

A
ROGUE'S
TRAGEDY
BY
BERNARD
CAPES

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A ROGUE'S TRAGEDY

BY
BERNARD CAPES

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A ROGUE'S TRAGEDY.

PART I

A LOVERS' PROLOGUE

MATTER is but the eternal dressing of the imagination; the world the unconscious self-delusion of a Spirit. Everything springs from Love, and Love is the dreaming God.

Two figments of that endless sweet obsession stood alone—high on a slope of Alp this time. Born of a dream to flesh, they thought they owed themselves to flesh—a sacred debt. Truth seemed as plain to them as pebbles in a brook, which lie round and firm for all their apparent shaking under ripples. There, actual to their eyes, were the white mountains, the hoary glaciers, the pine woods and foamy freshets of eighteenth century Le Prieuré. Here, actual in the ears of each, was the whisper of the deathless confidence which for ever and ever helps on love's succession. They loved, and therefore they lived.

Man has been for ten thousand ages at the pains to prove love a delusion, and still he greets a baby, and a kitten, and the nesting song of birds, and a hawthorn bush in flower, as freshly as if each, in its latest expression, were the newest product of his wisdom. But love is no delusion, save in the shadows which it builds itself for habitation. "Of dust thou art," said the older God, "and unto dust returnest." Yet man does not inherit from the earth, but from the imagination of that which created the earth and its life—the brain of the dreaming Love. Nor has he once, in all his æons of sequence, touched or borrowed from the earth. The seed which is himself was his mother's seed, herself the seed of another who contained his seed within his mother's seed within herself—a "nest" *ad infinitum*. Womb within womb, myriadfold, he proceeds from Love, his flight a heavenly meteor's, his origin the origin of the star which has never been of earth until it falls extinguished on it. He draws from the eye of the dawn. He is the top section in a telescope of

countless sections, each extending from the other, and all from all, and the last from the first. Close it, and it is he. Open it, and it is he. He helps to Love's view of the dream of which he is a part. He is Love's heir in dreams.

Or call him a bubble which rises in deep waters, and floats a moment on the surface and breaks. Whence came he? Whither vanishes? He is a breath; the expiration of a dream. The spirit of him looks out upon its phantom journey, as a traveller gazes from a coach window on the landscape. He is within it, but not of it. His destination is death, which is Love's sleep. He is reclaimed to Love, of whom he was always a thought. As a thought he can never be launched again. He has played his part and is at rest in Love.

But his part, while he played it, was Love's part. It was when he realised this most that the palpable world became a shadow, the solid ground a cloud, the sun and moon and hills but figments of a rapture of Love's dream. It was then that he stepped exalted, knowing his fair succession—knowing of whom he was born and for what reason. He had been accredited Love's representative.

So the man felt it here, walking on air. The mountains were more real to him than the rock he stood on. He dealt in dreams' paradoxes. "I have never lived till now," he said.

There was a little wind abroad which fluted in the pines, making sharp notes of their fragrance. One's ears and nose were always at a conflict in the matter, whether to claim music for perfume or perfume for music. It was the same as to the battle between sun and snow, which fought to a compromise on the terms of chilly warmth or glowing coldness. Yet the name was of no importance in the bracing sweetness of the atmosphere they contrived together. One could not breathe there and think of breathing as a condition of life. The temperature was the temperature of a neutral ground between earth and heaven—of a present unreality and a real distance.

The two had just issued in company from a hillside chapel, a little lonely ark stranded on a shelf of rock hung up in a pine thicket, with rills of water tinkling all about it like the last streaks of a receded flood. They had sent forth their unreturning dove, and had followed it to find their phantasm of a new world budding in green islands from a lake of mist. Their feet seemed to sink in eternity. Only the bright heavens above them were actual.

A butterfly, like a flake of stained glass blown from the robe of the Christ in the little painted window within, came wafted after them as they emerged. From a loophole in the presbytery above, the face of the old sacristan leered

out secretly, and, marking their going, grinned and apostrophised it in a fit of silent laughter. “You sha’n’t have him; you sha’n’t have him!” thought he, like the very sacristan of St Anne’s Chapel under the Hinne Mountain, of whom children read. Then they vanished in the mist, going upwards, and he sat down to chuckle.

As they ascended, the vapour sank beneath their feet, or was rolled away like bales to topple over the precipices. It had all been clear enough, bright palpable fact, before they entered the chapel. The swift change was nothing surprising in these resting-places of the clouds. Yet it seemed to them as if, returning to their world, they found it transformed beyond all precedent. But then, was not their rapture beyond all precedent? None had ever before loved as they loved—and that was true, because there is no such thing as a stereotype in Nature.

The whistle of a marmot straight ahead on a boulder startled them suddenly as into a self-consciousness of guilt. They saw an atom of mist cleave and close to the red flick of him as he vanished, and then the phantoms of mountains looking in upon them above the place where he had sat. It was like a priestly summons to love’s shrift. They stopped, as by one consent, and stood in scarlet confusion to falter out their confessions.

First love, I think, must reveal itself to fervent Catholics, as these two were, in a more poignant form than to most others. The wonder of it, as a divine absolution for shamefaced thoughts, as a divine authorisation of those thoughts’ indulgence to a natural end, must thrill their most sacred traditions of virginity to the marrow. Then they must first realise, on its human merits, the sacrifice of the Christ who died that men might live. They have worshipped the transubstantiation apart; now they are bidden to an intimate share in it.

That, perhaps, was why this man and woman were justified in feeling their state an ecstasy unparalleled. Love to them was a transubstantiation, such as no heterodox soul could ever know. They, to whom flesh had been a shame, were authorised, in a moment, of nakedness; they were surrendered, for their faith, to the paradise of mortal raptures. Henceforth, dear incarnations of a dream, they believed they owed themselves to flesh—while they trod on air.

Young god and goddess certainly they looked, poised on their misty Ida. The man was cream-pink of face, sunny of hair, blue and a thought prominent of eye. A fervour of soul perpetually flurried his cheek, flushing or paling it in flying moods. He had the air and appearance of an eager evangelist who

had a little outgrown his spiritual strength. He would sometimes overbalance on self-exaltation, and pitch into an abyss of depression. He was tall and well-moulded as a whole; but his hips were unduly feminine. His colour, too, erred on the feminine side of prettiness. But he looked, all in all, a fit bright mate for the happy figure beside him.

She, as like a Dresden china shape in melting demureness, as sunnily contrived in pink and blue and gold, was only the other's better partner by reason of eyes slightly bluer than his, of hair a shade more golden, of lips of a rosier dye on the soft pallour of her face. By the same token she stood as much nearer to womanhood as he stood from manhood—a step either way. It swelled in her, though she was but fifteen, as the milk-kernels swell in nuts. I think she was at the perfect poise, largeness in promise waiting on performance, shapely as Psyche when first stolen by love—a covetable bud, whom no mortal man could be above the desire to open with a kiss.

As this man, this good man, in a fury of love sanctified, desired suddenly and uncontrollably. She stood before him, her face a little raised, her lips a little parted—the prettiest figure between tears and rapture. Her hat hung on her shoulders by a blue ribbon looped about her neck, leaving her hair loose-coiled to snare the sun. Her dress was a fine smock, having half-sleeves tied at the elbows with ribbons, and a low bodice of rich blue velvet, open and laced in front, to clasp it about the middle. From her hips fell, in a fluting of Greek folds, a white skirt just long enough to show her ankles and silver shoe-buckles, and there were blue velvet ribbons fastened with diamond studs on her wrists.

So she stood gazing up at him, tremulous and fearful, unknowing but half-guessing what she had brought upon herself, what outrage on her meek decorum. The shrine she had most cherished, held most sacred, was threatened somehow; and God, it seemed, was on the side of the enemy. For had not this man's piety, sincere beyond question, been his passport, a divine one, to her heart? How could she have allowed his advances else? They were friends of but a few weeks; had met first in the chapel hard by, bent upon a common worship. Some accident, of stress in storm, had been his pretext for a self-introduction; and she?—she had loved the pretext because in this figure she had come to picture her ideal of virtuous manhood. And then words had wakened knowledge, and knowledge admiration, and admiration rapture—the desire of the moth for the star.

He had not spoken of love till this moment; he did not even speak of it

now. But all in an instant he leapt to the appeal of her lips, and was fighting for their surrender to him. She struggled a little, uttering no sound. And presently he conquered. Then speech came, breathless and imploring,—

“Forgive me. What have I done? I have done wrong! My God! I couldn’t help it!”

He was the one to break away. She stood motionless, white as a figure of wax.

“Yolande!” he cried, “don’t look at me like that! Say you forgive me!”

She did not stir, but her lips moved.

“Did you do wrong? O! and I thought you knew!”

“I knew?”

He caught at his storming pulses and took a new step towards her. But at that she backed from him.

“No,” she said, “if you have done wrong, if for one moment you think you have done wrong, you must not stay here, not with me, any longer.”

Understanding came to him.

“No, I do not think it,” he said. “Why should I, unless to dream of my being worthy of you was a presumption? But that is too late an apology now. Yolande, will you marry me?”

She gave a sigh of heavenly rapture, and came and put her sweet hand trustingly into his.

“O, yes, Louis, if God will let me!”

He cried “Amen!” and caught her to him again in an ecstasy.

“Why should He not, my bird, my love, my dear, dear angel?”

“He must speak through my father first.”

He laughed in triumphant confidence.

“Your father? Ah, yes! But I do not come empty-handed—not altogether. It is little enough, dear sweet, to pay this debt; but in the worldly view such bargains are relative, and the world—forgive me—has not treated *your* father according to his deserts.”

She coned his face with trouble in her eyes.

“No,” she whispered. “He is poor, but he thinks so much of me. What if he and you were to disagree as to my value?”

“Impossible. I will admit at once that you are priceless.”

He saw her distress, and tightened his hold.

“Little rogue,” he said playfully, “what *is* your value in your own eyes? What do you put it at?”

“The money in your pocket,” she said, smiling faintly.

“I believe that is no more than a couple of soldi.”

“I am yours for a penny, then. Give it me. Do you think I hold myself very dear? With that in my purse, yes. If the King wooed me with half his kingdom I should say, ‘Not even with the whole. I have a greater fortune in Louis’s penny.’” Her lip quivered. “But, alas!” she sighed, “it is not kings I dread!”

Moved beyond expression, he could only strain her to his heart, murmuring and adoring.

“Look,” he said presently, “you are trembling. Come and rest with me on this stone, and set your feet with mine at its base and say to me, as I shall say to you, ‘Here on a rock I plant my love, never to be displaced.’”

He helped her to the seat, then threw himself down beside her, and, raising his arm, was beginning in perfect gravity, “Here on a rock I plant—” when, without the least warning, there came a snap, and he went backwards heels-over-head into the grass, and lay there kicking like a delirious acrobat. Some demon of perversity, working with a wedge of frost, had once split a section of the stone near through, and he had sat upon that section.

The girl shrieked and ran to his help.

“O, Louis!” she cried, “art thou hurt?”

He did not answer with the poet, “I have got a hurt o’ the inside of a deadlier sort!” It is to be feared that both he and his lady were entirely lacking in the sense of humour. He arose crestfallen, but more mortified in his faith than his vanity. The two looked at one another tragically. Then Yolande suddenly burst into tears.

“O!” she sobbed, “what were we, to liken our love to God’s Church! He has answered our arrogance with a thunderbolt. Louis, you are all dusty and covered with prickles! Something in my heart tells me that I can never, never marry you!”

“Hush!” he said desperately. “We will go back to the chapel and pray for pardon. I ought to have looked to the stone first.”

But she only sighed miserably. “That would have made no difference. Do you think you are more foreseeing than He?”

He put his hand in his pocket.

“I have lost my soldi!” he said faintly.

That was the culmination. For an hour these two ninnies of a dream sought vainly in the grass for the missing coins. Then, together but apart, they went

like lost souls down the mountain.

Verily, the laws canonical, like the lawyers of Westminster, “thrive on fools.”

CHAPTER I

ON the day when Augias, Conte di Rocco, was raised to the Marquisate and made a member of the Government of Victor-Amadeus III., titular King of Sardinia and Duke of Savoy and Piedmont, an express was despatched from Turin by that newly-aggrandised nobleman to the Chevalier de France in his Hôtel Beausite at Le Prieuré, demanding in marriage the hand of the Chevalier's only child and daughter, Yolande of the white hands.

No more than a day later the brass-new Marchese in person came treading on the heels of his amorous cartel (for, indeed, that seems the word for it), and had his formal interview with the solitary parent—for Yolande was long motherless. This happened in the year 1783, when a certain democratic simplicity was beginning to temper the extravagances of fashion. Monsignore di Rocco, therefore, had that much excuse for his rusty buckles, his cheap wisp of a cravat (in which a costly diamond burned), his hired equipage and single equerry, or *valet d'écurie*, who was literally his stable-boy. Otherwise, as the great man of the neighbourhood and a suitor to boot, he might have been accused of that sorriest form of ostentation, which is for rank to parade its independence of recognised convention.

On the other hand, M. de France's "Hôtel" was just a decent abode at the southern end of the village, rich in nothing but the magnificence of the view from its windows.

The Marchese was already expected, and certainly with no delusions as to the manner of his appearance. M. de France gave no thought to anything but his visitor's expression as he advanced to meet him in the little "*salle d'audience*" into which di Rocco had been ushered. Of the two, even, the bearing of the Chevalier, though he was no more than a simple gentleman of Savoy, was the more overbearing in its self-conscious vanity.

He gave the other stiff welcome and congratulations on his exaltation. One would never have guessed that he knew himself very plainly for the mouse, sweating and desperate, in the claws of the great cunning cat which he took and pressed.

But the Marchese, with a high little laugh, broke through the proffered formality.

“Here, here, to my breast, father-in-law!” he cried, and seizing, strenuously kissed the Chevalier on both cheeks, verily like a cat in a sort of blood-lust.

The thin white face of M. de France pinked as he stepped back. His hollow eyes glared, his stern lips trembled, every fold of his threadbare dressing-gown seemed to flatten, as if the wind had been taken out of it. But an habitual self-discipline came to his aid with an acid smile.

“Pardon me,” he said. “You take me by surprise. The term is premature. You young men are so impulsive.”

The enormous sarcasm was in itself a confession of surrender. He would never have essayed it, save in the knowledge of the price he had at hand for acquitting himself of any and all such debts. For di Rocco was, as a matter of fact, old as times went, a scarred and puffed ex-libertine of sixty—a monster of unloveliness, moreover.

He was hideous as Dagon, in truth, half man, half fish, with strained cod eyes, a great wobbling jaw, and lips which had shaken themselves pendulous on naughtiness and laughter. Sordid, slovenly, unclean in mind and body, inordinate as a drayman in bulk and physical strength, a voluptuary, miser, and a fecund *raconteur*, his rank and wits had, through a well-filled life, been procurers to his inclinations at a nominal cost to himself. His parsimony, not his vices, had alone debarred him from taking that position in the State to which his wealth and social talents had else easily exalted him. At the same time it had always made of him a slumbering force, full of interest and potentialities.

The real power of wealth lies, indeed, not in expenditure but in possession. There is a sacredness about the crowded granary which affects even the starving. There is no fool so despised of the democracy as the spendthrift fool; and, when its time comes, it is the plutocrat it bleeds with an apology.

The Conte di Rocco possessed the tastes of a sybarite with the soul of a usurer. He lit his debauches with candle-ends, and could singe the paws of his tame cats with a most engaging humour whenever he desired chestnuts for nothing. The army of pimps, followers, led-captains and parasites which had always attended his ignoble career, cursed him eternally through jaws as lank as those of Falstaff’s ragged company. But it served him, nevertheless—on the security, it would appear, of phantom post-obits. Everyone hoped some day to have his picking from the carrion of that great carcase—even, it may be supposed, his physician Bonito, whose face in the meanwhile was like a cheese-paring.

And it was this paragon, *grandissimo* for all his imperfections, who had nominated himself to be the husband of Yolande, the loveliest young lily of Savoy.

How it came about was thus.

Sated, or merely whimsical, or, perhaps, as some said, in a sudden mood to withdraw himself timely from the world in order to “patch up his old body for heaven,” the Count had, about the end of 1782, retired upon his estate and grand Château di Rocco on the Flegère, with the intent, it seemed, to make it thenceforth his permanent abode. Here, having cashiered, or temporised or compromised with, or anything but paid off, the bulk of his disreputable *valetaille*, he resolved upon the simple life—of candle-ends. And here he made the acquaintance of M. de France and his lovely child, with the former of whom he was able, moreover, in some fits of moral reactionism, to play the effective usurer.

The Chevalier was a creature of enormous pride, though of fortunes fallen to the lowest ebb. But he could never forget that his ancestors had lost Chambéry to the Dukes of Savoy, nor his present despicable position in a State whose highest attentions to him might hardly have compensated for the dignities of which it had deprived his family. He had served with credit, under the reigning King’s predecessor, in the wars of the Austrian succession, yet not with such compelling brilliancy as to enforce recognition from Victor-Amadeus, when that prince came to succeed his father. Neglected, impoverished, De France had withdrawn from a Court whose master was always more concerned with problems of ceremonial than of statecraft, and had retired into necessitous oblivion. Debts, contracted in the days of promise, came winging paper billets after him, and his situation was soon fairly desperate. His wife died, and he gave her grand-ducal obsequies. His child must always go attired in the right trappings of her rank. He called his villa an hôtel, and his parlour an audience-room. Through everything he was gnawed with an eternal hunger for the recognition which would not come his way. He loved his daughter as vain men love their rank, holding it supreme above emotion, humanity, a thing untarnishable but by contact with the base. The possibility of a consort for her in Le Prieuré was a thing not to be thought of. The fact that she was only fifteen and dowerless was inessential. She was Yolande de France.

And then one day old di Rocco asked for her hand.

M. de France was not so surprised as sarcastic. He knew all about the

Count and his supposed reformation.

“You would do a final act of atonement, monsignore,” said he, “and dower a penniless girl?”

“I would do more,” answered the Count. “I would burn those bits of paper of yours.”

The Chevalier’s eyes glittered, but his face remained like hard ivory.

“Pardon me,” he said, “there is a difference in your ages.”

“Ah! monsieur, it would be obliterated when the rivulet mingled with the river.”

“You have lived fast.”

“The sooner to reach my redemption.”

“You are out of favour with the Court.”

“Pouf! Call it what you mean—black disgrace—and yet I tell you that I hold its favour in the hollow of my hand.”

The Chevalier’s eyes glistened more.

“I do not doubt your powers of propitiation; else, with grateful thanks for the proffered honour—”

“Exactly—you must decline so sinful a connection. Make it a condition if you will: reconciliation with the Government, and Yolande; or failure, and no Yolande. I am confident. I know myself and others. I will be Marchese in a week, and M. de France will have won his first step towards the position from which he has been too long excluded.”

“H’m!”

“Moreover, he will have acquired a devoted and generous son-in-law” (the Chevalier smiled), “whose first act will be to settle the reversion of his entire property on his own widow.”

“You are serious? And if I decline?”

“I shall leave everything—including bills, acceptances, securities, all the little pigeons waiting in my *casier* to be plucked—to M. Gaston Trix.”

“Who is he?”

“I am very fond of him. They call him also Cartouche. What does it matter? The hawk is not named hawk in every country of the world. Here he is this—there that. Trix was Cartouche in Chambéry, Scaramuccio in Turin, anything elsewhere. His mother was English; he was born in London; his father forgot to leave his address. Yes, I am very fond of him.”

“Count, you have never yet honoured one of the sex with your hand?”

“Alas! it has lacked cleanness.”

He held it out. It was obvious he spoke the truth.

"I have been a sad rogue," he said. "It would be useless for me to deny it."

The Chevalier put the confession by rather hastily. It would appear that his conscience may have resented its intrusion. It is such an advantage, after having realised a personal ambition, to be able to say, "I knew nothing of any moral objection until too late." But that is just what some queer providence or fatality will never give one the opportunity of asserting. He flushed a little and said, with a stiff air of demand,—

"Monsignore, what attracts you in my daughter?"

The powerful old *roué's* face became a mere leering slop of roguery. There was the picture, for anyone who cared to consider it, of concupiscence in its dotage. He had come, in the very exhaustion of his faculties, upon an unheard-of stimulant of loveliness; but sacred, and the more appetising for being so. Any sacrifice was worth to gain this ante-room to heaven. He felt once more the poignant ecstasies of hunger and thirst, he whose sense of surfeit had seemed confirmed to everlastingness. There is no need to enlarge upon his state.

"Ah, monsieur!" he said, "can you, who live in daily contemplation of such perfection, ask? Believe me, the question alone is the riddle; the answer possesses a thousand tongues of rapture and adoration. Would I could speak in them all, that I might ease my breast of this load of undelivered homage which stifles it. I swear, on my honour, there is no interpreter between earth and paradise but Yolande. You will bestow her on me—conditionally?"

M. de France didn't see, or wouldn't see, that he was being bribed. There is a point of magnificence, perhaps, above which corruption is elevated to sublimity. What earthly sacrifices can approach the gifts with which the gods reward them? He actually smiled, wintrily but condescendingly, on the other's enthusiasm.

"Well, well, monsignore," he protested; "what would your ardour say to a compromise?"

"There is none possible."

"A betrothal, for instance, on the conditions you were good enough to suggest? I am flattered—it goes without saying—by your proposal. I admit myself distinguished, actually and potentially, in the connection. But the child is but fifteen."

"I can never consent to it. It puts ten thousand obstacles of accident and caprice between me and my attainment of beatitude. Mademoiselle to-day is

an angel, but every feather of her wings, so tied, would invite the cupidity of worldlings—those robbers of the heavenly roost. I know them well. I must, indeed, have the first and last right to protect her.”

“*Must*, Count? Is she yours or mine? I have said enough, and you, I think, more than enough.”

His brows and his mouth closed down. His vanity could be a very obstinate devil. Di Rocco felt that he had touched his limits.

“Ah! my friend,” he pleaded, “love’s best proof of itself is in outrunning discretion. I went, in truth, too far. Let me hark back to reason. I pledge you my credit that within a month my father-in-law shall be War Minister. Di Broglio wearies of his office, and waits but for an efficient successor. Give me, I entreat you, that warrant to enlarge upon your claims.”

