

## THE NOBLE COURTESAN



*THE Apology of the Noble Courtesan* was fresh from the printers; the smell of ink filled the ante-chamber. The volume was bound in white parchment, richly gilt; on the front board was a scarlet shield graven with a familiar coat-of-arms. Frambant turned the leaves hastily, and found on the dedication page the following address:—

*‘ To the Right Honourable Michael, Lord  
Frambant, Baron of Britton*

‘ MY LORD,—It is not from desire of pandering to your position as one who has served his country wisely and well that I presume to dedicate to you the following Apology. A name so honoured, a character so perfect, need no illuming. ’Tis as a Woman whose heart you have stirred, into whose life you are bound to enter. For know, my Lord, that women are paramount in this world. In the

after-sphere we may be Apes, but here we are the Controllers of Men's fates, and so, in the character of one whom you have stricken with love, I profess myself, my Lord, your Lordship's Most Obligated and Most Obedient Humble Servant,

THE NOBLE COURTESAN.'

Frambant flung the book angrily across the room. What trull was this who dared approach him so familiarly? His brows contracted; his grey eyes shot fire; a warm dash of blood drove the wanness from his cheeks. The very thought of strange women was hateful: it was scarce a year since the wife he had won after so much striving had yielded up life in childbed, and he had sworn to remain alone for the rest of his days. Catching sight of his reflection in a mirror, he saw resentment and disgust there.

But when he looked again at the book he found that a note had been forced from its cover. Curiosity overcame, and he stooped and took it in his hand. Like the dedication it was addressed to himself: he unfolded it with some degree of fear.

'You will infinitely oblige a distressed Lover,' he read, 'if you meet her at Madam Horneck's bagnio. Midnight's the time. She will wear a domino of green gauze, a white satin robe braided with golden serpents.—CONSTANTIA.'

This communication fascinated him, and sitting

down by the window he began to read the wildest book that ever was written. It was a fantastic history of the four intrigues of a fantastic woman. Her first lover had been a foreign churchman (an avowed ascetic) who had withstood her sieging for nearly a twelvemonth; her second, a poet who had addressed a sequence of amorous sonnets to her under the name of Amaryllis; her third a prince, or rather a king's bastard; and her fourth a simple country squire. Some years had elapsed between each infatuation, and madam had utilised them in the study of the politer arts. The volume teemed with quotations from the more elegant classic writers, and the literature of the period was not ignored. The ending ran thus:—

‘It has ever been my belief that love, nay, life itself, should terminate at the moment of excess of bliss. I hold Secrets, use of which teaches me that after a certain time passion may be tasted with the same keen joy as when maidenhood is resigned. But, as the lively L’Estrange declares, “the itch of knowing Secrets is naturally accompanied with another itch of telling them,” I fling aside my pen in fear.’

As he finished reading his brother Villiers entered the room. He was ten years Frambant's junior, and resembled him only in stature and profile. His skin was olive, his eyes nut-brown,

his forehead still free from lines. He leaned over the chair and put a strong arm round his brother's neck.

'What is this wondrous book, so quaintly bound?' he said. 'By Venus, queen of love, a wagtail's song!'

Frambant flushed again, and raising the *Apology* flung it on the fire, where it screamed aloud.

'It is the work of an impudent woman,' he replied. 'To-morrow all town will ring with it. She has dedicated it to me.'

'Surely a sin to burn such a treasure! Let me recover it.'

Villiers took the tongs and strove to draw the swollen thing from the flame, but it collapsed into a heap of blackness. The note, however, which Frambant had replaced, lay uncurled in the hearth, and the lad read its message.

At that moment one came with word that Sir Benjamin Mast, an old country baronet whom Frambant held in high esteem, lay at the point of death. 'The water crept higher and higher, and my lady thought you might choose to be with him at the last. The coach waited.' Frambant hurried downstairs, and was soon with the dying man. Sir Benjamin's hydropsy had swollen him to an immense size, but his uncowed soul permitted him to laugh and jest with heart till the end. His

wife, a pious resigned woman of sixty, shared the vigil.

Darkness fell, and the chamber was lighted. Forgetful of all save his friend's departure he never remarked the passage of time, and not until after midnight when Mast's eyes were closed in death did his thoughts recur to the *Apology*. He took his seat in the coach with a grim feeling of satisfaction at the imaginary picture of the wanton waiting, and waiting in vain.

After a time, being wearied with excitement and lulled by the motion of the vehicle as it passed slowly along the narrow streets, he let his head sink back on the cushion, and fell asleep almost instantly. Five minutes could not have passed before he woke; but in the interval a curious idea had entered his brain. He remembered Constantia's account of her lovers, and her belief that life should wither at the moment of love's height, and simultaneously there came upon him the recollection of four tragedies which had stricken the land with horror. So overwhelming was the connection that he could no longer endure the tediousness of the journey, but dismissed his coach and walked down the Strand.

The first case was that of the Cardinal of Castellamare, who had been exiled from Italy, and who, after attending a court ball and mixing freely with the dancers, had been found dead on

his couch ; his fingers clutching the pearl handle of a stiletto, whose point was in his heart. Then, in the same conditions, Meadows the laureate, the Count de Dijon, and Brooke Gurdom the Derbyshire landowner, had all been found dead. No trace of the culprit had been found, but in every case was the rumour of a woman's visit.

