CLASSICS TO GO

A LOVE CRIME

PAUL BOURGET

A LOVE CRIME

PAUL BOURGET

CONTENTS

DEDICATION.

TO GASTON CRÉHANGE.

Many days have elapsed, my dear friend, since our childhood, but they have passed away without effecting any alteration in the affectionate feelings we then entertained. In memory of an intimacy of heart and mind which has never known a cloud, it is very pleasant to me to write your name at the beginning of that one of my books which you preferred to all the rest. It is further the book in which I have stated with most sincerity what I think concerning some of the essential problems of the modern life of our day. May this complete sincerity, by which you, the truest and most loyal being I know, have doubtless been attracted, plead in favour of the work with readers who would otherwise be startled by a certain boldness of depicture and cruelty of analysis!

For the rest, whatever may be the verdict of public opinion respecting "A Love Crime," as I have called this minute diagnostic of a certain distemper of the soul, it will always be possessed of one great merit in my eyes, for it will have pleased you, and have enabled me once more to subscribe myself, my dear Gaston, your ever faithful friend,

PAUL BOURGET.

CHAPTER I

The little drawing-room was illuminated by the soft light of three lamps—tall lamps standing on Japanese vases and bearing globes upon which rested flexible shades of a pale blue tint. The door was hidden by a piece of tapestry; two walls were hung with another piece, which was covered with large figures. Both windows were draped with curtains—drawn just now—of deep red colour and heavy of fold.

The apartment thus closed in had a homelike air, which was heightened by the profusion of small articles scattered over the furniture: photographs set in frames, lacquered boxes, old-fashioned cases, a few Saxon statuettes, books stitched in covers of antique stuff, such as were coming into fashion in the year 1883. The wreathing foliage of an evergreen plant showed in one corner. Close beside it, an open piano displayed its white keys. An English screen with coloured glass and a shelf on which tea-cups, books, or work might be laid, stood in folds on one side of the fire-place. The fire burned with a peaceful crackling noise which formed an accompaniment to the sound proceeding from the tea-pot as the latter received the caresses from the flame of its lamp on the low table designed for such service.

The furniture of the somewhat crowded drawing-room presented that composite appearance which is characteristic of our time, together with the peculiarity that everything in it seemed to be almost too new. At a first glance, certain slight indications would have seemed to show that its Parisian aspect had been voluntarily aimed at. Objects were contrasted here and there; there were, for instance, little old-fashioned silver spoons; on the walls were two excellent copies of small religious pictures, to which

memories of childhood were certainly linked, and which could have come only from an old country house. The photographs, also, witnessed, by the dress and demeanour of the relatives or friends represented, to altogether provincial relationships. The feeling of contrast would have become still more perceptible to one visiting the other rooms and finding everywhere evident tokens that the persons dwelling in them had lived but a very short time at Paris.

This small-sized drawing-room belonged to a small-sized house situated at No. 3½, Rue de La Rochefoucauld. The lower part of this street, which descends in a very steep slope to the Rue Saint-Lazare, comprises several private houses of very varied build, and a few retired dwellings surrounded by gardens. The house containing the little drawing-room was built for an actress by a celebrated financier under the Empire, at a period when the Rue de la Tour des Dames harboured many princes and princesses of the footlights. Too small to suit a wealthy family, too inconvenient, owing to certain deficiencies in accommodation, for tenants accustomed to the completeness of English comfort, it must have proved quite seductive to persons accustomed to a semi-country life by its attraction as a "home," as well as by the quiet pervading the end of the street, which is rarely affronted by vehicles on account of the difficulty of the ascent.

During this November evening, although the windows of the little drawing-room looked upon the courtyard, and the latter opened upon the street, only a dim and distant murmuring penetrated from without, broken by occasional gusts of the north wind. Judging by the whistling of this north wind the night must have been a cold one. So, at least, opined a fairly young man, one of the three persons assembled in the drawing-room, as he rose from his chair,

set down his empty cup on the tea-tray with a sigh, and looked at the time-piece.

"Ten o'clock. Must I really go to see the Malhoures this evening? What a disaster it is to have a sensible wife who thinks about your future! Never get married, Armand. Listen to that wind! I was so comfortable here with you. Look here, Helen," he went on, leaning on the back of the easy-chair in which his wife was seated, "what will happen if I do not put in an appearance this evening?"

"We shall be discourteous to some very kind people, who have always behaved perfectly towards us since we came to Paris a year ago," replied the young woman; she stretched out to the fire her slender feet, in the pretty patent leather shoes and mauve stockings, the latter being of the same colour as her dress. "If I had not my neuralgia!" she added, putting her fingers to her temple. "You will make all my excuses to them. Come, my poor Alfred, courage!"