“No, no, the poor child—scarce arrived at woman’s estate.”

“Then let her come to it, for me, unabashed. Make her mine ceremonially, and I swear on my honour to postpone the consummation for a year.”

“Ah! And if you fail?”

“I ask no pledge until my success is assured.”

The Chevalier gnawed his lip, looking on the suitor. He saw an old, fat, unlovely man, scarred by the claws of depravity (one of his eyes was bulging askew, as if actually half torn out by them). But the indelible stamp of rank and wealth redeemed the worst that could be in him. He told himself that it would be a high mission for his Yolande to make of herself the instrument for this monster’s salvation. It had come to be her only chance—and his. Besides, she was a de France, and surely eager for the restoration of her family’s rights.

He stopped there, by a strong effort of will, and pronounced—on his word of honour from which there could be no receding—his inexorable fiat.

“Accomplish what you promise, signore, and she is yours on the condition you propose.”

Nevertheless, he felt something as nearly approaching meanness as it was possible for his pride to feel when the Count returned triumphant with the glad tidings of his success.

“Bid mademoiselle attend me here,” he said coldly to the servant who waited on his summons.

Di Rocco rubbed his dry palms together, tingling through every nerve of his dishonoured old body.

And in the doorway, like Dorothea the martyr, stood the white lily of

Savoy, wondering with wide eyes on her judges.

CHAPTER II

THE Château di Rocco stood well back, among pine woods, from the little village of Les Chables on the Argentière Road. Above it sloped the stony steeps of the Flegère; below were huddled neglected terraces, like dams to check the further descent of the house into the valley. It might, in its relation to the huge quarry which contained it, have been part of the mountain itself, a vast boulder torn away from its parent rock, and retaining in relief the form of the socket from which it had parted. Towers, pinnacles and walls, heaped up like an enormous ice-mould, seemed to have shaped themselves to the uproar of avalanches, and falling torrents, and the thunder of the wind which uproots whole hill-sides. Yet it was so old itself as to have withstood a legion of assaults and survived unshaken. It had been the stronghold of the di Roccas from the days when the passes of the Alps were a very active trust in the keeping of the border lords, and was still a formidable veteran of its stones.

Within, a world of sombre and tarnished magnificence witnessed to the hands of great mechanics of the past generations. Only the spirit which could minister to such traditions was debased beyond recall. What strain was responsible for its existing lord's, who could say? The miser, like the comet, is a recurrent phenomenon, eccentric in his orbit.

The Château, all in all, was a savage, stone-locked, cold-harbour of a place, the teeth of whose very ghosts chattered as they walked its vaulted corridors. It was haunted throughout by sounds and whispers of cold—the boom of subterranean waters; the high rustle of snow; the growl of ice splitting in the great glaciers opposite. The wind whistled in its halls, lifting the skirts of the tapestry in a sort of stately dance, as if the phantom figures thereon were at a minuet to warm themselves. There was not a closet in all its recesses which might have been called cosy, nor a rat behind its wainscoting which had grown sleek on plenty.

Dr Bonito, private physician to the Count, was himself as waxy a spectre as any which inhabited there. His face was like a topographical map, with all its features in low relief—wrinkles for rivers, dull eyes for lakes, a nose like a rudimentary volcano. There was no expression whatever on it but what seemed to derive from drought and starvation, and no colour but a bilious

glaze, which pimped here and there into red. A death-mask of him might very well have stood for a chart of the dead moon.

The doctor was said to be a Rosicrucian, a member of that queer sect (then somewhat out of date) which mixed up alchemy with ethics, and thought to coin a millennium out of the alloy. Or it had thought to once. Rosicrucianism was not founded, professedly, to interfere with the polity or religions of States, but simply to pursue the True Philosophy—to “follow the Gleam.” Yet no secret society, I suppose, has ever failed, when success has brought it self-conscious of its power, to abuse its mission; and certainly Dr Bonito, as a latter-day Frater Roseæ-Crucis, distilled other and less perfumed waters than utilitarianism from his alembics. He was an empiric, in fact, and lived on the gross superstition of his employer—barely, it is true, but resignedly, since Di Rocco had promised him a legacy proportionate with his services in keeping him alive, and a very bonanza should he conduct him well over the Biblical span. For which reason Bonito scarcely resented his present treatment, because he counted every penny now withheld from him as a penny invested against his future.

Plumpness, under the circumstances, was hardly to be expected of him; but the doctor was so very thin that, when he hugged himself, his elbows seemed to meet in his waist. Mr Trix (as he liked to be called), sitting opposite at a little table, with a solitary candle burning between, laughed to see him so caress himself.

“You have no bowels,” he said, “consequently no hunger. What is the matter with you then, old Bonito?”

The physician, who, in order that he might cherish his numb fingers, had put down on the table an instrument which he had been engaged in correcting—an astrolabe so antique in construction that it might have dated from Hipparchus—answered, with a peevish wince of his breath,—

“Hunger, child? What dost thou know of the hunger of the soul?”

“Something,” said Trix.

“Something!” echoed the other. “Ay, the baffled appetites of one whose sensorium is but a mirror to reflect back into his brain the visible lusts of the flesh.”

Mr Trix laughed again, pulling at his long pipe. He had a reckless young dark face, jet-eyebrowed, winsome out of wickedness, and handsome enough to be a perpetual passport to his desires. His form, properly slim and elastic for the “blade” that he was, was “sheathed,” quite elegantly for di Rocco, in

cloth of a fine black, and with a ruff of Valenciennes lace at its breast. A glass and a bottle of old wine stood at his elbow.

“True,” he said, “I deplore the loss of our late good company. And so do you, my Bonito, if for a different reason. I miss its penny-wisdom, and you its penny-fees. But however our respective souls may feel the present pinch, they would do well, it seems to me, to prepare for, even to provide against, a worse. I think Di Rocco looks very bloated and shaky of late, don’t you?”

“Ah! you wish him to die first!”

Bonito rose to his feet and went pacing vehemently up and down. Trix, watching him, said quietly,—

“You are very wrong. I wish the padrone no harm whatever—least of all the harm of this ludicrous misalliance.”

The physician stopped suddenly.

“It is quite true,” he said. “I know the conditions. We should both be disinherited—taken by the scruff and kicked out. The notary has already been advised.”

“What then? The stars are always common land.”

“Do you think so, my friend? There are no pastures so exclusive, nor so costly in the grazing. Why else have I served parsimony these long years, as Galeotti served Louis Gripes, if not for promise of the late means to their attainment. Let us be frank; why have you?”

“For fun,” said the young man, “or my duty to an older scapegrace. I don’t see the possibility of either in a *regimen* of Mademoiselle de France.”

Bonito, sitting down again and leaning his elbows on the table, searched hungrily the brown eyes which canvassed his imperturbably. Suddenly he dealt out a question,—

“M. Louis-Marie Saint-Péray?”

“Well?”

“Have you come across such a gentleman here?”

Trix nodded.

“Eh! you have?” said the other. “Well, what do you know of him?”

“That he is a young gentleman of France, of slender means, which he expends largely on impracticable enthusiasms.”

“Anything more?”

“That he is in Le Prieuré for the second time, to attempt the assault of Mont Blanc.”

“Ay, and what else?”

“Incidentally, that he will never conquer anything.”

“Why not?”

“Because he is a creature of fervid aspirations and lame conclusions.”

“Has he taken you into his confidence?”

“More; into his arms.”

“How was that?”

“He would cross the Glacier of the Winds without a guide; he fell into a crevasse which, luckily for him, his alpenstock bridged. But he could not get out until I pulled him. There’s the thing in the corner. Do you see it? I gave him my hunting-knife for it, the one with the jade handle and little rat’s head in-gold. Nothing would satisfy him but that we exchanged blood tokens.”

“I don’t doubt it. A fair exchange, and M. Cartouche all over.”

“Why, thou unconscionable hunks! didn’t he give me, for his part, what he had reason to value most in the world? ‘Use it for my sake,’ says he, ‘so that I may dream always of my two best friends going hand in hand.’ There were tears in his eyes. Do you think he will ever ascend Mont Blanc?”

“Maybe not. But his aspirations mount higher.”

“You mean to the de France. Ha, ha, old fox! you have not had me, you see.”

“He has confessed to you?”

“No, I swear. But the sacristan of Le Marais is an exuberant toss-pot, and apt to overflow in his cups. My information is from him.”

“What information?”

“Why, that miss and my friend have very much the air of being lovers secretly pledged to one another.”

“It is a fact. But how does he know it?”

“His chapel is their pious rendezvous, sweet souls. There they met first, and there they meet still.”

“It is well they take their loves to church—a good sign. He will want to make an honest woman of her.”

Cartouche grew suddenly and fastidiously articulate.

“I will beg you to bear in mind, Dr Bonito,” he said, “that M. Saint-Péray has made his honour my own.”

“That is admirable indeed,” answered the physician. “But has he introduced you to the lady?”

“No,” said Cartouche, irresistibly tickled for the moment. “There are limits even to *his* friendship.”

“You do not know her?”

“Not even by sight.”

“She is very pretty, Mr Trix.”

Cartouche, staring at the speaker a moment, took his pipe from his lips, which as always, when his mood grew ugly, seemed to thin down against his teeth.

“What are you hinting at?” he demanded low. “A pox on your innuendo! Out with it!”

The physician grinned unconcerned.

“Only,” said he, “that I hope, when you do see her, it will not make you wish to take your blood-brother’s place in the spoiling of di Rocco’s romance.”

Cartouche leaped to his feet.

“Beast!” he hissed. “If thou hadst as much nose as a barber could lay hold on, I would take thee by it and shave thy cursed throat!”

The other did not move.

“As to my nose,” he said, “it serves its purpose.”

“I don’t doubt it,” cried Cartouche. “The smallest vent is enough for slander. When have you ever known me wrong a friend in his love?”

“Never, indeed—where the wrong’s been expected of you. Perversity’s your crowning devil. You’ve suffered some losses for the pleasure of confuting your oracles, I know. Well, you’ve only to confute them here, to earn *my* gratitude, at least.”

“A dog to suggest such a villainy!”

“What! to you? Ho, ho! Have you ever heard of carrying owls to Athens? But let it pass. It’s all one if we are in accord as to the impossibility of this alliance between Mademoiselle and our patron, and the timeliness of our young mountaineer’s intrusion. You choose to believe that you will serve monsignore best by helping M. Saint-Péray to the lady. Well, believe it, and save us our reversions by an act of virtue.”

Cartouche, yielding to humour with a sudden laugh, yawned and stretched himself.

“After all,” he said indolently, “there’s no such sporting science as casuistry. Di Rocco is certainly an old bottle for this heady young wine; a villainous scarecrow to be asking for a patch of this bright new cloth. The pattern is out of suits with his raggedness, and calls for a seemly pair of breeches. We’ll save him his character in spite of himself.”

“It would be a veritable act of grace,” said Bonito.

“If we could only do him that good by stealth,” said Cartouche, relighting his pipe.

“La-la-la!” cried the physician, softly. “Why need we appear in the matter at all?”

“What do you mean?”

“It is only a question of terms with Le Marais—of sufficiently gilding the countenance it will give to a stolen union. They have no particular tenderness there for di Rocco, whose ugly countenance, for his part, is the only thing he has ever given them. The rest lies between you and your blood-brother.”

“I can bring a horse to the water—”

“Bah! he will drink. It is a Pierian spring. You will know when you see.”

“Shall I? And how about the lady?”

Bonito chuckled.

“For choice she has di Rocco!”

A voice at the door, little, and gloating, and jubilant, took up the word,—

“Di Rocco, di Rocco, di Rocco! What about him, you rogues? What about the knave of hearts, the gallant, the irresistible, the latter-day saint of love, who is going to be so blessed that he will need no physician, nor no runagate scamp to remind him of his days of unregeneracy?”

Bonito, risen, shot one significant glance at Cartouche, and then lowered his eyes as his patron entered.

“Monsignore’s suit has sped?” he murmured.

“Drawn by doves,” crowed the Marquess; “flown straight as a bee into the bosom of love, where it stops to hive.”

He crossed to the table, took up the bottle, cried, “Ha, you inordinate dog!” to Cartouche; slapped him on the back with, “A thief of a cellarer, go hang!” and blew out the candle.

“Who can’t drink by moonlight,” he cried, “is no chaste Diana’s servant. I’ll have to immure thee, dangerous rogue, among thy bottles.”

The moonlight, as he spoke, striking from a white window-sill, threw up all his features grossly. He looked like some infernal sort of negro, flat-nosed, monstrous-lipped.

“It was my candle, padrone,” said Cartouche, placidly sucking at his pipe. “I think I will light it again, and this time at both ends.”

But di Rocco, paying no attention to him, was flicking at the astrolabe on the table.

“This folly, Bonito,” he said. “I am at an end of it all. What did it ever foretell me but lies?”

The physician rescued his instrument gravely.

“Nay, monsignore,” he said. “It cannot lie, so its parts remain true. Yet I confess it strained my credulity to the extent this night that I was fain to bring it in and examine it.”

“And what had been its message?” sneered the Marquess, uneasy while he scowled.

“That monsignore’s death must follow close upon his marriage,” said the Rosicrucian, calmly.

Di Rocco tore the instrument from his hand and dashed it upon the floor.

“Liar!” he screamed. “I know thy tricks and motives. Did it foretell this end to them? Begone, thou ass inside a lion’s skin, lest I spit and trample on thee! Begone, nor look upon my face again!”

Without a word Bonito stooped and gathered up the wreck of brass, then, clutching it, walked softly from the room.

Cartouche pulled calmly on at his pipe.

CHAPTER III

M. LOUIS-MARIE SAINT-PÉRAY lodged in the house of a M. Paccard, Le Prieuré's respectable doctor, and an enthusiast in matters of geology. Everyone loved Louis-Marie, even, in a sweet, impartial way, the doctor's only daughter, Martha, who, however, had other geese to pluck in the matrimonial market. The young man was so good and so good-looking, so pious, so enthusiastic and so sensible. Anticipating the boy-angel of "Excelsior," he came storming the frozen heights, which, nevertheless, he was not to attain. But his failures made the true romance of his endeavours—in the eyes of women, at least, who do not admire the cocksureness which comes of success. As to the men, the rugged mountaineers, who were experienced in the natural limitations to their craft, they mingled, perhaps, a little contempt with their liking. It would be all very well to put their knowledge to school by showing it the way up Mont Blanc; but, in the meanwhile, aspirations were not deeds. They all, for the matter of that, aspired to conquer the great white peak, but their women did not applaud them for the wish. True, they had not, not one of them, M. Saint-Péray's serene white face, and kindling blue eyes, and hair of curling sunbeams. Yet Le Prieuré was not deficient in manly beauty, however little it might derive from an exclusive ancestry of angels.

Le Prieuré, in Louis-Marie's time, was a rude enough valley, and almost forbidden ground to the ease-loving traveller. That was one reason, perhaps, why the women so favoured this gentle stranger, who came to them on his own initiative out of the despised world of luxury. If he brought with him the traditions of tender breeding, he brought also its fearless spirit. It was something god-like in him to defy, in his frail person, that unconquerable keep of the mountains.

That was good in itself; but a closer appeal was to reach them on the occasion of his second visit. For it was then that he and Yolande met for the first time, and provided in their meeting the basis for a more poignant romance than any which had yet glorified him. Within a week, every wife in Le Prieuré thrilled in the knowledge of a secret fathomed only by herself.

One wet July morning Louis-Marie left the doctor's door and turned his

face for Le Marais, which was a little dedicatory chapel standing under pine woods on the lower slopes of the Montverd. It was there he had first come upon Yolande, the saintly loveliness, craving some boon of the sacred heart; and what better rendezvous could the two afterwards appoint than the little holy shrine which had brought them mutually acquainted with the sweetest of all boons?

As Louis-Marie walked up the village street his heart sang like a bird with joy. It was full of thankfulness to the God of orthodoxy, who was nevertheless the God of nature and of love. How easy and how profitable it was to earn approval in those great eyes! One had only to keep the faith of a little child, to ask no questions, to court no vexing heresies, and be happy. And so to be rewarded for one's happiness, as witness himself twice blessed. He had done nothing but be good according to his orthodox lights, and for that virtue, which was instinct, here was he glorified in the affection of the loveliest lily of womanhood which had ever blossomed in a by-way of the world. He turned and breathed a laugh in the direction of the unsurmountable peak, hidden now within league-deep folds of mist. What was there to gain which seemed other than trivial in the light of his higher achievement? The mountain was shrunk to a mole-hill under that star, that altitude.

There was no wind; the wet dropped softly, caressingly; the fields were full of flowers. Louis-Marie could interpret the talk between them and the earnest rain. The patches of standing rye were stippled with poppies. He recognised why the supreme artist had touched them in here and there and nowhere else. Sacred love was the understanding love after all; he felt that he had been given the gift of tongues.

He took no sense of depression from the drowning mist. The gloom made the lamp of his heart shine the more friendly, smiling on all things in its consciousness of the ecstatic wings which were waiting up there to flutter to it in a little. He had no doubt of himself, or of his right to hold that lure to them. Perhaps he had no reason to have. He came, for all worldly considerations, of an old and stately family, and he had his orphan's patrimony—nothing great, but enough to bring him within the bounds of eligibility in the eyes of a poor Chevalier. If he had consented hitherto to make a secret of his suit, it was because he could not find it in his heart to materialise the first virgin rapture of that idyll—to submit it to flesh-and-blood conditions. There was no other reason; or, if one was to be suspected in M. de France's pride and aloofness, as gossip painted them, he would not

admit to himself that he had been influenced by it. But, in any case, propriety, always to him the little thing more than love, without which love itself must lack perfection, demanded its vindication the moment he realised that it was in question; and he was now actually on his way, in fact, to entreat his love's consent to an appeal to the paternal sanctions.

Half-way down the village street he encountered a young fellow, a friend of his, and one intimately associated with some past ambitions. This was Jacques Balmat, already the most experienced of mountaineers at twenty-two. His dark eager face and bold eyes showed in significant contrast with the girlish pink and blue of the other's. He held out a handful of pebbles.

Louis-Marie was in no hurry. "For Dr Paccard, Jacques?" he asked, with a smile. The young man nodded his head.

"Some of them are rare enough, monsieur. I risk my life in getting them. But who would win the daughter must court the father."

There was significance as well as sympathy in his tone. To him, also, there was a peak higher than Mont Blanc's to attain.

"Very true, Jacques," said Saint-Péray. "I hope we may both find favour."

The young mountaineer nodded again.

"And in the meanwhile, monsieur, there is no favour imperilled by showing what resolute fellows we are. I was even now on my way to monsieur. This mist presages a sunny morrow. Monsieur, the mountain still waits to be scaled."

"It must wait, Jacques, for me. There are rarer heights to gain. For the moment I hold my life like the frailest vessel, which it is my duty to protect from so much as a breath of danger."

"Well, monsieur, that sounds funny to me. But then, manliness is my only recommendation. To win a great name out of venture—there is my chance, and now more than ever."

"Why now, Jacques?"

"Monsieur has not heard? Dr Paccard has been appointed physician to the Château. Dr Paccard will be a big man presently—too big to countenance a son-in-law chosen from the people."

"Since when has he been appointed, Jacques?"

"Since last night, monsieur, by the talk. It tells of how the monsignore's erst familiar, the seer Bonito, came down into the village raging over his dismissal. And there are other whispers—of a libertine reformed; of changes projected at the Château. I know little of their import, I—only this, that

Jacques Balmat will lose nothing by conquering the mountain. Shall we not join hands, monsieur, in essaying once more a triumph which would make all men our debtors—monsieur, to win or perish?”

But Saint-Péray shook his head.

“Another time, Jacques,” he said. “My claim to conquest must rest on lower deserts. *Bonne chance, camarade!*” And he went on his way, to meet the fate of the irresolute; while young Balmat went on his, to climb to his Martha by-and-by.

Louis-Marie was grown thoughtful as he walked on. Nature somehow seemed a little further from his knowledge than before; the talk between the flowers and the rain was like a whispered conspiracy; the dank air chilled him. As he turned out of the village into the wet meadows, which sloped gently upwards towards Le Marais, he started to see a figure standing by a little freshet as if awaiting him.

“Gaston!” he cried, with an irresistible thrill of guiltiness in his note.

Mr Trix wore, making a grace of necessity, a thick dove-grey redingote. His buckish little “tops,” which came but half-way up his calves, appeared scarcely soiled by the rain and mud. The smallest of black cocked hats was placed jauntily on his black curls, of which one, and one only, was privileged to accent the whiteness of his fine forehead. Over his head he carried a small Spanish silk umbrella, an innovation of such effeminacy that his daring it at all in the teeth of fashion testified to something in his character which was at least as noteworthy as his foppishness. Like the dandy wasp, with his waist and elegance and sting, there was that suggestion in Mr Trix of an ever-ready retort upon the rashness of his critics. Some men there are who carry swords in their eyes, and no one laughed at Cartouche the macaroni unless behind his back.

He came up to Louis-Marie, and took his arm with an assured frankness. His smile showed an enviable regularity of teeth.

“Yes, I purposed to meet you,” he said. “Are you in a hurry?”

His self-sufficiency somehow mended Louis-Marie’s.

“My business can wait,” he answered, “for a friend.”

Nevertheless he paused meaningly, as if that business were exclusive.

Cartouche laughed.

“Louis-Marie,” said he, “you have never yet asked me for my credentials.”

“You saved my life,” said Saint-Péray, simply.

“That is true,” said Cartouche. “But supposing it was for my own ends? I

am the very hawk of opportunism.”

“You must have quick eyes indeed, dear Gaston,” said Saint-Péray, with a smile, “if you saw your way to turn me to account during those few moments of my peril.”

“Eyes of the hawk, Louis-Marie. Well, I saved your life, you say. It is certainly the only thing I ever saved, and therefore perhaps, like a spendthrift, I put a particular value on it.”

“And I too, Gaston, I assure you. There was never a time when I held my life so dear as now.”

