THE MASK OF LIFE.

By Virginia Woodward Cloud.

WITHIN a large envelope addressed to Mrs. Jeffrys, was a smaller one sealed and marked, "To be read when you are at leisure to receive a friend."

Marguerite Jeffrys lay back in the cushions before her fire and sighed. She had been receiving friends all the afternoon. She had welcomed, smiled, chatted, and, as Bertie Bartel was wont to say, "stroked the social fur until it purred." Now in her one rest-hour, before dressing for dinner, the letter which had come by the evening delivery was handed to her.

She closed her eyes, and lazily ignored the letter lying beside her. The warmth and quiet of her boudoir composed her physically; but the atmosphere of a crowded afternoon reception lingered, and the varicolored movement was before her—panoramic, brilliant, yet indefinite because suggestive only of the expected.

Life had become too distinctly a matter of adjustment for Marguerite Jeffrys to cavil, even in thought, at its many demands. The politician who plans his campaign and carries it through successfully does not murmur if its details be irksome. When her father died she had married Bernard Jeffrys as a natural result. He represented that inevitable sequence, life on an advanced scale, to which most women look forward. He belonged to her world, her order, and although she was not in love with him, she had no objection to him; and, what was of more importance, she was not in love with another. Therefore, in the face of a foreboding horizon, which darkened as she pictured it into that unpalatable effort at self-support, or "to do something"—always the most baffling outlook to a gentlewoman reared to do nothing outside of her own environment—Marguerite Jeffrys had married in her twenty-fifth year. She had found life, on the whole, very comfortable. Had she been less capable, less adaptive, it would have proved decidedly uncomfortable for somebody. But with beauty, wit, youth, money, and a husband who, albeit apparently given over soul and body to quotations in stocks, had the respect of his world, who possessed a thorough comprehension of their respective attitudes, who was never obtrusive, intrusive, sentimental, demanding, nor yet neglectful—and who received from her set admiration enough to satisfy a vainer woman than she—Marguerite Jeffrys was usually spoken of as an instance of fortune's most lavish partiality. Her friends remained the same friends, with the additions that gather around one through fluctuations of time and travel. She knew to a nicety whom she should meet that night at the Maxwells' dinner, even to the literary star who was the guest of honor. They were frequent, these literary and musical stars. They rose upon her firmament every season only to be received with acclamation and relegated to oblivion by the dawn of the next and newer sensation. She had stood sponsor for more than one collection of unnecessary verse, and what had it all amounted to?

She opened her eyes impatiently at having surprised herself into mental complaining. How foolish, how crude! What could be the matter with her? The clock struck the half-hour, and she vaguely recalled a story read to her in childhood, a story wherein the little Indian prince was bidden to cry for the moon because there was nothing else that could not be got for him, and he was tired of having everything.

She opened the letter mechanically—so many appeals came disguised into her hands, every sort of begging, from organizations to charwomen—and read:—

"At the outset, do not lay this down unread, thinking it to be a vulgar, anonymous appeal, or a love-letter. I have been too long your friend to write you that which I think would be received otherwise than in the spirit in which it is written. I have so carefully analyzed your wonderful, artistic, complex, yet controlled nature, which is being unfolded by time into its full beauty and significance, that I trust to that inherent nobility which I know so well, and tell you why I write to you. Were there the least possibility of your discovering me, and thereby making an

uncomfortable consciousness for you, I should not presume to speak to you. But I have waited for this time, the time when you begin to feel that you are alone, when you begin to know yourself, to realize that you have outgrown those who have proved of fleeting interest, and are adapting yourself through a habit which will inevitably become painful when monotony, that most dangerous realization to one of your nature, is showing its level before you, unbroken, hopeless. A new interest has always been inevitable, and is now. There is no one to whom you can turn for true understanding. Why should I not be that interest? I shall not intrude upon you, even so far as ever to reveal my identity. For, strange as it may seem, I should be as loath to accept a response from you as you would be to give one. My sole object is to be a part of your life, however small and unobtrusive a part; of your real life, not the side which is ever turned outward, that you may feel that there is one who understands it in all its phases, though they may be hidden, one who knows that rare nature of yours, so misapprehended by the many, one who is never deceived, even by the exquisite mask of your face. I have studied you for so long that I have grown to feel a sort of jealous mental guardianship over you, and no child could be more sacred to a parent, no sweetheart to her lover, than all pertaining to you is to me. Every week, on this day, I shall send you a word of assurance, the simple assurance of one who is loyal to you even in thought, upon whom you can rely in thought, and who can speak to you in truthfulness and trust.

