

Literature, &c.

From Lady Blessington's new work of
'The Lottery of Life.'

THE GAMESTERS.

A FRENCH STORY.

RAGE and shame struggled in the breast of the once proud Comte de Breteul, as he found himself, even in the lofty chambers of his noble ancestors, triumphantly boarded by the reckless miscreant, to an equality with whom his fatal passion for gaming had so unhappily reduced him.

'You are more alarmed by words than deeds,' resumed Roussel; 'you rescue the accusation of your crime, but you shrink not from its commission, else would your ward be now the heiress of a noble patrimony instead of being a defrauded pauper. You have spontaneously and remorselessly devoted her to beggary and humiliation: and yet, forthwith, in the redundancy of your exceeding charity, you would hesitate, nay turn in horror from the less cruel act of abridging the sufferings of the victim you have your self created. She is young and innocent, therefore her transition from this world of care to a better and happier state, must be a desirable event. Let her live her natural time, poor and unfriended, what has she to hope, and what must she not have to endure? Her beauty will expose her to the snares of wealthy and designing libertines; and her poverty will instigate her to become his prey. Remember, too, that a long life of misery and shame may await her: for degradation and infamy, though they murder peace of mind, but slowly undermine the physical sources of existence. You who have reduced her to the prospect of this career, can alone save her from its endurance, by sending her pure and undefiled to heaven. You will thus rescue your children from poverty, and all its humiliating attendants, and yourself from everlasting disgrace—do you, can you hesitate? If so, take the consequences of your weakness; and remember, when it be too late, that you had once the power of extricating your children and yourself from the retribution which now awaits you.'

'I will not, I cannot imbrue my hands in innocent blood,' said De Breteul, with horror depicted in his face; 'all—every thing is better than such a crime,' and he looked with terror at his hands, as if he already expected to see them died with the sanguine stream of life.

'Who talked of shedding blood?' said the crafty Roussel; 'laugh—laugh! not I, I'm sure, such barbarisms are now exploded from civilized society. But let us not dispute about words; listen to me without interruption:—Mademoiselle de Tournaville dead, you succeed to the large property she has lately inherited. This will be amply sufficient to enable you to replace the fortune left her by her mother, to satisfy any inquisitive heir that may spring up, as also to leave a provision for your children: who, thus enabled to marry the objects of their choice, will bless you for their happiness. To accomplish these most desirable results, you need only to send a soul to heaven as pure as when it left the hands of its Creator. I am your friend, and can instruct you to extinguish the vital spark, so as to leave no possibility of detection. The death of this young person is indispensably necessary to preserve your honor, peace—nay your life: and yet in return for the accomplishment of an object so imperious, I only require you to pay me the sum of twenty five thousand francs, in addition to the sum you already owe me, which I must have forthwith.'

The sophistry of Roussel, acting on the excited feelings of the fallen and guilty De Breteul, triumphed over the remaining sentiments of humanity in his demoralized heart. The proverb says, that they whom destiny would destroy, she first renders insane; and experience proves, that fate never conquers man, until he has yielded up reason at the shrine of passion.

In the unhappy Comte de Breteul, we find another instance of the truth of this maxim. Eideous and glaring as was the fallacy of the inculcation, yet his mind being prostrated by the conflicts and temptations to which it had been subjected, this wretched man, instigated by a knave more plausible, more crafty, and more callous than himself, was ultimately induced to implicitly believe, that in order to conceal the crime of appropriating his ward's fortune, and to preserve his children from disgrace, he was justified in laying on his soul the fearful crime of murder—of steeping himself in guilt a hundredfold more atro-

cious than that which he had already committed.

Let no man who has entered on the path of vice say, so far, and no farther will I go. The first step leads to destruction; for rarely can the wretch who has taken it, extricate himself from its consequences.

But though De Breteul listened to the proposal of Roussel, it was long ere he could bring himself to do more than listen to it. To leave him thus conscience-stricken and alarmed formed no part of the plan of Roussel, and he insisted that this dupe should accompany him to a *restaurant* to dine; at the time proposing that afterwards they should once more try their luck at the gaming table. Glad to escape from an interview with his daughter and Matilde, in his present state of mind, De Breteul left his house with Roussel, who having ordered a dinner *recherche*, and after it plied his companion with wine, disclosed to him his plan for destroying the beautiful and innocent orphan. He proposed to procure from the mechanics by whom it is employed, a quantity of wax of a peculiar tenacity, and to spread it very thick on a piece of linen. De Breteul was to enter Matilde's chamber while she slept, and placing this preparation on her mouth, to press it tightly until it should produce suffocation, and yet leave no external marks of violence. Excited as he was by wine, and maddened by circumstances, still the mind of De Breteul recoiled from the perpetration of this atrocious crime: but the modern Mephistophiles, too skilled in all the fiendlike arts of temptation to allow himself to be baffled by either the apprehensions or contrition of his intended victim, led him once more to the gaming table, that certain and fatal gulf of every manly virtue.

