

"La Bellerieuse" by C. E. Raimond [Elizabeth Robins]



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Pages 20-33 comprise the text.

Preceding the volume, it is Indexed as Raimond (page vi) and by title (v)

At the title's entry is "Illustrated by Bernard Higham"

Higham in the index is credited with this story only.

Discussed on page 101 of Gates biography and listed in Sue Thomas bibliography, no. 146, <https://victorianfictionresearchguides.org/elizabeth-robins/fiction-in-anthologies-and-periodicals/>

By December 1898, shortly after publication of the novel *The Open Question*, C. E. Raimond is identified as Elizabeth Robins. She had published two novels and a collection of short stories preceding this. See commentary on *The Open Question* at the Elizabeth Robins Web,

<http://www.jsu.edu/robinsweb/openq/opqaddre.html>



LA BELLERIEUSE.

ARIE DEBRECZIN was the greatest opera bouffe artiste of the sixties. She had a small but exquisitely tractable voice, a consummate audacity, and the most bewitching smile ever given to woman for the undoing of her natural enemy and prey. She was said to be of Hungarian origin, but even at the time when she was dispensing princely hospitalities at her favourite Schloss Csepel, near Buda-Pesth, any one venturing to ask where she came from, was answered with a gesture of indescribable gaminerie,—

“Where from?—the gutter, *mon ami*!”

Certainly she had lived by her wits, and made a good thing of it, even before she made her fortune out of *La Princesse Bellerieuse*.

People with good memories, and vagrant habits in the pursuit of amusement, recalled her obscure but original *café-chantant* performances when she was still of an age so tender that she was supposed by many to be an accomplished and horribly observant dwarf—so neatly and ironically did she reproduce in miniature the vanities and humours of the hour. But the dwarf grew up—learned more of music, pantomime and dancing, and certainly not less of the world.

At the time when Utterthal wrote his famous comic opera, she was one of the prettiest women in Europe. Through her astounding success as the *Princesse Bellerieuse*, she was soon one of the best envied. She had her town and country houses, drove the smartest drag to the Grand Prix, snubbed great nobles, and queened it from Paris to Petersburg. She was one of those artists who have a special genius for piquing public curiosity, on other than purely artistic grounds. Her wild extravagances, her sharp and tender sayings, her conquests and escapades, were the staple of gossip for many a year in more than one capital.

Perhaps the story that was remembered longest, was how Duke Hermann of Erlau, a favourite cousin of the Austrian Emperor, had fought a duel about her in Paris. When he had run his adversary through, Duke Hermann put him in a carriage and drove madly with him to the lady's hotel, where the man was made to sue for pardon with his dying breath. On the heels of this adventure came



"A man of distinguished bearing . . . helped a tall white-haired old lady to mount the steps."

the announcement that the Bellerieuse was to leave the stage and become the Duchess of Erlau. Whereupon fearful commotion, and every possible social and family pressure brought to bear upon the Duke. These alliances were less common in any part of the world in those days, and for a son of the House of Hapsburg!

When all else failed, the Emperor interfered. But rumour had it that His Majesty's last emissary—to the Bellerieuse this time—was as effectually routed as the first. When, in the name of his sovereign, he threatened forfeiture of the

Erlau estates, the Debreczin marvelled ingenuously to hear that a man who was a monarch should care also to be a robber. When she was offered an indemnity if she dismissed the Duke, she smiled her malicious little crooked smile. "His Majesty thinks too meanly of his kinsman," she said. "Tell the Emperor that Marie Debreczin makes as much out of a single ballad. His Majesty will appreciate the compliment I pay his house when I decline to sell his cousin for a song." The report of this interview, with a dozen additions, did not lessen popular excitement. Not only the *jeunesse dorée*, but many a fine lady as well, laid a wager on the issue. An admirer of the Bellerieuse swore publicly he would send her a bullet for a wedding gift. Possibly this last mark of interest had something to do with the singer's sudden flight from Paris the next night, after the opera. It was known in the morning that she and Erlau had taken the midnight express for the south. But as to what happened between her disappearance and the day she rose above the horizon again, no one ever hazarded more than a guess, and no one ever heard Marie Debreczin say. It was the only episode in life, people said, that she wasn't ready to sharpen her unsparing little tongue upon. And people were right. It was the one page in her history that the Bellerieuse had no smile, gay or bitter, in looking back upon.

