

An Exotic Flower

Georges Sand

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Translated and adapted from a play by GEORGES SAND BY F. J. MORLOCK

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AN EXOTIC FLOWER
C 1986

The interior of a comfortable garret studio for a painter.

To the right, a window half covered with a green curtain. Two doors. One open.

Julian is at the window; Mark, his cousin, enters with a little potted plant covered with paper.

Julian (to himself)

Nobody in the garden! Isn't she going out today?

Mark

How wrapped up he is! Hey, Julian, good morning.

Julian

Hello, Mark.

Mark

So, you were lost in your grand artistic reveries.

Julian

Yes, counsellor.— I was watching the blossoming of spring. And is your plant blossoming?

Mark

It's bursting out, my friend, it's bursting out. Ah, if she'd been paid it would have been better— The plant is flowering. Tell me, if you inherit the money, will you help me?

Mark

Oh, of course, but don't rejoice in advance, my poor friend and cousin, I won't inherit a penny.

Mark

Why not?

Julian

Uncle Roger. He doesn't like artists in general and me in particular.

Mark

He may change. A lot depends on you.

Julian

You think I should give up painting?

Mark

Not at all! Paint flowers—butterflies like your father—who was outstanding at it—and besides, you're already highly spoken of— I don't want you to give it up, still I would rather you——

Julian

Rather I what?

Mark

Rather you gave me some water.

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Julian

Are you thirsty?

Mark

No—it's for this little flower which must be kept fresh.

Julian

Ah—how beautiful and nice it smells— I've never seen one like it. Are you making me a present of it?

Mark

I wish I could make presents like this. It's worth a thousand dollars.

Julian

That much? Bah! It must be from Uncle Roger.

Mark

What do you think? It's an Asian lily.

Julian

From Asia?

Mark

Or from South America—I don't know what it's called— Listen, ah, my word, I don't know. Nor do I care, you think, but you know, it was given to me with instructions just as if it was a baby to nurse.

Julian

And where are you taking it?

Mark

I am to bring it to you and confide it to you in your turn. You are to make a portrait of this vegetation while it is in flower—and our Uncle will pay you for it.

Julian

How much?

Mark

Two hours.

Julian (puzzled and irritated)

Two hours of his company?

Mark

No—two hours of your work time. Never mind. Hurry up, Julian and set to work.

Julian

Fine. Has he begun to realize that a flower painter and an amateur gardener can do each other a service? Tell me, Mark—why couldn't he have begun sooner—rich as he is?

Mark

Be glad he's begun. He's giving you his business.

Julian

And he gives you his legal business, also.

Mark

Some of it. A client like Uncle Roger has more business than a sole practitioner like myself can handle—but he employs me.

Julian

Well—why doesn't he make you one of his heirs?

Mark

Me! Never! I married a middle class girl.

Julian

He's seriously distracted, isn't he? The vanity of a self-made man has taken up residence in his empty old head.

Mark

It's a mania—a fixed idea. You know, he's furious because you won't marry a certain widow—

Julian

That fat Irish lady.

Mark

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She's got her pockets full of her forefather's money and a lineage that she traces back to some Irish king—which flatters the old moneybags—but I admit she's—a faded rose. Now, he's got a new project—a little less alarming.

Julian

Another plan to marry me?

Mark

Yes—twenty-five years old, also a widow—where does he find them?— passably pretty, and, I'm told, a bit of a flirt.

Julian

Very good. That's finished. I refuse.

Mark

Why? For what? Are you mad?

Julian

Undoubtedly! (gets up and goes to the window)

Mark

Well, that's the sort of response that cuts off all remonstrances.— But, Julian—what are you looking at out there?

Julian

Nothing.

Mark

If you say so. (looking out the window) Well, well, Lady Stella Marchbanks,—a client of mine. Let me call to her—

Julian

Absolutely not! She has no idea I watch her.

Mark (surprised)

You watch her?

Julian

She's got no idea. I take all possible precautions. Whenever she appears, I lower the curtain.

Mark

And now, when she walks in her garden, you meditate on her behind this stifling curtain. Are you certain she's never seen you?

Julian

Ah, my friend, she doesn't even know that I exist.

Mark

But she's going to learn of it.

Julian (agitated)

How? Why?

