

**A  
WOMAN'S DEBT**

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A woman's debt by William Le Queux

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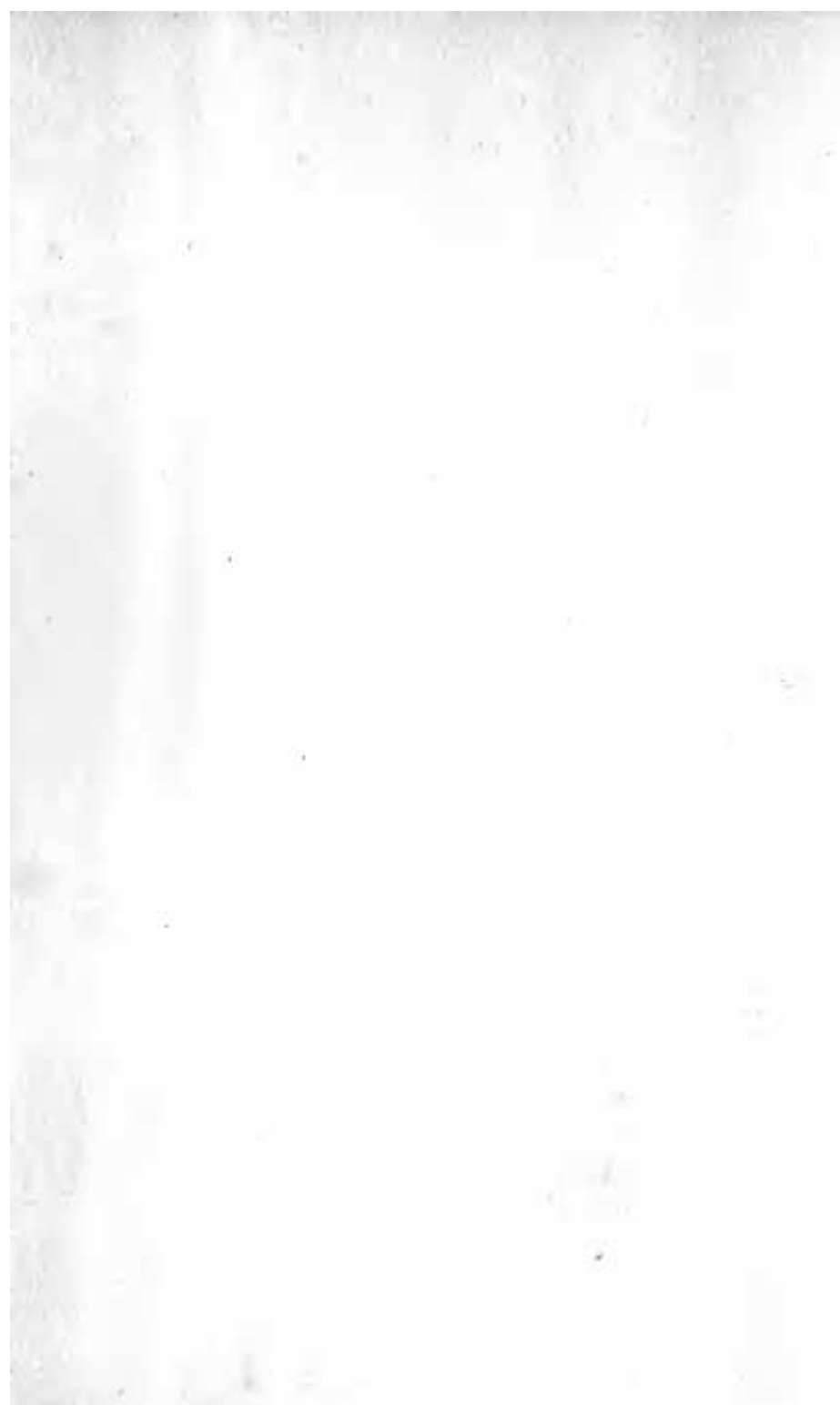
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WILLIAM LE QUEUX

1864-192

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# A WOMAN'S DEBT

## CHAPTER I

### A LUCKY YOUNG FELLOW !

"**Y**OU'RE a lucky chap, Croxton, to have got the measure of the old man so well. I don't suppose it will be long before you blossom into a partner."