She rose and held out her hand to her husband, who drew her to him in order to give her a kiss. Visible pain was depicted on Helen's handsome face for a minute, during which she was constrained to submit to this caress. Standing thus, in her mauve-coloured, lace-trimmed dress, the contrast between the elegance of her entire person and the clumsiness of the man whose name she bore was still more striking.

She was tall, slender, and supple. The delicacy with which her hand joined the arm which the sleeve of her dress left half uncovered, the fulness of this arm, on which shone the gold of a bracelet, the roundness of her dainty waist, the grace of her youthful figure,—all revealed in her the blooming of a bodily beauty in harmony with the beauty of her head. Her bright chestnut hair, parted simply in the centre, half concealed a forehead that was almost too high —a probable sign that with her feeling predominated over

judgment. She had brown eyes, in a fair complexion, such eyes as become hazel or black according as the pupil contracts or dilates; and everything in the face declared passion, energy, and pride, from the rather too pronounced line of the oval, indicating the firm structure of the lower part of the head, to the mouth, which was strongly outlined, and from the chin, which was worthy of an ancient medal, to the nose, which was nearly straight, and was united to the forehead by a noble attachment.

The pure and living quality of her beauty fully justified the fervour depicted on the face of her husband while he was kissing his wife, just as the evident aversion of the young woman was explained by the unpleasing aspect of her lord and master. They were not creatures of the same breed. Alfred Chazel presented the regular type of a middle-class Frenchman, who has had to work too diligently, to prepare for too many examinations, to spend too many hours over papers or before a desk, at an age when the body is developing.

Although he was scarcely thirty-two, the first tokens of physical wear and tear were abundant with him. His hair was thin, his complexion looked impoverished, his shoulders were both broad and bony, and there was an angularity in his gestures as well as an awkwardness about his entire person. His tall figure, his big bones, and his large hand suggested a disparity between the initial constitution, which must have been robust, and the education, which must have been reducing. Chazel carried an eye-glass, which he was always letting fall, for he was clumsy with his long, thin hands, as was attested by the tying of the white evening cravat, so badly adjusted round his already crumpled collar. But when the eye-glass fell, the blue colour of his eyes was the better seen—a blue so open, so fresh, so childlike, that the most ill-disposed persons would have found it hard to

attribute this man's weariness to any excess save that of thought.

His still very youthful smile, displaying white teeth beneath a fair beard, which Alfred wore in its entirety, harmonised with this childlike frankness of look. And, in fact, Chazel's life had been passed in continuous, absorbing work, and in an absolute inexperience of what was not "his business," as he used to say. Son of a modest professor of chemistry, and grandson of a peasant, Alfred, having inherited aptitude for the sciences from his father, and tenacity of purpose from his grandfather, had, by dint of energy, and with but moderate abilities, been one of the first at the entrance to that École Polytechnique which, in the estimation of many excellent intellects, exercises, by its overloaded and precocious examinations, a murderous influence upon the development of the middle-class youth of our country.

At twenty-two, Chazel passed out twelfth, and three years later first from the School of Roads and Bridges. Sent to Bourges, he fell in love with Mademoiselle de Vaivre, whose father, having married a second time, could give her only a very slender dowry. The unexpected death, first of Monsieur de Vaivre, then of his second wife and of their child, suddenly enriched the young household. Appointed the preceding year to a municipal post at Paris, the engineer found that he had realised a hundredfold the most ambitious hopes of his youth. His wife's fortune amounted to about nine hundred thousand francs, to the returns from which were added the ten thousand francs of his own salary and the small income which had been left by his father. But this competency, instead of blunting the young man's activity, stimulated it to the ambition of compensating in honour for the inequality of position between himself and his wife. He had, accordingly, gone back to mathematical labours with fresh ardour. Admission to the Institute shone on the horizon of his dreams, like a sort of final apotheosis

to a destiny, the happiness of which he modestly referred to his father's wise maxim: "To keep to the high road."

Add to this that a son had been born to him, in whom he already discerned a reflection of his own disposition, and it cannot fail to be understood how this man would congratulate himself daily for having taken life, as he had done, with complete submission to all the average conditions of the social class in which he had been born.