Mark

Because, as the result of a little lawsuit I won for her recently, this apartment has become her property.

Julian

Really?

Mark

Our Uncle wants to tear it down and enlarge his garden, which is on that side—separated from this by a small strip of land which he is trying to acquire.

Julian

Oh, my God—tear this place down!

Mark

It will be decided today.

Julian

By whom?

Mark

By the architect who will be here soon. If it is repairable, and can be put in good condition, the lady will keep it

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and rent it out—if not, she will sell it to Uncle Roger, and he will tear it down and plant tulips.

Julian

Impossible!

Mark

That's up to the tulips.

Julian

Ah, Mark—don't laugh at me! I am desperate.

Mark

What! Is it as serious as that—a woman you see only from a distance— and to whom you have never spoken?

Julian

She comes here—on that bench—where she stops for as much as an hour to read or dream. At other times, she is accompanied by one or two of her female friends or an old man—her relative. She argues with them. Ah, how soft her voice is, and her words—noble and touching. I am not wrong to listen, Mark! I'm not eavesdropping. I don't really know what she's talking about exactly—and besides, I'm not really interested in what she's talking about, except that she's talking. I care for her and all she says. I feel she's so good, so honest, so generous. Her soul is great and pure, a soul above all others. A true spirit, a rare sensibility, a magnanimous heart. In short, she's a creature from heaven, she's an angel come to earth—and I worship her.

Mark

Damn, damn—you are taken, my poor friend—and there's no hope! She's a very great lady!

Julian

And too austere in her ideas or her morals to take the least notice of me. So, you see, I can only love her in silence, without offending her. Don't betray me!

Mark

I'll be careful.— But, who knows, she's a widow, and not happy—if Uncle— But, what are you dreaming about?

Mark

Sorry. Were you speaking to me?

Mark

The devil! Yes, I am speaking to you! Are you stupid?

Julian

Tell me, Mark—this architect who's coming here—is it Ashley?

Mark

Eh—why, yes—our old schoolmate. Where are you going?

Julian

I am going to see him—he lives at the end of the street.

Mark

But, he's coming here.

Julian

Never mind! I intend—

Mark

What do you intend to do?

Julian

You will see.

Mark

But, this flower—the painting?

Julian

Yes, yes,—I'll be back right away. (rushes out)

Mark

Ah, this is a frenzy! What a head! Are all the artists like this? What an opportunity for a little fun—yes, I am going to do it. (Lady Stella appears) But first, I am going to test the waters—

(Enter Stella.)

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Stella

Ah, you here, Mr. Bradford.

Mark

Just like my own home—or rather, your home. Enter Lady Marchbanks.

Stella

No—I'll just come up. I wanted to see with my own eyes this place that's in danger of falling down. Mr. Ashley ought to be here by now?

Mark

No, m'am, he hasn't come yet. He's the one who's got the keys. Please wait for him here. This is the home of—I should say the studio of a painter, and no one's home.

Stella

Are you sure? The young painter who lives here is your relative, I believe?

Mark

Julian Thompson—my cousin. Besides, you are sure of your domain here—and in your capacity as landlady, have the right to inspect. And, you can have a look at the paintings—there's nothing wrong.

Stella

That's very good. Charming, in fact. I know from you that he's talented and well behaved—but I am going to be forced to tell him he must leave.

Mark

Without doubt. It's true that it's a case of force majeure—otherwise, he has a lease and there's an indemnity clause. It will have to be discussed.

Stella

Discussed? No—I will determine the extent of any indemnity myself. I understand nothing of business, you know that. But, he won't have any cause to complain. I am not going to stay here any longer—if he were to return! He lives all alone, right? He's not married?

Mark

He's not married—and no—. In fact, he lives alone—wisely and honorably.

Stella

His studio is very agreeable. All these flowers! Is he well off?

Mark

His earnings would permit him to live well enough, if he had not religiously paid all his father's debts.

Stella

So—he's refined and in straitened circumstances. Don't take my side, Mr. Bradford, I forbid you to.

Mark

If one may speak without offense, Lady Marchbanks is also in straitened circumstances. She never hesitates when it's a question of giving. She refuses to follow the advice of her humble solicitor. She dreams. She has already permitted me to tell her that she should think seriously of a second marriage.

Stella

Am I that badly off, Mr. Bradford?