The speaker, Archie Brookes, a slim elegant young fellow, very good-looking but with a somewhat effeminate expression, cast a sidelong glance at his companion as he uttered the remark, to observe covertly what impression it made upon him.

There was no love lost between these two young men, although they were thrown constantly into each other's society. Richard Croxton was the confidential secretary of Rupert Morrice, the well-known foreign banker and financier, whose firm had colossal dealings abroad. Brookes was a nephew and great favourite of the financier's wife, the son of a dearly beloved sister who had died many years ago. In consequence of that relationship, and the partiality of his aunt, he was a frequent, almost a daily, visitor to the big house in Deanery Street, Park Lane, where the Morrices entertained largely and dispensed lavish hospitality.

Croxton's voice was very cold, as he replied to the other's suggestion. "Those are the sort of things one does not permit oneself to speculate about, much less to discuss."

For a second an angry gleam showed in the light blue eyes of Brookes. Not troubled with very refined feelings himself, he thought it was rank hypocrisy on the part of Richard to refuse to talk to a man of his own age about prospects upon which he must often have meditated. But the angry gleam passed away quickly. Archie Brookes was a very self-contained young man. He seldom allowed his temper to get the better of him, and he never indulged in sarcastic remarks.

"Ah, you've got a very wise head upon your shoulders, Dick," he said in a genial tone, and accentuating his air of good-fellowship by the unfamiliar use of the Christian name. "You'll never let your tongue give you away. But I am sure it will be as I say. Uncle Rupert thinks the world of you, and he has no near relative of his own. What more natural than that you should succeed?"

To his emphatic reiteration of his previous remarks, Richard made no reply. While always perfectly civil to this elegant-mannered young man for whom he felt a vague dislike, he never encouraged intimacy. He was just a little resentful that he had been addressed as "Dick." Nothing in the world would have induced him to accost the other as "Archie," although they met nearly every day, and the one was the favourite nephew of the mistress of the house, and the other was as good as the adopted son of the master.

There was a certain element of romance about the introduction of Richard Croxton into the Morrice *ménage*. The great financier, hard as iron in his business dealings, was in private life a man of the greatest sentiment and sensibility. Some years before he met the lady who was now his wife, he had been desperately in love with a charming girl, who had been one of the fashionable beauties of the day.

The fate of this lovely girl had been a sad and

tragic one. With the world at her feet, she had bestowed her affections upon a man utterly unworthy—a rake, a gambler—and a spendthrift, and alienated her friends and her family by marrying him. On her death-bed she had sent for her old lover and confided her only child to his care. Rupert Morrice had accepted the trust, his heart warming to the son, as he grew to know him, not only for his own qualities, but for the sake of the mother whom he had so fondly loved with the passionate ardour of a strong, intense nature.

He had taken the young fellow into his own house and made him his confidential secretary. Some women might have resented such a sudden intrusion, but Mrs. Morrice was not of a petty or jealous nature. She grew in time to be very fond of Richard Croxton, and did not in the least begrudge him his place in her husband's affections.

There sauntered up to the two young fellows a very distinguished-looking man of about fifty years of age. Aristocrat was written all over him—in his tall, elegant figure, his aquiline features, his long shapely, well-manicured hands, his cultivated and well-bred voice. This was Sir George Clayton-Brookes, the paternal uncle of Archie, a well-known personage in London society, a member of some of the most exclusive clubs, and, report said, the possessor of considerable wealth. He had added the name of Clayton on inheriting a fortune from a distant relative.

He greeted Croxton with an air of great cordiality. His manners were very polished, some people thought they were just a trifle too suave for perfect sincerity.

"Well, my dear Richard, how goes the world with you?" Using the privilege of seniority, he always addressed the young man by his Christian name. For his part, Croxton did not always feel anything like the same antagonism towards the uncle that he