The day after their arrival in Venice, the Duke went early to the Consulate to arrange preliminaries for the marriage. Unexpected formalities detained him, and between his going out and his coming in several things had happened. Had he been less absorbed in his errand or his present happiness, he might have noticed the occupants of the gondola in the side canal to the left of the palace where he had lodged the Bellerieuse. As soon as his own boat had glided out of sight, this other one was brought swiftly round, and moored at the palace steps. A man of distinguished bearing, verging on middle age, landed with some show of haste, and helped a tall, white-haired old lady to mount the few steps. She turned at the top, and dismissed her companion. He went back in the gondola to the side canal, while the lady followed a servant up the marble stairs to the grand salon on the first floor. A low word to the servant, and the stranger seated herself and waited impassively—her deep eyes travelling through the suite of rooms to the pillared corridor at the end.

A pale blue figure flitted past the columns on the right, and came through the wide, florid arch towards the main salon. It was of necessity so long an approach, that before the two women met or had possibility of speech, each had made acquaintance with the other.

Never had the Bellerieuse looked lovelier. The blue of her eyes was scintillant and jewelled, but the mocking little mouth was tender, and the face so subdued to some far-off phase of a forgotten childhood, that her friends would scarce have recognised their Bellerieuse.

Her beauty and her softened grace had no visible effect upon the marble woman sitting there with her sombre draperies falling about her, steadfast-eyed, silent, immovable, throned at the end of the vast salon. If she had been the 'Fate' she looked, she could not have been less moved by the approach of this consummate type of youth and joy.

A couple of yards away from the black figure the Bellerieuse paused and bowed.

"Madame la Duchesse?" she said softly.

"You are Marie Debreczin?" asked the other voice.

The young woman drew a quick breath. Subtly, unexpectedly enough, the mere question asked by those proud white lips made her conscious, as she never had



"A pale blue figure flitted past the columns."

been before, of the arraignment of her life. The sounds that made up the word 'Debreczin' had become a set of syllables that stood for riotous scenes, audacities of speech and look and life, that only Art redeemed from degradation, and that even Art, in these grave eyes bent on her to-day, failed to redeem at all. Debreczin! The name conjured up associations in the European mind, and stood as definitely for a certain thing as any frank word of the plain-spoken past. It had started out innocent of blame; but long ago, no one knew just when or

how, had put on a crown of shame as imperishable as the bays of honour. "Are you Marie Debreczin?" For the first time in her life she would have liked to say no. To expect 'Yes' from her seemed like expecting her to condemn herself out of her own mouth.

"I shall never be Marie Debreczin any more," she answered, after that instant's pause.

The elder woman glanced down the Grand Canal.

"We have very little time, mademoiselle. They tell me you care for my son. Is it true?"

"Yes, I care for him."

"Ah!" The solemn eyes looked half incredulously into the shining blue. "If you understand what caring means——"

"Oh, I understand—at last."

"Then I shall not have come in vain."

"You *have* come in vain, madame, if you think to part us." There was no defiance in the softened face. "I knew Hermann had written to you. I almost dared to hope—I suppose my brain was a little turned . . ." She smiled tremulously.

"Yes, all this is a kind of madness. I've come to see if there is enough real feeling in the matter to cast the madness out."

Half pityingly the Debreczin shook her head. "You waste your time, madame."

"Perhaps not, if I can make you realise what will happen to my son if he marries you."

"Oh, I know already," she said, with a little flash. "After the Duke of Erlau has turned his back upon society—society will think itself revenged by turning its back on him."

"You think that all?"

"No:" she dropped her eyes. "I'm afraid the mother he loves—his whole family, will be very angry, and for a time——"

"No, no, it is not a question of time, or of mere anger, but of ruin—ruin that time will only emphasise, complete."

"You mean the Emperor is in earnest about the forfeiture and dismissal from the army?"

These considerations, so gaily flouted in Paris, suddenly assumed giant proportions here.

"That is part of the ruin that will overtake my son."

"*Part* of the ruin?" She slipped down on the sofa, conscious that her knees were trembling strangely. The white face opposite nodded, slow, speechless.

"Your son would tell you the only ruin he wouldn't have strength to face, would be loss of me."

"Is it the first time you've listened to such words?"

"The first time I've listened, madame. Not the first time I've heard them."

"And those others—surely you've lived to see——"

"I've lived to see some of them take that form of ruin calmly enough: one drowned his in the Danube——"

"No Hapsburg would do that."

