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HEART OF GOLD

By James Branch Cabell

“THE most beautiful woman in all Paris!” cried the Marquis de Soyecourt, and kissed his finger-tips, gallantly.

“*Tarare!*” cried the Duc de Puy-sange; “her eyes are—noticeable, perhaps; and, I grant you,” he added, slowly, “that her husband is not often troubled by—that which they notice.”

“And the cleverest!”

“I have admitted she knows when to be silent.”

“And yet—” The marquis waved a reproachful forefinger.

“Precisely,” said the duke, with utter comprehension.

He was in a genial midnight mood, and, on other subjects, inclined to be discursive; the world, viewed through a slight haze of absinthe, seemed a pleasant place, and inspired a kindly and natural desire to say clever things about its contents. He loved de Soyecourt as he loved no other man; he knew him to be patient and long-suffering, even stolid, under a fusillade of epigrams and contorted proverbs; in short, the hour and the man for wild midnight talk were at hand. A saturnalia of flushed, pink-tighted phrases whirled in his brain, demanding and alluring utterance.

He waved them aside. Certain inbred ideas are strangely tenacious of existence, and it happened to be his wife they were discussing.

“And yet,” queried the duke, of his soul, as he climbed, democratically, into a *fiacre*, “why not? For my part, I see no good and sufficient reason for discriminating against a woman one has sworn to love, cherish and honor. It is true that several hundred people

witnessed the promise, with a perfect understanding of the jest, and that the keeping of it involves a certain breach of faith with society. *Eh, bien!* let us, then, deceive the world—and the flesh—and the devil! Let us snap our fingers at this unholy trinity, and make unstinted love to our wives!”

He settled back in the *fiacre* to deliberate. “*C'est bourgeois,*” said he; “bah! the word is the first refuge of the unskilful poseur! It is *bourgeois* to be born, to breathe, to sleep, to die; for, in which of these functions, which consume the greater part of my life, do I differ from my grocer? *Bourgeois!* Humanity is *bourgeois!* And it is very notably grocer-like to maintain a grave face and two establishments, to chuckle secretly over the fragments of the seventh commandment, to cry over spilt milk, and then—*ces bêtes-là!*—to drink carbolic acid. *Ma foi,* I prefer the domestic coffee!”

The Duc de Puy-sange laughed, carelessly, and waved aside the crudities of life. “All vice is *bourgeois,*” he continued, and lighted a fresh cigarette. “It is sordid, outworn, *vieux jeu!* In youth, I grant you, the sowing of a few wild oats is as natural as the instinctive dislike every healthy boy entertains toward the Bible. In youth, it is the unexpurgated that always happens. But at my age—*ehé!*—the men yawn, and *les demoiselles*—bah! *les demoiselles* have the souls of accountants! They buy and sell, as my grocer does. Vice is no longer a matter of splendid crimes and sorrows and kingdoms lost; it is a matter of course.”

With a little sigh, the Duc de Puy-sange closed his fevered eyes for a mo-

ment. He was acutely conscious, in a wearied fashion, of the many fine lines about them as he looked out on the deserted streets, where the glare of the electric lights was already troubled by a hint of dawn. Two workmen shambled by, chatting on their way to the day's business; a belated *marcheur* followed, with elaborate and somewhat unconvincing sobriety. The duke laughed, shortly. "I have no conscience, I think," he murmured, "but, at least, I can lay claim to a certain fastidiousness. I am very wicked"—he smiled, without mirth or bitterness, as he spoke—"I have sinned very notably as the world accounts it; indeed, I think, my name is as malodorous as that of any man living. And I am tired—ah, so tired! I have found the seven deadly sins deadly, beyond doubt, but only deadly dull and deadly commonplace. I yield the palm to my grocer, and retire with such grace as I may muster. Let us return to the temple of Madame Grundy, and take to heart the motto written there: 'Be good and you will be happy.' Hers is the true creed, and she—*O dea certe!*—ranks the mighty ones of the world among her servitors. Ashtoreth and Priapus have gone into trade, and their divinity is a little draggled."

His glance caught and clung, for a moment, to the paling splendor of the moon that hung low in the vacant heavens. A faint pang, half-envy, half-regret, vexed the duke with a dull twinge. "Oh, to be clean!" he cried, suddenly; "to have done with these sordid, pitiful little liaisons and sins!—to have done with this faded pose and this idle making of phrases! *Eheu!* there is a certain proverb concerning pitch, so cynical that I suspect it of being truthful. However—we shall see."

