

**VALERIE AYLMER.
A NOVEL**

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Valerie Aylmer. A Novel by Christian Reid

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CHRISTIAN REID

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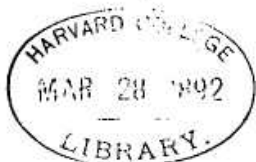
A NOVEL.

BY
Mrs Frances G. Fisher Sherman.
CHRISTIAN REID: pseudon.

A woman's will dies hard,
In the hall, or on the sward.
E. R. BROWNING.

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VALERIE AYLMER.

BOOK I.

CHAPTER I.

STRIKING THE FLAG.

"READ that, Valerie!" said General Aylmer, as he strode hastily to his daughter's side, and tossed an open letter into her lap.

Now, being a man little addicted to choleric impulses, the passionate tone in which he spoke—the very act itself—were so different from his usual voice and manner, that the girl whom he addressed started perceptibly. Then, instead of touching the letter, she looked up with evident astonishment into his face.

"Why, papa!" she said, after an instant—and her tone of surprise spoke volumes for her father's usual amiability—"what can the matter be? Nothing about Eugene, I hope?" she added, anxiously.

"No—nothing about Eugene."

"Something about the New-Orleans business, then?"

"No; certainly not."

"Then what—"

"Suppose you read the letter!" interrupted her father, with an impatient acerbity altogether new to him. And as she proceeded to obey a suggestion, the tone of which made it a command, he turned from her, and began to walk restlessly up and down the long piazza, with a very flushed and angry countenance.

It was plain that something of more than ordinary importance had gone wrong with the general; since, under ordinary, and even extraordinary misfortunes, his philosophy

was invariably that of the Stoic, with a strong dash of the Epicurean. "Grieving over a loss never yet helped a man to bear it," the general was wont to say; and few people ever reduced theory to more perfect practice. *Che sard, sard* had been his life-long motto; resignation, strongly tinged with indifference, his life-long mode of meeting danger or difficulty; and this debonair creed had borne him lightly and scathlessly through many a peril, and over many a misfortune which would utterly have wrecked ordinary men. There had been more than enough of these perils and misfortunes in their time, yet they had scarcely marked a line on his frank, handsome face, or tempered by a shade his genial, pleasant manner. So, it followed that in all the gay and hospitable countryside of St. Stephen's Parish, Louisiana, no man was more popular, or more deserving of popularity, than General Aylmer of Aylmers. No man understood half so well the art of pleasing all men—and all women, too—with hardly an effort beyond that of the will; no man better united knowledge of the world with the *bonhomie* of his open-handed, open-hearted race; no man lived faster, and yet few men ever suffered less in the opinion of society. Indeed, he was one of the exceptional people who seem born to rule opinion. Instead of being ruled by it—though why this was so, it would be hard to say. The sources of power are almost always mysterious, and if we attempted to analyze them—which Heaven forbid we should do!—we

should be apt to find ourselves sadly at a loss to account for many elevations to greatness, social or otherwise, unless we accept as a solution the plausible theory of a special ruling faculty. If there be such a thing, General Aylmer undoubtedly possessed it in singular degree. It had made him a man of mark and influence all his life; it had rendered him foremost in every enterprise in which he engaged, from his college escapades and early social triumphs, to the political successes and military renown of later life; and yet, in what it consisted, his nearest friend could not have told. "He had a wonderful way with him," they all said; and there they stopped. The secret of his fascination seemed as subtle as the charm of his hospitality—a hospitality which had been quite famous during the *ancien régime*, and still held its own bravely, even under the changed aspect of affairs. For affairs had changed very much in the year eighteen hundred and sixty-five, when our story opens; and General Aylmer, like the rest of his class and generation, had paid, in subjection to wholesale robbery, the penalty of being a gentleman by birth, and an aristocrat by position. Yet it chanced that Fortune had been a degree kinder to him than to many of his compeers. After that terrible end—that end full of bitterness and degradation unutterable!—which came with the early roses of the fair Southern April, he returned to the home from which for four long years he had been an exile, and found that this home had fared somewhat better than he had dared either to hope or expect. Defaced and injured it was, undoubtedly, but in less degree than most of the habitations near at hand, and certainly not irreparably, since, in a short time, something of the old beauty began to appear again—something of Eden to bloom once more out of Sahara. The general was not a man to sit down in useless repining, and still less was he a man to tolerate, even for a day, the least discomfort which effort could remove. So, the plundered rooms were refurnished; the empty stables and cellars at least moderately refilled; the trampled shrubberies trained into order; the barren fields put under cultivation; the great doors thrown

open in their hospitable welcome, and the old tide of life bid to flow back again.