"Who knows?"

"Even if it came to that"—the old voice did not waver nor the old eyes flinch—"even that would be better than——"

"Ah!" the Debreczin broke in, catching her breath—"and you are his mother."

"Yes. His mother would rather see him dead."

There was silence in the great room for a moment. The old woman's passion of anxiety broke it harshly.

"You told me you cared for *him*. You were not honest enough to confess you cared more for what he could give you."

Half absently, as though with mind bent vigilantly on some more vital matter, came the low question,

"You are so sure I must be mercenary?"

"It may not be all that. There is many a lady"—the faint accent on the last word wrought its unconscious work electrically—"many a lady who would be dazzled at the prospect of being the Duchess of Erlau. It does not seem to me strange or difficult to pardon in you. And then"—for the first time the stern face was reflecting a touch of sympathy—"for *you* no doubt the prospect of marriage—"

"Marriage: ha! ha!" the keen young look grew cold and bright as a dagger blade. "You can hardly think your son is the first man who has wanted to marry me?" The silent scepticism of the older woman pricked the younger on. "You must not forget we women of the stage are not in such hot haste to marry as women of—of possibly fewer opportunities and greater needs."

"I have made allowance for you in view of a greater need than the women I know are called upon to face."

"What need do you mean?"

"Why should you wish to force me to say the superfluous?" She waved explanation warily aside, and presented a new point of view. "Your attachment to my son, if not your intelligence, must show you this marriage is impossible, except as an instrument of revenge." At the passionate, quick gesture from the other, she added:—"And we hear of no one thing so often of Marie Debreczin, as that she is generous."

"And generosity is *rare* in your world, madame?" She asked the question with unsteady voice.

Seeming to misunderstand, the anxious mother answered:—

"If you'll do this great service to my son, you won't find *me* ungrateful. I will help you in every way in my power."

"You are very kind, though I can't see what there is you can do for me, since——" She turned away her head an instant, and then went on: "In view of what 'great need' of mine were you so good as to make allowance for me?"

"The obvious one!" and the old voice grew softer—or was it only faint with apprehension?—as she said, "The refuge of an honourable name."

"Ha! ha!" The light laugh rang out again through the wide spaces. "You think I'm loth to give *that* up! You conceive such women as *I*, waiting eagerly for the first chance to give up fame and freedom and Art, for the privilege of being called 'Madame' and buried alive. It's time women of your class should know how we pity, when we don't despise them. The plays and story-books are wrong, madame! When you go back to your world, take that for a legacy. We do *not* look upon you with envy and with awe, unless——" a great sob tore the passionate voice—"unless you are the mother of——" The broken sound sank level to the silence.

The black figure drew a falling cloak of lace about her shoulders and fastened it.

"You came here," the young voice went on, strained and muffled, "thinking to find another Dame aux Camélias, a repentant damsel with a weak chest and a passion for respectability, who would help you to value the more your own limited life, seeing how Marie Debreczin was panting to share it. Have you no

idea how we make merry over this legend of superiority? And when we are not merry," she came a step nearer, "we wonder why some may steal the horse while others mayn't look over the hedge. It's no secret from *us*, the mock morality, the hypocrisy, of the class the world consents to call 'the Upper.'"

For all answer the tall figure drew itself a little more erect, and turned slowly as if to go.

"Oh, don't misunderstand," the eager voice arrested her. "I'm not so vulgar-minded but I know there are others, thousands, tens of thousands, whose lives are free from *that*—who have dutifully married some suitable person they didn't care a fig for, and lived correct lives to the end. What have they done for themselves? Have they ever worked? Have they ever earned their dinner, or themselves paid for a stitch they wear? Have they ever stood on their own feet and faced the world without leaning on some man? I *have*, madame, and thousands more whom you feel called upon to pity, and to patronise."

"You have forgotten. So far from patronising you, I was so mistaken as to come to ask from you a service and a sacrifice."

"Forgotten?" The little blue figure dropped on the sofa like a bird shot suddenly at the zenith of his arc of flight. "Forgotten? No, I'm not likely to forget." She glanced about in a dazed fashion. "But I've said things I never, never meant to say." She covered her face with her hands.

"What you say affects nothing. You may rage against the world's injustice till your strength is spent, and you are old as I—the injustice will remain. The only question is: will *you* pay the penalty the world exacts, or will you make my son pay?"

