

# **The Last Kiss**

Maurice Level

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"Forgive me. . . . Forgive me."

His voice was less assured as he replied:

"Get up, dry your eyes. I, too, have a good deal to reproach myself with."

"No, no," she sobbed.

He shook his head.

"I ought never to have left you; you loved me. Just at first after it all happened . . . when I could still feel the fire of the vitriol burning my face, when I began to realize that I should never see again, that all my life I should be a thing of horror, of Death, certainly I wasn't able to think of it like that. It isn't possible to resign oneself all at once to such a fate . . . But living in this eternal darkness, a man's thoughts pierce far below the surface and grow quiet like those of a person falling asleep, and gradually calm comes. To-day, no longer able to use my eyes, I see with my imagination. I see again our little house, our peaceful days, and your smile. I see your poor little face the night I said that last good-bye.

The judge couldn't imagine any of that, could he? And it was only fair to try to explain, for they thought only of your action, the action that made me into . . . what I am. They were going to send you to prison where you would slowly have faded . . . No years of such punishment for you could have given me back my eyes . . . When you saw me go into the witness-box you were afraid, weren't you? You believed that I would charge you, have you condemned? No, I could never have done that never . . ."

She was still crying. Her face buried in her hands.

"How good you are! . . ."

"I am just . . ."

In a voice that came in jerks she repeated:

"I repent, I repent; I have done the most awful thing to you that a woman could do, and you you begged for my acquittal! And now you can even bid words of pity for me! What can I do to prove my sorrow? Oh, you are wonderful . . . wonderful . . ."

He let her go on talking and weeping; his head thrown back, his hands on the arms of his chair, he listened apparently without emotion. When she was calm again, he asked:

"What are you going to do now?"

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"I don't know . . . I shall rest for a few days . . . I am so tired hen I shall go back to work. I shall try to find a place in a shop or as a mannequin."

His voice was a little stifled as he asked:

"You are still as pretty as ever?"

She did not reply.

"I want to know if you are as pretty as you used to be?"

She remained silent. With a slight shiver, he murmured: "It is dark now, isn't it? Turn on the light. Though I can no longer see, I like to feel that there is light around me . . . Where are you? .

Near the mantelpiece? . . . Stretch out your hand. You will find the switch there."

No sense even of light could penetrate his eyelids, but from the sudden sound of horror she stifled, he knew that the lamp was on. For the first time she was able to see the result of her work, the terrifying face streaked with white swellings, seamed with red furrows, a narrow black band around the eyes. While he had pleaded for her in court, she had crouched on her seat weeping, not daring to look at him; now, before this abominable thing, she grew sick with a kind of disgust. But it was without any anger that he murmured:

"I am very different from the man you knew in the old days I horrify you now, don't I? You shrink from me? . . ."

She tried to keep her voice steady.

"Certainly not. I am here, in the same place . . ."

"Yes, now . . . and I want you to come still nearer. If you knew how the thought of your hands tempt me in my darkness. How I should love to feel their softness once again. But I dare not . . .

And yet that is what I wanted to ask you: to let me feel your hand for a minute in mine. We, the blind, can get such marvelous memories from just a touch."

Turning her head away, she held out her arm. Caressing her fingers, he murmured:

"Ah, how good. Don't tremble. Let me try to imagine we are lovers again just as we used to be . . . but you are not wearing my ring. Why? I have not taken yours oft. Do you remember? You said, 'It is our wedding-ring. Why have you taken it off?'"

"I dare not wear it . . ."

"You must put it on again. You will wear it? Promise me."

She stammered:

"I promise you."

He was silent for a little while; then in a calmer voice:

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"It must be quite dark now. How cold I am! If you only knew how cold it feels when one is blind. Your hands are warm; mine are frozen. I have not yet developed the fuller sense of touch.

It takes time, they say . . . At present I am like a little child learning.'  
She let her fingers remain in his, sighing:

"Oh, Mon Dieu . . . Mon Dieu . . ."