“That is as I supposed, and the very reason why I am here to warn you.”

“What! is my life in danger?”

“That is as it may hit. If someone came to me and said, ‘Gaston, there is one who has it in his power to administer to you the potion of virtue, so that you shall wish to marry and live respectable,’ I should say that my life was in peril. But one man’s food is another man’s poison, and it is possible that you might welcome such a physicking.”

“Indeed I think I should.”

“Very well. Then there is a priest at Le Marais, I believe—a professional dealer in such potions. There is also, if I am not in error, the necessary other party to such a transaction awaiting you there. I would seize the opportunity, if I were you, to be made respectable for ever.”

“What do you mean?”

Saint-Péray’s face was grown suddenly a little white and stern.

“We are blood-brothers,” answered Cartouche, quietly; “comrades of a very recent sentiment. I honour the tie, despite—I say *despite*—an older and, to me, more natural one. I mean no reflection upon anything but the blindness of two simplicities, living, privately as they suppose, in a little-high paradise of their own. Will you not be satisfied with a hint? Will you not believe in its sincerity, though I tell you that I should profit personally by its acceptance by you? You have chosen to take me on trust. I choose to vindicate that confidence by assuring you that my patron di Rocco has spoiled more idylls in his time than I can tell. He is in the way to ruin yet another, this time by the Church’s sanction; and his arguments, from the worldly point of view, are overwhelming.”

Saint-Péray was like a ghost now.

“Speak plain, brother,” he whispered; “or rather, answer only. Is the Marquess a suitor for the hand of Mademoiselle de France? Is that what you

mean?”

Cartouche stepped back and nodded.

“He is an accepted suitor, Louis-Marie.”

The young man dropped his head with a shudder, as if he had been stabbed. But in a moment he looked up again, pale and trembling.

“So vile!” he said hoarsely. “She’s soiled in his mere thought! Gaston! My God! it must not be; it—”

He checked himself suddenly, gazed a troubled moment into the other’s face, then turned and went quickly up the hill. As soon as the mist had hidden him, Cartouche followed easily in his steps.

“I must see this folly out,” he thought. “Perhaps they will want a witness.”

The chapel of Le Marais hung in the clouds. Its stone walls streamed with rain. The sop and suck of it were the only sounds which broke the silence of the hillside. Cartouche stepped softly to the door and looked in.

It was just a dovecot, of a size for these two pious pigeons. They knelt side by side before the little gimcrack altar. The girl had been waiting there for the other to join her. A picture of the sacred heart transfixed hung on the wall above her head. It was thence she had sought to gather strength for the cruel thing she had to say.

Cartouche, standing without, looked through the crack of the door. He could not see Yolande’s face, for it was hidden in her hands. But presently, with a quivering sigh, she raised it, and, seeing her lover still bowed down in prayer, turned towards the entrance as if seeking light. So the young virgin of Nazareth might have turned, in great doubt and loveliness, following with her eyes the dimming messenger of heaven. And then she herself went to prayer again.

We have likened Yolande once before to Dorothea the Martyr, she who, when condemned to death for loving Christ, promised that she would send to Theophilus, the young advocate who had bantered her, a posy from the garden of her desires. Now, like that Theophilus, when a child-angel stood before him offering to his hand a spray of unearthly roses, Cartouche felt his heart suddenly constrict and, rallying, choke his veins with fire. Stepping softly back, he tiptoed round the end of the chapel, and gained the tiny presbytery which stood in a clearing above. The little house was deserted, it seemed, both of father and sacristan. No one answered to his low tapping. As he stood undecided, the voices of the lovers approaching from the chapel reached him. The door of the presbytery was on the latch. He opened it,

entered, and stood hidden just within. He had no wish to eavesdrop; his heart was in a strange panic, that was all. He felt as Actaeon must have felt as he backed into the thickets.

The two came close up to his hiding-place; and then they stopped, and uttered for his shameful ears the tragedy of their lives. In the first of their meeting, amazed as yet, and unrealising the abyss which was fast gaping between them, they spoke in the soft romance, the old love-language of Savoy; but soon a woefuller cry wrung itself from the torture of their hearts.

“Garden of my soul! as the rose clings to the wall, so art thou mine.”

“I have clung to thee, Louis.”

“The sun hath welded us into one. Thy perfume is in me, as my strength upholds thy beauty. We cannot be torn apart but we perish.”

“I have climbed heavenwards resting on thy heart. My cheek hath glowed to thee by day, and at night, when thou sleptst, I have put my lips to the moon kisses on thy face.”

“Who is this thief that comes into my garden to steal my rose? A beast whom they liken to Gilles de Rais; a thing so foul that I would rather my rose were scentless than that he should boast to have shared in the tiniest largesse of her perfume.”

“Hush! he is the husband whom my father has chosen for me.”

At that Louis-Marie threw poetry to the winds, and seized Yolande’s hands, and looked with madness into her eyes.

“He may choose, but let me gather no submission from your tone. Yolande, we will go down together, and claim our older pledge and win his heart by tears. I had meant this very morning to urge you to that course. Why didn’t I before! O, why didn’t I before! I curse my own delay! I—”

“Louis!”

“Yes, I was wrong. ’Tis love’s, it seems, to damn. Come down, Yolande, before it is too late.”

“Listen, dear love; it is too late. It was a conditional promise, and the condition has been observed. What should my father know of you? His word is his bond, and he will hold to it.”

“He cannot know the reputation of this man. His breath’s a blight upon the earth. Why, even now—”

He broke off with a cry, and clasped his arms convulsively about her.

She was like a ghost, holding up her white hands to him piteously. Cartouche saw what perfect things they were, frail and slender, yet of a

beauty to cradle all love. Her face, in its milky pallour, grey-eyed and scarlet-lipped, was like the face of some spirit tragedy flowering from the mists.

"Ask me nothing," she whispered. "Tell me what to do."

"I tell you?" he said, releasing and stepping back from her. He forced his trembling lips to resolution. "What does your heart say, Yolande? your stainless womanhood? your duty to yourself?"

"My duty to my father, Louis."

"Now, God help me! Is that a note of wavering in your voice? This man's rich and powerful, and I'm neither."

"Louis, I'll not upbraid you."

"For duty's sake to tie yourself to a leper! What abuse of authority will not women plead to justify their treacheries!"

"Will you break my heart? If I married him from duty, I should kill myself from love."

"Hush, dearest! hush, my lily! I was a brute and coward. Forgive me. Yolande, Yolande! have I offended you beyond recall?"

"I forgive you, indeed. But, Louis, were it not better just now to think than kiss?"

"Yes, to think, Yolande. I would carry you by force if driven to it."

"Would you? O, I am helpless!"

"But not unless all else failed. To prevent one outrage by another! God would not love us any longer, Yolande. We must try all juster means first."

Cartouche, wincing, ground his heel softly into the boards where he stood. The girl was weeping very hopelessly.

"You wring my heart," said Saint-Péray, sobbing himself. "What am I to do? What think? I would pray for light before I act—pray for fortitude and reason. Precipitancy makes self-martyrs, Yolande. Our cause is better won by moderation."

She turned from him. "Yolande!" he cried in agony. "You love me best?"

Cartouche uttered a very wicked oath under his breath. But the white lily was in her lover's arms.

"Yes, yes," she said. "You are always right, dear Louis. Only tell me what I am to do."

"Supposing you went now to your father, Yolande, and confessed the whole truth to him?"

"Alone, Louis?"

"Only for a little, dearest. I will follow when I have prayed for guidance."

Would he know my name even?"

"I have done very wrong."

"Hush! the blame is mine. But we will mend it—start afresh. He must be broken to my idea—learn my deserts before he sees me. I'll trust to you to speak them, sweetheart, better than myself. We must not descend upon him with flags flying, daring his enmity."

"You'll not be long?"

"Yolande! do you doubt me?"

"I only doubt myself, Louis. If he appeals to me by all I owe to him!"

"You owe God your soul, Yolande."

"Yes, yes. Pray to Him for me, Louis. I am so weak alone. Good-bye, Louis."

"*Au revoir*, Yolande."

She did not mend her term, however, and they parted. Cartouche turned his face away. When he looked again they were both gone—Yolande down the hill, Louis-Marie to the chapel.

"I have seen an angel," thought the watcher. "Henceforth I am in love with chastity."

He lingered long in his eyrie, waiting for Saint-Péray to go. At length, restless beyond endurance, he decided to take the lead in the descent. As he went down the hillside, the mist was already retreating before the onset of the sun. It was the dawn of mid-day. Cartouche looked over his shoulder towards Le Marais.

"Will that bring him out?" he thought, "or will he always put off making his hay until to-morrow?"

Coming out into the road below, he ran suddenly upon Bonito. The physician sprang back and stood breathing at him, grinning horribly.

"Ha!" he cried. "Well met, fellow-disinherited!"

He champed like a rabid dog. He was woefully unclean and disordered. Cartouche fell severely calm.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"The matter!" cried Bonito. "Enough and to spare for us. Go and hear it in the village. Thou hast sped, if thou hast sped, to great purpose indeed. Le Marais was already bespoke, it seems. They are man and wife this hour."

Cartouche did not move.

"Who are man and wife?" he said.

The other raved.

“Who but the dog that hath disowned us, and the—woman that hath replaced!”

“The woman! she of the white hands? Why, she was up yonder not twice as long ago!”

“I cannot help that. You should have kept her there. If you let her go, you were the fool.”

“I had nothing to do with it. She went down to plead for her lover.”

“A pretty pleading! I don’t doubt she’s like them all—caught by a title. Anyhow springed she was and is, and held at this moment as fast as Church can bind her.”

Cartouche laughed recklessly.

“Well,” said he, “man proposes, but woman disposes. Our best-laid plans are nothing without the collusion of the party planned against. We must carry our wits to a fresh market.”

Bonito, with a fearful blasphemy, hit out into the air.

“I know my market!” he screamed, “I know my market!” and ran raging up the road. Cartouche turned his face to the hill once more.

A little way up he met Saint-Péray, pale and exalted, descending at last. He stood in his path.

“Louis-Marie,” said he, “you have delayed too long. It does not do to give the devil tether while you pray. Mademoiselle de France is at this moment the Marchesa di Rocco.”

He owed the young man no mercy, he thought. His own heart, for all his cynic exterior, was burning between contempt and anger. But he was hardly prepared for the blighting effect of his own words. Louis-Marie fell at his feet as if a thunderbolt had struck him.

CHAPTER IV

YOLANDE DE FRANCE walked straight down the hill to her doom. She had no Spanish silk umbrella, like Cartouche's, to shield her head from the tempest, nor any strength, like his, to dare orthodoxy. She wore only a simple cloak and hood, like "Red-riding-hood the darling, the flower of fairy lore;" and that was quite insufficient to protect her from the wolf.

At the door of the "Hôtel" her father met her, distraught and nervous. He led her, his lips quivering, into the little side study which he called an ante-room. He was obviously, pitifully, agitated.

"Where have you been?" he said. "But no matter, since you are here. Yolande, the moment has come when you must decide."

"Decide, father?" She trembled.

"Whether," he answered, "you will bow to my earnest wishes, or commit me to dishonour and the grave."

She felt suddenly faint, and sat down in a chair.

"Father!" she whispered; "I don't understand you."

"I am only too easily understood," he said. "The Marquess di Rocco, who holds my very existence in the hollow of his hand, renews his suit at this moment, and peremptorily."

"I cannot marry him."

"Wait, before you condemn me, me, your father, to worse than death. I must be plain with you, Yolande, in this terrible crisis. I do not plead my word to him, although you as a de France should appreciate its inviolability. It is associated with other pledges which, in default of your consent, would mean my instant ruin. I owe him money, Yolande, which it is impossible for me to repay—money borrowed chiefly to enable you, my daughter, to maintain the condition which is your due. You alone have it in your power to liquidate that debt."

She did not speak. She could not, indeed. But he gathered a little confidence from her silence.

"And after all," he said, with a sickly smile, "one can conceive a less attractive way out of an *impasse*. Riches, position, a princely jointure, an alliance with the most powerful house in Savoy, whereby our own would be

enabled to recover its lost influence—are these small considerations to be discarded for a personal sentiment, which a month of such devotion would cure?”

She shuddered, repeating, “I cannot marry him.”

“On the other side,” he hurried on, ignoring her words desperately, “utter material ruin and, what is worse to me, my word, my honour foresworn. Listen, Yolande. In that very hour when you become, if you will become, his wife, he settles his entire property upon you by will. You will be the most influential woman in the duchy, a force for the good which is so dear to your heart. Is to put this in your power the act of a libertine, or of one rather who yearns to find his redemption at the hands of a virtue which he holds so inestimably dear?”

She cried out at last, rising from her seat and staggering as if she were blind.

“Father! father! give me time at least!”

Even in her despair she knew that it were useless to plead how her heart, her soul were engaged elsewhere. The shock, at this pass, would have driven him to a very frenzy of cruelty. As it was, he leapt to the little concession implied in her appeal, and sought to improve upon it instantly.

“Impossible. He is on the very eve of a journey. He demands the ceremony at once—this moment.”

“The ceremony? O, mother of God!”

“A formal one only, conditionally, for a year. Not till that time has elapsed may he claim you for his wife in fact. It was my provision, made in consideration of your youth and inexperience.”

She stared at him as if mad.

“You are my father,” she began. He interrupted, to better her,—

“Your dead mother’s trustee for your welfare, Yolande. As I hold that charge sacred from abuse, believe at least in the sincerity of my desire to urge, impartially, upon you the wisdom of a step which I am sure she would have approved.”

The girl gave a little rending laugh—horrible—in a note quite foreign to her.

“Is he—M. di Rocco—in the house?” she asked.

“He is in the next room awaiting us. The Maire, the notary, and the good Father of Le Marais are also there, attending on your decision.”

“Only my mother is wanting,” said Yolande. “Call her to this conspiracy

against her child, and see what she answers to the impartial head of it.”

He had turned his fine eyes from her, even as, it is said, the royal despot of beasts will cower under the fearless human gaze; but at this the goaded fire flashed into them.

“She would answer,” he cried, “cursing the graceless offspring of our house, who could so misread a father’s tender love.”

“No, father, she is in heaven. The secrets of our hearts are bared to her.”

He cringed before her for a moment, defeated and exposed. Looking in her noble eyes, he knew that his moral tenure of her heart, her duty, hung upon a thread—knew that nothing but the last poignant threat of self-destruction could restore them to him. His stately cowardice had even foreseen this contingency.

“You leave me no alternative,” he said, his face as grey as ashes. “I cannot survive dishonour and my broken word. Thus, Yolande, do I take your message to her!” and with the word he fetched a pistol from his pocket and put its muzzle to his temple.

She uttered a fearful scream, and flew to him—wrenched down his arm, cried, and fondled him with inarticulate moans. He stood quite passive.

“Give me time!” she could only sob at last.

“I can give you nothing, Yolande,” he answered. “Yours is all the gift. I am a bankrupt but for you.”

He made a movement as if to break from her. She held him madly. In that minute the whole joy of life drained from her veins and left them barren. At length she released him, and stepped back.

“Father,” she said, “in all your life never mention my mother’s name to me again. When I die, bury me away from her in another grave. I am only worthy to be your daughter. Deal with me as you will.”

A double rose of colour had come to his cheeks. He made an eager step towards her, but she retreated before him.

“It is enough for me that you have vindicated your name,” he said. “It is enough that I am not mistaken in you.”

“Spare me that comment on my shame,” she said. “Why will you keep me in this torture?”

But he must still hunger to justify his self-degradation by enlarging on it.

“Hush!” he said. “It is a sacrifice, I know; but perhaps, Yolande, only a provisional sacrifice. Dare I whisper my own expectations? You will be free for a year—a wife in nothing but the material endowments of wifhood; a—a

prospective dowager, Yolande. The Marquess is much shaken—a prematurely old man—a—”

She turned from him, feeling sick to death.

“I am waiting,” she said icily.

* * * * *

That was how the Marchese di Rocco gained his wife. For the rest, the priest, the Maire and notary were creatures of his own, and among them soon accomplished the ceremony and settlements. At the end, monsignore offered to kiss his newly-made bride; but she backed from him.

“Is this in the bond?” she asked coldly of her father. He was very righteous and peremptory at once.

“It is a breach of it,” he said. “I must ask you, monsignore, to observe our compact to the letter.”

The old libertine grinned.

“A pledge only, to be redeemed in a year,” he said. “But it will keep, sweet as roses in a cabinet. In the interval, I hope the Marchesa will honour my poor abode, during the absence of its master.”

“No, pardon me,” said de France. “She will continue in her father’s house.”

“I shall do neither,” said the lily.

“How!” cried the Chevalier.

“I am my own mistress,” she said. “From this moment please do not forget that—” and she swept from the room.

He stared after her, dumbfounded; but di Rocco burst into a great laugh.

“By God, I like her spirit!” he said. “She is a prize worth the winning.”

CHAPTER V

THERE was a little *auberge* on the Montverd, kept open during the summer months for the benefit of those (not many in 1783) who came to enjoy the view. There, in a green oasis, planted amongst the stupendous buttresses of the mountains, lived Nicholas Target and his daughter Margot, the latter a good sensible girl and the responsible *aubergiste*. The father was a drunken scamp, a guide by profession, but long discredited as such in the eyes of all but his daughter, whose faithful heart continued to make its compromise with the self-evident. The fellow spent his days, of slouching and soaking, mostly at the foot of the steep path which descended from the inn to the moraine of the Winds, where, in a tiny shed, he kept a store of woollen socks for the feet of those who desired to cross the glacier. This at least left the *auberge* free of his presence, and Margot to the peaceful entertainment of her guests.

Amongst these, on a certain tragic day, came to be included Yolande, new Marchesa di Rocco. Only the wonderful visitor came to stay, it seemed, and not merely to gather Dutch courage for the passage of the glacier. She took a bed at the inn, and cold command, as by right of her husband, its rent-lord, of its general conduct. She had always had an affection for Margot, the good girl, and this was her way of showing her confidence in her discretion.

“I want to be alone,” she had said; “and hither none comes but the stranger who cannot know me or my concerns. I look to you to secure me utter privacy—from man, from woman, from child, from the whole world. Only if my father comes must I see him, for I am his daughter. For all else be my true and faithful watchdog, Margot.”

Margot had of course heard of the tragic ending to that idyll on Le Marais. In common with her fellow-women she had deplored the finish to a pretty romance; but then, when one’s feudal lord stepped in at the door, love must fly out at the window. It was pitiful, it was sad, but it was inevitable. She promised with all her heart to contribute what gentle salve was hers to that open wound.

She said it with fervour, but in a panic. It was difficult for her to reconstruct, from this figure of bloodless hauteur, the sweet and kindly patroness of yesterday, who had never held herself other than such a simple

girl as she was herself. Could shock so turn to stone? It was a catalepsy of the soul.

And Yolande made her home there in the *auberge*. With all Le Prieuré at her feet, she elected for this chill small refuge of the hills. She felt she could breathe there—was nearer God and her mother. She felt she could pray a little even, and with more chance of being heard in that austere silence. There was no sound of waterfalls in all the vast valley to strike between her and her isolation, rushing down into the hateful plains where men dwelt, dragging her thoughts on their torrents. What voices reached her came from above—the whisper of avalanches, the echoing crack of ice-falls in those enormous attics of the world. She was alone with her desolation among desolations.

Once, and once only, her father visited her there. He was very humble and deprecating. He had come to remonstrate, and he remained to weep. She saw his tears without emotion, and bid him kindly to the descent, lest the mists should rise presently and give him cold. He went without a word.

Did she ever think of Louis and that dead idyll? A will of self-reticence had so been born in her that perhaps she was able to hold his figure from her mind. If she had not, the memory of the cruelty of her part to him must have driven her mad. Not to think at all was her hold on reason—not to think what he was thinking, suffering, designing. That he could come to claim her yet, in defiance of law, orthodoxy and every right but the right of human nature, she could not believe, nor wish to believe. He was not so to be dethroned from her worship of him past. It would be another Louis than the Louis of her knowledge who could so dare. Yet was she not another Yolande? An awful rapture, should outrage have conceived a wicked will in him like hers! But Louis would not come. He was a purer soul than she, and prayed, always prayed, before he committed himself to action.

The far unconquered heights above her were her reassurance, she told herself, that he was of those who accept repulse unquestioning. His faith was always first in heaven, and its high reasons for baffling high achievement. Christ's creed, and he a Christian. He could not love her so much, "loved he not honour more." She bowed to that higher rival, and believed that the thing remotest from her wishes was to see her ousted. And her brain reeled to the sound of every footstep which came up the mountain.

Among them all she never dreamed of listening for her husband's. That di Rocco had kept his word and left Le Prieuré on the morrow of the tragedy she never doubted. It was not he, but the interval which was to separate her from

him which filled her thoughts. Nebulous, unformed, the idea was still never less than a fixed one in her mind that any consummation to that tyranny but Death's was unspeakable. Whether his or hers it mattered nothing. The knot must be cut before it was double-tied; and in her heart she rejoiced to think of his succession to an empty bed. She did not suppose she could possibly survive the year—twelve long months of suspension between torture past and the prospect of the living “question” to come. She had only to be herself and die. “Duty” could not traverse that decision. Her heart was cold already.

Rare and alien the footsteps came up. One day it would be a traveller, one day a goatherd. The world went by her thinly, and vanished into the mists. She remained alone, and fell, after each interruption, into her old communing with Death. He was the only understanding friend left to her.

One day, as she was in talk with him, high on the hill where no one usually came, a stranger suddenly stood before her. Either the watchdog had been slack or the interloper cunning. He doffed his hat to her with the most sympathetic grace imaginable.

“You seek the *auberge*, monsieur?” she said haughtily. “It lies below. You are off the road.”

“And mademoiselle also?” he asked. “But supposing we each undertake to put the other on it?”

She had been seated on a stone. She rose hurriedly.

“The road lies down, monsieur.”

“As I would convince mademoiselle,” he said. “I have just come up it from a stricken friend.”

Her intuition touched some meaning in his words. She looked breathlessly at him.

“If you know me, monsieur, as your manner seems to imply, you will know that I am out of love with subterfuge.”