Marie Debreczin dropped her hands from her face. The blue of her eyes was dim and drowned.

"But you—you haven't understood. You asked me if I cared. I care so much, madame, that everything in my life will be changed. It is in no woman's power to be a more faithful wife to your son than I will be."

"It is not in Marie Debreczin's power to be such a mother to my son's children as would not shame them—and their father through them. I tell you I would rather see my boy dead at my feet than with your child in his arms."

"Ah!" she flung up her arms with a primitive instinct of self-defence. "You have other sons," she said, struggling to her feet, "and I have no other——"

"No other lover, mademoiselle?"

"Stop!" No trace of tears now, nor of trembling. "I did not understand in what spirit you had come here, or we need not have wasted so much time."

"Certainly I did not come to say soft words, to wheedle or to bribe you."

"You have heard such tactics failed," said the other, quietly.

"I came to see for myself if you were wholly sunk in callousness and greed. If so, I knew, in spite of all I could say, you would hold your prize fast with both hands and drag him down; but if your life had left in you some power of faithful caring for another, you would turn your back on Hermann of Erlau and go your ways." As the Debreczin was about to speak, "Make no mistake!" cried the old voice, trembling now and raised: "either you are my son's worst enemy, or you will refuse to bring about the downfall of his house, his own disillusionment, and his children's shame." The black figure turned away and left the palace as she had come.

Marie Debreczin sat motionless in the sunshine. By-and-by she glanced out of the window and hurriedly dried her tears. She rang the bell. Then, walking a little unsteadily, she crossed the room to the writing-table.



"Venice saw them no more."

"Who else besides you saw that lady come in and go out?" she said, as the servant appeared.

"No one, madame."

She felt in her pocket and drew out a little purse. "Eight napoleons! I'll send you as much more every year on this day, if you never tell a soul that any one visited me this morning. I shall know if you keep faith. There! Tell Katrine I want her."

"Thank you, madame." The man went out with eyes bulging over his easy earnings.

The Bellerieuse wrote rapidly :

"We've made a mistake. The charms of private life lessen as they come near. I belong to the public, and not, as I was absurd enough to think—to you. Good-bye."

"Bah!" A tear had dropped on the paper. It ran like an eager champion and met the lying ink, contending, mingling with it.

"No, no, we'll have no tear-stains," she said, a little savagely, and crushed the blotted sheet in her shaking hands. She wrote the words on another paper, folded, addressed it, and hurried out of the room, hiding both notes in the drapery of her gown.

Hardly ten minutes later the Bellerieuse and Katrine, with the scantiest store of luggage, went down the side canal in a gondola, and Venice saw them no more.

The lady presently reappeared in Paris, ready to sing and equally ready to laugh at the absurd notion of her being in earnest about retiring. And as to marriage—*ma foi!* wasn't that a refuge reserved for women who couldn't do better?—wasn't it society's charitable institution for the unfit—a species of almshouse where the helpless of her sex were sheltered? But Marie Debreczin! what should take *her* there? And she flashed through that season in Paris with an even madder brilliancy, spent money like water, and turned heads as blithely as before.

True, it was said by some Peeping Tom who, unobserved, had travelled in her company on that long journey back from Venice, that the Bellerieuse had wept every mile of the way. Everybody knew, too, that soon after her return to the gay world Duke Hermann of Erlau retired from it, and went into the Church.

Then newer stories drove the old one out, and newer idols competed for the palm of public favour. Still men said, "There is but one Bellerieuse, and her name's Debreczin." That gaiety of hers, unfailing and infectious, the goodness of heart so ineradicable, kept many a conquest her beauty had brought her, long after her beauty was on the wane. Besides, the woman was in her way a consummate artist, and to have arrived at that is to be very near the well-spring of eternal youth. But even in Art—even to the lightest heart that follows her—comes the going down of the sun.

* * * * *

The Debreczin laughed on even after her vogue was gone, abating not a jot of her generosity to others, or her extravagance in gratifying her own tastes. She was not of the family of those who drink skimmed milk now, that they may have butter and cheese in a problematical by-and-by. As the years wore on, she sang for shorter and shorter seasons, for less and less magnificent sums; but, drawing heavily on her capital, she kept the pace gaily, and was still one of the glittering notorieties of the great capital where she had found fame.