There was a long silence. The duke smiled, equivocally, at some hidden thought. "The most beautiful woman in all Paris?" said he; "ah, the most beautiful woman in all the world, is this grave, silent female with the great eyes that are as cold and as fathomless and as beautiful as the sea! And how cordially she despises me! *Ma*

foi, I think that if her blood—which is, beyond doubt, of a pale, pink color—is ever stirred, it is with loathing of her husband. To make her love me—as I mean to do—*mon Dieu*, it will be magnificent, incredible! Life holds many surprises for *madame, ma femme*, now that I am grown uxorious and—virtuous. We must arrange a very pleasant little comedy of belated courtship; for, are we not bidden to love one another? So be it—I am henceforth the model *père de famille*," ended the duke, as the *fiacre* pulled up before the Hôtel de Puy-sange.

The door was opened to him by a dull-eyed lackey, whom he greeted with an adorable smile. "*Bon jour, Antoine!*" cried the duke; "I trust that your wife and doubtless very charming children have good health?"

"Beyond doubt, monsieur," answered the man, stolidly.

"*Bon, bon!*" said the duke; "it rejoices me to hear of their welfare. For the happiness of others, Antoine, is very dear to the heart of a father—and a husband." The duke chuckled, seraphically, as he passed down the hall. The man stared after him, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Rather worse than usual," said Antoine.

Next morning, the Duchesse de Puy-sange received a moderate armful of frail, strange-tinted orchids, with the duke's card attached. He spent the afternoon selecting bonbons and wholesome books, "for his fiancée," he gravely informed the shopman. At the Opéra, he never left her box; afterward, at the Comtesse de Hauteville's, he created a furor by sitting out three dances with the duchess in the Winter-garden.

A month passed.

"It is the true honeymoon," said the duke.

"He is mad!" said the world.

"I wonder—!" said the duchess.

The duchess was undeniably a beautiful woman. As they sat over the re-

mains of the luncheon—*à deux*, by the duke's request—she seemed to her husband quite incredibly beautiful. Seen through the wreaths of a meditative cigarette, there was something of the fantastic, something of unreality in her perfection; the filmy pink of her morning-gown blended imperceptibly into the blue-gray haze, and her gold hair made such a pale glory about her face that one involuntarily looked for the white, folded, heavy wings that should have touched their tips in a thin, Gothic arch behind her head. The duke, half-drowsily, identified her with a Preraphaelite watercolor; there should have been a row of her, all in the same attitude, he decided. Then, as the pleasures of digestion lapsed gently into the pleasures of sleep, she spoke, suddenly:

"Monsieur," said she, "will you be pleased to tell me the meaning of this comedy?"

"*Ma mie*," answered the duke, raising his brows, "I do not understand."

"Ah," said she, bitterly, "believe me, I do not undervalue your perception. I have always acknowledged your cleverness, monsieur, however much"—she paused for a moment, a fluctuating smile upon her lips—"however much I may have regretted its manifestations. I am not clever, and cleverness has always seemed to me to be an infinite incapacity for hard work; its results are usually a few sonnets, an undesirable wife and a warning for one's acquaintances. In your case, it is, of course, different; the weight of a great name stifles cleverness and stupidity with equal impartiality. With you, cleverness has taken the form of a tendency to absinthe, amours and—amiability. I have acquiesced in this. But, for the past month——"

"The happiest period of my life!" breathed the duke.

"—you have been pleased to present me with flowers, bonbons, jewels and what not. You have actually accorded your wife the courtesies you usually preserve for the ladies of the ballet. You have dogged my foot-

steps. You have talked to me as—as——"

"Much as the others do?" queried the duke, helpfully. "Pardon me, *ma belle*, but, in a husband, I had thought this very routine might savor of originality."

The duchess flushed. "God knows," she cried, "what men have said to me, or I to them, has been a matter of little moment to you for the past fifteen years! It is not due to you that I am still——"

"A pearl," finished the duke, gallantly; then touched himself upon the chest; "cast before swine," he sighed.

She rose suddenly to her feet. "Yes, cast before swine!" she cried, with a quick lift of speech. She seemed very tall as she stood tapping her fingers irresolutely upon the table; then, after a moment, she laughed and spread out her little hands, in a hopeless, impotent gesture. "Ah, Gaston, Gaston!" she said; "my father entrusted to your keeping a clean-minded girl! What have you made of her—what have you made of her, Gaston?"