“I know you, mademoiselle, by sight and reputation.”

“Scarcely, monsieur, if you so address me.”

“Ah!” he said. “I do not hold by orthodoxy. And yet there was a time when I was tender of it. You would be madame on a surer title had I had my way.”

“Tell me who you are?” she demanded icily.

“It can hardly interest you. They call me Cartouche.”

Her face fell frowning.

“I have heard of you. I would not be ungracious, sir,” she said. “You saved a life that was once dear to me.”

"I wish I could say I saved it *because* it was dear to you. I had not seen you then."

"You can dispense with your compliments, sir. Your reputation is sufficiently well known to me without."

"Then doubtless mademoiselle is aware that disloyalty to friends is not a part of it. Moreover, it is a human eccentricity to love what we have saved."

"It is easy to love some people."

"It is easy, though our natures may be the remotest from theirs. Verjuice loves oil in this queer salad of life. But where I have come to love through saving, I would save again and yet again."

"You speak a good deal of yourself, monsieur. Forgive me if I cannot quite share your interest in the subject. No doubt your friend appreciated your assistance in saving him a second time from destruction. It is fatter, I am sure, in such eyes as yours, to fall in love than into an abyss."

"You misunderstand me—I hope not wilfully. I did not mean to speak of saving my friend *from* you, but *for* you. I do not mean it now. I am here to offer you my services."

She drew herself up magnificently.

"I thank you, monsieur. I was to be excused perhaps, for wishing to read on the better side of an insolence. You had done well, according to your lights, I am sure, to strive to keep us apart—well to your worthy patron; well for your worthy self. I could have respected you at least for that consistency. But to offer to mend what you have helped to mar! I am at a loss to understand how I have invited this insult."

A dark flush rose on Trix's cheek. What was this new-born perversity in him which made him not only bare his heart to this sting of words, but, like a very anchorite of love, take pleasure in his chastising? Her frost fired him.

"You are bitter, mademoiselle," he said. "I could answer, very truly, in self-defence that I was so far from choosing to have a hand in this business, as it has sped, that I foresaw from the first what has actually happened—that your exaltation would spell my ruin. I would answer that, I say, but that I own to no man's power to ruin me."

She was quite unmoved.

"Those who serve evil must bide evil," she said. "If, as you would seem to imply, monsieur, your employer has made you the scapegoat of his reformation, I can only regret, very sincerely, my involuntary part in your dismissal. Believe me, I would give all my *exaltation* to reinstate you."

“I used the term unthinkingly,” said Cartouche. “It was the formal phrase of a worldling. Will you persist in thinking me too bad to be moved by the distresses of virtue hard beset?”

“And how would you propose to help that poor virtue, sir? For what are your services offered? I will not even sully myself by understanding—unless to suppose that you design to make me an instrument of your revenge on one who has wronged you.”

The flush on his face deepened.

“You are an angel, madame,” he said grimly. “You claim your full prerogatives. I can never please you better, I see, than by avowing my knowledge of the gulf which separates us. I, too, will be myself, flagrantly and without compromise. My affections are all earthly. Very well, I love the man I have saved, because I saved him. I see him stricken down—helpless—his very reason threatened under a calamity worse than death.”

Her face had gone bloodless; she answered, faltering,—

“As to that, monsieur, assure yourself, assure him if you please, that nothing but a convention separates us now, nor ever will.”

He looked wonderingly at her. Did she mean to kill herself? He could quite believe it, as the more pardonable of two self-offences. Then he breathed and laughed.

“A convention!” he cried. “I am nearer you by that admission. There is no moral bondage in conventions. Let me bring my friend to you and save him.”

She reared herself like a very snake.

“I would you had never saved him,” she said deeply; “I would you had never laid that claim on his regard. My only regret in dismissing you is that I re-condemn him to this corruption. Go, sir, and insult and trouble me no longer!”

He had lost, and turned to leave her. But for a moment he paused, in anger and confusion, to fire his final charge,—

“Very well, madame! Only be quite sure of the strength of that convention—as sure as your husband may be of its weakness. I do not think he will wait a year for the test. Farewell!” and he went.

And no sooner was he out of sight and hearing, than Yolande bent herself face downwards on the rock, and delivered her soul in a cry of agony,—

“Louis! my Louis! so ill, so broken! and I may not help thee, nor think of thee!”

CHAPTER VI

IF all the rest of feminine Le Prieuré was agreed in accepting Louis-Marie's discomfiture with regretful resignation, Martha Paccard was certainly not going to number herself of that complacent sisterhood. She was hot with pity and indignation, and, because vexed, illogical of course.

"What did the man seek?" she asked sharply of Jacques Balmat, referring to the Chevalier de France. "Honour, renown, riches, through this connection with a *débauché*? Our monsieur had provided them all, and with a better savour, if only you had spurred him timely to achieve the ambition of his life. But how was the poor boy to accomplish that ascent, with you and your wisdom for ever at his elbow persuading him from it? You men are all alike—great promises, and little reasons for not performing them."

"No later than the day of the marriage, Martha, I urged him to come and try once more."

"Then you did very wrong. What title had you to demand that risk of him, when all his happiness was at stake in Le Prieuré?"

"To increase the odds in his favour, to be sure."

"Favour and odds! Has he not his patrimony, enough to frank a presence less angelic than his?"

"I do not see how to ascend the mountain could have added to it, certainly."

"Don't you? But there is money in fame, let me tell you, even if it is achieved ultimately through a book. As for you, you may ascend Mont Blanc, and nobody will believe it, because they will have to take your word, which is nothing."

"They will take my word, nevertheless."

"They will be more credulous, then, than I. I have long lost faith in it. And if I still doubted, there is that poor sick boy at home to confirm me. By this time, if you had done as you promised, not fifty di Roccas could have equalled him in reputation."

"Is he very ill, Martha?"

"He wrings my heart. Why are you so strong, Jacques, and so honest and so resolute? I cannot conceive my father parting *us* at a blow. And yet I am a

dutiful daughter too. I think we love weak men like mothers. I am glad you are not weak, Jacques."

"So am I. So shall your father be some day."

"You must learn modesty, Jacques. Poor M. Saint-Péray is a model of it."

"And he has been jilted."

"So he has; that is the truth. He still sits as if stunned. I don't know what will happen when he recovers himself. Jacques, for pity's sake watch him when that happens—for pity's sake, Jacques."

"I will be his shadow, Martha."

"But not for him to know. I dread the time terribly. I think there is often no such fiend as a good man wronged through his goodness. And there has been an evil one whispering in his ear, I am sure."

"An evil one?"

"M. Gaston, the old lord's black whelp. He brought him home that day—straight from hearing the disastrous news. He has been with him once or twice since. Jacques, I should not be surprised—I should not be surprised, I say, if that devil were urging him to dare all and abduct—her up there."

"Would you not? I think I wish I could believe it."

"O, hush! are you all fiends? This Cartouche, they say, is ruined in the marriage. *He* may have his reasons—but *you*!"

"Well, good-bye, Martha. I will watch him."

"That is right; to save him from himself—such a self, my God, as he may come to be! Good-bye, Jacques."

She went on her way home. It was a chill, oppressive day for the season, with threat of cold storm in the air. Few people were abroad. As she neared her door, she noticed that a man was keeping pace with her. He reached the house as she did, and accosted her as she was lifting the latch. She recognised him for the Dr Bonito whom her father had supplanted at the Château, and her heart gave a little heave.

"Whom do you seek, monsieur?" she said, standing with her back to the door as if to bar his passage. She had not in her heart approved her father's promotion to that distinction; but to any outer criticism of it she was ready to ruffle like a mother hen at a cat.

The doctor, it appeared, however, was to disarm her with a show of the most ingenuous urbanity.

"M. Saint-Péray lodges here?" he said, with a smile like a spasm of stomach-ache. "I should like to have a word with him."

She looked at him with her honest eyes. It was at least a relief to find that his visit was not connected with his replacement by her father.

“He is not at all himself, monsieur,” she said. “Will not a message suffice?”

“Doubtless,” he answered. “Only I must deliver it myself.”

“A message?”

She questioned his face searchingly. Whose possible delegate could he be? Certainly he and M. Louis were at one in the question of their discomfiture by di Rocco. There was that much of sympathy between them. Besides, it was known that this man dealt in the occult—could cast nativities and foretell deaths. His message might be one of comfort and reassurance. Things were already at such a pass that no conceivable evil could congest them further. A certain awe awoke in her eyes. The neighbourhood of mountains engenders superstition.

“Is your—your message, monsieur,” she said, with a little choke, “from someone—somewhere that only such as you can understand?”

He chafed his bony hands together, leering at her wintrily.

“Yes,” he said. “I think it may interest him.”

“Wait, then,” she answered, deciding in a moment, “while I ask him if he is willing to receive it.”

She had intended to leave him on the doorstep while she went, but he followed her in closely, lingering only at the foot of the stairs while she ascended.

Louis-Marie sat in a little room which overlooked the hills. His ambitions and their unfulfilment were eternally symbolised before his vision. He was not much changed outwardly; only his eyes appeared physically to have shallowed. A cloud had come between them and the sun, and the transparency of their blue was grown chalky, as if a blind had been pulled down over his soul. And as yet no lights were lit behind, to show the shadows of what moved there. He was as quiet and courteous as ever in seeming; but women are as sensitive as deer to atmosphere, and Martha never saw him now but she quaked in anticipation of a storm to come.

He was reading, or feigning to. He looked over to her kindly.

“What is it, Martha?” he asked.

“There is one come to see you, monsieur, with a message from the stars.”

She trembled a little. He laughed.

“That is kind of him, whoever he is. Is it a fallen star, Martha? It can have

no message for me otherwise.”

“It is fallen, monsieur, and therefore, maybe, in sympathy with its kind. It is Dr Bonito, the mage and soothsayer.”

“What! is he too the victim of a reformation? Heaven is very impartial, Martha. It condescends to no degrees in its chastisement. As well, after all, to be hanged for a sheep as a lamb.”

“Quite as well, if it is necessary to be hanged at all,” said Bonito at the door, to which he had mounted softly.

Martha exclaimed angrily, but Saint-Péray did not even stir.

“Pray make yourself at home, fellow-asteroid,” said he. “I must not complain if like attracts like. You can leave us, Martha.”

She obeyed reluctantly. Having followed impulse, she retired on mortification, which is the common way.

“What is your message?” said Louis-Marie, impassively, the moment his visitor was left alone to him. “You can sit or not as you like,” he added. “I am master of nothing.”

Bonito, as apparently phlegmatic for his part, remained standing where he was.

“You may think you know enough of my reputation to insult me,” he said. “It is no concern of mine what you or anyone thinks. The surest sign of worth is to be worth men’s slander, as its surest reward is ingratitude.”

“Pardon me,” said Saint-Péray. “I have never thought of you at all until this moment. But I agree with you so far—that to be vile and unscrupulous is, in this world, to be successful. If you are fortunate, we will admit, by antithesis, that you are virtuous.”

“They call me a Rosicrucian,” said Bonito. “I am at least so far in sympathy with the sect as to believe in the universal regeneration and the cosmopolitanism of the intellect. They call me also an alchemist. Certainly I would transmute the dross of life into gold. It is the world’s way to gild the calf and worship it. We see below the vile enamel. No idols of wealth or patriotism for us; no states or churches as jealous entities. Base metal is under the skin of all. Into the furnace with the vast accumulation, and there anneal it, with the salt of godliness, into that one and universal benevolence which shall be shoreless, landless, eternal—a single harmonious republic of the entire human race!”

He took breath. Saint-Péray sat as apathetic as a deaf mute. The other never thought to attribute his unconcern to his own uninvited self-exposition.

Any propagandist, even of disinterestedness, is always absorbed in the first place in himself. In a moment he gave tongue again,—

“No need to question of the force which is to compel this transmutation. It has been growing consistently with the mind of man. The shame of the dominion of the brute in a world which intellect has shaped for itself; the shame of liberal knowledge lying at the mercy of illiberal ignorance; the shame of the animal coercing the angel, the fool cackling discredit on the sage—these things must cease off the earth at last. For when learning learns to combine, it shall be to ignorance as is the little bag of gun-powder, rammed home, to the material bulk which it is capable of annihilating. This is as certain as it is that the moment of the intellectual renaissance, age foreseen, is at last approaching. Because I, too, hunger and thirst with the fool, am I, Bonito, no better than a fool? The ‘fool’ can make it appear so, because in his numbers he commands the markets. Or has commanded—we shall see. The hour of his disillusionment perhaps is imminent. In the meantime we, who prepare the stage, do not cease of our efforts to divert the paths of evil, to over-reach iniquity, to gather each his quota of dirt and filth ready for the burning.”

He ended on a loud note, and wrung his lips between his thin fingers, leering at the other. If he had been tempted into an over long exordium, the more plausibly, he thought, would its moral “thunder in the index.” His craftiness was not to stultify itself by over-precipitancy.

Saint-Péray discussed his twitching face quite unmoved.

“I am obliged for your interesting message, sir,” he said. “You are reported to be a Rosicrucian? That concerns someone, no doubt; only I was under the impression that that sect eschewed politics. Thank you for putting me right. Good morning.”

Bonito did not stir.

“I aim,” he answered coolly, “in common with kindred spirits, many and potent, at the universal purification. Our politics are no more than that. Latency, cabala—all the rest of the terms which are held by the ignorant to condemn us, are only so many proofs of the divine sympathy with our mission. We can read the stars because we have, so to speak, friends at court there. Woe on him that scoffs at our message! Woe on di Rocco, I say, who heard and would not believe!”

He had shot his bolt, and as instantly saw that he had hit the mark. Louis-Marie gave a mortal start, and sat rigid. The curtain of his eyes was rent;

there seemed things visible moving behind it. But not a word came from him.

“My message now is to you,” said the physician, low and distinct, “as to the one most intimately concerned in the scotching or expediting of a half-acted iniquity. I propose no plan; I point out no way. Bear that in mind very clearly. My task was accomplished when I warned di Rocco that his horoscope revealed Mars at the conjunction of the seventh and eighth houses, presaging quick death for him to follow on his marriage consummated. I have said that he disbelieved me. Disregarded would be the truer word. Passion in him was desperate enough to dare the test.”

“But not for a year.”

It was Saint-Péray who spoke, though his voice was scarcely audible. Bonito laughed little and low.

“Do you believe it? I know him very well indeed. There is no monster in all the world so self-convinced of his own irresistibility. You think he has left Le Prieuré. As a fact he does not start for Turin until to-morrow morning, when urgency compels him. But he will not fail to storm the coy fortress first—to-night he will do it—either to persuade or enforce!”

He paused, listening for an answer, but none followed.

“You may question how I know this,” he went on. “Be satisfied; we who read the stars command our instruments. He is to go secretly after dark, to-night, I say, crossing the glacier of the Winds from the further side towards the Montverd. Nicholas Target will be there to conduct him; Nicholas Target will have been instructed first to dismiss his daughter from the *auberge* on some errand which will delay her. Monsignore will find the Marchesa quite alone and defenceless—nothing to complain of for a wife. He will presently leave her to return, as secretly, by the way he came. What then? There are pitfalls on the glacier, and Target will likely be drunk. Perhaps Fate will choose to verify its prediction during that passage. I cannot tell. For me, I have done my part. If this act is necessary for his destruction, a young widow will be ensured in Le Prieuré before long. That is my message to you; I speak it, with absolute conviction of its truth, for your consolation. If the marriage is consummated, the man must die. On the other hand, if one would save a threatened honour, balk by a timely abduction the hand of Fate, one would certainly procure a renewed lease of life for a villain, and a villain, one might be sure, who would not accept his despoliation with meekness. It is a nice point in ethics, upon which I will not presume to give an opinion. It had occurred to me once, I admit, that a revelation of the plot to the father would

be the proper course. Reflection, however, convinced me that he would be only too glad to sanction, indirectly, the most treacherous of means for breaking down the barrier which his daughter had raised between himself and a potential greatness. In the end, monsieur” (he prepared to leave), “I resolved to confide the issue to the hands the most strong, in faith and godliness, to direct it—to your hands, in fact. You have my sympathy and good wishes. I have the honour to bid you good morning.”

He might have been speaking to an apparition for any response he could extort. Only Saint-Péray’s eyes were fixed upon him with a greed more horribly eloquent than words. He felt them following him as he left the room—clinging, it seemed, like the discs of tentacles to his back as he descended the stairs—pursuing him, silently, deadlily, through all the convolutions of his way, however he might twist and turn to elude them. He was not a fanciful man for all his mysticism; but the impression of this unwinking pursuit haunted his soul into the very dominion of sleep. The eyes followed him upstairs, in the little inn where he was sojourning for the moment, and lay down with him on his pillow.

* * * * *

On that same day Mr Trix received his final *congé* from his patron with the most serene good temper.

“Rogue, rogue,” said the old devil—“though I have loved a rogue, we must part. There is no place in this reformation for a Cartouche.”

“You have taken good care of that,” said the young man, pleasantly. “It is very natural you should not wish to be haunted by your past. Besides, I can foresee all sorts of complications if we remained penitents together.”

“Don’t tell me that you also are a penitent—no, no,” said the Marquess, with a nervous chuckle.

He was fumbling at a cabinet against the wall.

“See here,” he said; “I wouldn’t do the graceless thing by your mother’s graceless son. If this hadn’t happened—had redemption been denied me, I won’t say but that it might have been my intention to make you my heir—an evil inheritance. That’s past, that’s all over. Better to lose the world than your soul, eh? But I should blame myself to deprive you of the means to honesty. Take my advice, rascal, and live cleanly for the future. We’ve sown our wild oats, you and I. We must both be out of the house by to-morrow, and leave it clear to the sweepers and garnishers. In the meantime, here’s to commute

your expectations. Money I can't command, without abuse of the marriage settlements, but its equivalent lies here—take it.”

He held out a handful of jewels, of ancient setting and indiscriminate value. Cartouche received the heap passively.

“It would be false modesty in me to refuse my wages,” he said.

“Yes, yes,” said the other, returning, still agitated, to the cabinet. “There may be another trifle or so. There—”

He paused, holding a ring in his hand.

“This is your mother's hair,” he said, suddenly and sharply. “You can have it also, if you wish.”

Cartouche received the ring from his hand.

“Thank you, father,” he said quietly.

“No such thing!” began di Rocco, loudly; but his voice broke on the word. Cartouche stepped forward, and kissed him on the cheek.

“Goodbye!” he said. “I wish you had made a good man of me.”

Di Rocco turned to the wall. When he looked round again, Cartouche was gone. Then the old libertine sat down and wept. But tears in such are nothing but the provocation to fresh evil emotions.

CHAPTER VII

THERE was a night of hurried storm long remembered in Le Prieuré. All during it the wind drove up in squalls, like the thunder of passing artillery, unlimbered over the mountains, crackled into brief tempest, and swept on. Billows of black smoke marked its passage, each in its retreat leaving a vacuum of dense silence, until the next, rushing in to occupy it, awoke the echoes with new uproar. The roofs smoked under the cannonade of hail; the glaciers foamed like torrents with the dancing pellets; the brows of the hills seemed to melt and flow down. Everything would be sudden, stunning, overwhelming for a space; and then—exhaustion, and the drip of wounded trees alone breaking the quiet.

Le Prieuré, weather-hardened, inhabiting under the sky-light of Savoy, thought nothing of all this, sleeping with its face to the clouds. What made this night of many nights notable to it was the period it marked in the course of a human tragedy, which had certainly seemed to cry to heaven for some such solution of its riddle. For, so it appeared, out of all the dogs of storm unleashed to hunt the hills, one had found the quarry sought by many; and had dragged him down, and torn and devoured him, so that not a bone remained to mark the spot of his undoing—di Rocco's.

The morning succeeding opened chill and austere—a brave day for a journey. Monsignore's equipage, ordered overnight, was ready betimes to convey him to Turin, whither urgencies State had called him. The lean horses champed their rusty bits; the lean postillions whoa'd, and cursed their cattle sympathetically for their ill-lined stomachs. When mid-day came and with it no di Rocco, they dared the devil for the sake of a toothful of oats and polenta, and drove back grumbling to the stables.

Monsignore did not come, then or thereafter. Monsignore was never to be seen in life again. At first the story of his disappearance was received with utter incredulity. One could not conceive a figure so potent, so absorbing, the sport of any such casualty as might overtake a little soul in its little pride of doing. He must be keeping out of the way intentionally—watching, from some cunning eyrie, to pounce upon the first self-committing wretch who should venture to presume upon his supposed removal from the board.

A hope, in that case, predoomed to unfulfilment. For, even when curiosity woke on surprise, and gossip on curiosity, and emphasis on gossip, his name was never bandied about but with decency. Le Prieuré, rough as its rocks, was too manly to flog a dead lion, or even a dead boar. There were no unworthy comments on the snatching of that terrific presence from its midst—not in the first surmise, nor in the last moral certainty. For so at length it came to be.

How the whisper grew, the shadow thickened, one might scarcely tell. It took form, no doubt, in the winks and becks and exaggerated secrecies of a sot, too brain-sodden himself at first to grasp the full significance of his innuendoes. But as a word or two, caught from the blabbings of sleep, may linger suggestively in ears that listen, so Nicholas Target's tavern maunderings came presently to be suspected of embodying in their text a very momentous cypher.

The fellow, bewildered between apprehension and vanity, was unable, nevertheless, to forego that hint of his marketable values, nor his intention to negotiate them when his way became clear to him. It became clear, brilliantly clear, all in a moment, when he felt himself nipped by the scruff, and, twisting about, saw that the law had got hold of him. With whine and collapse, then, he let full daylight into so much of the mystery as it was in his power to resolve.

On that night of rapid storm, ran his confession, he had been engaged by Monsignore to bring him secretly into the presence of the Marchesa, where she had sought refuge in his little *auberge* on the Montverd. The lady was to be taken by surprise; for which reason his daughter Margot had been despatched into Le Prieuré on the pretext of some business which would detain her. For the same reason of privacy, Monsignore had elected to avoid the popular route up the hill. He, Target, was to meet him at the place called the *mauvais pas* opposite, and conduct him thence across the glacier to his own side. He had known nothing of any engagement on Monsignore's part to hold himself aloof from the Marchesa; or, if he had, it was none of his business to cross the caprices of his over-lord; nor could there be any real sin in procuring a wife for her husband. His conscience was as clear on that matter as on the question of his sobriety, which at the time was absolute.