Did these various reflections pass through the mind of the third individual—the man whom Alfred Chazel had called Armand, as he contemplated the conjugal tableau through the smoke from a Russian cigarette which he had just lighted—a liberty which revealed the extent of his intimacy with the family? The same contrast which separated Alfred from Helen separated him also from Armand. The latter looked at first younger than his age, though he too had passed his thirty-second year. If Alfred's carelessly-worn coat revealed rather the leanness and disproportion of his body, the frock of the Baron de Querne—such was Armand's family-name—fitted close to the shoulders and bust of a man, small but robust, and evidently devoted to fencing, riding, tennis, and all the sporting habits which the youths of the richer classes have contracted in imitation of the English, now that political careers—diplomacy, the Council of State, and the Audit Office—are denied them by their real or assumed opinions.

The quiet jewellery with which the young baron was adorned, the delicacy of his hands and feet, and everything in his appearance, from his cravat and his collar to the curls in his dark hair, and to the turn of his moustache, drawn out over a somewhat contemptuous lip, disclosed that deep attention to the toilet which assumes the lengthened leisure of an idle life. But what preserved De Querne from the commonplaceness usual to men who are visibly occupied

with the trifles of masculine fashion was a look, in a generally immovable face, of peculiar keenness and unrest. This look, which was not at all like that of a young man, contradicted the remainder of his person to the extent of imparting an appearance of strangeness to one who looked in this way, although a desire to evade remark, and to be above all things correct, evidently influenced his mode of dress.

Just as Chazel seemed to have remained quite young at heart, in spite of the failure of constitution, so the other, if only in the expression of his eyes, which were very dark ones, appeared to have undergone a premature aging of soul and intellect, in spite of the energy maintained by his physical machine. The face was somewhat long and somewhat browned, like that of one in whom bile would prevail some day, the forehead without a wrinkle, the nose very refined; a slight dimple was impressed upon the square chin. It would have been impossible to assign any profession or even occupation to this man, and yet there was something superior in his nature which seemed irreconcilable with the emptiness of an absolutely idle life, as well, too, as lines of melancholy about the mouth which banished the idea of a life of nothing but pleasure.

Meanwhile he continued to smoke with perfect calmness, showing every time that he rejected the smoke small, close teeth, the lower ones being set in an irregular fashion, which is, people say, a probable indication of fierceness. He watched Chazel kiss his wife on the temple, while *she* lowered her eyelids without venturing to look at Armand; and yet, had the dark eyes of the young man been encountered by her own, she would not have surprised any trace of sorrow, but an indefinable blending of irony and curiosity.

"Yes," said Alfred, replying thus to the mute reproach which Helen's countenance seemed to make to him, "it is bad form to love one's wife in public, but Armand will forgive me. Well, goodbye," he went on, holding out his hand to his friend, "I shall not be away for more than an hour. I shall find you here again, shall I not?"

The young Baron and Madame Chazel thus remained alone. They were silent for a few minutes, both keeping the positions in which Alfred had left them, she standing, but this time with her eyes raised towards Armand, and the latter answering her look with a smile while he continued to wrap himself in a cloud of smoke. She breathed in the slight acridity of the smoke, half opening her fresh lips. The sound of carriage wheels became audible beneath the windows. It was the rolling of the cab that was taking Chazel away.

Helen slowly advanced to the easy chair in which Armand was sitting; with a pretty gesture she took the cigarette and threw it into the fire, then knelt before the young man, encircled his head with her arms, and, seeking his lips, kissed him; it looked as though she wished to destroy immediately the painful impression which her husband's attitude might have left on the man she loved, and in a clear tone of voice, the liveliness of which discovered a free expansiveness after a lengthened constraint, she said:

"How do you do, Armand. Are you in love with me to-day?"

"And yourself," he questioned, "are you in love with me?"

He was caressing the hand of the young woman who had thrown herself upon the ground, and with her head resting on her lover's knees, was looking at him in a fever of ecstasy.

"Ah! you flirt," she returned, "I have no need to tell you so to have you believe it."

"No," he replied, "I know that you love me—much—though not enough to go all lengths with the feeling."

The tone in which he uttered this sentence was marked with an irony which made it palpably an epigram. It was an allusion to oft-stated complaints. Helen, however, received the derisive utterance with the smile of a woman who has her answer ready.

"So you will always have the same distrust," she said, and although she was very happy, as her eyes sufficiently testified, a shadow of melancholy passed into those soft eyes when she added: "So you cannot believe in my feelings without this last proof?"

"Proof," said Armand, "you call that a proof! Why the unqualified gift of the person is not a proof of love, it is love itself. It is true," he went on with a more gloomy air, "so long as you refuse to be entirely mine I shall suspect—not your sincerity, for I think that you think you love me, but the truth of this love. Too often people imagine that they have feelings which they have not. Ah! if you loved me, as you say, and as you think, would you deny me yourself as you do? Would you refuse me the meeting that I have asked of you more than twenty times? Why you would grant it as much for your own sake as for mine."

