is your love ? *The* Antonio was not like that. He could meet his Duchess half way, at least, and take her to his heart. Come—meet me half way." She advanced towards him.

"Beatrice," he said gravely. "I don't quite understand

your altered manner. You are not quite yourself. You are not well. You want care and tenderness and watching." He forced himself to talk gently and kindly to her. His real self he felt sure must be all gentleness and kindness to her. But there was something stirring in his heart that seemed to keep him away from her, that seemed to make him shrink from her, almost to make him hate her.

"Not well!" she exclaimed with a scornful laugh. "My solemn Antonio, I am bubbling over with outrageous health and sheer animal spirits, and with love for *you*. Come—talk to me like a lover."

"You will find a lover—a true, devoted lover—in your husband, Beatrice."

"Let us not wait too long, then! I am sick of this separation, this lonely life." There was something now in her tone that touched him in spite of his revolt against her.

"We shall not wait long, we shall be married at once, as soon as ever you wish." His heart seemed to sink as he spoke the words. A fearful thought arose in him, was he as one who chains himself to a maniac? Oh, what *had* become of his Beatrice?"

"Oh, at once, at once," she said eagerly. "I long to be able to call you mine for ever. You will be mine for ever?"

"For ever!" The words came out as if they acknowledged a sentence of doom, rather than gave forth a pledge of love.

"In this world and the next," she cried, and flung her arms round his neck.

Suddenly she started violently. Her arms fell, and she cowered back as though she had seen something which terrified her.

Lendon turned. There had been no announcement, no sound of opening door, no step on the stairs, and yet there, not six paces from him, stood Maddox Challis—Maddox Challis, the mystic philosopher, whom the papers reported to be thousands of miles distant, away in the fastnesses of Lebanon, yet here in a light semi-Eastern dress, grey-bearded, keen-eyed, withered, and sallow, and with the same half cynical, half benevolent smile as when he had taken leave of the Countess Adrian at Sir Donald Urquhart's supper-party.

"Forgive my intrusion," he said, in his slow incisive way, looking from one to the other, and showing no sign of surprise at the effect his appearance produced. "I had orders, Mr. Lendon, from those in authority, to present myself in your studio this morning."

"From those in authority?" repeated Lendon in bewilderment.

"Strange things seem to have happened in the last few days," Challis went on, taking no heed of the interruption. "It is the death of Countess Adrian which has brought me here from Palestine."

"You say you have come from Palestine!" cried Lendon. "Impossible. It is scarcely a week since

Countess Adrian died ; and, even if the news had been sent you by telegraph, you could not have arrived so soon."

The mystic smiled his peculiar smile. "My Masters have other means of transmitting intelligence than by the electric wires," he said. "And as for my rapid travelling—well, Mr. Lendon, time and space are very slight hindrances to those whom the Masters choose to do their business. If the conditions of my visit appear strange to you now, I will give you an explanation later."

"You are welcome, Mr. Challis, under any conditions," said Lendon, recovering himself. "First, I want you to know this lady—my future wife—Miss Beatrice Brett."

Challis made a slight dignified inclination of his head, and his deep luminous eyes fixed themselves on Beatrice with an expression of sternness—it seemed to Lendon, of wrath. The effect his gaze produced on Beatrice was extraordinary. For an instant she glared at him like a wild animal entrapped. Then her eyes drooped as if she were cowed. All the grace and charm of womanhood vanished from her features. There was something approaching bestiality in their look. Lendon, who had gone close to her, started back. As Challis addressed her he gave a cry of horror and amazement, but words forsook him.

"Woman, possessed with a devil," said the mystic, "my business is with you." He drew up his bent frame

and stood before her erect and stately, with set majestic face and arm upraised, the forefinger pointed at her, like some high priest denouncing a sinner against the supreme law. "I know you for what you are," he went on in vibrating tones that thrilled Lendon with the sense of being in presence of a power above things earthly. "You, who walked the earth in the body of a passion-tossed woman, and as Countess Adrian awoke the desire of sin and the lust of the flesh—spirit of all evil and uncleanness, in the might of the White Brotherhood, by the Sign which must be obeyed, by the Word which is Holy, I command you to come forth."

He pronounced some syllables in a strange tongue of which Lendon knew no interpretation, and with his first finger traced rapidly in the air the sign of the mystic Pentagram. As his hand moved, the Odic Force flowed from it, showing a faint bluish light. Fire seemed to flame from the Initiate's eyes. His spare frame dilated. Twice again, in low awe-inspiring accents, he uttered the sacred formula.