One day, at the races, she was taken suddenly ill. She was carried home, and presently recovered, but no one dared say in her hearing that Marie Debreczin had had a stroke of paralysis. So anxious was she on her recovery to prove that she was entirely fit for work again, that, failing a suitable metropolitan opening, she went a tour of the second and third-class towns in Austro-Hungary and France, where the long rumour of her fame in distant capitals brought her a season's success. The next year she tried it again, but provincial curiosity had been satisfied. She sang and laughed and danced to empty seats.

The following year the only dates her impresario could get were in the small towns and villages. Broken as her fortunes were, she declined to exhibit the

Bellerieuse in country concert halls and on temporary stages to gaping bumpkins. No, she would rest for a season, and then sing in Vienna again.

She "rested" for four years—"rested" at Nice during the carnival, rested at the races, at balls, at Monte Carlo, and at one Bad after another—always surrounded by troops of those hangers on, who are proverbially willing to dance in your company so long as you are willing to pay the piper. Marie Debreczin stinted neither parasite nor piper,—she paid them with both hands, and laughed at the changing world.

Of course the end came. She had sold all there was to sell, and found herself stranded at Bad Gastein, after the gay world, the parasites, and even the piper, had vanished from the scene. And she was ill. She had had another of those mysterious seizures.

On that first day of her convalescence, when she had ventured downstairs, she sat by the window, looking out on the deserted street. The piquant face was very worn and faded, but her flossy hair was yellow still, and curled lightly as a child's. "Everybody's gone," she thought to herself. No, here was a carriage with a lean and nervous-looking gentleman, his large, heavy wife, and two plain daughters. Behind, a humbler vehicle with luggage and two servants. Evidently the cavalcade was on its way to the station. Dully the Debreczin examined the party, leaning a little farther out of the window. Suddenly she started back. The man had bowed to her, and the carriage rattled into the station enclosure. Who in the world? Ah, well, she had known so many men, how was it possible to remember them all?

Hardly three minutes, before the thin, harassed-looking traveller stood under her window, with his hat in his hand and the morning sun shining insistently on his bald head.

"How do you do, Madame Bellerieuse?" he said, holding up his free hand a little awkwardly. It was hardened and knotted by rheumatic gout.

"How do you do, monsieur?" She bent down to him with something of her old manner, and a ghost of that provocative, half-mocking, half-caressing smile that had conquered the world—in the sixties.

"So fortunate," the man was saying. "A mistake about the train time. I've twenty minutes to spare."

"Ah!" she said: the momentary interest had faded out of her face, as she scanned the bourgeois-looking invalid, with his dull yet nervous look. *He* wasn't one of those who had "mattered" at any time of life.

"I was so struck by your recognising me as I passed in that hurried way," he went on, "I felt I must come and speak to you." Then lower, almost tenderly, "You are greatly changed, Marie."

"I might pay you the same compliment, monsieur, if my memory were as good as yours."

"What! You—you mean you didn't know I was Jean Duclos!"

His tone of blank incredulity amused her. She shook her head wickedly, and the crooked, perverse little smile banished age and illness for an instant from the mignonne face.

"Did I ever know Jean Duclos?"

"Marie! You're pretending!—just as you used to."

Something in his tone besides the smug confidence annoyed her.

"What did you ever do that I should remember, monsieur?"

"I—I—— It's impossible you could have forgotten, Marie. We first met in Paris in '67."

"Ah, I've met a good many people in Paris!"

"At least you haven't forgotten that morning in the Bois when I—" he glanced a little nervously over his shoulder towards the station—"when I offered to marry you."

She bent a vague, humorous look on the shrivelled face.

"I've wasted so many mornings in the Bois; and by your own account there was an absence of originality in your conversation that day."

He drew back a little hurt, a little angry.

"It would have been better for you if you had considered more seriously what I said that morning. I warned you then that your success wouldn't last."

"Have you since discovered that thing in the world, monsieur, that *does* last?"

"You can't deny that if you had listened to me then——"

She broke the sentence by an airy motion of the hand; but he blundered on with that kind of sympathy that derives its special force and flavour from a sustaining sense of prophecy fulfilled.

"It's terrible to see you like this. And I warned you. I told you that day in the Bois just how it would end."

The Bellerieuse stood up.

"My good soul, since that morning in the Bois I've had twenty-five glorious years. Have you fared as well?"

She stood there, smiling for an instant at his discomfiture, and then disappeared, leaving the successful man of business gaping at the empty window.