"Armand—" she began thus, then stopped, blushing.

She had risen and was walking about the room without looking at her lover, her arms apart from her body with the backs of her hands laid on her hips, as was usual with her at moments of intense thought. Since she had begun to love, and had acknowledged her feelings to Monsieur de Querne she was quite aware that she must some day give up her beautiful dream of an attachment which, though forbidden, should remain pure. Yes, she knew that she must give her entire self after giving her heart, and become the mistress

of the man whom she had suffered to say to her: "I love you." She knew it, and she had found strength for the prolonging of her resistance to that day, not in coquetry—no woman was less capable of speculating with a man's ungratified desire in order to kindle his passion—but in the persistence of the duty-sense within her.

Where is the married woman who has not fondled this chimera of a reconciliation between the infidelity of heart and the faith sworn to her husband? The renunciation of the delights of complete love seems at first to her a sufficient expiation. She engages in adultery believing that she will not pass beyond a certain limit, and she does in fact keep within it a longer or a shorter time according to the disposition of the man she loves. But the inflexible logic that governs life resumes its rights. Soul and body do not separate, and love admits of no other law than itself.

Yes, the fatal hour had struck for Helen, and she felt it. How many times during the last fortnight had she had this horrible discussion with Armand, who always ended by requiring from her this last token of love? She was sensible that after each of these scenes she had been lessened in the eyes of this man. A few more, and he would lose completely his faith in the feeling which she entertained towards him, a feeling that was absolute and unreasoned; for she loved him, as women alone are capable of loving, with such a love as is almost in the nature of a bewitchment, and is the outcome of an irresistible longing to afford happiness to the person who is thus loved. She loved him and she loved to love him. Pain in those beloved eyes was physically intolerable to her, and intolerable also mistrust, which betokened the shrinking back of his soul.

She had taken account of all this, she had looked the necessity for her guilt in the face, and she had resolved to offer herself to her "beloved," as in her letters she always

called him, because "friend" was too cold, and the word "lover" purpled her heart with shame,—yes, to offer him the supreme proof of tenderness that he asked for, and now, when on the point of consenting, she was impotent. Her will was failing at the last moment. Was she going again to begin what she used to call, when she thought about it, a hateful contract? Ah! why was she not free—free, that is, from duties towards her child, the only being whom she could not sacrifice to him whom she loved—free to offer this man not a clandestine interview but a flight together, a complete sacrifice of her entire life.

All these thoughts came and went in her poor head while she herself was walking to and fro in the room. She looked again at her lover. She fancied she could see a change come over the features of the countenance she idolised.

"Armand," she resumed, "do not be sad. I consent to all that you wish."

These words, which were uttered in the deep voice of a woman probing to the inmost chamber of her heart, appeared to astonish the young man even more than they moved him. He wrapped Helen in his strange gaze. If the poor woman had had strength enough to observe him she would not have encountered in those keen eyes the divine emotion which atones for the guilt of the mistress by the happiness of the lover. It was just the same gaze, at once contemptuous and inquisitive, with which he had lately contemplated the group formed by Alfred and Helen. But the latter was too much confused by what she had just said to keep cool enough for observing anything.

Then, as she had come back and was crouching on Armand's knees, and pressing against his breast, a fresh expression, that, namely, of almost intoxicated desire, was depicted on the young man's face. He felt close to him the beauty of this yielding body, he held in his arms those

charming shoulders of which he had knowledge from having seen them in the ball-room, he drank in that indefinable aroma which lingers about every woman, and he pressed his lips upon those eyelids, which he could feel quivering beneath his kiss.

"You will at least be happy?" she asked him in a sort of anguish between two caresses.

"What a question! Why, you have never looked at yourself," he said, and he began to extol to her all the exquisiteness of her face. "You have never looked at your eyes"—and he again drew his lips across them—"your pink cheek"—and he stroked it with his hand—"your soft hair"—and he inhaled it like a flower—"your sweet mouth"—and he laid his own upon it.

What answer could she have given to this worship of her beauty? She lent herself to it with a half-frightened smile, surrendering to these endearments and to these words as to music. They caused something so deep and withal so vague to vibrate throughout her being that she came forth half crushed from these embraces, like one dead. It was not for the first time that she was thus abandoning herself to Armand's kisses. But no matter how sweet, how intoxicating these kisses, which she found it impossible to resist, she had on each occasion been strong enough to escape from bolder caresses.