The question was an awkward one; and yet a great, strange, perfectly unreasoning happiness swept through the duke's soul as she spoke his name, for the first time within his memory. Surely, the deep contralto voice had lingered slightly over it?—half tenderly, half-caressingly, one might think. "It is an old, old saying," he suggested, with careful modulations, "that a woman dies when a woman marries."

"Some of them are not so fortunate," said she, a wistful little catch in her speech; "they only wish—sometimes—that the proverb had proved true." Her lips made a wan, uncertain smile, and, for a moment, her hand rested, half-maternally, upon his shoulder.

"*Ma foi*," retorted the duke, "if women continue to marry with such beasts as men, what can they expect?" He glanced upward for a reply, and his glance lingered idly, then curiously, then almost hungrily. The duke sprang to his feet, and caught his wife

quickly by both wrists. "What have I done with her?" he cried, in a shaking voice. "What have I done with her? Before God, Hélène, I think that I have given her my heart!"

Her face flushed in sudden anger. "Mountebank!" she cried, and struggled impotently to free herself; "do you mistake me, then, for a raddle-faced actress in a barn? Ah, *les demoiselles* have formed you, monsieur—they have formed you well!"

"Pardon!" said the duke, with a faint click of the teeth. He released her hands, and swept back his hair with a gesture of impatience. He turned his back to his wife, and strolled to a window, where, for a little, he fingered the cord of the shade, and stared into the quiet, sunlit street. "Hélène," he said, in a level voice, "I will tell you the meaning of the comedy. To me, always, as you know, a creature of whims, there came, a month ago, a new whim which I thought attractive, unconventional, promising. It was to make love to my own wife, rather than to another man's. Ah, I grant you, it is incredible," he cried, as the duchess raised her hand as if to speak, "incredible, fantastic, unducal! So be it; nevertheless, I have played out the comedy. I have been the model husband; I have put away wine and—*les demoiselles*; for it pleased me, in my petty insolence, to patronize, rather than to defy, the laws of God and man. Your perfection irritated me, *ma chérie*; it pleased me to show how easy is this trick of treating the world as the antechamber of a future existence. It pleased me to have in my life one short space over which neither the Recording Angel nor Monsieur Prudhomme might draw a long face. It pleased me, in effect, to play out the comedy, smug-faced and immaculate—for the time. I concede that I have failed in my part. Hiss me from the stage, *ma mie*; add one more insult to the already considerable list of those I have put upon you; one more will scarcely matter. It is but an ill-planned, ill-acted comedy gone wrong, *ma belle*—only a comedy. And yet,"

cried the Duc de Puysange, in a sudden, puzzled voice, "I do not know—I do not know——!"

She faced him, with set lips. "So, monsieur," said she, slowly, "your boasted little comedy amounts to this—only to this?"

"I do not know—I do not know," he answered, dully. "I think that, perhaps, the swine, wallowing in the mire they have neither strength nor will to leave, may yet, at times, long—long—" The duke snapped his fingers, and laughed, lightly. "*Eh bien*," said he, "let us have done with this dull comedy! Assuredly, de Soyecourt has much to answer for in those idle words that were its germ. Let us hiss both collaborators, *ma mie*."

"De Soyecourt!" she cried, with a little start. "Was—was it he that prompted you to make love to me?"

"Without intention," pleaded the duke. "I have no doubt his finest sensibilities would be outraged by our indifferent revival of Darby and Joan."

"Ah!" said she; then smiled at some unspoken thought.

There was an awkward pause. The Duc de Puysange drummed, irresolutely, upon the window-pane; the duchess, still smiling faintly, trifled with the thin gold chain that hung about her neck. Both felt their recent display of emotion to have been somewhat unmodern, not entirely *à la mode*.

"Decidedly," spoke the duke, turning toward her with a slight grimace, "I am no longer fit to play the lover; yet a little while, *ma chérie*, and you must stir my gruel posset, and arrange the pillows comfortably about the octogenarian."

"Ah, Gaston," she answered, raising her slender fingers in protest, "let us have no more heroics. We are not fitted for them, you and I."

"So it would appear," the Duc de Puysange conceded, not without sulkiness.

"Let us be friends," she pleaded. "Remember, it was fifteen years ago

that I made the mistake of marrying a very charming man——”

“*Merci!*” cried the duke.