"Yours."

Marguerite Jeffrys looked at this incomprehensible letter first in amazement, then in disapproval, then in vexation, for she failed to arrive at any definite opinion about it, which was of itself something new to her. Her humor rose to the occasion and she started to throw the letter into the fire, but something stayed her hand, a sentence under her eye:—

"When you begin to feel that you are alone, when you begin to know yourself ——"

It seemed impossible that any looker-on, however astute, could divine that recently a vague sense of solitariness, of apartness, of realization that she was facing the inevitable limitations of her life, was wrapping her around. Yet it was so. She examined the letter by the light on her toilet-table. The writing was wholly unfamiliar; a man's hand, small and cramped, albeit clear; a rather literary hand, or that of an exclusive nature; a sensitively discriminating and sincere handwriting. Then she opened her dressing-case and tossed the letter in it, and locked the lid.

The letter did not recur to Mrs. Jeffrys' mind until late that night when driving home, having looked in at a reception after the dinner. Leaning back, with her eyes closed, she suddenly remembered with a thrill of resentment that the presumptuous writer must have been present inspecting her, criticizing her. She made an impatient gesture, in the darkness. Nevertheless, man after man rose before her mentally in spite of herself, to be dismissed as impossible, yet one of them it certainly was. At any rate, she determined, should the preposterous letter come again the next week, she could by that time discover him and put a stop to it.

Nevertheless, in the coming week, the words of the letter returned to her more than once. In vain she told herself that it was quixotic, sentimental or actually impertinent; the writer had touched the truth too sharply at the core to be ignored. Before the week was out, Marguerite Jeffrys acknowledged to herself that she was being bored, that life was trite and its incessant round palling upon her. When she went out she met the people she had expected to see; when she stayed in she received them, or sat opposite her husband at the table. He had never been so wholly absorbed in business, or so inexpressive. Of course, she knew that he was pleased when she made a good appearance, but something an old Frenchwoman had once said to her, when in Paris, returned like an unwelcome echo: "Do not be mistaken, my child, it is not pride we all want, it is love."

Yet did she want her husband to love her? Hardly that. She supposed that in his own way he did, but what a way it was! When they married she had let him

fully understand her relation to him, and he had said, "I appreciate how you feel and shall never presume upon your position."

She knew that he knew she had not loved him, and he was willing to marry her anyhow. He was satisfied with her as she was. He went his uneventful, silent, businesslike way, and she her social routine, and there had never been a ripple between them. She began to wish, almost, that there might be. He was always ready to accompany her when she wished, and she always at liberty to go without him when she chose. Once the same old lady had remarked upon this unusual freedom, and Marguerite Jeffrys had replied impatiently: "Where nothing is denied, nothing is desired. I have the misfortune to have no wishes."

"And monsieur, your husband, even looks on while the Count de A—— adores you!" said the Parisian, and Marguerite had replied, "He knows that the Count bores me, but if he did not, a fall in the cotton market would erase the thought of the Count and myself entirely from monsieur's mind, I assure you!"