The girl struggled under the spell. Ourious inarticulate cries came from her. Her features were contorted and her eyes became glassy. Her body writhed as in a convulsion, and she beat the air helplessly with her hands as she staggered forward, and then fell, a piteous heap, white and still on the ground.

A dumb horror seized Lendon as he watched her. He too felt under a spell. He had an impulse to rush to her

and support her, but he was not able to move or speak. He was conscious of a sensation of intense cold. Again the mystic spoke, but his voice sounded afar-off and unintelligible as a sound in a dream. A wonderful supernal light filled the studio, outshining the light of day and bringing with it a giddy sense of exhilaration and of divine ecstasy. He fancied that he beheld for a moment the outlines of a gracious god-like form. There ran through his body a thrill ineffable, and then his limbs grew numb as under the influence of an atmosphere rarer and more potent than that which the untempered human frame can endure. His brain reeled. The celestial radiance, the glorious visitant, the helpless, huddled form of Beatrice, even the face of the Seer himself—all grew dim, and he knew no more.

.

When he came to himself the studio was darkened, he was seated in his own chair, and Maddox Challis, to all appearance in ordinary flesh and blood, was bending over him, one hand on his forehead and the other feeling his pulse. He drew back as Lendon opened his eyes.

"You are right now," he said quietly. "The Master's magnetism was more than you could stand; but you will feel the benefit of it in time to come, and your studio will certainly be the clearer of all unwholesome influences."

"The Master!" repeated Lendon dreamily. "What has happened?"

"You scarcely remember," said Challis. "It is well

that the impression of horror should fade. For your comfort I will tell you that in a few hours' time you will have ceased to connect the woman you love, and who is pure and sweet and worthy of your love, with the soul of that unhappy being who was Countess Adrian."

"Ah!" cried Lendon with a shudder. "The horror comes back now. But my mind is confused. I can't realize what you have done. Mr. Challis, there is a mystery, will you explain it?"

"Yes, there is a mystery," replied Challis, "but it is easily read by those whose eyes are open to the Inner Light. Mr. Lendon, if you were learned in the lore of the Cabala you would know that there exist in Nature certain elementary spirits which are indeed the astral corpses of those who have died in crime or in the flush and heat of sensuous longing, and who, bodiless, tormented by desire, and incapable of gratifying it, haunt cities, like vampires suck the vitality of human beings, and even sometimes enter the bodies of living persons, and thus live on in enjoyment of their material pleasures.

"To those who know, many a man and woman going about in the world is but a soulless organism whose higher self has been expelled by some sudden shock or demoniac machination, and whose body has become the home of one of these wandering earth-bound spirits. Strange it is that the more spiritual the nature, the more loosely are the particles bound together, and the more readily is the soul separated from the body. Do not misunder-

stand me. Such expulsions, though retarding the progress of the soul, do it no ultimate injury. For the body is but a garment; the spirit is eternal and must live again. . . . This is the occult explanation of incurable propensity to crime, mania, epilepsy, and other diseases with which medicine is powerless to grapple. For even in this nineteenth-century London, devils may enter into a man and torment him as in the days in Galilee when Jesu cast forth that dumb spirit which threw the young man down and tare him grievously. . . . It was for this reason that the ancients, who understood the secret laws of nature, guarded their Sybils and their Pythonesses so that no impure magnetism might touch them, and that they might be less accessible to the influences from the astral world. In these days such beings are called mediums, and they are let loose in the foul atmosphere of cities, and woe be to those who are not pure and strong to escape destruction." Challis paused. "Do you understand the mystery?" he asked. "The soul of Countess Adrian was one of these vampire spirits. When it lost its home of flesh Countess Adrian's will prepared for it another body. Countess Adrian's kiss established the necessary physical contact at the moment of dissolution. The emotional conditions, the peculiar organization of Beatrice, the love of the two women for you—all contributed to the magnetic rapport."

"And Beatrice," cried Lendon. "Oh, tell me—she

is saved?" He rose in his agitation, one thought only possessing him. "Where is she?" he cried.

"Sec," said Challis. He led Lendon to a sofa beneath the window where Beatrice lay, pure, sweet, and serene, as a child in a happy sleep. She smiled in her dream as her lover bent over her. Her eyes opened. It was the soul that he knew which gazed out of them.

He caught her in his arms. In that kiss, long, deep, wholly rapturous, the memory of Countess Adrian and of the nightmare Avatar vanished for ever. When he released her, they were alone. Maddox Challis had vanished too.

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