So he had met Monsignore—with difficulty, for, as it turned out, the night was terrible: he had met him, and was already proceeding with him down the moraine, when he, Target, had slipped and fallen. Monsignore was very

furious at that, and had cursed him for a drunken sot, which was quite untrue. They had proceeded, however, and were actually on the glacier, when by great ill-fortune he had fallen a second time. On each occasion the lantern he carried had been extinguished, and had had to be relighted. Monsignore, on the repetition of his mishap, had flown into an ungovernable rage, snatched the light from him, and, driving him from his presence with blows and curses, had bade him seek his own way to the rocks, for that he would trust himself to his guidance no longer. The man was a demon in fact, and he had fled from him. Instinct had guided him to his cabin by the moraine, where he had crouched, waiting for Monsignore to follow. While he dwelt there, there had broken over the glacier one of those furious storms of hail and wind, which for a time had made thought impossible. Its cessation was not followed by the arrival of Monsignore: in fact Monsignore never followed at all. Knowing the resolute cruelty of his passions, he, Target, had not been long in guessing at the reason. He must have foundered in that terrific blast—have wandered astray, with quenched light, and pitched into some crevasse.

Long he had waited for him; and, at last, in an interval of calm, had sought back, so far as he might dare, across the glacier. He had peered, he had shouted. He had left at last no boulder or familiar crack unsearched when the first weak wash of dawn had come to his aid. It was all unavailing. The glacier, it was as morally certain as anything circumstantial could be, had bolted Monsignore; and there was an end of him.

So Le Prieuré agreed, awake at last to the full significance of the shadow which had been stealing in step by step to overwhelm it. Its verdict was untraversable, as plain as reason: Monsignore had perished.

There was no need to question the essential truth of the drunkard's story. Target could have had no possible interest in committing or leading his patron to destruction. A just retribution had overtaken an illustrious sinner against his word. Di Rocco, the monster, the miser, was a thing of the past. Heaven, in its own stupendous way, had decreed the manner of his death and burial.

Moral certainties are, however, by no means legal. A man is not dead in law without proof of witness, even though his carcase lies on the table before it. Much remained to challenge, to certify, to cite and answer by default, before the widow could come into her own. In the meanwhile the Chevalier de France was not backward in righteous and indignant denunciation of his dead son-in-law's abuse of faith. At the same time he was even extravagantly

exacting in the question of the acknowledgments due to himself in his position of natural guardian to the Marquess's august "relict."

The village, perhaps, did not at the outset take him quite so seriously as he expected. It was more curious to learn how M. Saint-Péray accepted this provisional change in his fortunes. But there Martha Paccard proved herself a very Cerberus in guarding the approaches to her charge. She was agitated, but quite resolute about it all. Only between her and young Balmat was there ever an interchange of meaning glances, and once or twice, in moments of emotion, some fearful comment. She cried, too, in private a good deal, however brave a face she might turn to the world. For, as a fact, none but these two knew how Louis-Marie had slipped out alone on the night of the tragedy, and had returned home as secretly by-and-by, death white and drenched to the skin.

Then the next thing Le Prieuré heard about him was that he had left the village and gone none knew whither.

At that, for the first time, men and women united in putting him on one side as an irreclaimable faint-heart.

But, for all the rest, *Vogue la galère!* Di Rocco was dead, dead, dead!

* * * * *

One summer afternoon a young man stood on a projecting rock which overlooked the Glacier of the Winds at a point, on the north-east side, at no great distance below that whence his patron had, a few nights earlier, descended to his death. Right in front of him the vast river of ice, creeping to its fall over a precipice, was rent and splintered into a throng of monstrous pinnacles, one or other of which would ever and again lean, topple, and go spinning down the shallower bed below in a thundering shatter of fragments. This happened more than once while he lingered, and on each occasion he winced, and stepped back, and then expanded his chest, and watched for the next ruinous downfall. But at length, with a sigh, he prepared to go.

"So breaks away the past," he thought. "What will the future reveal? Well, I am still Cartouche."

He turned, turned again, and showed a wicked face to the glacier.

"He was good to me," he murmured. "If Bonito did it, bad for Bonito. I shall know some day. Goodbye, evil father of a worthless child!"

He went down sombrely into the valley.

END OF PART I.

PART II

CHAPTER I

TURIN, wedged into a corner between the Po and Dora, with all its ranks of lines and squares criss-crossing the angle like the meshes of a snow-shoe, was a depressing city to be abroad in on a rainy night. It was characteristic of it, of its unenterprise and unoriginality, that it had never deviated from the pattern set by its Roman founders. It suggested, when the rain poured persistently, a vast congeries of waterworks, with reservoirs and pumping-stations all drawing from the rivers. Its barrack-like uniformity of buildings; its shyness of imposing façade; its system of parcelled-out dwelling-blocks, called appropriately “Islands,” which were ruled, scrupulously rectangular, along the wide channels of its streets; its eternal monotonous brick and heavy porticoes, all combined to produce an effect of unlovely utilitarianism. Artistry, struggling here and there to emancipate itself, and soar above the level roofs on wings of brass and timber, had always halted, in the end, on a blank expression of futility, and retired within doors, there to fulfil its soul of the splendour which it had shrunk from daring without. For some reason, of taste or policy, architectural display was not favoured in Turin. Its fanes and palaces were all so many uncut diamonds—dull surfaces to hearts of fire.

There was something in all this, no doubt, significant of the character of its government; for, as art flowers at its richest under despotisms, so, oppositely, its growth is most stunted in the temperate climate of democracies. Turin, it is true, was not of those latter; yet it was as true that its lords had never learned to rule independently of their people. Even as kings, though when sovereign by a generation or two, they had not come to take themselves very seriously. They seemed to reign, self-consciously, by virtue of a plebiscite; they avoided superficial ostentation; they kept all their grandeurs for privacy.

There had been those among them who had planned, fitfully, to face all this heavy monotony with light and lightness, to overlay it with skin of

marble, stone, or even, as a last lame resort, with stucco. Their ambitions had declined upon a policy of *laissez faire*; in many buildings the very holes for their scaffolding remained unfilled—ineptitude yawning from a hundred mouths. Turin, under the rule of Victor-Amadeus III., was still Rome before Augustus, lacking its splendid autocrat. At the same time there was this much to its credit: it had never bred, or allowed to self-breed within its walls, a race of tyrants.

The Savoy princes were the militant monks of history, always keeping a reserve of cloister for contingencies. They were recluses by conviction, freebooters by constitution. The first duke of them all had died a hermit. The grandfather of the present King, the “Piedmontese Lear,” had abdicated (prematurely) on a religious sentiment. It had been his pious intent to efface the feudal system, age-dishonoured. It was the policy of his grandson to attempt its restoration. He made a mistake, being a vain, weak man. It is not the wisdom of the proletariat, but the folly of its rulers which opens the ways to revolt. Worse than the grudging of wise concessions is their rescinding when they have become establishments. Victor-Amadeus made much of his army, which was a warlike father’s perfected bequest to him. He also made much of his nobility, with the result that, according to the popular waggery, there was, in his reign, a general to every private. So he consistently favoured birth, ignored intrinsic merit apart from it, alienated the sympathies of his people, and opened his passes thereby to the hordes of the French Revolution. It was always a figure of speech to say that he strode the Alps. He had lost his French stirrup long before he knew it, and was jogging lop-sided to his fall.

In the meantime, lacking the soul of Augustus, he left Turin much as he found it, and, in place of bread and circuses, fed up discontent on the public lottery. His kingdom was rotten when it tumbled.

Montaigne in his time found Turin a small town, situated in a watery plain, not very well built nor very agreeable. Some two hundred years later the ineffable Count Cassanova passed a verdict on it not much handsomer. It was densely populated and full of spies, he said. It boasted, as a fact, at the latter date, a population of some ninety thousand souls. But it was not crowded nevertheless, except to one who *saw eyes* at every turn. A city’s numbers are not to be calculated by one who moves exclusively in its markets. Turin’s population, if regularly distributed over its area, would have shown most of its quarters relatively empty.

It looked its best on a moonlight night, when along its canal-like streets the

cobble-stones glinted and sparkled like very ripples on water, and the great hulks aligned on either side became shadowy leviathans anchored at rest. Its worst was kept for twilight drenchings, when the mists trooped down from the distant Alps and, blotting out the intervening slopes—the Superga, the hill of the Capucins, and others, a green high-stretching swarm—made one shoreless swamp of all the level town.

On such an evening, a man, going, with humped shoulders and dripping hat, down the Via del Po, which was one of Turin's principal thoroughfares, cursed the city's original settlers with all his soul of venom. He was, nevertheless, so bent on a particular errand, that nothing less than a flood would have diverted him from it. Presently he ran to a stop before a dimly-lighted shop window, and peered eagerly up at certain labels and vouchers which were pasted to the glass within. There were other inquisitors at the same business, quite a throng of them, and one and all, including the newcomer, like rude and ravenous poultry.

The shop itself might have been, in its dinginess and gloom, a mere money-changer's office; which at the same time it was in a measure, only on a national scale. There were pious frescoes daubed on its walls, as if in irresistible association of hucksters with the temple. On either side of its door was hung a slim red board, the one headed "Torino," the other "Genova." Each board was ruled into five sections, and each section contained a number. These numbers represented, more or less, the victims of what the wags called the torture of the wheel. The office was, in fact, one of the many bureaux of the never-ending State lottery.

The stranger having examined, to his hunger or satisfaction, the numbers on the boards and the hieroglyphics in the window, stepped back into the rain with a click of his strong teeth together.

"Weeding, weeding!" he thought, exultant and rageful in one. "Next week will reach the grand climacteric—for me. My God! and what then?"

As he reflected, or muttered, chafing like a fettered beast, the form of a man, advancing up the street, came between himself and the light. Instantly he started, uttered a violent exclamation, and quickly pursuing the figure, accosted and halted it.

"M. Saint-Péray!" he cried. "So, after all, you have come into retreat in our capital!"

Louis-Marie regarded the speaker ghastlily. The young man's face, in the shaking lamp-shine, seemed to twitch like the face of an epileptic. It was

white and haggard, and indeed scarcely recognisable for the face which had kindled to the mountains of Le Prieuré a month earlier. He made no answer.

“*A la bonne heure!*” cried the other, very careful all the time not to let his capture escape him. “I had wanted much to come across you, and never so much as at this moment. Conceive my ridiculous position, monsieur! Realise me, here on this spot, debarred the heavenly mansions for lack of the necessary trifle of gate-money!”

“You are—Dr Bonito?” began Saint-Péray, clearing his throat to the effort.

“And flattered in your memory of me, monsieur,” interrupted the doctor, with a little bow which seemed to creak at the joints. “As you will recollect, I read nativities, I foretell events, however a capricious destiny may alter her tactics to procure them. For instance, you will remember, I prophesied the consequences of a certain achievement, which prediction was none the less verified because, as it happened paradoxically, the consequences anticipated the achievement. What then? It is the end which justifies the seer. The lady, you will scarcely deny, is a widow at this moment.”

Saint-Péray put his hand to his pocket.

“You want money,” he said hoarsely. The other stopped him with dignity.

“A loan is the word, monsieur—a little oil for the lamp; a little grease for the wheel; *une épingle par jour*; a sprat to catch a whale. You observe where you passed me just now?” (He pointed to the bureau.) “My star culminates there, monsieur, in a week. So surely as the heavens cannot lie, the numbers revealed at the next drawing will spell my apotheosis. In the meanwhile one, even a seer, must buy one’s promotion. The gods are very human. I have only approached this climax at the cost of all my little savings. If you will condescend to drink a glass of vermouth with me, I will explain. There is a *café* hard by, and the night is cold.”

Louis-Marie seemed drained of will or resolution—a flaccid, half-dead creature. He followed whither he was told, and drank his vermouth and élixir de China—one glass, then another and another. A spark woke at last in his ash-blue eyes. Bonito, watching it, kindled reassured.

“The Fates, after all, have been kind to you, monsieur,” he said, gently touching the other’s arm with a long thin finger, as a spider experiments with a fly before he rolls it up. “There lives a spotless widow in Le Prieuré, and wealthy beyond words. You could not yourself have managed it better, if you had been a villain.”

Saint-Péray started, half-rose from his seat and sank down again.

“If it is villainous to have lost belief in God,” he muttered, “I am a villain, and no longer worthy to utter her name—nor even to resent its utterance by you.”

“As you please,” said the doctor, coolly. “I served virtue in serving M. Saint-Péray, and so would serve again without asking thanks. But to become an apostate and be damned at the instance of her whose name you are unworthy to utter—that seems to me like meaning heterodox and acting paradox.”

The spark had spread to Louis-Marie’s cheek.

“I desire, monsieur,” he said loudly, but quaveringly, “that you will state what you wish of me without further comment on my affairs.”

Bonito was not ruffled, though immensely dry and articulate.

“Very well, Monsieur,” he said; “though you will forgive my proposing to amend your resolution by inserting the word *present* between the words *further* and *comment*. The time will come, perhaps, when you will see *my* disinterestedness and your own *interests* more closely. In the meanwhile I go wanting my gate-money.”

“Well? for your apotheosis, sir?”

“Exactly; by way of the lottery. The last of my scrap-metal, like the sculptor Cellini’s in the crisis of his fortunes, has gone into the mould. It needs but a finishing contribution, a final sacrifice, and the Perseus of my destiny will rise on winged feet. Other men have their systems, worldly and fallible. Mine derives from the stars and is *infallible*.”

Saint-Péray laughed shakily, starting to scoff, but compromising with discretion. His soul was always malleable by another’s strong conviction.

“What, then, is this lottery?” he asked.

Bonito threw up his hands in mock-incredulity.

“You have been in Turin this month, and have not discovered its distraction of distractions! Alas! what a comment on your own! The lottery? I can explain it in a word—the very grandeur of simplicity; the art which conceals all art. Imagine, Monsieur, a wheel which contains numbers up to ninety and a single zero within its hollow circumference. Of these numbers, five are withdrawn weekly (in Turin or Genoa, turn-about), recorded and replaced. Well, you or I select five numbers—any, after our fancy—register them at a bureau, and receive a counter-check in exchange. Now, supposing two out of those our numbers shall occur in any one drawing, we score an *ambo*, and receive two hundred and seventy times the amount of our stake: if

three, or a *tern*, we receive it multiplied five thousand five hundred times: if four, or a *quatern*, sixty-thousand times. On the other hand, if no such combination occurs, we forfeit our stake, to renew it, if we please, week by week, month by month, year by year. There is no end and no limit. *Enfin*, the zero occurring in any drawing forfeits all stakes of that week to the Government. There are complications, such as distributing one's chances over the five numbers; but the principle is what I say. I throw for a quatern, and I shall gain it. Its sum will be, relatively, the sum which you shall be good enough to advance me. Join with me, if you will, and foreclose on Fortune. You will be rich, presently, beyond the dreams of parsimony. Wealth attracts wealth. You will lose nothing thereby, if I may say it, as a suitor."

Wise men are often ready to listen to empirics who cite the occult with an air of finality. Louis-Marie was not very wise, and was thereby the nearer superstition. His faith had told him to discredit soothsayers: but for the time he had lost his faith. Like all good men thrown from their self-respect, he greatly exaggerated his own potentialities for wickedness. This man, he thought, had rightly foretold a misfortune. Might he not with equal certainty predict a fortune? There was some material balm in that. If he was to lose his soul, would not to gain the world better compensate the interval than a life of inglorious brooding? As well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb: he called the words to memory with a new sense of daring. What a folly was piety—a hair-shirt on a heathen preordained to damnation. It was no God, no Father, who could set snares for the feet of his children. There was no God, unless a Prince of evil. Let him serve the chance. Live the world and the lottery!

The spirit he had drunk revelled in his starved unaccustomed brain. He thrust his hand into his pocket, and drawing out all it contained, offered the sum to Bonito, with a half-maudlin laugh.

"Half for myself and half for you, then," he said. "I make you my broker with Fate."

The sum was large enough to awaken a glitter in the Rosicrucian's cold eyes. Something, the nearest approach to warmth which his heart was capable of feeling, tickled in his breast. He showed, for the moment, quite genial, quite impulsive.

"Always understand, Monsieur," he said, "that I am actuated by the most earnest desire to serve you. We have a point of sympathy in our common wronging by one who shall be nameless. Let me here suggest, with only the

lightest touch on a sensitive place, that women generally are not attracted by extreme ethical correctness, nor won by diffidence so much as overbearance. Believe my sincerity when I assure you that nothing would gratify me more than to see the ultimate accomplishment of a union, to which no bar but that of sentiment can ever—”

Something, some shadow of reawakening terror in the face opposite him, warned him that it would be present wisdom to pursue the subject no further. He “doubled” instantly.

“But I will say no more there,” he interrupted himself. “It is enough for the moment that I undertake to prove myself” (he touched the pocket of his coat) “your efficient friend and steward.”

An uproar of approaching voices broke upon his word. The *café* hitherto had been but thinly peopled, mostly by weather-stressed citizens, who had been conversing apart, low and rapid, on the subject of the eternal lottery, while they sipped their liqueurs or bacchierino, and flourished their cigarettes back and forth to their lips. Now, “Cartouche!” exclaimed someone, and the sombre quietude seemed instantly to splinter into light. The mirrors cleared to reflect it; the sensuous figures in the pictures woke to a Bacchanalian dance. Louis-Marie stared, speechless, at his companion, who, for his part, appeared as dumbfounded.

“Sentite!” he muttered. “Scaramucchio! Si, ê vero!”

The tumult, as he spoke, had broken in, running with the feet and voices of half a score young men, a contingent, truculent and vivacious, of the bellimbusti, or “bloods” of Turin. And in the midst appeared Cartouche, commanding, insolent, policing a captive, a youth of the same guild, but, unlike the rest, in a state of moral and physical collapse. He, the latter, struggled, sobbing hysterically, in the determined grasp of his gaoler, while the others hovered, cackling and circling, about their neighbourhood.

“Listen, my Severo,” said Cartouche; “thou shalt drink first, and destroy thyself afterwards, if thou wilt.”

“He has lost his whole fortune in the lottery,” whispered one onlooker to another.

The wretched boy fought to escape.

“I will drink the river,” he gasped; “no dog shall prevent me.”

Cartouche’s hold tightened.

“Call me not a dog, little Severo,” he said, “or perchance I may show my teeth. Be wise, while there is time. There are beer and grassini still in Turin,

and trollops enough at a penny. Beggary will yet buy thee all that Fortune is worth but the silly gilding. Nay” (he darkened), “if thou wilt be stubborn for death, insult me—I am more certain than the river—and save, at least, thy immortal soul.”

The boy, writhing round and sputtering with his lips, managed to strike his captor lamely on the cheek. The next moment he was free, and cowering into himself, the wind all clapped out of his heroics. The whole company stood silent and aghast.

Cartouche unbuttoned and slipped off his surtout, hung it over a chair, adjusted the ruffs at his neck and wrists, smoothed a crease from his slim black undercoat, and shifted the bright steel hilt of his sword an inch or two forward—all quite quietly and deliberately. Then he spoke with a very soft courtesy.

“That was the pious course, little Severo. Now shalt thou compromise with thy Maker for no more than a spell of purgatory. It will not be much, I doubt, with one so excusable for his youth.”

His blade came out with a silk-like swish. Death, in the venomous sound, hissed into the youngster’s ears. He looked up, his face as white as paper.

“I seek the river, not thy sword, M. Trix,” he quavered.

“That is unfortunate; because I seek thy life, little Severo.”

The boy looked round fearfully: his companions, set and terrible, hedged him from the door. He gave all up in a pitiful cry,—

“I was wrong: I don’t want to die! Cartouche, I don’t really want to die!”

“That is sad indeed,” said Cartouche. “You will have to summon all your resolution.”

His face changed suddenly.

“Will you draw, sir,” he said sternly: “or am I to cut your throat like a sheep’s?”

“It is murder,” cried the boy. “I call all to witness it is murder!”

Some exclamations of contempt alone answered him. Rallying, under the shame, to a last agony of resolution, he drew his sword and advanced. His under lip was shaking and dribbling; the bosom of his linen was torn; he looked like a death-sick girl.

The blades crossed. Cartouche held his motionless a moment while the other’s vibrated on it like a castanet. An answering small laugh went up. Then he engaged deftly, in a wicked little prelude of cat’s-play; and then—

It was at least as great a shock to him as to any other to hear a sudden leap

and rush, and see his sword torn from his hand and flung to the ground. For the moment, a fury of hell flew to his eyes and blinded them; the next, he saw Louis-Marie standing before him, white, and terrible, and denunciatory.

“Save thou thine own soul!” shrieked Saint-Péray, “nor lose it, saving this child’s. O, my brother! drive me not to this last despair of cursing all I have loved. Give me the boy’s life.”

A stun of utter stupefaction had fallen on the company. For the instant everything stood stricken—a strange and pregnant tableau. But in the still hearts of all was a terror of the inevitable crash which must rend in an instant the appalling hush.

To their confusion, scarcely less astounded, the crash did not follow; but, instead—miracle of things!—the disarmed one drew a deep breath, and smiled.

“It is a trifle; take it, my brother!” he said.

Even with the word he saw Saint-Péray sway where he stood. He darted forward and put a strenuous arm about him.

“What is it, Louis?” he whispered.

Saint-Péray’s fluttering hands went feebly about his neck.

“I have saved a life? O, God, dear Gaston, tell me that I have saved a life!” he whispered in wild emotion.

Cartouche, glaring around, caught sudden sight of Bonito standing slack-jawed in the gloom. The doctor, seeing himself discovered, came forward.

“Hist!” he muttered. “Our friend is in a poor way, Mr Trix, and needs looking after. Get him to come outside with us.”

“You have certainly saved a life, brother,” murmured Cartouche—“though, I am afraid, not a very worthy one.” Then he said aloud: “To pass, by your favour, gentlemen! But deal gently with my character, I beg you. I am still in evidence to answer for it.”