Now, however, the discerning truth of this peculiar letter had struck home at the very moment when the tenor of her life was becoming unbearably monotonous, and a new interest inevitable. Had she been a commonplace woman with less humor, perhaps one of her many adorers would have filled the vacancy and played the part, but they, too, bored her. One week later the letter arrived:—

". . . Revelation is, after all, only realization," it said. "This occurred to me last night while watching you in your box at the opera. What absolute slaves we are to ourselves and to each other, and how little we realize it. Eternally coaxing ourselves to feign delight at that which we are forced to accept. For this oblivion we can thank habit on one side, which furnishes the narcotic, and whose bondmen we are. Take your likes and dislikes, for instance: you began by heartily disliking certain people, but so molded are we by habit that through necessity you have well-nigh forgotten all about it. Yet a wholesome dislike is not to be despised. We are many-sided, and anything is better than neutrality. I should know, for the life I live outwardly is wholly neutral, and the one which writes to you, and is unknown outwardly, is a veritable recluse. . . . You may say you have no dislikes. That is not so. You tolerate them. Your real nature is an extreme one and knows little medium. You do not love, because there is no one upon whom you can lavish your entire affection. For pardon me the unavoidable knowledge that you do not love your husband. You tolerate him comfortably, which is much. Had he been jealous you would have flung yourself into some violent love-affair ere this, which you would have regretted ever after. Many have loved you as far as they dared, for it is an easy matter to love you. I once heard a man say it was too easy to love you and too hard to confide it to you. This shows your knowledge of the power of reserve, and your understanding of men. You have too keen a humor ever to have married other than as you did, or under the influence of a 'grande passion.' . . . . I wonder if my espionage troubles you? I deeply (yet fearfully) hope not, for there may come a day when you shall need the consciousness of me. When you begin to vary your inevitable white gown by one of another color, I shall know I have disturbed you. Until then, this weekly letter shall go to you until death stops me. . . ."

One night at Mrs. Reuter's, Bertie Bartel said, "May the Jabberwocky rest from his labors and sit beside the White Queen?"

"She was very nearly a blue one tonight," said Marguerite, making room for him on the divan.

"You look pensive, now I think of it," he said. "Who is the man?"

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. Jeffrys. "I mean that I nearly wore a blue gown."

"Why, when it is so unique to be always distinctively white?"

"Oh, because"—she stopped, amazed to find the color flaming her face.

"I see," said he, speculatively, "some unlucky beggar doesn't like the blue one, or likes the white one too well. I never knew any one who could let a man drop so successfully without breaking his neck."

She considered his guileless blondness while he chatted. Could it be? Impossible! He was too young, too flippant. Soon afterward, she was walking through the rooms with Alec Reuter, and he said:

"Mrs. Jeffrys, it is awfully good of you to appear so interested in the music to-night. I know you do not love Wagner a rap more than I do. I believe you are as consummately bored as I am, but you conceal it so well that it is a pleasure to watch you!"

She laughingly denied it, and thought of the letter. Was it possible? They had known each other for years, but she knew that his engagement was about to be announced, and that he was absorbed with another. While driving home, she spoke to her husband, who sat beside her: "Did I appear bored to-night?"

"You never appear other than to advantage," he said. "Are you tired? Would you like to go away? To run down to Lakewood?"

She moved impatiently. "Lakewood! It would be the same there, anywhere. I find no difference——" She stopped. How pettish, how childish, it sounded!

"Is there anything you wish?" he asked, as they left the carriage.

"No; in fact, I have nothing to wish for," she said, in a half-whimsical way.

"I am glad," he said, politely.

She sighed, as she went upstairs. How kind he was, how inevitably correct.

When she had sent her maid away, she unlocked the dressing-case and opened a letter received that evening. It had seemed uncanny that the writer should know her so well, should discover even those things about her nature which were but half acknowledged to herself.

"Who is the bravest," it said, "yet the most cowardly? Who the boldest, yet the most fearful? Who the fleetest of thought, yet the most doubtful? Who the wisest, yet the most foolish? Who has such sight, and who (thank heaven!) such blindness? You guess aright, the lover. But, stay, I have not yet said that I am your lover. True, I have not said I am not. Who, so well as Love, knows the hunger of the heart, who its satiety? Who else can feed upon such frugal fare and live—upon a thought, a word, a barren hope? Alas, it is love alone who can be, at once, king and slave, tyrant and suppliant. Suppose, all unannounced, the beggar should cast aside his rags and stand before you king? . . ."