“—and I did not know that I was thereby depriving myself of the pleasure of his acquaintance. I have learned too late that marrying a man is only a civil way of striking him from one’s visiting list.” The duchess hesitated and smiled, inscrutably. “And, frankly, Gaston, I do not regret the past month.”

“It has been—adorable!” sighed the duke.

“Yes,” she admitted; “except those awkward moments when you would insist on making love to me.”

“*Ma foi,*” cried he, “it was precisely——”

“Oh, Gaston, Gaston!” she interrupted, with a shrug of the shoulders; “why, you do it so badly!”

The Duc de Puy-sange took a short turn about the apartment, then whistled, softly. “And I married you,” said he, “at sixteen—out of a convent!”

“Ah, *mon ami,*” she murmured, in apology, “am I not to be frank with you? Will you have only—only wifely confidences?”

“I had no idea——” he began.

“Ah, Gaston, it bored me so frightfully! I, too, had no idea but that it would bore you equally——”

“*Hein?*” said the duke.

“—to hear what d’Humieres——”

“He squints!” cried the Duc de Puy-sange.

“—or de Crequy——”

“That red-haired ape!” he muttered.

“—or d’Arlanges, or—or any of them, were pleased to say. In fact, it was my duty to conceal from my husband anything that might pain him. Now that we are friends, of course, it is entirely different.”

The duchess smiled; the duke walked rapidly up and down the room, like a caged tiger.

“*Ma foi,*” said he, at length, “friendship is a good oculist! Already my vision improves.”

“Gaston!” she cried. The duchess rose and laid both hands upon his

shoulder. “Gaston!” she repeated, with an earnest, uplifted countenance.

For a moment, the Duc de Puy-sange looked into his wife’s eyes; then, he smiled, sadly, and shook his head. “*Ma mie,*” said the duke, “I do not doubt you. Ah, believe me, I have known—always—that my honor was safe in your hands—far more safe than in mine, God knows! You have been a true and faithful wife to a very worthless brute, who has not deserved it,” he murmured, and lifted her hand to his lips. The duke stood very erect; his heels clicked together, and his voice was very earnest. “I thank you, *ma mie,* and I pray you to believe that I have never doubted you. You are too perfect to err—frankly, and between friends,” added the duke, “it was your perfection that frightened me. You are an icicle, *Hélène.*”

She was silent for a moment. “Ah!” said she, with a little sigh, “you think so?”

“Once, then——?” The Duc de Puy-sange seated himself beside his wife, and took her hand, very gently.

“I—it was nothing.” Her lashes fell, and a dull color flushed through her countenance.

“Between friends,” the duke suggested, “there should be no reservations.”

“Ah, it is such a pitifully inartistic little story!” the duchess protested. “*Eh bien,* if you must have it! I was a girl once, you know, Gaston—a very innocent girl, given as most girls are to long reveries and bright, callow little day-dreams. There was a man——”

“There always is,” said the duke, darkly.

“Why, he never even knew, *mon ami!*” cried his wife, laughing and clapping her hands, gleefully. “He was much older than I; there were stories about him—oh, a great many stories—and one hears even in a convent——” She paused, with a reminiscent smile—that was pregnant with meaning. “And I used to wonder shyly what this—this very wicked man might be like. I thought of him

with *Faublas*, and *Don Giovanni*, and the Duc de Richelieu, and those other scented, shimmering, magnificent libertines over whom *les ingénues*—wonder; only, I thought of him more often than the others, and made little prayers for him to the Virgin. And I cut a little picture of him out of an illustrated paper. And, when I came out of the convent, I met him at my father's. And—that was all."

"All?" The Duc de Puy-sange raised his eyebrows, and smiled, encouragingly.

"All," she reëchoed, firmly. "Oh, I assure you, he was still too youthful to have any time to devote to young girls. He was courteous—no more. But I kept the picture—ah, girls are so foolish, Gaston!" The duchess, with a light laugh, drew out the thin chain about her neck. At its end was a little, heart-shaped locket of dull gold, with a diamond sunk deep in either side. She held it close, for a moment, in her pink-tipped hand. "It has been sealed in here," said she, shyly, "ever since—since some one gave me the locket."