CHAPTER II

“UNDER the Porticoes,” in the thronged fashionable heart of Turin, two men met by appointment before the city was well awake. Their encounter was sharp, to the point, and made nothing of superfluous courtesies.

“By your favour, Mr Trix,” opened one, “we will eschew idle discussion of coincidences. All roads lead to Rome. I am here; you are here; he is here; and we have gravitated naturally into each other’s company. What have you done with him?”

“Why do you want to know, friend Bonito?”

“Is not that rather amusing? I encounter him; we renew an intimacy; in the middle of it you appear, and appropriate him to your exclusive possession.”

“I undertook at the same time to answer to you for my claim. I named the place and hour: I am here to vindicate myself: everything is convenient for a settlement.”

“Bah! will you never learn my indifference to such gasconade? If you had struck me in the face, I would not fight you.”

“No; you would have procured an assassin to murder me, I expect.”

“Certainly I should. My life and reputation are of infinitely more importance than yours. Men of sense have to consider these things. Only fools argue with swords. What a miserable self-confession! You had better call yourself a fool at once.”

“Well, I’m not sure but you are right.”

“Then, if you see it, you are no fool. No more am I. If you admit that, you admit also that you are only withholding from me information which I can, with a little trouble, procure elsewhere. You really may as well tell me what you have done with M. Saint-Péray.”

“Perhaps I will tell you, then; but I should just as really like to be convinced of your reason for wishing to know.”

“For one thing, I am his agent to the lottery, and answerable to him for an investment which, in less than a week, is to bring us both certain fortune.”

“Holy Mother! You are there, are you? I thought, from the look of his face, that you had been painting it with moonshine.”

“You are very welcome to a share of the gilding. If you wish, for old

friendship's sake I will place you too in possession of the winning numbers."

"No, I think not, thank you. You have put me a little out of conceit with the stars."

"How! What have I done?"

"Why, I think sometimes they get to depend too much on the human agencies which interpret them—act up to arbitrary prophecies; or anyhow are made to seem to."

"O?"

"Besides, apart from myself, I fail to see your interest in making M. Saint-Péray's fortune for him."

"Things have altered with you, certainly. Did we not once discuss his eligibility as a suitor?"

"Well?"

"What was enough for Mademoiselle de France is less than worth the consideration of the Marchesa di Rocco."

"What! You propose proportionately to restore to him his eligibility."

"That's it exactly."

"What advantage would success bring *you*?"

"I don't know if I mentioned that I was his agent."

"O! I see, I see. I beg your pardon—his matrimonial agent, of course. That reassures me. I confess at first I was sceptical of such altruism. But here's my Bonito. Well, we are one there, if from different sentiments. And does he know of your intentions towards him?"

"The Fates forbid!"

"I understand you. It is quite plain that he wants nursing, reassuring, coaxing back into a measure of self-confidence. He is a desponding spirit, that's the truth, and determined to read his scrap of purgatory into utter damnation."

"Well, I have answered you. Will you tell me where he is?"

"Certainly I will, your sentiments being what they are. I have persuaded him to place himself under the healing care of the virtuous Signorina Brambello."

"Your—!"

Bonito exclaimed and grinned.

"You are certainly very silly or very deep," he said. "How do you propose to speed his recovery that way?"

"She is a very good and sensible girl."

"No doubt. And a very pretty."

"I must use my instruments. They do not comprise many Madonnas."

"But why—?"

"A woman's arguments are everything in these matters. She will convince his diffidence, if any can."

"Of what?"

"That Fortune has been very obliging to him."

"How? In giving him such a confessor?"

"Well; if you were worth my steel!"

"I am not, I assure you. I wish her the last success, naturally. If she encourages him to the venture, and, better, if he prospers in it, there will be none better pleased than I. Fate, certainly, has already interfered very opportunely in his behalf. It would be criminal to forego that advantage. Believe me, I shall do nothing, for my part, to balk the Signorina."

"What goodness! But it is not always necessary to give Fate the credit for opportuneness. In this case, for example, one might suggest more than one explanation of a mystery."

"Of di Rocco's death, you mean? It is quite true. We should consider the evidence of motives first, perhaps. There is none more powerful than revenge."

"Or, with an astrologer, the wish to verify the reading of his astrolabes. He had certainly done you a great unkindness, my friend."

"And you no less, my friend."

"What! do you suggest that *I* killed him?"

"With a reason quite as plausible as yours in accusing me."

"I have not accused you."

"Nor I you."

"No more you have. There was no need. He died plainly of an accident—of the treachery of the elements. I shall hope to call the elements to account for it some day. Well, if we have no quarrel, seer Bonito—*addio!*"

He went off, singing lightly. Bonito stood a moment, looking after him, wintry and caustic.

"He thinks I did it," he muttered. "The fool, not to know me better! Let him beware, if he once goads me to reprisals!"

CHAPTER III

THERE was a jumble of old streets and buildings in Turin, flourishing out of sight behind the Palazzo Reale—like a scrap of wild thicket overlooked in the reclamation of a waste—which, to the many enamoured of orderliness and respectability, was a scandal, and to the few, having an eye for haphazard picturesqueness, the solitary oasis in a desert of uniformity. This irregular quarter, called “L’Anonimo,” possessed the qualities of its heterodoxy, and was consistent in nothing but its moral unconformableness. It was not so much a rookery as a hive, whence gold-ringed *donnaccias* flew to gather their honey, and, having collected, came back to store it, against a winter’s day, in their unconventional little cells. It was always very vivid and very busy—a never-ending fair, full of life and frivolity. Its stalls displayed a characteristic opulence of cheap Parisian hosiery and Genoese jewellery. White ankles twinkled for ever in its doorways. Its stones were dented with the clatter of little gilded heels. It had its own *cafés*, and its lottery-office, of course, and its Government shops for the sale of salt and tobacco; for even nonconformity had to subscribe to the relentless *gabelle*. Finally, it had its drones; but they for the most part loafed at home.

It was not so very bad, this quarter, even at its heart, and rippled into less and less expression of itself the further one got from it, like the concentric rings extending from a splash in water. At quite a little distance it began to merge into a compromise with order—became a sort of sedate St John’s Wood—until, down by the Dora, it lapped itself away in an unimpeachable colony of washerwomen.

In the meanwhile, flowing down by many outlets, it threaded none prettier than that which was called the Lane of Chestnuts. And of all the whitewashed *maisonnettes* in that same fragrant alley, the Signorina Brambello’s was assuredly the whitest and most sweet.

It, this little house, was called the Capanna Sermollino (which means Wild-thyme Cottage), and it looked and smelt up to its name. Its walls were the shrine to a candid heart; its jalousies were of the green of Nature; and its mistress, whose beauty and perfume had come straight out of an English village, was Molly Bramble Bona roba—nothing worse and nothing better.

Poor Molly! once a rustic toast, queen of a single May, and then, alas! stolen—to what? She stood no further from honour now than by the thickness of a screen of convention. Loyalty, faith, honesty—these were all hers unimpaired; you could not look in her eyes and doubt it. Her shame was one man's possession—near enough to the virtue of wifehood to be forgotten by her, except, perhaps, in the presence of children. Cartouche was to answer for it all.

She was lovely, of course. Her face, like a human face sketched by some amorous Puck, was a little out of drawing—a dear imperfection of prettiness. But the artist had rubbed its cheeks with real conserve of roses, and painted in its eyes with blue succory petals, and scented its rich brown hair with fragrance from the oakwoods. L'Anonimo, even in its purlieus, could hardly have justified a claim to Molly Bramble.

"I never hear your name spoken, Molly *mia*," said Cartouche, "but it seems to bring a whiff of blackberries across the footlights."

She was dressed in a clean lilac-sprigged muslin, with a fichu, soft as "milkmaids," half-sheathing the white budding of her womanhood. A mob cap sat at grace on her pretty curls. A pity that her atmosphere was all of Spring, which perishes so soon. Molly had no arts to reap love's winter.

Cartouche spoke, took a pride in speaking, English like a native. Molly's "Frenchings" were as sweet an imperfection as her lips.

She laughed, busy at the table preparing his breakfast, coffee and chocolate mixed in a little glass and garnished with a number of tiny rolls like pipe-stems.

"And I never hear yours," she said, "without thinking of a silly fellow."

She took a chair by him while he ate and drank. He did it all daintily; but she would have watched him with as much delight if he had guzzled like a hog. It is all one to a woman whether her baby is nice or gluttonous. But I have known a man turn disgusted from a ravenous infant.

Cartouche sat preoccupied a long time, nibbling his rusks. Suddenly he looked up, dark and troubled.

"Why have you such a sweet face, *ma mie*?" he said. "I wish I had never brought a blush to it."

She started up, and went to the table again, affecting business there. Then she turned, and her lashes were winking.

"Let that flea stick in the wall," she said. "I'd rather you had its blushes than its frowns."

Her under lip was trembling a little, as she came again and knelt at his feet.

“What is it, Cherry?” she said, looking wistfully into his face. “There’s something, I know—something different, since you—since you—. Is it anything to do with that fellow you brought here last night?”

“No—yes—” he answered. “Perhaps—I can’t say.”

“Well, I mustn’t ask, I suppose,” she said. “You’ve taught me not to, though it made me cry my eyes out sometimes. If you’re bad, dear, I don’t want you anything else—it’s like a man. He—he doesn’t want to take you from me, does he?”

She nestled her face, willy-nilly, between his unresisting hands.

“To take you?” he said distressfully. “His code isn’t mine, Molly. I daresay he’d like to. Like a man, quotha! It’s like a blockish boy, rather, to make a toy of love—a doll out of a goddess. He wouldn’t have done it.”

She uttered a faint cry.

“Then he does want to separate us!”

“How can he, little fool? He doesn’t know you, even.”

“O, you frightened me so! Love your Molly, Cherry!”

He had taught her early to call him “*Chéri*,” which, on her sweet fruitful lips, had become Cherry; and so her love had christened him. Kent was her county.

“I have shown my reverence for love,” he said sadly, “by desecrating its Host. I have broken open its tabernacle and eaten the sacred bread because it was forbidden. A greedy, blockish boy, Molly.”

She wrung her hands to him.

“What is it? Everything seems wrong. I saw it in your face last night, the moment you and he came in—and me near crazed with joy to hear you at the door again—O, Cherry! after all these months!”

He smoothed the hair from her temples.

“That’s it, dear heart,” he whispered, “after all these months. Well, rest satisfied; I’d not been in Turin twelve hours before I came to you.”

She pouted; gave a little tearful laugh.

“O, a fine coming! to charge me with a tipsy gentleman.”

“Poor Louis-Marie!”

“Is that his name?”

“Saint-Péray to you, Madam, if you please. I’ll tell you of him in a moment. He’d lost his head, but not his legs.”

“La, now! he won’t bless its finding, I’m thinking. I warrant it aches this

morning.”

“You shall ask him. He’ll be down anon to greet his landlady.”

“Let him lie on, for me. It’s only you I want; and a tongue to say ten thousand things at once. Where have you come from?”

“Le Prieuré.”

“That takes—let me see—how long?”

“It took me a month.”

“A month!”

“I came on foot; I loitered by the road; I had ten thousand things, not to say, but ponder.”

“Cherry!”

She looked at him amazed. A shadow of some sick foreboding would not leave her heart. She had never yet known him, her “gentleman,” her fond heart’s tyrant, in this strangely sober mood.

“Go on,” she whispered. “Won’t you tell me?”

“What?” he said. “Of my adventures by the way? I had one or two. Once a thunderstorm overtook me near a village. Some children, hurrying for the church, bade me come and help them ring the bells to keep the lightning off. I smiled the poor rogues away—cried, ‘I should attract it rather,’ and went on. The bells were already clapping behind me, when there came a flash and crash. The tower had been struck and every mother’s infant of them killed. The devil fends his own; or perhaps he is as blind as justice. Well, I stayed to see them put in the ground, and—I cried a little, Molly.”

“Cry now with me, darling. O, Cherry! the poor dears!”

“Another time I passed some peasants preparing to fill in an old well. A little whimper came out of its depths while I watched. ‘Only a cur, Monsieur, that has fallen in,’ they said. They were going to shovel the earth atop of him without a care. I asked them to lower me, and they did, and presently up we came together. He set his teeth in my hand, the little weasel; and I called him Belette for it. See the mark here. It was only because his leg was broken, and I hurt it. There was a bone-setter in the village, an old toothless Hecuba—a lady you’ve not heard of. She could mend bone, if she couldn’t graft it on her withered gums. Belette was made whole by her, and I waited out his cure. When he was done with, the rascal came along with me, eager to show that he had adopted me for ever. He’s thy rival for my love, Mollinda.”

“And I’ll kiss him for it, if that’s all.”

He did not answer immediately.

“Is it not all?” she urged; and, staring at him, sank away, sitting on her heels.

“No, it’s not all,” she whispered, gulping. “There’s more you’ve got to say. Don’t I understand. It’s the old lord has got a match for you, and I’m to go. Speak out, and be a man. Is he here? Did he come with you?”

“He’s dead.”

Cartouche rose, and went hurriedly up and down, a dozen times in silence, before he stopped and spoke to her again where she crouched upon the floor.

“He’s dead, and so my wages end.”

She put out groping hands to find his feet. He heard her sobbing and whispering:—

“I’ll work for you.”

Then he knelt, and touched her, and spoke to her very tenderly.

“Not so bad as that. You shall work for me, indeed; but not with these soft hands. Listen, while I tell you how he died; and why God killed him; and what is the moral of it all to me.”

She turned her ear to him, one arm, like the rustic Griselda she was, bent across her weeping face. But his first words seemed to catch her breath back, and fill out her bosom, holding her dumb from speech and tears alike.

“There was a lady in Le Prieuré called the lily, because she was so sweet and pure of heart. She was of an ancient family, but poor—the child of a proud, cold man. She had pledged her love, unknown to her father, to a stranger of modest means, a soul as good and pious as she. But the man was weak of purpose, and delayed to confess himself to the parent. Then came di Rocco, doating, and asked her hand of her father; and she was given to him on condition that he settled everything he possessed on her, and that the marriage was to be one in form only for the space of a year. And the poor child was forced in a moment into complying, and she became di Rocco’s wife, and a broken-hearted woman. She sought refuge, defying her father, now that it was done, in a little *auberge* on the hills; and thither her husband, scorning his vow, followed her secretly one stormy night in order to force her to his will. But Heaven intervened before he could accomplish his vile purpose, and he went astray on the ice, and fell into a crevasse and was killed.”

He paused. The girl did not speak for a minute. Her mind was still loitering on the road to that tragic conclusion. Di Rocco’s death was only of relative interest to her. Her first word showed it.

"Is she—prettier—than I am?"

Cartouche smiled.

"She is only an angel, *ma mie*; but eligible—eligible! Have you forgotten her lover?"

She clasped her hands, looking for the first time breathlessly into his face.

"I know now. It's him there—upstairs."

"Yes," he said: "It's *him*."

"Why doesn't he go and claim her, then? She's better worth the winning than she was."

"Soberly, my girl! It's early yet to rake over the weeds. Besides, there are broken faiths to mend. He took his jilting hardly. An angel himself, she'd been his goddess. He's down in the mud at present. These sanctities are always for extremes. There's no middle course for them. The devil's the gentleman for moderation; that's why he's so convincing. We must nurse up this friend of mine between us—restore him to reason. She's better worth his winning, says you. No doubt: but, by the token, miles further removed from a poor suitor."

"That's nothing, if they love."

She spoke it impulsively; and stopped.

"Poor!" she whispered suddenly. "What's his ruin to that she's brought upon my sweetheart! So the old man's gone and left you nothing."

"No fault of hers, child. Don't breathe or think it. Yes, he had to put his house in order; settle old scores before he asked new grace. He parted with me the day before his death. He'd already sent Bonito packing—you know him, the old hungry dog. He got his master's curse for wages: I, at least, got a handful of jewels. Why should I love his memory? Yet, though he died justly, it was not good that anyone should kill my father."

Even then, she hardly seemed to listen. But she saw her lover moved beyond her knowledge of him, and put her arms about his neck, and entreated him passionately:—

"Don't throw me over, Cherry—not altogether. Give me enough to live on, and keep good—for her sake—there, I'll say it—if she's shown you what a woman ought to be."

He sat on the floor beside her, and took her in his arms, pressing her wet cheek against his own.

"You shall understand," he said, much moved. "This lady's for my friend—we'll bring him round to see it by-and-by, we two. But the lesson of her

whiteness is for all. Am I Cartouche to own it? I only know she's taught me to respect something I never respected before. To pay to keep you good, my darling? With a fortune, if I had it. That's it. Shall we be good together, sweetest—never, never, never sin again? You've loved me one way: will you love me better this—own the wrong and renounce it? show—”

“Not her. I've been wicked. I'll pray to God to forgive me. He's a man.”

His face twinkled.

“Hush!” he said. “Our act of grace shall be to mend this tragedy with love. That's why I brought him here. You shall teach him the way. Don't you see, Molly—can't you see all that that means?”

She clung to him with a burst of tears.

“O, I'll be good, Cherry! And perhaps—perhaps, some day, you'll want to learn from me.”

He heard a sound overhead, and, rising, lifted her to her feet.

“Dry your eyes,” he whispered; “he's coming. He mustn't find a wet-blanketing hostess.”

“No,” she said. “I'll get his coffee. Let me go—O, let me go! I shall be right in a minute”—and she went hurriedly from the room.

A minute later Louis-Marie came down, his haggard face bright-eyed out of fever. But there was an expression on it such as one might imagine in the face of a convicted felon summoned to hear his reprieve.

“Such dreams, Gaston,” he said, crossing the room eagerly: “but the dream of all was the dream that went to bed and woke with me. I thought I had saved a life, Gaston.”

“That was no dream, my friend.”

Louis-Marie came and fondled him, smiling all the while. His actions were marked by a curious haste and agitation, as if in everything he were restless to hurry conclusions, to spurn the passing moment, to urge on the hands of time.

“Wasn't it?” he said. “What a meeting, dear Gaston, my brother! Who would have dreamt of *that*! And the occasion! We are always saving lives between us, it seems—you more than I, I expect. Isn't it strange? I know so little about you, and you my blood-brother. Do you always lodge here when you come to Turin?”

“Generally.”

“Your life, your habits, your story are all a shadow to me. I—”

Cartouche interrupted him.

“My story is told in a word, Louis-Marie. Would you like to hear it?”

“Indeed I should.”

“Very well. It won’t edify you, I’m afraid; but it’s quite right you should know the truth about me. Innocent souls like you are apt to take too much on trust—to judge all men by their pure self-standards. It’s time, perhaps, you grew up, Louis-Marie.”

“Nay, Gaston,” muttered his friend. “If to be grown up is to be wicked, I’m a giant already. Prove yourself what you like—the worse, the nearer to me.”

Trix laughed.

“Listen to this, then,” he said. “I was born in Mayfair, in London—during the absence of my mother. That was why she would never acknowledge me. My father always believed that I was her son by him; but, as he was not her husband, she had no difficulty in proving an *alibi*. He may have been mistaken, *for he had many irons in the fire*; but the upshot of it for me was that, as no one would claim me, I was pronounced a changeling and put out to nurse. From that state di Rocco rescued me—for reasons of his own. I was very like him, for one—an extraordinary coincidence. He brought me up, and treated me as if I were his son. Paternity always came easy to him. I grew up under his tutelage. The result is what you see; but, in case its expression lacks eloquence, I may tell you that I am a very accomplished person—a scholar, a wit, a capital swordsman, a rakehell and a star-gazer. There is no folly of which I am incapable but love; no hypocrisy but self-sacrifice. I owe the world nothing but myself: and that is a debt I pay back, with interest, on each occasion of its demand. *Enfin*, I am your very faithful servant, M. Louis.”

He rose and bowed, with a grace of mockery. His feeling towards this blood-brother of his was always mixed of devotion and contempt. He could resist one no more than the other. But he loved the poor fool: that sentiment predominated.

Saint-Péray looked down and away from him, his jaw a little fallen. At that moment his hostess entered, carrying his bread and coffee. He raised his head and saw her, uttered an exclamation, and then, like a lost child who recognises a friend in a crowd, suddenly burst into tears.

No, it was certain that Louis-Marie would never ascend Mont Blanc.

CHAPTER IV

AND Yolande of the white hands! How was it faring with her, the lily gathered to perfume a Saturnalia, the victim of as heartless a casuistry as ever committed a clean virgin to outrage?

When she first heard of di Rocco's fate, and of the unspeakable treachery on which it had foreclosed, she came for the moment as near a fall from "grace" as Louis-Marie himself. That duty to a father must be held the paramount duty, his will the household law, his judgment the ruling wisdom, nature and religion in her had once held for the first principle of conduct. Honour, self-respect, sworn faith—these, pious recommendations in themselves, were, if pledged without a father's sanction, vain credentials. His curse could blight them all—convert their virtues into sins. From God, the primal Word, had come, in straight succession, his power to bless or ban. She had believed in this his right so truly as to cede her whole heart to him for immolation on the altar he had raised, letting it break rather than incur his malediction.

But when, having sacrificed these virtues to duty, she saw her moral debasement argued from the act, saw herself claimed, by very virtue of it, to the vile company of the un-self-respecting, held its legitimate sport, her soul stood up, revolting from its creed. She felt like one who, self-destroyed to save her honour, wakes up in hell.

She shook; she shuddered; she went white as death. She felt her feet in snares of celestial sophistry. Heaven had laughed to lure her to a church, which, when she entered it, had proved a *bagnio*. Following God's lead, she had foundered in a swamp, and cleared her eyes to find herself the scoff of uncleanness, to know herself valued at the common currency of the common road. That this dead beast could have conceived a hope of her argued how, in his eyes, in the world's eyes, her soul's dread sacrifice to duty had cheapened, not exalted, her. He would not have dared the thought in the days before she had bared her white bosom to the knife. Her soul for the first time rushed to pity of Isaac on his altar. The father's tragedy was all in all for history. What of the harmless child—the hideous revelation to him of what love could sacrifice to faith? No after-kindness could blot out that memory.