She threw the letter back into the box and closed the lid, casting the words from her, but they would return, and she did not destroy the letter. All through the following week she was conscious of a subtle undercurrent of anticipation. She found herself studying the men around her with new interest, to discover if the writer were among them. She experienced a wholly novel sensation of youth, almost of girlishness, which is ever dormant, ready to awaken when a woman has aught in her heart to conceal. None knew better than she the power of mystery, of elusiveness, and she knew that it was for that reason, perhaps, that the situation interested her. But why should it not? What could prevent the knowledge that, when she dressed at night, it was for one who would see her, not with the impartial eyes of the many, nor yet the prejudiced gaze of others who admired her most, but with the discriminating vision of one who refused to be deceived by her moods? Mrs. Jeffrys was experiencing a baffling, and therefore a new, sensation.

When the next letter came, she was alone, and be it known she rather expected a declaration, a love-letter, and was ready to be disillusioned and disappointed. On the contrary, it gave no such sign, but was full of mental vitality, color, humor, with that sense of intellectual sympathy so precious to one whose intellectual life has been without response. It seemed as though the unspoken questions of her mind were being answered, and the falsity of her life were laid bare under the searching vision which read her so unerringly. She recalled how mechanically she had agreed with every one else about the play of the night before, passing over such idiosyncrasies as appealed to her and talking mainly of the star's last divorce. A paragraph in the letter said:

". . . I knew that you were realizing, as I was, the glory of Shakespeare, and how marvelous a thing it is after all to

have conceived such a possibility, which becomes real when presented to the eye. The combination of forces in the court scene, for instance, the harmony of it—that free, Greek rabble, always voicing—moving between the King and the outcast Queen like the fatal tide of ignorance that must ever be turned before justice is reached. For is not ignorance the most cruel thing in the world? . . ."

Gradually Marguerite Jeffrys ceased to deny to herself that she waited for the letter with something akin to expectancy. The absence of the personal element, of all pose, the baffling impossibility of calling up any physical image of the writer, of grasping any tangible opinion concerning him—all lent fuel to the imagination; and, too, there came that consciousness, perhaps of the maternal instinct, of possessing something wholly her own, yet something which made no demands.

The letters that followed were never the same in tone. There was always the element of the unexpected about them. One would lead her to think that the next would surely commit the writer to some definite avowal, or disclosure; the next would prove wholly elusive, opening a new channel of thought, suggestive and inspiring to her. But the writer's incognito remained absolute. At last, one day he wrote:—

". . . Every one has his willingly weak moments. It is a little mental coddling we allow ourselves. Not the fortunate, such as yourself, but such as I, the irretrievably lonely. Well, I confess to the wilful weakness of an intense longing that is upon me. Surely the realm of silence is not abolished to beyond the grave, for in my life it is boundless, and the longing is this—to receive some expression which will tell me if you read my letters, or if they are destroyed unread. This is all. If I receive none—and I know that you would not grant it unless you freely wished to do so—I shall take it for granted that you have never seen these words, but have destroyed the letter; or again, that you are displeased at my presumption. Now, I shall risk making you my eternal foe (no, no—not that!) and ask if you believe in my loyalty and sincerity. Do you read the letters, or are they destroyed? At least, I may know thus much. And if I may, it will be with so sacred a sense of gratitude—oh, from my soul, so deep a sense of gratitude that—well, never mind! Play to-night that it is a Venetian carnival, and not the grand opera—for I suppose you will go. And if I may know this which I ask, will you wear or carry something scarlet about you? . . ."

That night, Marguerite Jeffrys appeared in her box all in white—regally, radiantly white. There were pearls in her hair, and her arms and neck were bare.

"Vive la Reine Blanche!" said Bertie Bartel, arranging her white cloak on the back of her chair. Then as she leaned forward to speak to some one in the adjoining box, she unfurled a fan of scarlet feathers and laid it upon the edge of the box. That was all.