With a quick gasp, the Duc de Puy-sange caught the trinket from her, still warm and perfumed from the contact of her flesh. He turned it awkwardly in his hand, his eyes flashing volumes of wonder and inquiry. Yet, he did not seem jealous; no, nor exactly unhappy. "And never," he demanded, some vital emotion catching at his voice, "never since then?"

"I never, of course, approved of him," she answered; and, at this point, the duke noted for the first time in his life the strong, sudden, absolutely bewildering curve of her trailing lashes. It seemed so unusual that he drew nearer to observe more at his ease. "But—I hardly know how to tell you—but without him the world was more quiet, less colorful; it held less to catch the eye and ear. He had an air, Gaston; he was never an admirable man, but, somehow, he was always the centre of the picture."

"And you have always—always—?" cried the duke, drawing nearer and yet nearer to her.

"Other men," she murmured, "seem futile and—and of quite minor importance, after him." The lashes lifted, though with a visible effort. They fell, promptly. "So, I have always kept the heart, *mon ami*. And—yes, I have always loved him, I suppose."

The long, thin, gold chain—the slight link that seemed to bind them mockingly together, after the breaking of so many stronger ties—moved and quivered in his hand. Was it he or she who trembled? wondered the Duc de Puy-sange. For a moment, he stood immovable, every nerve in his body held tense; he knew the air about them to be vibrant and heavy with some strange, nameless force. Surely, it was she who trembled? Surely, this woman whose cold perfection had galled him these many years, now stood before him with downcast eyes, and blushed and trembled like any rustic maiden, come shamefaced to her first tryst? Was this madness? Was it thus that men's blood pulsed and leaped and exulted in the cells at Char-enton? Surely, it was he, the nineteenth Duc de Puy-sange, whose dry lips moved and crushed each other, and made no sound? Surely, without, all Paris laughed and worked and died, as it had done yesterday? Then, a great light broke suddenly upon the duke, and he knew that, for him, yesterday and the life of yesterday and the man who had lived it, were vanished, never to return.

"Hélène!" he cried, with a great, tremulous, choking sob.

"Ah, my story is dull," she protested, shrugging her shoulders, and freed herself—half-fearfully, it seemed to her husband. "Even more dull than your comedy, *mon ami*," she added, with a swift, provoking smile. "Do we drive this afternoon?"

"*Ma foi*, yes!" cried the duke. He paused and laughed—a low, gentle laugh, pulsing with an unutterable content he had not known for years. "For the day, *ma chérie*, is——"

"Beautiful?" she queried, turning at the door.

"No," said the Duc de Puysange—"promising."

Meanwhile, the duchess prepared for the drive, the duke walked in the quaint garden of the Hôtel de Puysange, in gleeful wise, and smoked innumerable cigarettes. Up and down a shady avenue of lime-trees, he paced impatiently, and chuckled to himself, and smiled benignantly upon the moss-incrusted statues—a proceeding that was, beyond any reasonable doubt, prompted by his own great happiness, rather than their artistic merits, for they constituted a formidable, broken-nosed collection of the most cumbrous, the most incredible and the most hideous specimens of sculpture the family of Puysange had been able to accumulate for love or money. Amid these mute, gray travesties of antiquity and the tastes of his ancestors, the last Duc de Puysange laughed and soliloquized.

"*Ma foi*," said he, "will life never learn to improve on the magazines? Why, it is the old story—the hackneyed story of the husband and wife who fall in love with each other! Life is a very gross plagiarist. And she—did she think I had forgotten when I gave her that little locket so long ago? Eh, *ma femme*, so 'some one'—with a pause and an adorable flush—"gave it to you? Ah, love is not always blind!"

The duke paused suddenly before a puff-jawed Triton, who wallowed in an arid, dusty basin, and uplifted toward heaven what an indulgent observer might construe as a broken conch-shell. "Love!" cried the duke. "*Mon Dieu*, how are the mighty fallen! I have not even the decency to conceal from myself that I love my wife! I am shameless. I had as lief proclaim it from the housetops. And a month ago—*tarare*, the ignorant beast I was! But then I had not passed a month in her company—*eh, bien*, I defy Diogenes and Timon to come through the ordeal with unscratched hearts. I love her.

"And she loves me!" His voice sank into well-nigh incredulous wonder. Then he drew a deep breath, and lifted his comely hands toward the pale Spring sky, where the west wind was shepherding a sluggish flock of clouds. "O sun, moon and stars!" cried the duke, with a tremor of speech, "I call you all to witness she loves me! She has always loved me! O kindly little universe! O little kings, tricked out with garish crowns and sceptres, you are masters of your petty kingdoms, but I—I am master of her heart! She loves me!