Mark

Bad enough not to be in a position to rebuild this house which still brings in a little rent. Lady Marchbanks ought to put herself in a situation that would not give her such preoccupations as these! Truly, a person of her rank, with so fine a character—

Stella

Again, Mr. Bradford. I see you plan to make me contract a rich marriage.

Mark

It's up to you, Madame; I know a young chap—

Stella

Ah, you know a young chap—

Mark

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Handsome, good-looking, and full of heart.

Stella

Eh—it must be nice to be such a fellow—

Mark (aside)

This is going to take nerve. (aloud) And rich, very rich, Madame.

Stella

That's an advantage if he intends to marry money.

Mark

Just so, m'am. The magnificence of one's clothes makes up for the absence of titles. In the times in which we live, a mesalliance is not such a big affair as it once was.

Stella

Oh, excuse me—would it be a mesalliance? Don't speak of it any more— that disgusts me.

Mark

Oh! (aloud) I humbly ask pardon for having wounded your ladyship's principles.

Stella

You were about to say prejudices. Well, I mean to tell you that you are a gallant man. I have no prejudices—but, I think it somewhat cowardly to sell one's name for money. Especially to the vanity of a parvenue who seeks to marry a lady of quality. The whole situation ought to have more respect. I don't criticize the parvenues for having pride in their riches—if those riches were honestly won. But, to expect us to be proud of their riches for them is too much! Everybody belongs in his or her place without covetousness and without puerile ambition.

Mark

Madame is perfectly right. (aside) Poor Julian! He's going to have to leave here.

(Enter Julian.)

Julian

Well, I've seen Ashley, and— (seeing Stella) Oh!

Mark

Here he is, Madame, it's my cousin, Julian, the artist, your tenant. And since you have orders for him, here he is to receive them.

Stella

Sir, don't blame Mr. Mark for finding me installed here in your absence. I've been enjoying myself looking at your works.

Mark (aside to Julian)

She hasn't looked.

Stella

And, since we are here together, why shouldn't I tell you that I want to retake possession of this house.

Julian

But Ashley and I—we are agreed. Repairs are urgent, true—but since I don't want to leave, I will pay for them myself, and since it is of no concern to you that I am more or less inconvenienced—

Mark

Yes, but

Julian

Excuse me, Mark, this is my business.

Stella

Then, you refuse to agree to my request?

Julian

Your demand, Madame, I believe—

(There is a knock. Mark goes to the door and speaks to someone.)

Stella

You think it's only a question of—— What is it, Mark? The architect?

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Mark

No, Madame, it's my Uncle, who needs to see me about a pressing affair. (low to Julian) Your response to the marriage question.

Julian (irritated)

I told you 'no'!

Stella

Go, Mr. Mark, I will manage this business myself.

Mark

I will return very soon, M'am. (low to Julian) I'm going to gain time. You're insane. Don't hope for anything here. Intractable pride, my dear fellow.

(Exit Mark.)

Stella

Perhaps they asked for you, too.

Julian

No, m'am.

Stella

Well, I am going to speak frankly. If this place can be fixed, I want it for myself. I intend to install a friend here. The wife of one of my friends. I want you to set whatever damages you think fair for your prompt departure.

Julian

I will leave today, Madame. I can only obey you.

Stella

And your cousin was right—

Julian

No, Madame, one can lose one's happiness, one doesn't sell it.

Stella

Happiness. Yours can hardly be connected with this modest apartment.

Julian

Pardon me, it is so bright, so gay, so filled with laughter—the flowers before my window, the flat lawn—a corner of heaven above, the trees below, the song of a little fountain—the least sparrows of which I know—all that—all that is happiness—that is the life of a poor artist.

Stella

Well then—it hurts me to sadden you. You can stay on. I will put my friend on the first floor and you can have the attic. You have seen the view here (opening the window curtain) Ah, but it's my garden you see. I thought this place uninhabited.

Julian

I never use it, except to work; there's too much going on. I usually shut it.

Stella

Then, you don't enjoy the view you were boasting about?

Julian

When you are not there, Madame.

Stella

You know when I'm there? Do you know, Mr. Thompson, I find this window annoying.

Julian

Why, Madame, do you believe that I would take the liberty?