After this, the letters were full of deepest reserve, the very eloquence of silence. This restraint impressed her with a strength hitherto not experienced, as of something real, something to rest upon, something as vital as the blood in her veins. Little by little she felt that the letters had appealed to all that was best in her nature, all that was strongest; they buoyed her mentally, they seemed to mirror all that she might be rather than to exaggerate what she was. They held before her the vision of herself, a result of her possibilities; and she began to guard herself, to go softly lest she should in some light manner fall short of that which she seemed to him to be. And then——

There stole into them something like a fragrance long suppressed, too strong and too sweet not to evade the barrier of words—something tender, intangible, appealing, suggestive, determined—something that thrilled her as with pain, but with pain that was exquisite. She began to move as in a dream, to fear to know more, because of the sweetness of uncertainty.

It was just at this time that Marguerite Jeffrys' husband died. He was killed in an accident on the cars. In the excitement of that terrible day when he was brought home to her, and in the many demands following, she had scarcely time

to give way to the sorrow that she sincerely felt. Her grief was real, but not keen. Their lives had been lived so utterly apart, their personalities so divided, that other than the respect and gratitude in which she held him, and the dependence which habit had enforced, it was impossible she should experience bitter grief at his death.

When evening came, however, and she was alone in the silent house, with the quietly moving servants, she experienced a horrible sense of loneliness. She had been so surrounded with the certainty of his protection that she was for the first time actually solitary. When the clock struck, she vaguely remembered that it was the day for the letter from her unknown friend. With this memory, she realized that she had grown older of late and better able to stand alone under the loss of her husband than she would have been six months before. What had wrought this change? The answer, in thought, was like an unseen touch upon the hand, and with it, the evening mail was brought to her.

She hastily looked over the pile of letters, but for the first time the weekly letter was not among them. Something in her throat seemed to arise and stifle her. She had thought that at this time, if at no other, the writer would not fail her. She instinctively moved toward the room where her husband's body lay, and in the hall she met his man coming toward her with a letter. This man was an old servant deeply devoted to his master, and there were traces of profound sorrow upon his face. He bowed silently and handed her a letter, and in spite of herself her heart bounded. It had come, then, and had only been overlooked. She entered a dressing-room adjoining that of her husband, and stood under the light to open it, and read this:—

"This once shall I speak to you again, even though it shut the gate of heaven to me forever. It is not my will to speak to you now, for I have learned of late that there is that which is stronger than the human will, stronger than life or than death, and in spite of me it speaks to you to-night. Oh, I pray you listen to me, for I am alone in the desert and starving, starving, not for words of yours—God help me, I know too well that they will never be mine—but starving for utterance. Since there is no other comfort, I can at least cry out once, I love you so. I love you so, that it is useless to masquerade any longer, for every word I write must tell you. It goes from me in every breath I draw, and if I continue to send you letters you must discover me, and I avert mine eyes before the meaning of that. Now that I have broken my word, and the bond of silence, I shall write to you no more. For the thought of you and love for you wraps me round until there is nothing else on earth for me, except pain, with which I am one. I have eased my heart by writing you these letters. It was my sole salvation, and I ask you to forgive me, now that I shall never write again, for now I can conceal no longer, and for this reason by no sign shall I ever again approach you—no, not by a written word. The letters must cease, although I had thought to write them still. I may not even mail this one, though I am pitifully weak. Perhaps I can destroy it and let silence again be the eternal bar between us. The grains of comfort have been few, but I thank you for them from my soul. I have lived upon them. My dear love—good-by."

The realization of what she lost in losing the sustaining power of this unknown friend was too sudden, too crushing, to be otherwise than benumbing. Mechanically, with the letter in her hand, she turned to the room where her husband lay, and stood beside him, as though even his bodily presence was something upon which to depend. As she stood with the new and awful sense of solitude pressing upon her, she looked down upon the serene mask molded by the great magician; it seemed as though a wonder had been wrought, making it masterful, delicate, beautiful. Suddenly there came a sound. The old servant stood behind her striving to speak.

"Madam," he said, "I think better to tell you that I have just now found the letter which is addressed to you, in the pocket of Mr. Jeffrys' coat."

He went out and closed the door.

Like light striking upon a sword, words smote through her brain—"This weekly letter shall go to you until death stops me."

She fell upon her knees with a bitter cry, her arms thrown over him.