"I do not deserve it," he conceded, to a dilapidated faun, who, though his flute and the hands that held it had been missing for over a quarter of a century, still piped on with grim determination. "Ah, heart of gold—ah, little heart of gold, I have not merited that you should hold my likeness all these years! If I had my deserts—*eh, bien*, let us take such goods as the gods provide, and not question the wisdom of their dispensations. Thus may many of us escape hanging."

The duke came to an armless Cupid, who brooded, misanthropically, in a damp temple at the farther end of the avenue, and was, from circumstantial evidence, not wholly unacquainted with the tastes and habits of snails. "If—if she had not loved me—?" he queried of the unsympathetic deity; then shuddered a little. "Ah, I am afraid to think of that! If she did not—if she did not—before God, I could not live!" cried the duke, in a frightened voice.

"But she loves me!" he repeated, over and over again, as he sought the hôtel with a quick tread—"me, all unworthy as I am!

"O heart of gold!" he said, with ineffable tenderness, and paused for a little at the end of the avenue. "Ah, my dear, my dear! the long, long years I have wasted!" The wicked Duc de Puysange raised his eyes toward heaven, and spoke as simply as any village lad. "I will make recompense," said he. "Dear God

in heaven, aid me to make recompense!"

"So, madame has visitors? *Eh, bien*, let us, then, behold these naughty visitors, who would sever a loving husband from his wife."

From within the red salon came a murmur of speech—quiet, cordial, colorless—which showed very plainly that madame had visitors. As the Duc de Puyssange reached out his hand to draw aside the portières, her voice was speaking, courteously, but without vital interest.

"—and afterward," said she, "weather permitting——"

"Ah, Héléne!" cried a voice that the duke knew almost as well, "how long am I to be held at arm's length by these petty conventionalities? Am I never to be permitted to speak freely?"

The half-drawn portière trembled in the duke's hand. He could see very plainly, from where he stood, the inmates of the salon, though their backs were turned to him. They were his wife and the Marquis de Soyecourt—de Soyecourt, the companion of his youth, the friend of his manhood, his co-partner in many mad escapades, and the owner of a name scarcely less scandal-tainted than his own. The marquis bent eagerly toward the Duchesse de Puyssange, who had risen as he spoke.

For a moment, she stood immovable as her perplexed husband; then, with a little, wearied sigh, the duchess sank back into a *fautuil*. "You are at liberty to speak," she said, slowly, and with averted eyes—"what you choose."

The portière fell; but, between the folds of the curtains, the duke still peered into the room, where de Soyecourt had drawn nearer to his wife. "There is little to say," the marquis murmured, "beyond what my eyes have surely told—that I love you."

"Ah!" the duchess cried, with a swift intaking of the breath that was almost a sob.

"Monsieur, I think you forget that

you are speaking to the wife of your friend."

The marquis threw out his hands in a gesture that was a trifle theatrical, though the trouble that wrung his countenance was very real. He was a slight, fair man, with the face of an ecclesiastic and the eyes of an aging seraph. A dull pang shot through the duke, as he thought of the two years' difference in their ages and of his own tendency to *embonpoint*. The fellow was incredibly well preserved.

"Do you think," said the marquis, "I do not know that I act a dishonorable part? Honor, friendship!—ah, I regret them, but love is greater than these little things!"

The duchess sighed. "For my part," she said, "I think differently. Love is, doubtless, very wonderful and beautiful, but I am sufficiently old-fashioned to hold my honor yet dearer. Even—even if I loved you, monsieur, there are certain words, sworn before the altar, that I could not forget." She looked up very firmly, as she spoke, into the flushed, handsome face of the marquis.

"Words!" he cried, impatiently.

"An oath," she answered, sadly; "an oath that I shall not break."

There was a great hunger in the marquis's eyes, and his hands lifted and trembled a little with a passionate longing to take her in his arms. Their glances met for a long, breathless moment, and his eyes were very tender, and hers were like resolute, gray stars, but very, very compassionate.

"I love you!" he said, simply.