Speaking like a man in a dream, he went on:

"How glad I am that you came. I wondered whether you would, and I felt I wanted to keep you with me for a long, long time: always . . . But that wouldn't be possible. Life with me would be too sad. You see, little one, when people have memories like ours, they must be careful not to spoil them, and it must be horrible to look at me now, isn't it?"

She tried to protest; what might have been a smile passed over his face.

"Why lie? I remember I once saw a man whose mistress had thrown vitriol over him. His face was not human. Women turned their heads away as they passed, while he, not being able to see and so not knowing, went on talking to the people who were shrinking away from him. I must be, I am like that poet wretch, am I not? Even you who knew me as I used to be, you tremble with disgust; I can feel it. For a long time you will be haunted by the remembrance of my face . . .

. it will come in between you and everything else . . . How the thought hurts . . . but don't let us go on talking about me . . . You said just now that you were going back to work. Tell me your plans; come nearer, I don't hear as well as I used to . . . Well?"

Their two armchairs were almost touching. She was silent. He sighed:

"Ah, I can smell your scent! How I have longed for it. I bought a bottle of the perfume you always used, but on me it didn't smell the same. From you it comes mixed with the scent of your skin and hair. Come nearer, let me drink it in . . . You are going away, you will never come back again; let me draw in for the last time as much of you as I can . . . You shiver . . . am I then so horrible?"

She stammered: "No . . . it is cold . . ."

"Why are you so lightly dressed? I don't believe you brought a cloak. In November, too. It must be damp and dreary in the streets. How you tremble! How warm and comfortable it was in our little home . . . do you remember? You used to lay your face on my shoulder, and I used to hold you close to me. Who would want to sleep in my arms now? Come nearer. Give me your hand . . . There . . . What did you think when your lawyer told you I had asked to see you?"

"I thought I ought to come."

"Do you still love me?"

Her voice was only a breath:

"Yes . . ."

Very slowly, his voice full of supplication, he said:

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"I want to kiss you for the last time. I know it will be almost torture for you . . . Afterwards I Won't ask anything more. You can go . . . May I? . . . Will you let me? . . ."

Involuntarily she shrank back; then, moved by shame and pity, not daring to refuse a joy to the poor wretch, she laid her head on his shoulder, held up her mouth and shut her eyes. He pressed her gently to him, silent, prolonging the happy moment. She opened her eyes, and seeing the terrible face so near, almost touching her own, for the second time she shivered with disgust and would have drawn sharply away. But he pressed her closer to him, passionately.

"You would go away so soon? . . . Stay a little longer . . . You haven't seen enough of me . . ."

Look at me . . . and give me your mouth again . . . more of it than that . . . It is horrible, isn't it?"

She moaned:

"You hurt me . . ."

"Oh, no," he sneered, "I frighten you."

She struggled.

"You hurt me! You hurt me!"

In a low voice he said:

"Sh-h. No noise; be quiet. I've got you now and I'll keep you. For how many days have I waited for this moment . . . Keep still, I say, keep still! No nonsense! You know I am much stronger than you."

He seized both her hands in one of his, took a little bottle from the pocket of his coat, drew out the stopper with his teeth, and went on in the same quiet voice:

"Yes, it is vitriol; bend your head . . . there . . . You will see; we are going to be incomparable lovers, made for each other . . . Ah, you tremble? Do you understand now why I had you acquitted, and why I made you come here to-day? Your pretty face will be exactly like mine.

You will be a monstrous thing, and like me, blind! . . . Ah, yes, it hurts, hurts terribly."

She opened her mouth to implore. He ordered:

"No! Not that! Shut your mouth! I don't want to kill you, that would make it too easy for you."

Gripping her in the bend of his arm, he pressed his hand on her mouth and poured the acid slowly over her forehead, her eyes, her cheeks. She struggled desperately, but he held her too firmly and kept on pouring as he talked:

"There . . . a little more . . . you bite, but that's nothing . . . It hurts, doesn't it? It is Hell. . ."

Suddenly he flung her away, crying:

"I am burning myself."

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She fell writhing on the floor. Already her face was nothing but a red rag.

Then he straightened himself, stumbled over her, felt about the wall to find the switch, and put out the light. And round them, as in them, was a great Darkness . . .