Stella

I believe nothing at all. I've never remarked anybody, and I don't suspect you of being curious. That would be—and I have no secrets. Never mind: you love your home here, and a neighbor's eyes would disturb you. If you really want to stay here, I will do my best not to disturb you, but you understand perfectly well, that this window must be walled up.

Julian

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Walled up? Good God, you plunge me, an artist, into darkness.

Stella

Wait a bit! If I am oriented properly, Mr. Bradford has large and beautiful gardens right here—he's your relative.

Julian

Yes, but—

Stella

You can put in a window over here—as large as you like—and your Uncle certainly won't object. Actually, you'll profit by the change. Speak to your Uncle—as soon as possible—you will oblige me. (seeing **Julian** is overcome)
You are very new here, they told me. You've only been here two or three months.

Julian

Two months. Two days, two hours are all the same. When I came here, the sadness of having lost my father—

Stella

A man of great talent, I know, and well liked by the whole world.

Julian

Yes, Madame. The regret of that loss was still very painful. I didn't go anywhere; I didn't live any more. Solitude was a need and a punishment. The tranquility of this place charmed me. I have learned calm—and also found lofty ideas, an ideal—and dreams and aspirations without end. From a world of desires without hope. Ah, your flowers are less scornful and less cruel than you. They don't believe themselves soiled by the glances of a poor nature lover. And God, who has made all that is good and beautiful makes it no crime to adore him in his divine works.

Stella

A spirit as lofty as yours will find pure joy and divine models in everything. Aren't you surrounded by them? Here you have plants more rare than mine, and you ought not to forget them for those of others. Live for the beautiful art your father has taught you, and where his renown precedes you. And, as you love to symbolize, I think that this lily—it's admirably white—ought not to bloom except in its purity—and you will find it naturally loves the shade and solitude.— Goodbye.

Julian

Goodbye, Madame.— But this flower you've admired. Allow me a sole consolation, a single kindness. (cuts the flower for her)

Stella

Ah, what are you doing?

Julian

Take it.

Stella

But— No, sir, I cannot accept it.

Julian

Ah, miserable thing that I am! You refuse me that! Yes, it is just; I was forgetting. Poor, and without rank, I have no right to offer you a flower.

Stella

That's not it, sir. But I don't receive flowers from anyone—and, I fear I may be allergic to the perfume of this one.
(Enter Mark.)

Mark (to Stella)

Are you leaving?

Stella

Mr. Ashley hasn't come. You will send him to my house.

(Stella disappears.)

Mark

Uncle Roger is getting impatient and irritated. (seeing the cut flower) Ah, good God, what have you done, you

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wretched man? It's a crime!
(Reenter Stella.)

Stella

What is this? What's wrong with him? (hurrying towards Julian)

Mark

A crime! A murder! You see, Madame. (pointing to the flower)

Stella

Ah, how you frightened me. (falling into a chair)

Julian

Frightened! Ah, she's fainted! (searching for a glass of water)

Stella

No, nothing, thanks—I don't understand—I thought, I don't know what I thought. Why such a terrible cry?

Mark

I am desolated to see you frightened, Madame—but if you knew—it's a veritable suicide.

Stella

What? Explain! Who?

Julian

But, I don't understand anything. Mark is crazy.

Mark

Yes, I laugh, I cry, I rage, I swear, I dare— We are all lost. Calm us, understand us, and be our judge. You know the views and reputation of our Uncle—the ex—shipping magnate, the fantastic, the honest, the disagreeable, the rich, Mr. Roger Bradford?

Julian

Eh! What does that matter to her ladyship?

Mark

Shut up, you fool, you are insupportable! (to Stella) Have you ever heard of a passion for tulips?

Stella (astonished)

What!

Mark

Yes, tulips and lilies. These here open only in the heat. Fifty—seven Celsius—it was put in my care for this cursed dauber to sketch.

Stella

Oh—I understand, I see.

Mark

No, Madame, you don't see at all. The consequences are beyond all expectations. Our Uncle Roger has decided—I've just received his confidence—to leave his wealth to Julian here—on certain conditions.

Julian

Will you please shut up! I—

Mark

NO, you please shut up— You have no common sense. After this horrible accident, this unforgivable mistake—or inexplicable malice—it's all over with you. I know him. I can see his fury; he will disown you; he will disinherit you. Here is a flower that will cost you three or four hundred thousand pounds.