Dragging herself along the deserted parade a few days later, she met her old impresario.

"Yes, I heard you were here," he said, "and I thought I'd come and see you."

They walked back to her lodging. He glanced about the small, dingy room.

"Odd place to find me in, eh, Geyer?" laughed the Debreczin. "But it's far more sumptuous than I can afford to pay for."

He avoided her restless eyes with an instinct of dumb sympathy. There had been a time when Geyer was the humblest of Debreczin's devotees. He was probably one of the few men she had known well, who had never tried to make love to her.

"Have you any plans for the season?" he asked.

"Plans? oh yes," she said vaguely—"not ready to announce."

Did Geyer divine what a grim last appearance she was calmly devising, that he said suddenly, "Why won't you change your mind, and come and sing the *Bellerieuse* and one or two other operas in the small towns?"

She sat silent.

"There are very appreciative people in the small towns," he added.

A faint shine of tears veiled the woman's eyes as she turned away her head and said, "No, no, my good Geyer, we are done with all that."

"Don't say such things," he pleaded. He took an old letter out of his pocket, and on the back of the envelope he jotted down a list of obscure towns. "Look," he said, handing her the envelope, "here are eleven or twelve places where we could get dates at once. Some of those towns are very pretty. You ought to see them. You'll feel better, once you're at work again."

Her eyes travelled mechanically down the list. Suddenly she lifted her head with that old, quick, bird-like motion.

"Altsatz? Can you get a date there?"

"Certain of it. Come back to Vienna, and we'll get a company together and rehearsed in three weeks."

She looked out of the dingy lodging window into that fairy world of her youth; saw the Duke of Erlau, hat in hand, standing at her carriage door after the opera—saw the early Italian spring framing those few hours of love and of enchantment in the south—saw the white-haired Duchess glide in between the lovers, phantom-like as death, and like death saying, "the end has come." There was the Bellerieuse herself whirling back alone to Paris, all her gaiety drowned in tears, and the knowledge heavy on her heart, that come what might she needs must laugh at the journey's end. Altsatz! He had gone into the monastery there, and rumour said had been ordained a priest, and went amongst the poor. Altsatz! Were there people there frivolous enough to care to hear the Bellerieuse? If she went, should she have a glimpse of him, perhaps, before the end of all things?

Geyer had his way. He even made money in some of the places. The Debreczin was in better form than he had dared to hope. That night at Altsatz she was really wonderful. Geyer began to speculate whether, after all, with a brand-new opera, the Debreczin might not venture to appear again in Vienna. Even the stupid country audience was warmed, and at the close electrified, by the woman's genius and brilliant gaiety.

Geyer came behind the scenes in high spirits at the end of the opera. He found his *prima donna* looking through a hole in the curtain, and listening with intense excitement to the clamour in the house.

"Is he there? Have you seen Erlau?" she asked, shaking with excitement.

"Erlau?" repeated Geyer, not in the least comprehending.

"I've taken three calls—yet they aren't satisfied," she hurried on, tossing back her yellow hair. "It's like old times. Quick! up with the curtain, Gaston!"

Before the prompter could give the signal she had fallen forward on her face in the middle of the stage without a cry.

They lifted her up and carried her to the inn. Geyer brought the village doctor.

"Paralysis!" he said: "she probably hasn't many minutes to live. Fetch the priest."

Geyer shook his head. He knew his Debreczin too well.

"Then I'll send him [myself," said the doctor, regarding the godless Geyer with disapproval. After the doctor had gone, she seemed partially to recover consciousness, and complained drowsily of being cold. Geyer laid his great-coat over her. While he was doing so, the door opened. A priest came in and stood an instant at the foot of the bed.

"Am I too late?" he asked Geyer.

Marie Debreczin made a faint inarticulate sound—one hand stirred and grasped the coverlet.

Geyer leaned over her, and heard her saying in that strange, muffled voice, "No, no, not too late."

He beckoned the priest to the bedside, and went over to the stove with his handkerchief to his eyes.

"Lift me up," said the voice down among the bedclothes: "so tired—can't move."

The priest turned towards Geyer. Convulsively the fluttering hand outside the coverlet clutched at his cassock.

"*You* lift me up," said the muffled voice.

He put his arms round the thin little body, feeling how dead and limp the left arm hung, and drew the woman up on the pillows.

"Thank you,—Hermann," she said.