She hated herself at last, not because she had hitherto been self-absorbed, worshipping her own whiteness; but because she had not considered herself at all until this moment. She hated her body, a shrine on which her mind had never dwelt, until it woke to see it foul, a thing defiled in thought, a prey of beastly dreams. A shadow had dethroned her maidenhood. Henceforth she was Yolande of the soiled hands.

No man, perhaps, could gauge her sense of shame, or understand it. She had suffered no wrong in act. A miss, in his blunt logic, is always as good as a mile. But that in the eyes of woman it is not. She, whose innocence has just shaved a scandal, feels a like grievance against fate with her who has solicited and been rebuffed. In each case it is the outrage upon the woman's self-respect which bars the sting.

Unworthy of her lover! But how unworthy she had never dreamt, until she saw herself this lure to low desire. She had not even been coveted for anything she had cherished in herself of moral sweetness. The moral of all sweetness was carnality.

She had walked with uplifted eyes praising God, and had trodden on an adder. For the future she would look down to guard her feet.

It was all a chimera, that figure of a beneficent Father meting out justice and mercy, protection and reward. The lamb in the fold was cherished to make good mutton, and the shepherd's love watched and warded him to that end. No picture of Christ carrying home the strayed weanling could cover that flaw in its divine symbolism. So with the pious aphorisms which were thrown in the eyes of men by interested priestcrafts to blind them from the truth. God helped those who helped themselves? Yes; who helped themselves unscrupulously to the best and least they desired. A bold thief was always popular in heaven. The Lord was a lord of bandits.

She had but to run upon this blasphemy at last, to recoil, gasping and half-stunned, from the dead wall of it. Whither had her madness led her? into what dreadful wanderings from the fold? She had sped blindly in the mist, and struck her forehead against hell's gate. O, Father, rescue Thy lost lamb, so bleating to the wolves of her betrayal! Didst Thou not make a pit-fall for the dog-wolf himself, so that her fleece might escape his soilure and her flesh his ravaging? And her gratitude was this—to cry out upon Thee because Thou hadst let a beast's thought expose her to herself for beast. Yet what else, indeed, were she or any other, save for the measure of Thy purifying spirit in her? I have disowned Him, she thought, and by that act alone become the

beast His spirit once redeemed in me.

She believed, then, that she had committed the unpardonable sin, the sin against the Holy Ghost. For days she lay prostrated, tended only by the little *aubergiste*, poor Margot, who had meanwhile her own difficulties to contend with—gossips to face and baffle; little lungings of innuendo to counterfoil; a drunken parent to answer for. The world was restless about that refuge on the hills: great issues were at stake there: the Law, the Church, the Home were all deeply interested in the potentialities of those white hands. This unattached star of maidenhood had become, at a stroke of heaven, the centre of a system. The lesser bodies, enormously attracted to it, spun and circled round incessantly. But for the present it was obstinate in veiling itself in clouds from their worship.

How long was her “retreat” to last? for how long would it be countenanced by those most concerned in terminating it? No convention of seemly mourning could apply to such a widow—widowed of a love before a husband. Le Prieuré did not expect that hypocrisy of her. But it wanted its Marchesa.

During all these days her father politicly kept aloof, awaiting the first signal of her surrender to him. He had learnt his lesson, and recognised how any approaches from him would but aggravate the malady of her despair. Target kept him, at very little cost, informed of madama’s state; and in the meanwhile he made a judicious ostentation of his poverty, implying, “See me here, the natural trustee of thousands, condemned, by a child’s undutifulness, to go in mended boots!” His patience under suffering made an impression.

But presently, quicker than his soles, it wore out. He would not climb the hill himself, but he commissioned a deputy, in the person of Dr Paccard, shrewd and kindly, to put a case for him. The old man gained access to the patient by a ruse (M. Saint-Péray’s landlord begged a word with her, was the message he sent in), and found her lying like a sweet thing thrown up by the sea, white and just breathing. She saw directly that the mad hope on which her heart had leaped was but another shadow of the shadows which were haunting her. Her eyes absorbed his soul.

He uttered some commonplaces of his craft. She stopped him.

“Why did you send in that message?”

He blushed and stammered: then rushed, characteristically, for the truth.

“I feared you would refuse to see me else. I lodged M. Saint-Péray, it is true, and loved and respected him. We are homely people, I and my daughter

Martha. It was that simple quality which most endeared us to him. What he chiefly valued in my girl was the domestic probity which attached her, first of all sentiments, to the sentiment of filial duty.”

“Old man, I will not go home to my father.”

“O, madama! let me speak. One, even a Marchesa—”

“I am not a Marchesa—”

“One, I say, even a high lady, may profit by the example of simplicity. Do I not know, I—yes, very well—that Martha’s heart is engaged outside her duty? What then? She’s loyal to duty.”

“It is young Balmat, is it not? Wed her elsewhere; sell her clean body for a price—then come and tell me what she pays to duty. I was as good as Martha.”

He ignored her bitter words, urging his point across the interruption.

“Even a great thing for her, I’ll say, where duty is so tedious—just a little daily routine, the house, the kitchen, the conduct of small affairs. There might be compensation else in such a state—great compensation, even, where the life, the happiness, the salvation of many souls depended on one woman’s trust and example.”

She held him with her tragic eyes.

“There’s no salvation possible by way of me. Tell the Chevalier, Monsieur, if you speak for him, as I assume is your commission, to charge himself with all that duty—the lives, the title, the estates, the administration of them all—and leave me to give him thanks and die in peace. He’ll find full compensation for duty, I’m sure, in what duty has bequeathed him. Please will you go now, and take him that message?”

“Never—I say never, madama. This is a bad revolt—I am old, and I will say it. Is it, do you imagine in your perversity, to show honour to an honoured memory? If you think so, I will dare to say that I knew a noble heart better than you yourself, and I speak in its name when I mourn your refusal to take up your cross like a Christian, thanking God for having spared you the weight of an irreparable injury to its burden!”

She sat up, with glittering eyes. “You insult me,” she began, and burst into heart-rending tears.

He let the fit run out, before he spoke again gently.

“My old heart bleeds for your young tragedy. But, believe my word, by so much as I am nearer the grey shore which seems to you now so far, it is not measureless. If these thoughts were possible to your heart, the All-seeing was

doubtless wise to forewarn it with a chastisement, which even yet was not the worst. Lower your head; come down from this false humility which only mocks at heaven. If your feet—for flesh is proud: who can know it better than I?—falter from the whole descent at once, make your first halt half-way with Martha and myself—live with us a little. I say at least for my own advantage; because, indeed, people would be sure to point at me for a self-interested politician, and that would hurt my honest fame. But come, I say—come down from these heights where your heart is locked in ice, and where the ghost of a dead wickedness holds it frozen with his frozen eyes, looking up through the dark window of his grave.”

She was staring at him, quite bloodless. But her lips whispered mechanically: “I cannot—I cannot come to you.”

“How can you pray or think aright,” he said, “or keep your health or reason, with that horror hidden, perhaps, but a stone’s-throw below you there? Its spirit rises, like an evil emanation; its—”

She stopped him, staggering to her feet. What fearful picture was he conjuring? In all her stunned misery, her mind had never once turned to the appalling thought of her close neighbourhood to that baffled evil. It had dwelt and dwelt, in mad iteration, on an earlier figure, on the tragedy of a fruitless sacrifice, on death, as it might find her in the hills.

But now!—to find her, perhaps—trip her on the thought, and entomb her! Was there, in all that vast cemetery of ice, a corner remote enough from *him* to keep their souls divorced? Horrors thronged into her brain once breached. What if her clinging to this spot were construed into devotion to his memory? What if he were not dead, after all, but were slowly toiling upwards to the light from some pit into which he had fallen? She had heard of things as strange. What—wilder terror! if he had never even suffered such a catastrophe, but were hiding somewhere out of knowledge, to descend presently upon his traducers and blight them with his mockery? It had always seemed inconsistent with his character, as resourceful as it was wicked, to let itself astray in the little confusion of a storm, instead of crouching while that passed.

She thought no more—tried to shut out all thought, shuddering with her hands against her eyes. The doctor saw his advantage.

“We have an empty room,” he said, “endeared to us by a memory. Come down, madama, and take possession of that memory. *He* would have wished it.”

She went with him. That marked the first step in her surrender.

The next was inevitable, fruit of a royal commission. It was not to be supposed that a wealthy and powerful noble of the State, new reconciled with its Government, too, could be allowed to disappear thus mysteriously and no inquiry held. Turin sent its *juges d'instruction* and officers of probate and verification to look into the affair. They examined innumerable witnesses, and into as many as possible motives. Cartouche they would have liked to question; but he was gone, none knew whither. So also was Louis-Marie; so also was Bonito. The thing might have taken an ugly turn, so far as any of the three was concerned, had not Nicholas Target been opportunely "pinched" at the psychologic moment. He focussed the mystery for them, brought it into form and coherence. It appeared, after all, to be one to be hushed up rather than ventilated. The matter ended for the widow with official sympathy and congratulations.

And she? how had she stood the long ordeal? They said her bearing was the very majesty of pathos—like Dorothea before her judges again. One can keep one's countenance under torture, as the statistics of martyrdom prove. But every allusion to her assumed acquiescence in her own tragedy had been a white-hot rake to her side. They imagined her stately fortitude was a pose, a compromise between decency and the exaltation her heart could not but feel over the thought of what she had escaped and the prospect before her. That she must not undeceive them, must suffer the onus of coveting a position which her whole soul loathed and rejected, was not the least part of her anguish. Even if she had ventured to assert herself, to call them to witness to her renunciation of all which they held so covetable, her father was there to stultify her protests. She saw him daily—spoke to him, even. But there was a gulf between them. The atmosphere it exhaled was felt by the commissioners, and felt to be inexplicable. Some commiseration was shown for the victim of so unnatural a misunderstanding. His noble candour in giving evidence, his dignified endurance of that implied slander on his disinterestedness, excited a measure of sympathy—even of sympathetic indignation. Yet, for all his public vindication as a father, the triumph of his child's cause seemed only to deepen the abyss which separated him from her.

Well, a thing grown past bearing is a thing ended. The torture consummated itself at last in anti-climax—in the official citation of Augias, Marchese di Rocco, to the Court of Inquiry, there to answer and show cause why Yolande di Rocco, *née* de France, should not enter into possession of his

estates as his widow and sole inheritrix. Which summons the appellee having failed to answer, the Will was declared proved, the lawyers returned to Turin, and the lady to the privacy of her lodgings at Dr Paccard's. And so the matter ended.

At least, so it seemed to. It was a unique situation: on the one side great houses, great wealth, great stakes in the country, and a fluttering crew of prospectors waiting to negotiate their values for the benefit of a mistress who disregarded them all; on the other the mistress herself living in humble lodgings on a few centesimi a day. And this state of things held for quite a month after the inquiry.

"It makes you an important person," said Jacques Balmat to Martha. "You are approached and courted like a queen's confidante. I hope your silly little head will not be turned by it all."

"Jacques, she is dying of love, and what right have you or I to say that she ought to live?"

"The right, my girl, of dutiful children to uphold the natural law. She, too, is not so independent but she must owe her father a life. It makes no difference that he crossed her plans for herself. Besides, are we so certain that one we will not name has made himself unworthy of her? It rests on our conjecture, and that is the devil's word for scandal. They whisper that the old man is dying."

"My God! what is that you say?"

"I only repeat what I have heard. It is that madama's obstinacy is slowly killing him. It is certainly aggravating, when one is starving, to see a fine feast spread just out of one's reach."

Martha went with her information straight to Yolande. That Marchioness of shadows was a good deal altered during the last month. Grief, where a flawless constitution defies its corrosion, retaliates by turning all into stone. She was white and unimpressionable as a statue. Martha dared an ultimatum.

"You would blame yourself, I am sure, my lady, if death were suddenly to end the misunderstanding between you and your father."

The blue unearthly eyes were turned swift upon her with a look of horror.

"Death!" she whispered.

"O!" said Martha, weeping, "chagrin will kill a cat. What is it, do you think, to lie starving and abandoned outside the walls of the paradise you have staked your soul to win?"

"Abandoned!" repeated the other. "It is all his—he knows it—to do what

he likes with.”

She had assumed, indeed, that all this time her father was established at the Château. Martha threw up her hands, protesting.

“Do you pretend to believe that he, so proud and stern, has accepted a trust bestowed on him like that? But believe it if you like. He will not be long in unconvincing you.”

“Give me my cloak. Do you hear? My God, how slow you are!”

* * * * *

Thus was negotiated Yolande’s third and final step to self-surrender. She hurried through the familiar streets, a reincarnate ghost, shocked from her grave by a cry as superhuman as the one which stirred the dead in old Jerusalem—a cry of mortal desolation. God spare her the revelation which might have come to them—the knowledge that she had out-died her welcome!

The place seemed strange. There was an air of dust and neglect about the “hôtel.” The face of the woman who answered her summons was unfamiliar—a smug, frowzy, “laying-out” face in suggestion. The girl could hardly articulate the words which strove for utterance on her lips. But, commanding herself, she asked at last, and was a little reassured.

Yes, the Chevalier was in bed, in a poor enough way; but curable, no doubt, by one who knew the secret of his disorder.

She hurried upstairs to him, entered his room with a choking heart. He was lying back, propped on pillows. His face was stern and wintry, with a rime of unshorn hair on its jaws. His eyes, cold and unscrutinising, were like globes of frog-spawn, each with a black staring speck of life for pupil.

A withered crone, ostentatiously unclean, was dishing up for the patient a thin broth of herbs. Reason might have questioned of the meaning of her presence, or of the soup’s poor quality. De France was under no necessity for retrenchment just because he had been disappointed of a handsome legacy in trust. But remorse has no reason. Yolande saw nothing here but the tragic figure of an ambition her perversity had doomed. A dignified presence may command so much more than its due of sympathy for the common crucifyings of circumstance. Majesty covers a multitude of meannesses. She fell on her knees by the bed.

“Father, I have come to make my peace with you!”

The pupils of the Chevalier’s eyes, turned darkly on the suppliant, dilated

imperceptibly.

“Who is this who enters to disturb my resignation? I have made *my* peace with Heaven.”

“No, no, father! No, no! I am Yolande, thy daughter, thy one poor child. Know me and forgive me. I have done wrong. O, my father, I have been wicked and undutiful, but God has cleared my eyes!”

His own were brightening wonderfully; the specks were grown to tadpoles. He snapped at the wheezy beldame with a sudden viciousness that almost made her drop the dish.

“Begone, thou old prying gossip! What dost thou here, pricking thy mouldy ears?”

She scuttled. He held out a waxen hand. Yolande imprisoned and devoured it.

“Art thou my child?” he said. “I had thought she had abandoned me indeed.”

She wept, bowing her head, and mumbling:—

“Not abandoned—only to that I thought your soul desired; the place, the riches, the—the honour. I had never supposed but you possessed them all—managed—administered them—”

“For you, my daughter? Even *my* love must reject a trust so offered. What honour could survive that imputation of self-interest? I would have consented to be your steward else—faithful on a crust, if love and confidence had sweetened it. But it does not matter now. Nothing matters any longer, since my child is here a penitent to reconcile me with the thought of our separation.”

“Father! O, my God! I have not deserved it. Look, I will nurse you back to health and peace of mind. I will be so humble and so loving. Father, do not die!”

He questioned her face searchingly. He saw her heart was his so surely, that any further fencing before he pierced it would serve but to prolong his luxury of triumph. Yet he fenced.

“To nurse me?” he said, smiling weak and saintly. “A simple task, Yolande. Even the remnant of fortune left me, after my debts are paid, might crown my few last days with feasting, if I wished it. But my wants are soon supplied.”

“Only live, dear father, and your fortune—”

She stopped, shuddering, and buried her face in the bedclothes. He scanned

the back of her head curiously.

“My fortune!” he echoed. “Ah! I had once dreamed my fortune might have lain in helping to turn great evil into a blessing. I had seen, in my fond imagination, churches enriched, charities endowed, all that wealth and power had used to evil ends converted to measureless good. But it was a fantastic dream. We exalt ourselves, no doubt, in planning for the human emancipation. God has rebuked my vanity.”

She lifted her flowing eyes to him.

“Had you had such dreams? O, father! be my almoner, then, and let *me* live on the crust.”

He stroked her hair rapturously. Murder would out at last.

“You put new life into me,” he murmured. “You shall live on what you like. Only, for appearance’s sake, my child, make yourself the nominal minister of that atonement.”

And on these terms he carried her off to the Château.

CHAPTER V

THE Royal Palace of Turin, situated off the Piazza Castello, in the east, or distinguished quarter of the city, epitomised in itself the policy of the Savoyard rule. Externally it was as unpretentious a pile as any brick-built factory—or, shall we say, for the sake of apt analogy, as our own original South Kensington Museum. For, in like manner with that illustrious emporium, did the utilitarian face which it turned to the street afford no clue whatever to its inner meaning. It was just a countenance dressed for the demos—a sop of unostentation offered to that triple-headed sleuth-hound.

It was certainly unelating as an architectural composition; but then we know, by the story, that the plain pear is often the most luscious. Beauty, saith the sage (a plain fellow himself, no doubt), is but skin-deep. That is an aphorism as untrue as many another. But, take it for what it is worth, and ugliness, by the like measure, is also skin-deep.

The Palazzo Reale, at least, was, like its later South Kensington parallel, a very museum of treasures contained within a mean casket. They were of all sorts, from a Benvenuto salver, or a suit of mail worn by an enormous armiger at the battle of Pavia, to the individual “kit” of M. Dupré, who had been “*le Dieu de la danse*” in the supreme days of Turin’s gaiety. Those, perhaps, were fled for ever, as a characteristic and prerogative of “privilege”; but their reactionary spirit lingered on, awaiting revitalisation in the dumb strings of the great dancer’s fiddle.

I am not sure but that the present representative of the house did not hold this instrument among the first of his treasures. It symbolised for him his beautiful ideal of humanity frolicking in an Arcadian estate. Watteau, Gillot, and the *fête galante* were always figured in the dim backgrounds of his policy. He yearned to educate democracy with a harpsichord, and pelt it into silence with roses. He was not altogether a bad little fellow, for his fifty-seven years, only his ideals were expensive, and of course supremely unpractical. While seeing very clearly that Arcadia was only to be reached through education (he endowed and encouraged learning quite handsomely), he stultified all the effects of his liberality by conceding to hereditary prejudice the whole conduct of his government. He did not walk with the

world, in fact, and so it walked into him.

The Palace, in the meanwhile, was as sumptuous within as it was bare without. Mr Trix, entering towards it, one fine September morning, by the gates opening from the Piazzo Castello, tasted, in some curious anticipation, the possible flavour of the fruit hidden behind that uncompromising rind. He was “waiting,” by private “command,” on his sovereign, and the occasion (the first of its kind to him) found him by no means so possessed by its importance as that his *self*-possession was moved thereby to yield an iota of its serenity. He was received, with consideration, at a private door to which he was directed, and, after the slightest delay, ushered straight into the presence of Victor-Amadeus.

The monarch was seated at a secretaire, heavily gilt and with painted panels, talking or dictating to a little fat, bedizened aide-de-camp, who wrote apart at a littered table, and who was so buried in bullion that he might have been taken for the First Lord of the Treasury just emerged from a dip into one of its coffers. The royal toilet itself was a *négligé*—dressing-gown, embroidered slippers, and bare close-cropped head—all very gimp and finical. Shrewd, wizened, narrow, Victor-Amadeus’s face—a dough-white, flexuous-nosed, long-chinned, under-jawed little affair—perked up from its collar of white ermine like a beedy-eyed condor’s. Thought was engraved on it in a number of thready wrinkles, like cracks in parchment. The deepest owed themselves to profound self-searchings on such questions as the conduct of Court precedents, of royal hunts, of ceremonial and pageantry. The slightest might record some difficult moments accorded to the size of a button, or the claims of the subversive shoe-tie over the constitutional buckle. To find the royal countenance simply vacant was to know the royal mind concentrated on affairs of State.

Those might include the potentialities of the Lottery, the friendship of Cousin Louis of France, a new uniform for the army. It is certain that they never excluded the necessity of some new drain upon the exchequer. Victor-Amadeus recognised very clearly that the true evolution of man is in his clothes. And he was right in a way. It seems impossible to advocate even so much, or so little, as a return to Nature without wanting to dress up to the part. He was a *petit-mâitre*, in short, of the first rank and the most fastidious taste, who had spent his reigning life in offering himself a leading example of refinement to his subjects. He was something better than a benevolent Caligula.

He went on dictating now, while Mr Trix, standing just within the doorway by which he had entered, awaited passively his royal pleasure.

“Write, my dear Polisson,” said the King, “that, as regards the Pont Beauvoisin over the Guier, we cannot consent to the abolition of the double toll. To leave Savoy may be a necessity; to enter France may be necessity; but two necessities do not make one privilege. On the other hand, two privileges make a certain necessity—that of paying for both.”

The gilded scribe raised his head and little screw-eyes. M. Polisson was terribly short-sighted, but was forbidden the use of spectacles because of their ugliness.

“I must recall to your Majesty,” he said: “that the petition dates from Dauphiny.”

“*Chou pour chou*,” said the King. “Would it rob me the less, because it would also rob King Louis of his half of the perquisites? To concede it would be to concede the first principle of the *octroi*. The keystone is a small part of the arch; but remove it, and what then! Tell me that, M. Polisson.”

The secretary still ventured a deferential protest.

“Your Majesty’s duchy of Savoy is ultramontane. It is perhaps infected a little through its contiguity with revolutionary doctrines. Its predilections, as your Majesty knows, have always been for French arms, French arts, French sentiments. It may happen to have imbibed some of the worthless with the sound. A little concession to unrest would not make unrest more unrestful.”

The King took snuff from a jewelled box.

“That was a clumsy iteration, my charming Polisson,” said he. “But all concessions are an admission of weakness. If we slacken the curb, we shall presently be run away with. Be careful of that pouncet-box, or you will spill it on the carpet and make an unpleasant dust. Besides, it was given me by a very pretty child, and I love children.”

“But, sire—”

“Say no more, M. Polisson. Is the document prepared?”