In view of these facts, it was not singular that St. Stephen's Parish returned quickly enough to its old allegiance—swearing as cordially by the general's wine and the general's horses as it had ever done in the past. And yet it was not singular, either, that, once safely out of the domain of Aylmers, the parish did not hesitate to shrug its shoulders, and ask very injuredly, how the deuce he managed it. He was a man whose apparent sources of wealth were no greater than those of his neighbors; but, while they were daily forced into closer retrenchment, he had resumed a mode of life which bordered closely on extravagance. It was very pleasant, of course, to know that one house at least was yet open, where a capital dinner and a good mount were always ready for a friend, where the best of Hochheimer and the best of cigars were things at command, and the brightest of eyes smiled a welcome; but still that did not solve the puzzle as to how he managed it; and this rendered the pleasure something of a discomfort also. "To be sure, it is none of my business," everybody said; but then everybody felt that he or she would very much like to know. True, the general was the lucky possessor of a rich father-in-law, to whose fortune his daughter was sole heiress; but this father-in-law, so far from being an old man, likely to step off the scene at any moment, was a man of little more than middle-age, who, not long before, had taken unto himself a new wife, and apparently a new lease of life; so his existence was scarcely to be assumed a solution of the enigma. Then, although Gerald Aylmer was the most "steady" of young men, and really an excellent planter, there was Eugene, the handsome scapegrace, whose dissipation and recklessness were known to all the parish, and who had gone to Europe immediately after the close of the war, where of course he was spending any amount of money. While, as for Valerie—but the extravagance of General Aylmer's only daughter had been known to her friends and neighbors so long that they had ceased to marvel over any fresh manifesta-

tion of it, and indeed considered it rather a commendable quality in the presumptive heiress and beauty-regnant, who was chief among the charms of Aylmers. For other men might possess horses as good, and wine as unexceptionable, but no other man could possibly boast, as head of his household, the loveliest girl of the Mississippi Valley, the queen of a hundred loyal hearts, the toast of a hundred gallant lips, from the Potomac to the Rio Grande.

All of these things, Valerie Aylmer made good her claim to be esteemed, and yet her head was not absolutely giddy—a fact which in itself entitles her to respectful consideration. She had been a beauty and an heiress from her cradle; she was clever enough to hold her own in any fair intellectual tilt without falling under the terrible odium of being blue; and she was, besides, thorough mistress of all the thousand fascinations which some exceptional women possess, and which are more charming than the beauty of Helen, or the dower of a princess; and yet, if it is impossible to say that she was quite unspoiled (for that would be saying she was an angel, and no woman at all), it is at least possible to say that the spoiling had not done her much harm. It had made her wilful and daring, and fond of her power, perhaps; but it had not darkened over the sweet, frank charm of her girlhood with even so much as a shade of that intense self-appreciation, that offensive vanity, and more offensive affectation, which make bellehood a thing to be dreaded rather than desired for any girl. "A shameful coquette," people called Miss Aylmer; but they said it half in jest; and never a man or woman of them all loved her the less for her gay flirtations. She amused herself with the admiration offered her, and broke hearts, as it is called, by the dozen; but it was so much as a child accepts sugar-plums and demolishes playthings, that even the very victims would not have had the heart to deny her the enjoyment. "It is so pleasant to be pretty and to be admired," she said once to an intimate friend; and the sentence embodied her whole opinion on the subject. It was so pleasant to feel that, whoever looked on her, desired to look again—so pleasant to

know that, go where she would, she carried a talisman, potent ever to win kindness and service—so pleasant that men strove with each other which of them should do most to gain even such a trifling favor as her hand for a dance—so pleasant that the roses of life and love were all scattered, as it were, under her very feet! She exulted in it, and enjoyed it, with the full, glad exultation, the keen, fresh enjoyment of youth, when youth has known few troubles. And her troubles had been very few; for even the war, with its attendant horrors, had fallen lightly on her head. She had seen havoc and death around, but it had not been brought home to her, since her father and brothers came safely through the baptism of blood. She had been exiled from her birthplace, but she had roughed it very gayly in camps and beleaguered cities, shedding the glory of her youth and beauty wherever she went. Considering her many attractions, it was scarcely wonderful that her fame spread far and wide, or that few women of her day and generation counted more loyal subjects. Yet her beauty was only the beauty of her countrywomen intensified to superlative degree—only the graceful features, the pearly complexion, the soft, dark eyes, and silken-dark hair, which we meet in every wayside village, from Maryland to Mexico, making a type of loveliness that is to be found under no other sky. Of all of these personal gifts, Miss Aylmer possessed a trifle more than her due share, together with something which rendered them specially and entirely her own. It is very hard to draw the exact line where prettiness—which is so common—ends, and where beauty—which is so rare—begins. And the effort to do so is not made more easy by the fact that a great many people never draw such a line at all; never trouble themselves to remember that there is any higher standard than that of their own individual taste; or that a face which seems to them all loveliness may, without losing a tittle of this loveliness, fall outside the magic circle of beauty, because its tints lack harmony or its features fall in proportion. Yet, nevertheless, there are certain plain rules of art, which, if we choose to call them in, settle the matter