He reached the old road where stood his house, and stumbled against a weird sedan that waited in a recess by his gateway. An arching horn-beam hid it from the moonlight. Two men stood beside it attired in outlandish clothes. Frambant stopped to examine the equipage, and at the same moment a link-boy approached. He called for the light, and to his wonderment found that the bearers were blackamoors with smooth-shaven heads and staring eyes.

The sedan was of green cypress embellished with silver ; a perfume of oriental herbs spread from its open windows. Frambant asked the owner's name, but the men with one accord began to jangle in so harsh a tongue that he was fain to leave them and go indoors.

In the antechamber a great reluctance to pass further came upon him, and he halloed for a serving-man. Frambant was merciful to his underlings, keeping little show of state. Rowley, the butler, came soon, half-dressed and sleepy. On his master's inquiry if any visitor had entered

the house, he protested that he knew of none, though he had waited in the hall till past midnight. So, at the word of dismissal, he retired, leaving Frambant to enter his chamber alone.

He took a candle and went to the place where hung the portrait of his wife. There he paused to gaze on the unearthly loveliness of face and figure. His eyes dimmed, and he turned away and began to undress; but he was wearied and troubled because of his friend's death, and when his vest was doffed he threw himself upon a settle.

Presently the ripple of a long sigh ran through the sleeping house. Frambant sprang to his feet and went to the antechamber. There he heard the sound again: it came from the west wing, which for the last year had been reserved for Villiers's use. He caught up the candle and hurried along the cold passages. At his brother's door he paused, for through the chinks and key-hole came soft broken lights.

A woman was speaking in a voice full of agony:—

‘Infamous, cruel deceiver! I have loved another, and given myself to thee!’

Again came that long sigh. Well-nigh petrified with fear, he fumbled at the latch until the door swung open. A terrible sight met his eyes.

Villiers lay stark on the bed, a red stain spreading over his linen. On the pillow was a mask

that had been rent in twain. Beside him stood a tall, shapely woman, covered from shoulder to foot with a loose web of diaphanous silk. Her long hair (of a withered-bracken colour) hung far below her knees; a veil of green gauze covered the upper part of her face. She was swaying to and fro, as if in pain.

‘Dastard,’ she wailed. ‘Thou hast attained the promised bliss unjustly. In my arms all innocently I slew thee, praying for thy soul to pass to my own heaven.’

Frambant’s lips moved. ‘My brother! my brother!’

The woman turned, glided towards him, and sank to her knees. She laughed, with the silver laughter of a child who after much lamentation has found the lost toy.

‘It is thou,’ she murmured. ‘Let us forget the evil he hath wrought against us—let us forget and—love.’

She put out her hand to grasp his, he lifted his arm and thrust her away.

‘Touch me not!’ he cried.

She rose and faced him, supporting herself by grasping the bedpost.

‘He has wronged us foully,’ she said. ‘The last love—the flower of my life—he would have cheated me of it!’

‘Murderess! murderess!’



Her breath came very quickly; its sweetness pierced her veil and touched his cheek.

‘What evil thing have I done?’ she asked. ‘Tis my creed to love and to destroy.’

Frambant went to the further side of the bed, and felt at his brother’s heart. It was still, the flesh was growing cold. He flung his arm over the dead breast and wept, and Constantia stole nearer and knelt at his side.

‘God,’ she prayed, holding her hands above her head, ‘pervert all my former entreaties, let all the punishments of hell fall upon the dead man! Sustain the strength that has never failed, that I may conquer him who lives.’

Frambant staggered away; she locked her arms about his knees.

‘Listen,’ she said. ‘I loved thee from the first moment. . . . When we met at the bagnio, he was disguised—not until I had killed him and looked on his brow did I know the truth.’

He made no reply, but considered the corpse in stony horror. So she released her hold and stood before him again.

‘O cold and sluggish man! Why should I faint now? Cleopatra bought as hard a lover’s passion.’

With a sudden movement she undid her robe at the neck, so that it whispered and slipped down, showing a form so beautiful that a mist

rose and cloaked it from his eyes,—such perfection being beyond nature.

He moved towards the door, but she interrupted him. ‘Is not this enough?’ she cried. And she tore away the green veil and showed him a face fit to match the rest. Only once before had he seen its wondrous loveliness.

Again his eyes were drawn to Villiers. How he had loved the lad! Very strange it was: but at the instant his mind went back to boy-hood, when he had made him hobby-horses.

‘You have killed my brother! you have killed my brother!’

Constantia laughed wearily. ‘Enough of that mixture of iron and clay. What is the penalty?’

‘The law shall decide.’

She sprang forward and drew the knife from Villiers’s breast. Frambant, however, forced it from her hand.

‘For love of the wife who died, who even now is pleading at God’s throne for me?’

Frambant’s fingers relaxed. ‘Hush!’ he said.

‘If I must die let it be at thy hands.’

‘As you will: here . . . write.’ He took a quill from the table and dipped it in the pool of stiffening blood.

Then he dictated, whilst she wrote in a firm hand.

*‘I, Constantia, the Noble Courtesan, after slaying*

*five men, meet with a just punishment. Seek not to know further.'*

She pressed close to him, smiling very tenderly. Her eyes were full of passionate adoration. As he raised the knife to her breast she caught his disengaged hand between her own. . . .

Frambant wrapped her in the gauze. Then after pinning the paper at the head, and covering all with the gown of white satin that was braided with golden serpents, he carried her through the house and garden. Dayspring was near, the light appalling.

He reached the cypress sedan and laid his burden inside. The two blackamoors, who had gibbered sleepily the while, caught up the poles and bore the Noble Courtesan away.