Stella

Poor young man! And all over me! (aloud) Run, Mr. Bradford, Go tell your Uncle Roger that I did it.

Mark

You, Madame? He won't believe it.

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Stella

It really was my fault. I took a fancy to this flower, and without knowing what I did— Go quickly, Mr. Bradford. I take all the blame on myself.

Julian

But, I don't wish to deceive—

Mark

And, I don't wish to be accused. I answered for you. I'll be banished. Devil! No, it's my fault. I will run, I'll fly. (stopping) She hasn't left, and I'd better stay to see what concerns me— (hiding behind a tapestry near the door)

Julian

Let Mark appease my Uncle's fury if he likes. As for me, I have effrontery enough to bear it all. Ah, she was so sweet to me, so—

Stella

So?

Julian

So—instead of haughtily refusing my humble offering, you almost accepted it.

Stella

An offering which has perhaps cost you dearly! Wait, sir! What you've done is unreasonable, and perhaps what I'm going to say to you is unreasonable, too. But, far from treating you with disdain as you seem to believe, I am very moved by your stupidity. I see an absence, an absence of reason, certainly, and also an absence of calculation, and whether you are blamable or not—it is impossible not to esteem you—a person who so easily forgets his own interests in thinking how to please others.

Julian

It would have been a small pleasure if you had accepted it.— Why did you refuse it so harshly?

Stella

Harshly?— I don't believe I was harsh.

Julian

Harsh or not, why did you refuse it?

Stella

My God—there are certain conventions in the world.

Julian

Madame, I've seen the world a little, too. My father's wit and talent oftentimes caused me to be with the great ones of this land, and placed as I was at his side, despite my youth, I have been able to see and observe what is acceptable and what is not. If you had come to my father's studio and he had offered you a flower, you would not have refused him.

Stella

No, doubtless. An old man has the right to be gallant—and it would have been ungracious to offend him.

Julian

Then, I've had the misfortune to offend you—is that it?

Stella

My God! I didn't say that!

Julian

Very well, I lack manners; I've been presumptuous, impertinent.

Stella

Certainly not.

Julian

Pardon me, while you run me off the neighborhood—

Stella

Stop, Mr. Thompson, it really is necessary. You are not well here. The isolation, the dreaming—with such an imaginative mind! You create chimeras—get ideas which are not realistic, and are only fantasies of an artist, the spirits of a heart which is ignorant of itself. Me, I do not know why you have spoken of me—apropos of my

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refusal which has hurt you. I see a great fear of myself. I don't like to suffer, I have a horror of flirtations, but I'm also afraid that my honesty may be misconstrued and the most innocent act taken for—lightness or weakness. I don't accept homages or bouquets from anybody. I flee men's looks—my position forces me to adopt this reserve, and what I have not accepted from you, I have not accepted from a Duke of the blood. Please understand: it's the truth I'm telling you.

Julian

Goodbye, then, Madame,—and let nothing trouble the serenity of your soul. Mine breaks, and though I may not see you again—

Stella

What?

Julian

No, nothing, Madame. In losing everything, I do not intend to lose the respect I owe you.

Mark (aside)

Imbecile! If I don't meddle some more—— (aloud) I'm back.

Stella

Well.

Mark

All is lost. Uncle doesn't believe my word. He doesn't believe a word. He curses Julian and disinherits him—unless—

Stella

Unless what?

Mark

Unless he marries the Irish widow—

Stella

What widow? (Julian gestures for Mark to shut up)

Mark

No, I will name her. Let Lady Marchbanks be the judge of your foolishness. Mrs. Sheehan.

Stella (upset)

Oh—very charming—fashionable woman—but not pretty—a bit—a woman who contrives to please everyone. And why has he refused a person so— so charming?

Mark

Because the gentleman pretends to adore another woman—a woman who doesn't love him—a woman who scorns parvenues, who thinks herself too highly placed for him—a woman who—

Stella (sharply)

A woman that you know, Mr. Bradford?

Mark

No, Madame, I don't know her name.