"Monsieur," said the duchess, and the depths of her great contralto voice were shaken like the sobbing of a violin, and her little hands stole upward to her bosom, and clasped the tiny gold heart, as she spoke, "monsieur, ever since I first knew you, many years ago, at my father's home, I have held you as my friend. You were more kind to the girl, monsieur, than you have been to the woman. Only since your return to Paris this Spring have I feared—have I feared—this. I have tried to prevent it, for—

for your friendship was very dear to me. I have failed." With a little sob, the duchess lifted the gold heart to her lips, and her golden head bent over it. "Monsieur," she cried, in a stifled voice, "before God, if I had loved you with my whole heart—if I had loved you all these years—if the sight of your face was to me the one good thing life holds, and the mere sound of your voice set my heart beating—beating—" she paused for a little, and then rose, with a sharp breath that shook her slender body, "even then, monsieur, my answer to you would be the same, and that is—go!"

"Hélène!" he murmured, his outstretched hands groping vaguely, blindly, toward her.

"Let us have no misunderstanding, monsieur," she protested, coldly; "you have my answer."

The Marquis de Soyecourt had not led a clean life; his past held many transactions of which even he had the grace to be ashamed. But the great passion, that now possessed him, had purified and transfigured the man, for the moment. His face was ascetic in its reverence, as he stood with his head slightly bowed, and the wonder of her flawless beauty surging over his heart, like a flood. "I go," he said, picking his way carefully among tumbling words; then bent over her hand, which she made no effort to withdraw. "Ah, my dear!" cried the marquis, staring without shame into her shy, uplifted eyes, "I think I might have made you happy!"

His arm brushed against the arm of the duke as he left the salon. Neither was aware of the fact; the blind, sick misery of neither would have been disturbed by anything less noticeable than an earthquake.

"If I had loved you all these years," murmured the Duc de Puy-sange. His dull gaze wandered toward the great "Herodias" of Giorgione, that hung beside him; the strained face of the woman, the accented muscles of her arms, the purple, bellying cloak that spread behind her, the livid coun-

tenance of the dead man staring up from the salver—all these he noted, idly. He loathed that wonderful picture until his dying day. "I will make recompense," said the duke. "Dear God in heaven, aid me to make recompense!"

He came into the room, humming an air of the Boulevards; the crimson hangings swirled about him, and the Louis Quinze furniture swayed in many airy, thin-legged minuets. He sank into a chair before the great mirror, supported by frail love-gods, who contended for its possession. He viewed his pale reflection therein, and laughed, lightly. "*Pardon, ma mie,*" he said; "but my castles in the air are tumbling very noisily about my ears. It is difficult to think clearly amid the crashing of the battlements."

"I do not understand." The duchess had lifted an incurious face toward him, as he entered the salon. She was all in gray, and a broad, low hat of gray felt spread about the hair that had snared the sunlight in its tendrils. Over its brim, a great white owl, lying with outstretched wings, flashed sardonic glances toward the duke.

"My life," laughed the Duc de Puy-sange, "I assure you, I am quite incorrigible. I have just committed another dishonorable action; *peccavi!*" He smote himself upon the breast, and sighed portentously. "I accuse myself of eavesdropping."

"You mean—?" She had risen to her feet.

"Ah, I am punished," the duke reassured her; then laughed, with discreetly tempered bitterness. "Figure to yourself, *ma mie*: I had planned a life for us two, during which our new friendship was to stretch unimpaired to the very door of the tomb. *Eh, bien*, man proposes! De Soyecourt is of a jealous disposition; and here I sit, amid my fallen air-castles, like Marius in the ruins of Carthage."

"De Soyecourt?" she echoed, dully.

"Ah, my poor child!" said the duke, and, rising, took her hand in a paternal fashion, "did you think that, at this

late day, the state of matrimony was still an incurable one? We progress, *ma mie*. You shall have grounds for a separation—oh, sufficient, unimpeachable grounds, that even the society journals will not question. You shall have your choice of desertion, infidelity, cruelty in the presence of witnesses—oh, I shall prove a veritable Bluebeard!" He laughed, not unkindly, at her bewilderment.

"You heard—all?" she queried, with wide eyes.

"I have already confessed," the duke reminded her. "And, *ma foi*, speaking as an unprejudiced observer, I should say the man really loves you. So be it! You shall have your separation; you shall marry him. Behold a fact accomplished!" The duke snapped his fingers airily, and made a pirouette; then, with mocking emphasis, he hummed a certain march of Mendelssohn's.

There was a little pause. She was—oh, God, how beautiful she was!