There having by the unfair means which had already reduced him to ruin, despoiled him of the few thousand francs he yet possessed, with a heavy additional debt, desperation rendered him reckless; and he was ready, even eager, for the commission of any crime his betrayer might dictate. Armed, therefore, with the intended instrument of destruction, they returned at a late hour to the Hotel de Breteul. And now we must leave them prepared for guilt while we return to the other parties in this domestic tragedy.

It had been decided that the interview between the lovers and Gustave de Breteul should take place in the garden, when all the family in the hotel should be in bed, with the exception of the Comte de Breteul, who was in the habit of returning late. As he sometimes entered by the garden, it was also arranged that, to prevent his detecting the interview between his son and daughter and De Villeneuve, as soon as the latter was admitted by the small door, from the Rue de Babylon, the two friends, with Louise, should retire to the most distant part of the garden.

These arrangements having been narrated, we must now proceed to the night of the intended rendezvous. Louise had retired to her chamber, which thought it was next that of Matilde, looked on the court, while Matilde's opened on the garden. She was impatiently awaiting the signal concerted with her brother, for her to join him in his room, whence she was to pass into the garden, with which it communicated, when Matilde rushed into the apartment pale and terrified, declaring that she had heard voices at her window, and that she was afraid to remain alone in her chamber. It immediately struck Louise that the voices heard by Matilde were those of De Villeneuve and her brother, and anxious to join them, as also to quiet the alarm of the agitated girl, she desired her to enter her bed, and that, as she had no fears, she would occupy Matilde's; a proposal that was readily accepted.

Having left Mademoiselle de Tournaville restored to composure, Louise wrapped a shawl round her, and stole to the door of her brother's chamber, when she met him coming in search of her. They quickly entered the garden, which Gustave opened for him, and all three retired to a remote spot, where half an hour flew rapidly by, ere they had thought that even a quarter of that brief period had elapsed.

A shower of rain induced Gustave to conduct the reluctant Louise to the house, and while she sought her pillow, and resigned herself to the balmy influence of sleep, he returned to his friend, and passed a couple of hours in discussing their plans for the present and the future. They were at length about to separate, and had approached the private door, when, to their utter amazement, they discovered a man with his hat drawn

over his eyes, and enveloped in a large cloak, applying a key to the lock with one hand, while in the other he had a dark lantern. They both rushed forward and seized him, under the conviction that he was a robber; while he, in evident trepidation, stated that he had entered the garden with the Comte de Breteul, and was retiring, making use of the key given him by that gentleman. There was an evident embarrassment and mystery about this person, that led them to doubt his statement, and Gustave insisted on his returning with them to the house, in order that they might confront him with the comte. Finding them bent on this course, he was forced to yield, and turning to Gustave, he said,

'Well, be it so. You say you are his son. Now mark me; he will not thank you for this interference; but on your consequences. A time will come when you will wish that you had not stopped me.'

Gustave and De Villeneuve conducted the stranger to the door of the chamber of the Comte de Breteul, which contrary to his usual custom, they found locked on the inside, and it was not until Gustave had repeatedly called to his father that the latter replied; but he still declined opening the door, and his voice betrayed evident symptoms of agitation.

The stranger cried aloud to him, 'De Breteul, I have been stopped, in leaving your garden; by your son, who holds me a prisoner until you have certified that I accompanied you into this house; was thence returning to my residence, and that the key I was employing for that purpose was confided to me by yourself.'

'Yes, yes, my son, all that he states is correct,' groaned rather than spoke the Comte de Breteul; 'so let him depart in peace.'

'Excuse,' continued he, addressing the stranger, 'the interruption you have met with, I pray you; for my son knew not that you were a—' friend' he would have added, but the word died on his tongue. The rebuked young men looked at each other in silent amazement and allowed the stranger to depart; who darting on them a glance, in which every malevolent passion was expressed, hastily and in silence withdrew.

Gustave and De Villeneuve slowly left the ante room, pondering on the extraordinary occurrence they had witnessed, and willing to give the stranger time to quit the garden ere they entered it. As they paced the gravel walk, Gustave broke silence by saying,

'This is all very mysterious; I cannot comprehend how my father can hold intercourse with a man such as he who has left us; for if ever I saw villain written in the human countenance, it surely is in his.'