Julian

I could name her to the world without compromising her. Since when is a woman of wealth exposed to blame because a fool, an unfortunate fool, kills himself for her. (gesture by Mark) All is over for me; the joys of youth, the promises of the future, the triumphs of art, the hopes, the illusions—everything! It's very hard to combat the evil this day brings—it's incurable. I can do nothing but nurse my wound; let myself be consumed by a terrible passion, and succumb to it without cowardice. Whether I am repulsed, disdained, abandoned, and cursed, I will cherish—I want to cherish this pure and holy fire that burns and kills me. (putting his head in his hands)

Stella (low to Mark)

His passion troubles me. Poor, turbulent heart! His manner is so good and so true! Console him, Mr. Bradford—tell him—

Mark

What can I say to him?

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Stella

Oh, really, I don't know. Tell him that his misery is worthy of pity. (aloud) My God, what can one say? How to console one who is so strong in loving like this? Is she free of all control? Does she manage her own affairs? And, if as he says, she is without flaw—shouldn't she be jealous—I mean determined to merit the respect with which he surrounds her? What can she be thinking of to encourage a man who can never hope to have her? And, if she does decide to have him—can she take him? Admitting that she is intimate with him—will she ever admit it publicly? She ought to complain without doubt—and perhaps she complains too much about him—for she ought to be decent: he would not love her if she was a vain thing, insolent, or a prude.— But, I believe she will make an effort to discourage him as she ought. (aside) Oh, this is cruel, and my heart feels a weakness I can no longer hide. (leaving, hiding her face in her handkerchief)

Mark

Dreamer—open your eyes—the fort is taken.

Julian

Ah, Mark, leave me alone; I am broken up.

Mark

But, don't you understand; Uncle Roger doesn't know the accident that has befallen his precious lily. I haven't been near him. I stayed here: I heard. I came back in time and saved everything by speaking of the Irish widow. Without my help and finesse, you would never have dared to make your declaration, and it's to me you owe the little bit of eloquence which has carried the day.

Julian

You're crazy.

Mark

Not at all! It's you—you are blind—Uncle Roger—

Julian

Ah, what are you talking about? It's a question of—

Mark

It's a question above all of that! Be loved by Lady Marchbanks, and be Uncle's heir. Be Uncle's heir and you have a right to pretend to Lady Marchbanks.

Julian

But she is above all—

Mark

Above all cupidity, I know it, but the world which would condemn her for marrying a poor painter will absolve her if she marries an honest millionaire. And you, yourself: would you dare to accept her hand if you had only privation and misery to offer her? No. Love matches are beautiful, I don't disagree: I love my wife. I work, she economizes, and we keep company together. But, when one marries a lady, one simply has to dispense with economies—for they'd be a shame and a torture to her. One must surround oneself with well-being and dignity—one must be rich—and I am telling you, you are rich—take my word. In less than three days, Uncle Roger and I are going to make you so rich that Lady Marchbanks will listen to the propositions she rejected this morning.

Julian

What are you saying? You've dared to—?

Mark

She doesn't know that I have spoke of her to you. She loves you today for your misery. Tomorrow, she will love you for being happy. She will pardon your happiness.

Julian

You lie—she doesn't love me.

Mark

Listen. She's not far off. Go! She is frightfully unhappy. She's crying all the time. (watching from the window)

Julian

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She cried?

Mark

She's looking up here. Yes, yes, she feels your despair.

Julian

What do you intend to do?

Mark

A test. (very loud, by the window) To the devil with this cursed flower. To the devil with grand passions that make a man crazy—and the great ladies who mock them. Come, let's leave. I don't want you to stay here another day—you will die! Come on, come on, I insist. (opening and shutting the door noisily and pushing Julian in a chair he, he hides in another corner)

Julian (low)

What—you think, you really think?

Mark

Obey—quickly.

Julian

I'm shaking

Mark

Silence.

(Enter Stella.)

Stella

Gone! Forever, perhaps! I will never see him again! Ah, what did I see him for? (taking the lily) Poor flower. Poor Julian! But, what's the matter with me, then! My heart is breaking. He was happy here—happy to love me—and I'm the one who's run him off. I'm the one who's killing him. Ah, I am going to write him. (sits at table) Dear sir— **Julian**—this is getting worse. Julian, in a word. I accept the lily and I accept you. (kissing the lily)

Julian (falling at her feet)

Ah! Thank you!

Stella

Julian!

Mark

Come, come, a happy friend, a lady for my cousin and my fee is paid.

CURTAIN