No, never, never would she have consented, even had there existed no danger of a surprise, to yield thus in the little drawing-room, where the portraits of her mother, her husband, and her son reminded her of what she was nevertheless ready to sacrifice. Ah! not like that! And again at this moment, when she saw on Armand's face a certain expression of which she had so deep a dread, she found courage to escape, seated herself once more in another

easy chair, and opening and shutting a fan which she had taken up in her quivering hands, replied:

"I will be yours to-morrow, if you wish."

Armand seemed to rouse himself from the sweep of passion in which he had just been tossing. He looked at her, and she again experienced the sensation which had already caused her so much pain, and which was that of a veil drawn suddenly between herself and him. Yet, what could she have said to displease him? She thought that he was wounded by the fact of her shrinking from him, for was not the uttering of the words that she had just uttered equivalent to giving herself to him beforehand, and how could he be vexed with her for desiring that their happiness might have another setting than that of her every-day life? But he had already answered her by the following question:

"Where would you like me to meet you? At my own house? I can send away my servant for the whole of the afternoon."

"Oh, no!" she replied hastily, "not at your own home."

The vision had just come to her that other women had visited Armand, those other women whom a new mistress always finds between herself and the man she loves, like the menace of a fatal comparison, like an anticipated discrediting of her own caresses, since love is always similar to itself; in its outward forms.

"At least," she thought to herself, "let it not be amid the same furniture."

"Would you like me to request one of my friends to lend me his rooms?" Armand asked.

She shook her head as she had done just before. She could hear by anticipation the conversation of the two men. She was a woman, and hitherto had been a virtuous one. She was only too well aware that the manner in which she

regarded her own love would have little resemblance to that of the unknown friend to whom Armand would apply. In her own eyes passion sanctified everything, even the worst errors; spiritualised everything, even the most vehement voluptuousness. But he, this stranger, what would he see in the affair but an intrigue to afford matter for jesting. A shudder shook her, and she looked again at Armand. Ah! how her lover's thoughts would have horrified her had she been able to read them. It was very far from being De Querne's first affair of the sort, nor did he believe that it was a first act of weakness on her part. She had, indeed, told him that he was her first lover, and it was true.

But what proof could be given of the truth of such vows? The young man had himself deceived and been deceived too often for distrust not to be the most natural of his feelings. He had provoked this odious discussion concerning their place of meeting only for the purpose of studying in Helen's replies the traces left by the amorous experiences through which she had passed, and mere curiosity led him to dwell upon a subject which at that moment was stifling the young woman with shame. The scruples that she displayed about not yielding to him in her own house seemed to him a calculation due to voluptuousness; those about not yielding to him at his house, a calculation due to prudence. When she refused to go to the rooms of a friend: "She is afraid of my confiding in some one," he said to himself, "but what does she want?"

"Suppose I furnished a little suite of rooms?" he said.

She shook her head, though this had been her secret dream, but she was afraid that he would see in her acceptance nothing but a desire to gain time, and then—the necessity, if their meetings occurred always in the same place, of enduring the notice of the people of the house, the thought of being the veiled lady whose arrival is watched!

Nevertheless, although such a contrivance also involved a question of outlay which horrified her, she would have consented to it had she not had another feeling, the only one which, shaking her head with its rising fever, she uttered aloud.

"Do not misjudge me, Armand; rather understand me. I should like to be yours in a place of which nothing would remain afterwards. What would become of the rooms you furnished for me if ever you ceased to love me? Why, I cannot endure the thought of it, even now. Do not wrong me, dear; only understand me."

Thus did she speak, laying bare the profoundly romantic side of her nature, as also her heart's secret wound. Although she did not account fully to herself for Armand's character—a character frightful in aridity beneath loving externals, for in this man there was an absolute divorce between imagination and heart—she perceived only too clearly that he was inclined to misinterpret the slightest indications. She saw that distrust was springing up in him with an almost unhealthy suddenness. She had been quite aware that he suspected her, but she had believed that this doubt proceeded solely from her refusals to belong to him.

It was on this account that she was consenting to give him this last proof. "He will doubt no longer," she thought to herself, and the mere idea of this warmed her whole heart. If only he did not give a guilty construction to her replies? She rose to go to him, and leaning over the back of his arm-chair, encircled his forehead with her hands.

"Ah!" she said with a sigh, "if I could know what is going on in here. It is such a little space, and it is in this little space that all my happiness and my misfortune are contained."

"If you were able to read in it," the young man replied, "you would see only your own image."