"You—you really wish to give me my freedom?" she asked, in wonder, and drew near to him.

The Duc de Puysange seated himself, with a smile, and admirable discretion. "*Mon Dieu!*" he protested, "who am I, to keep true lovers apart? As the first proof of our new-sworn friendship, I now offer you any form of abuse or maltreatment you may select."

Very timidly, she drew yet nearer to him. Afterward, with a little sigh of happiness, her warm arms clasped about his neck. "Mountebank!" she murmured, and her voice was a caress to the ear, "do you, then, love me very much?"

"I?" The duke raised his eyebrows. Yet—yet, surely, there was no great harm in drawing his cheek a trifle closer to hers?

"You love me!" she insisted, softly.

"It pains me to the heart," the duke apologized—oh, God, what strange tricks a man's voice may play him! Oh, God, how long a man's heart may stand quite still, and he yet live!—"it

pains me to the heart to be guilty of this rudeness to a lady; but, after all, honesty is a proverbially recommended virtue; I must admit I do not."

"Ah, Gaston, will you not confess?" Her cheeks were, undeniably, much warmer and much softer than those of other women.

"*Eh, ma mie,*" cried the duke, warningly, "do not be unduly elated by de Soyecourt's avowal! You are a very charming, but—'*de gustibus*——'"

"Gaston!" she murmured.

"Ah, dear God!" The duke cast her from him, roughly, and paced the room with quick, unequal strides. "Yes, yes, yes!" he cried. "I love you with every nerve and fiber of my body—with every pure thought and aspiration of my soul! I love you—ah, the weak, pitiful words that cannot grapple with love's majesty! ah, the weak, pitiful folly that cannot be silent! Oh, heart of gold! oh, heart of gold, that I have not merited!" The brave turmoil of his soul died, as he faced her, into a sudden, sick, illimitable calm. "Hélène," said he, gently, "I had not meant to speak thus. But I love you. I love you sufficiently to resign you to the man your heart has chosen. I— Pardon me," and he swept a white hand over his brow, with a little, choking laugh, "but I find this new passion somewhat boisterous. I—it stifles one unused to it."

She faced him, inscrutably; but her eyes were deep wells of gladness. "Monsieur," she said, "yours is a noble love. I will not trifle with it. I—I accept your offer."

"*Ma mie*, you act with your usual wisdom," said the duke.

"On one condition—" she continued.

"Unconditionally," he suggested, with an insinuating smile.

"—that you resume your position as eavesdropper."

The duke obeyed her pointing finger, in a dull fashion. When he had reached the portières, he looked back, wearily, into the salon. She had seated herself in the *fauteuil*, where the Marquis de Soyecourt had bent over her, and she had kissed the little gold locket.

Her back was turned to him; but their eyes met in the great mirror, supported by frail love-gods, who contended for its possession.

"Comedy for comedy," she murmured. Sea-cold!—who had called her eyes sea-cold?

"I—I do not understand," he said, in a frightened whisper; then sprang toward her, gasping. "The locket—the locket—?" cried the Duc de Puy-sange, and the joy of heaven and the despair of hell tore at his voice.

"Open it!" she answered, and her speech, too, was breathless.

The Duc de Puy-sange ground the trinket under his heel. The long, thin chain clashed and caught about his foot; but the face of his youth smiled back at him from the broken fragment held in his quivering hands. "Oh, heart of gold! oh, heart of gold!" he sobbed, and his eyes turned blindly toward the great, glad, glorious eyes of his wife; "I am not worthy! I am not worthy!"



A VALENTINE TO ROSE

MY valentine is Rose, and she
Is her own happy simile;
By any other name a rose
Were not more sweet, and Cupid knows
This Rose is sweet enough for me.

Her lips with rose-leaves well agree—
Crimson and curled; and I can see
That every day more lovely grows
My valentine.

Sweetheart, when Cupid comes, and he
Asks but a rose's kiss for fee,
Grant him the balm for all his woes;
Give him your heart before he goes,
And bid him bring it back to be
My valentine.

FELIX CARMEN.



NO RESPONSE

"I DON'T believe that the spirits will come to-night," said one impatient waiter for the séance to begin.

"I don't think they will," said another; "they don't seem to care a rap for this medium."



FIRST DIVINITY STUDENT—What is the subject for discussion at the Debating Society to-night?

SECOND DITTO—The Influence of Creased Trousers on the Decadence of Prayer.