De Villeneuve paused for a few minutes, and then replied,

'My dear friend, this is a subject on which I had intended to have spoken to you, but delicacy has hitherto induced me to postpone it; as, however our reconre with this mysterious stranger seems in some way connected with it, perhaps it is better that I should now disclose it. Your father is looked upon as a gamester—nay, more, report states him to be a ruined one: This stranger may be, must be, one of the wretches who frequent the gaming houses, and who have aided and participated in his ruin. How else can we explain your father's intercourse with such a man, and the agitation which his voice denoted? This knave probably returned to night with his dupe to the hotel, to receive either money or valuables for sums lost at play; and your father, ashamed to let the porter see him enter with such a companion, admitted him by the garden, and evidently intended that he should have retreated by the same route. Had we searched him, we should most likely have found either the contents of your father's *coffre forte* or some valuable jewels; but, *n'importe*, it must be our business to relieve the Comte de Breteul from any distress he may have brought on himself by this fearful passion for play, and so terminate all intercourse between him and such dangerous and disgraceful associates as the man who has left us. I have a large sum of money in my own power, the fortune left me by my aunt: it shall be all at his service, and I, my dear Gustave, shall be but too happy if I can extricate from his present dangerous entanglements him who is the father of my Louise and of you, and who, I trust, may soon be mine and my sister's.'

To find the parent, whom from his infancy, he had revered nearly as much as loved, a reputed and dangerous gamester, was a cruel blow to the filial feeling of Gustave; and to see him the

acknowledged associate of the vile person who had left them was a severe humiliation; but the warmth of friendship displayed on this emergency by De Villeneuve soothed him, and while passionately thanking his warm hearted friend, a strong sense of gratitude and affection for a moment superseded his other too painful emotions. 'H-re,' said De Villeneuve, 'take this pocket book; I had nearly forgotten it, though I brought it in consequence of the reports I heard and the opinions I have formed of the extent of your father's pecuniary embarrassments. It contains half the sum at my disposal, and to morrow the remainder shall be forthcoming.—Nay, dear Gustave, seeing his friend hesitate, 'do not pain me by a refusal. Are we not brothers as well as friends, and will not your father shortly be mine?'

Gustave yielded to the solicitations of De Villeneuve, and they parted, animated by cheering hopes of the morrow—that morrow so fraught with misery, but let me not anticipate.

De Villeneuve had reached the door of the garden, and was about to apply the key to the lock, when a sudden blow from a dagger prostrated him on the earth. Rapidly drawing the reeking weapon from the deep wound it had inflicted, the assassin struck it a second time into the body of his victim, then wiping it deliberately in the grass, he concealed it beneath his cloak, and hurried from the spot, carefully locking the door after him, and taking away the key.

The Comte de Breteul and his son met in the breakfast room at the usual hour on the following morning, the former with an embarrassed air and care worn brow, while his heavy eyes denoted that repose had been a stranger to his pillow. Gustave felt for him, and accounted for his trouble looks by the knowledge he had acquired of his pecuniary difficulties and entanglement. There was no recurrence made to the reconre of the past night, and both labored under a restraint that neither knew how to surmount; when the door opened and Matilde entered.

At the sight of his ward, a cry of horror escaped from the unhappy Comte de Breteul, and he fell fainting on the floor. Gustave and Matilde assisted to replace him in his chair, and animation had but just returned, when Claudine, the aged attendant of Louise, rushed distracted into the *salon*, and with cries of anguish and despair, announced that her dear young lady, her precious Mademoiselle Louise, was dead!

The confusion, horror, and grief of the family may easily be imagined, but cannot be described. Gustave and Matilde flew to the chamber where the beautiful Louise lay extended, cold and motionless, but lovely even in death. The brother, nearly frantic, ordered the servants to fly for doctors, and commenced chafing her cold limbs, totally forgetting in this new and over-powering affliction the state of his father, when a party of gendarmes, rudely entered the room, and made him their prisoner, on the charge of having murdered the Comte de Villeneuve in the garden on the previous night. They dragged him from the room, where lay the inanimate form of Louise, unmindful of his entreaties and frantic prayers to be allowed to continue his efforts to restore her, and forced him into the *salon*, where the wretched father continued in nearly a state of insensibility. They now examined his person, and on discovering the pocket book of De Villeneuve, whose name was written in it, and the large sum it contained, they declared that this evidence of his guilt was conclusive.

They subsequently, either casually or intentionally, added, that the anonymous information they had received that morning stated that the pocket book would be found in his possession, and that the body of the murdered man was concealed beneath some shrubs in the garden where they had discovered it. When the wretched father heard the accusation against his son, the pride and idol of his life, he tried to speak, but the effort was unavailing; the powers of motion and utterance were paralyzed, and his son was forcibly dragged a prisoner from a house that contained a dead sister and a dying father.

Gustave was overwhelmed with horror by the accumulated misery of his maddening situation. The murder of his friend—that friend so fondly cherished, whose life he would willingly have sacrificed his own to have saved, seemed to add the finishing blow to his despair! Oh! it was too, too horrible! and he closed his eyes as if to shut out the dreadful images that presented themselves to his mind.