He stared down into the face of the woman he had loved, speechless, motionless—feeling his eyes committed sacrilege, but powerless to turn away. It was no mere shock of finding age where he had last seen youth triumphant—it was a coarser kind of horror that held and racked him. If she had been utterly and unrecognisably altered, he could have borne it; but here was the very Bellerieuse—her childish golden head shining in the soft candle-light, her eyes gleaming with feverish excitement as brilliantly as ever they had with youth and joy, and yet he seemed to be looking at the poor little face through some cruelly distorting medium. The mouth was drawn violently to the stricken side, in an awful travesty of the old irresistible smile.

"I knew you'd be there to-night, priest or no priest," she said.

"There?" he repeated.

"Yes. I sang for you to-night just as I used in Paris. Ha! ha!" she laughed feebly—"always did sing better when you were in front. Four calls after the last act!"

"Marie," he said, a little hoarsely, "you are very ill."

"Ill? Oh, no," she answered—"only over-excited, coming to Altsatz and singing again for you."

"You ought to be told, the doctor says——"

"I've imagined you," she broke in, with a stronger voice—"seeing the announcement in the newspaper that I was coming, and looking out for me. Only from curiosity, of course; one doesn't expect more after so many years——"

"Marie"—he tried to interrupt, but she went on feverishly.

"How long ago did you know?"

He passed his hands over his eyes like one trying to rouse himself from a dream.

"I've known for two months that I was coming," she said. "How long have you been expecting me?"

"I—I don't read the papers."

— "Ah, then you didn't know till you saw the bill in front of the theatre. There isn't another bill in the town, I've noticed. Geyer doesn't advertise enough,—good fellow, but he doesn't advertise. For my next tour you'll see I——"

"Listen," said the priest, grasping the fluttering hand. "I've come to pray with you."

"To pray?—oh, là, là!"

He dropped his eyes.

"Don't talk nonsense, Hermann. How nice you look in those clothes! I'm so relieved you aren't fat. One always thinks of a priest as fat. But I miss your mustachios,"—she slipped her hand out of his, and twirled an imaginary moustache at the side of her distorted mouth. Then the hand crept back into his, and she said, ruefully:—

"I thought when we met again you might be very angry, or even pretend not to know me. But I never thought you'd offer to pray with me." Her accent of reproach was half-mocking, half-sincere.

"Hush, hush, child!—you are dying!" He knelt by the bedside.

"Dying?—who says so?—Hein?"

"The doctor. You have only a few minutes left in this world. Oh, my child, make your peace with God." He held up the crucifix and began the prayer for the dying.

She put her hand over his mouth, and spoke excitedly through the blurred words of his prayer. "If the time's so short as all that we mustn't waste precious

moments praying. Of course you blamed me furiously for running away from you without a word of warning——"

"I have forgiven," said the priest in level tones.

"Nonsense. A man *never* forgives what I did to you—until he has forgotten it. Tell me you still blame me. *Hermann!*" She struggled in vain to rise, her voice was sharp and eager. "Say you *still* blame me, and I'll tell you——"

He had closed his eyes and was silently praying. She threw up one hand with a passionate gesture, and then lay motionless.

The priest opened his eyes and met hers.

"There is still time to unburden your heart, my poor Marie—time for absolution."

"You've just absolved me, Hermann," she said wearily. "I *had* something on my mind, but I see it needn't have weighed so heavily, after all."

He thought she was wandering.

"Try to say one prayer, Marie, for your poor soul's sake."

"Fancy you and me, Hermann, saying prayers!" she laughed faintly. "Though there was a time when I was used to seeing you on your knees. Oh, you prayed most moving prayers—but to me in those days—to me!"

"Hush! Think how near the end is! Beseech God for His infinite mercy."

"And suppose it suits me better not to go cringing out of the world,"—the old spirit flickered up an instant,—“but with my prettiest acknowledgment of past favours, instead of clamouring about the good things in the future. Hein? I've had a fair share of the good things—and of the ill. There's not much I've missed. I'm willing to admit that to God or anybody."

The priest held up the crucifix. "Pray, pray!" he said.

"Very well, then"—with an almost superhuman effort she dragged the stricken body forward, and held up one hand as if calling the Eternal to be witness: "I thank Thee, O God! that I have lived *MUCH*." She fell down like lead. When the priest laid her lifeless body gently back upon the pillow, she was smiling her old victorious smile.

C. E. RAIMOND.