All the while he was talking, the corner of his eye was given to Mr Trix. Now he turned a little, and said quite suddenly, “That is a very pretty idea of the earrings, Monsieur.”

So he would pass, butterfly-like on unsteady wings, from blossom to blossom of a flowery mind. There was some purpose, no doubt, ahead of his irrelative flittings, but it seemed for ever the prey to distractions by the way.

His allusion was to a certain novelty in dandyism, it appeared—to a couple

of little diamonds which were let into the gold earrings worn by his visitor. For the rest, that visitor, it was obvious, attracted his most flattering regard. He observed, with admiration, his coat and breeches of fine buff cloth and fastidiously elegant cut; his tambour vest of white satin sprigged with silver, and his white silk stockings; his mushroom-coloured stock, and solitaire of broad black silk which was tied in a bow at the back of his natural black hair, and brought over his shoulders to hold a miniature framed in diamonds and turquoises; his silver-headed Malacca cane looped to the right wrist, and the tiny Nivernois hat held under his left arm; the slim steel-hilted sword at his hip (for continental “bloods” still held to a fashion which was grown out-of-date in England); his neat black pantoufles fastened with little gold-tagged laces—and only as to these last did his countenance express any doubt or qualification.

Still admiring, he arose from his chair. At the same moment M. Polisson skipped to his feet and fell over a stool. The King glanced at him vexedly.

“You are always the one, little Polisson,” he said, “to cough in the exquisite moment of the opera.”

Then he advanced to the visitor, very winningly.

“It is all a triumph of taste, Monsieur,” he said. “Accept the congratulations of a sympathetic spirit.”

Cartouche bowed profoundly.

“I have the good fortune of seeing M. Trix?” said the King; “the *protégé* of our late lamented Marquis? It is a pleasure of which I have often dreamed, and now realise to my instruction. You were very attached to your patron, Monsieur?”

“I returned his regard for me, Sire, with duty and affection.”

“He is a great loss to us. We had looked upon him as a bulwark against the licentious encroachments of the age. He would have found for your modern Rousseaus poor quarters at Chambéry—or at Le Prieuré, for that matter. No question of subversive petitions, had he remained alive. It was a pity he was so appallingly ugly. I am not sure about the laces, monsieur. They are a little democratic.”

“They have gold tags, Sire,” was all that Trix could find to answer.

“True,” said the King, “and that perhaps redeems them, like the jewel in the toad’s head. I understand, Monsieur, that the widow is as great a beauty as she is a fortune.”

Cartouche sniggered to himself, dogging these apparently inconsequent

“doublings” of the royal mind.

“She is priceless in every way, Sire.”

The King looked at him rather keenly.

“It would want a courageous man,” he said, “to aspire to the priceless.”

Cartouche smiled, in a state of inner astonishment. To what end, of favour or correction, was all this irrelevance of the royal flibbertigibbet addressed? Knowing his own reputation in Turin, he could hardly flatter himself with a thought of promotion. And the next remark of the monarch only deepened his perplexity.

“Have you ever heard, Monsieur,” said Victor-Amadeus, “of a secret society calling itself the Illuminati?”

“Surely, Sire,” answered the visitor, profoundly bewildered. “It is, by general report, a fellowship of star-gazers, who, consulting the heavenly systems, flounder among the earthly.”

“Ay,” said the King: “and they meet at night, as astrologers should—here and there, on dark hill-sides, on remote roads, on lonely wastes. But doubtless you know that?”

“I know nothing whatever about their habits, Sire.”

“So?—I think, Monsieur, but I am not sure, that these ruffles might be doubled. Perhaps, however, it would vulgarise, in the tiniest degree, the exquisite simplicity of your conception. My faith! what Goths we have to educate, artists like you and me! Hopeless to expect their appreciation of these delicate *nuances* of taste and selection. The many-flounced flower is always foremost in their approval. Sometimes, in despair, I feel that I must yield the eternal conflict—go mad in pea-green stockings and a scarlet wig. But then I think how Nature, in her inaccessible eyries, continues to produce, without a didactic thought, her tastefullest forms; and I am comforted, because I recognise that the final appeal of elegance is to the gods. Has it ever occurred to you, Monsieur, that your patron was murdered by these Illuminati?”

The sudden swerve and swoop brought a gasp from Cartouche, verily as if his Majesty had whipped a hand from behind his back and struck him in the wind. He was, momentarily, quite staggered.

“No, never,” he could only ejaculate.

Victor-Amadeus conned him curiously.

“Admit, Monsieur, for the sake of argument, that it were so,” he said. “How, then, would you regard this Brotherhood?”

“Sire, as your Majesty regarded the Jesuits.”

“What! as a canker to be cut from us, lest it should come to corrupt the whole body of our estate?” The King scraped his chin thoughtfully. “I have heard said,” he murmured, “that of all compelling personalities, that of the fire-eater *dilettante*, the truculent wit, the *gaillard* with his tongue in his scabbard and venom at its point, is the most to be admired for its penetration, since it will pierce through both steel and brain. (I shall certainly adopt this inspiration of the earrings, Monsieur.) We are fortunate, at least, in recognising in M. Trix—with whose exploits in Turin report has made us familiar—the qualities of his reputation. Courageous, brilliant men, men of resource and daring, men even remorseless *vengeurs* at discretion, are not to be gathered like edelweiss at the expense of a little risk and trouble. And so La Prieuré has its Illuminati, Monsieur?”

“I learn it, for the first time, of your Majesty.”

“A convenient observatory, M. Trix, for the studying of systems—wild, remote, high-lifted—a place for storing thunderbolts, and launching them. It would need a man, to circumvent and storm it, almost as courageous as he who should aspire to the priceless. Well, di Rocco—though terribly ugly—was that man, on both counts, and he is dead. But Nemesis, if we are not mistaken, bore a child to him. Will you be our Prefect of Faissigny, M. Trix?”

“My God, Sire!”

The offer was so sudden, so unexpected, that he could utter no more on the instant. The King—a disciple, perhaps, of Walpole in the baser part of his policy—hastened to clinch an appointment he had set his heart on. Munificence happened to be the price he could bid for it, and without his being a penny the poorer thereby. He spoke on eagerly, eschewing hyperbole.

“We are not unacquainted, Monsieur, with the minutest circumstances of that tragedy, or of some local meetings of the Brotherhood which, in our opinion, were responsible for it. The Marquess was, of all men, calculated to be abhorrent to these would-be subverters of the constitution, whose aims are by no means so astral or so harmless as you would appear to believe. That they, and their pernicious doctrines, are not unrepresented in Faissigny I can well tell you. From the Col-de-Balme to Bonneville they have their secret rallying-points. The place is blotched with corruption. It needs a strong man, a man of local knowledge, whether inspired by vengeance, or by duty, or by both, to put his knife to those tainted parts. I had thought of M. de France in

my difficulty. Bah! he is an old pompous vanity. I will quiet him with a little portfolio. In the meanwhile—”

“But, Sire!”

“In the meanwhile, I say, we can conceive of no better man than yourself to instruct vulgarity of the fallacy of ugliness. We do not expect M. Trix, the exquisite, the man of the sword, to condemn himself, unrewarded, to a virtual exile from life, as he regards it. We have had a little bird to whisper in our ears; and, as a consequence, we propose to endow our Prefect of Faissigny with a fine local estate, and a fine fortune, encumbered only with the condition of a wife. In short, Monsieur, we offer to bestow upon our faithful lieutenant the hand of the widowed lady di Rocco.”

Cartouche dropped his hat, picked it up, straightened himself, laughed a little laugh, and answered. His face was white and his lips were trembling.

“Pardon me, Sire; but that is impossible.”

Victor-Amadeus stared a little; then spoke drily.

“You may misconceive our prerogatives, Monsieur. Or, perhaps, you are married already?”

“No, Sire.”

“It is well, then. We have commanded the lady and her father to Court—a little prematurely, maybe; but, what would you!” (he shrugged his shoulders). “A loveless marriage makes a short mourning. In the meantime—”

“I will be your Prefect, Sire—if not for vengeance’ sake, for duty alone.”

“You do not believe he was murdered?”

“The suggestion shall at least stimulate me.”

“And nothing else? But we will see. A stake in that country would afford you a strong personal interest in its cleansing. We will see, we will see.” He turned to his secretary. “Make out M. Trix’s patent as Prefect of Faissigny, my dear Polisson,” he said; “and, for heaven’s sake, straighten your stock.”

CHAPTER VI

WITHIN a stone's throw of the royal Palace, under its usurious eye, as it were, stood the Palazzo di Citta, the headquarters of the Banco del Regio Lotto. There, every alternate Saturday at noon, the drawing of the numbers took place, and the impoverishment of a few thousand King's subjects, guilty of nothing but fatuity, was decided by lot.

It was a recurrently mad time, whose agitation was transmitted to remotest parishes all over the country—only with this distinction: the Piémontais, watching the central game, was held hostage to its excitement; the poor Savoyard, ruined out of sight, cursed himself for a blockhead victim to fraud, and, with the common inconsistency, vowed hatred against a Government which could thus rob him of his mite.

That was inevitable. Gambling in cold blood can only breed usurers where it succeeds, and desperadoes where it fails. The Turinois possessed the glitter of the table. It was not he who was to fail the Monarchy in the dark days to come.

He was as fevered, as voluble, as gesticulatory, as seething in his numbers on this particular occasion of the drawing, as he had been any time since M. D'Aubonne first brought his damnable invention of the lottery-wheel from France some fifty years earlier. His cheek was as glowing, his heart as fluttering with a sense of novelty, as if he had never before seen a hundred or two of butterflies broken on the wheel. Even Dr Bonito, standing amidst the pack with a young friend, felt the infection of the occasion, and bit his blue lips with that sort of agonised transport which makes men under the lash set their teeth in whatsoever they encounter.

He had had that vanity of his qualities, the old grey rat, to hold by an independence even to the last capacity of the gutter for yielding him one. The stars, the cards (a greasy pack), the astrolabe and divining rod, had procured him thence, latterly, an obscene living. In taking it, he had had at least the justification of his own superstition. If he sold immortal truths at a halfpenny apiece, it was only because necessity obliged him. They had all the value of genuineness in his eyes, and to "fake" antiques would only discredit him with the gods, upon whom was his ultimate reliance. What he had borrowed from

Louis-Marie had been a loan to conviction—a last ounce of metal needed to insure his winged feet to the Perseus of his destiny. That he fully believed. Beyond it—it was a fact—he had not asked, nor accepted, a farthing from the young man.

But superstition, as a one-devil possession, prevails only through its plausibility. Let its dupe once be disillusioned, and all the moral obliquities, out of which it had shaped its pretence, confess themselves the owners of the mansion. The maggots which devour a dead faith were bred in it living. Superstition, cast down, becomes the prey of what it had entertained. Dr Bonito, a Rosicrucian by conviction, had never perhaps been really dangerous until the stars came to prove themselves impostors. And then he delivered himself wholly to corruption.

In the meanwhile, bond-slave to his faith, foreseeing nothing so little as the imminent disruption of that faith's particles, or articles, he cherished for the moment no particular thought of rascality towards anyone. He may even have felt a little cold thaw of emotion towards the human souls about him, as towards beings predestined to witness in him alone, conversant with the hieroglyphics of fate, that apotheosis which they all desired vainly for themselves. Smugly self-conscious of his frowsy coat and broken shoes, he likened himself to Elijah, on the banks of the Jordan, awaiting, an unconsidered prophet, the descent of the fiery chariot. His eyes travelled incessantly, feverishly, from his companion—poor Louis-Marie, the dull, apathetic soul—to the steps of the Town-hall, on which was displayed—under guard, but for all to see—the wheel of Fortune.

Suddenly a sound went over the vast throng, like a sweep of wind over a bed of rushes, bowing all heads in a single direction. It wailed, and passed, and died, and was succeeded by an intense hush. The wheel was seen to turn—and stop. Bonito clutched his voucher, holding it under his nose for identification.

The number, large and white, cynosure of a thousand eyes, went up on a black board—61.

A thin wheeze, such as strains itself from lungs winded by a blow, came from him. Then he gasped, and, twitching in all his features, nudged his companion, and set his finger on the card—61, sure enough. The sigh, the wail, rose again over the throng, and died down—11. Bonito, for all his faith, was shaking as if palsied as his finger travelled to the number. Even Louis-Marie, standing staring in his place, felt in his veins a sluggish thrill of

excitement. Again the wheel turned, and again the card duplicated its record—81; and then once more it revolved and disgorged a single number—9, and the quatern was accomplished.

Bonito looked up. His forehead was wet; his lips were dribbling and smiling in one.

“*Quantum fati parva tabella vehit*,” he said crookedly. “And there are those who mock at astrology!”

A roar, instant, overwhelming, heart-shaking, broke upon his words. It greeted the appearance on the board of the fifth and final figure—a zero!

The gods had laughed. *All stakes were cancelled, and forfeit to the Government.*

Dr Bonito stood quite still. The sweat dried from his forehead. Slowly his face seemed to turn into grinning stone. The surge of the crowd roared round him, like fierce water about a pile. He heeded nothing of it. He only grinned and grinned, until his grin became a blasphemy, a horror. Then he recognised that he must stir, speak, do something human, to cheat the hell to which his looks were claiming him. He was conscious of a rigor enchaining his flesh; his feet seemed locked in the jaws of a quicksand; a little, and he would be under.

At the crisis, the card in his hand caught his attention. Very stiffly, moving his arms mechanically, he tore it into halves, folded, quartered, requartered, and, at a wrench, divided and sent those fluttering piecemeal. The act spoke an inhuman grip. It had hardly been possible to him a minute earlier. But its madness rent the veil.

He twisted awry, and glared up at his companion. Louis-Marie remembered that night in the *café*. He recognised well enough what had happened. The calamity might have stirred him little on his own account, had it not been for this look in the ruined face turned to him. He shivered slightly.

“So much for the Taroc Mysteries!” whispered the doctor, “chaff of the gods! But I forgot that nought stood for the Fool.”

His tongue rustled on his palate like a dry scale.

“He hunts butterflies,” he said. “Why, you cursed owl, what are you staring at? Have you never seen him, with his net, on the cards? Nought is the Fool, I say, and I am nought—the butt of the gods. I’ll pay them!”

He took a frantic step or two, returned, seized his companion’s arm, and urged him from the press.

“Come,” he said hoarsely; “you lent me the means to it—I owe this to you

—I'll not let you go now."

All his tolerance, it seemed, was turned to hatred. He regarded the young man as the instrument, however contemptible, of his undoing. The worse for the poor tool of Fortune! He would have to act whipping-boy to her ladyship. And serve the weak creature right for his flaccidity. He sneered horribly at him.

"Faith's dead in me," he snarled. "You'll have to serve her turn."

Quite stunned and helpless, Saint-Péray let him lead him whither he would. As they crossed into the Via Seminario, a royal carriage, making for the Palace, was brought to a stand against a gabbling stream of pedestrians, and stopped across their very path. They faced direct into a window of it; *and there inside was Yolande.*

Pale, agitated, her Dresden-shepherdess eyes glanced to and fro, and, all in an instant, caught that vision of other two, other four, fixed upon them.

We've heard of faces stricken into stone before some Gorgon apparition. Love's severed head converts to softer stuff. His art is the plastic art, and answers to his dead hauntings in features stiffening into wax.

So seemed Yolande's features in that moment. Her breath hung suspended on her lips, the colour in her cheeks. She had procured Love's death, and thus was Love revenged upon her. Like a thing of wax she confronted the sweet cruelty of his eyes.

There sat a thin grey gentleman by her side, of a very refined and arrogant mien. The Chevalier de France had never encountered Louis, nor Louis him. Suddenly the former projected his head from the window, and demanded in haughty tones the reason of the delay.

"Monsignore," said a postillion, "it is the Lottery."

The Chevalier *sacre'd*.

"Does that concern a minister of State, puppy? Drive through the rabble."

The carriage jerked forward, and rolled on its way. Saint-Péray stood motionless, following it with his eyes. A touch on his arm aroused him. Acrid, vicious, fearfully expressive, the face of Dr Bonito peered up into his.

"Monsieur," whispered the Rosicrucian: "there goes Madame Saint-Péray."

Louis-Marie gave a mortal start, and put his hand to his forehead.

"There is something weaving in my brain," he muttered. "Look, look—shake it out! My God, it is an enormous spider!"

CHAPTER VII

THE Prefect of Faissigny, commanded, for the second time within a week, and with a flattering grace of intimacy, into the King's presence, discovered an exquisite butterfly where he had left a chrysalis. The royal head—erst as round and blue as a Turk's—was adorned with a bob-wig in buckle, from whose toupee a couple of pearl pins stuck out like clubbed antennæ; the royal limbs and body were glossy with embroidered silks; on the royal coat of maroon-coloured velvet sparkled a diamond star. Twin satellites of this sun, moreover, twinkled, like new-discovered planets, in the royal ears—a sincerest flattery, which his Majesty did not grudge to pay to so unique a pink of the elegances as M. Trix.

As he advanced to greet his visitor, he held a wisp of point d'Alençon a little raised between the finger and thumb of his right hand, while his left poised a gleaming snuff-box at a like angle. His manner was as charmingly playful as his "style" was unexceptionable. As a monarch he had no rival to challenge his pre-eminence in the Kingdom of puffs and patches.

"Welcome, my dear Prefect," he said. "You come as irresistible as Apollo in Arcadia. I vow I am jealous of you, since seeing our adorable Daphne. Alas! that Fate hath imposed upon me the *rôle* of Father Ladon. But it is some compensation to have a god for suitor."

"Your Majesty flatters and confounds me in one."

Cartouche's eyes were bright and nervous. He had not a full command of his lips.

The King smiled.

"Confounds you, Monsieur? How is that?"

"Daphne, Sire, if I am not mistaken, took refuge in a laurel tree, rather than suffer the god's pursuit."

"Bah!" The King shrugged his shoulders. "And she bewailed, I'll swear, her foolish precipitancy for ever after. But the laurels in this case, Monsieur, are for your brow."

"I do not feel like a conqueror, indeed."

"Fie, fie, Monsieur! Is it necessary to remind M. Trix of his Cervantes? Faint hearts and fair ladies, forsooth. O, you have a character to maintain, I

assure you! But certainly such beauty cuts the sinews of self-confidence. Well, it is no matter. You have only, as it happens, to receive the keys of the capitulated citadel.”

“I do not understand your Majesty, I declare.”

“Our Majesty, Monsieur, has already thrown the handkerchief for you, and one without a crown in its corner. That was a self-denying ordinance, for which we will not altogether insist on your gratitude. But, in plain language, sir, we desire this union, and have made no secret of our desire.”

“Sire!”

“Hush, Monsieur, or she may hear! You would not damn your reputation with a show of diffidence? Hush!”

Cartouche looked at him aghast.

“She is present? She—Sire, Sire!” He made a hurried step forward.

The King, smiling, motioned him aside, and tiptoed to a door. The two were quite private and alone. The royal closet was destined, for the moment, for Love’s confessional-box—ordered with a view to the stimulating of emotional disclosures and throbbing confidences. It was evening, and the tapers, shrouded in their silver sconces, diffused a soft motionless glow over a piled luxuriance of stuffs and cushions; over a carpet tufted thick as turf; over hangings of purple velvet. They woke slumberous gleams in furniture; flushed the drowsy faces of satyrs on polished bureaux; creamed the bare legs and breasts of nymphs; touched the cheeks of grapes, piled in a gold salver on a table, with little kisses of light; slipped into the warm depths of decantered wine, and hung tiny crimson jack-o’-lanterns there to lure the already half-drunken senses to red ruin. No drugging pastille ever vulgarised the air of that enchanted chamber; but a sweet and swooning perfume was contrived to steal all over it, as if a bed of lilies of the valley lay beneath the floor.

And, in a moment, she was there, before Cartouche’s eyes—the loveliest, most lovable shape to be conceived in such a setting.

For an instant desperate and defiant, he feigned to himself to claim her appropriately to it—its sensuousness and artificiality. Her lily complexion was toilet cream; her lips, too startlingly scarlet, were painted; the flowers in her cheeks were well assumed, since they owed to the rubbing of geranium petals. All these, with that gleaming gold for crown, that spun starlight of her hair, were but so many modistic arts, to which her simple dress of black supplied the clue. Out of that dusk sheath her shoulders budded with a double emphasis of whiteness—a cunning scheme of contrasts.

And so he lusted to slander her to his own heart; and would have cut that same heart out only to lay it at her slender feet and feel them trample it.

And she could be so stately, though a child. Giving the King her hand, she held him vassal to its whiteness, and smiled a gracious smile when he raised and kissed it reverently. She had become woman at her tender years—but through the hate and not the love of man. She had borne sorrow and was a virgin still. Passion fell dumb before that poignant motherhood: desire slunk ashamed before her eyes.

The King handed her forward, with a sort of conscious *chassé*. He was at pains to practise every punctilious elegance in his reception of this untutored girl. He looked even nervous and a little inferior. But custom gave him command.

“There are occasions, Madam,” he said, “on which even the King is *de trop*. I leave it to a lovelier monarch to reconcile the parties in this suit, sure that my affection for both, their sense of duty to the State, their own passions and interests, will move them to a compromise. Respect that Judge, my children, for whom I dethrone myself; and accept his ruling on a cause which I have very much at heart.”

With that, he released the Marchesa’s hand, and bowed profoundly, and withdrew. She made no gesture to retain him. The two remained standing as he had left them, silent and far apart.

A storm of emotions swept through the chambers of Cartouche’s brain. He shook in its thunder. What was the power in this child, this white-and-pink wax doll, to humble mighty worldlings in her presence, bring them to her feet—not to sue, but to deprecate all suit of her as guilt—not to pray; only to adore, and own themselves unworthy?

She had beauty; and it was not a snare. She had virtue, and it was not a pose. ’Twas her inaccessibility made her covetable, O thou fond Ulysses!

But he did not desire her for himself, he thought. And yet, after all, why should he not? She was unattached; fair quarry to the free-lance; no other man’s preserve. He had the right of chase with the whole world—no bond to honour, even, since she had let another cross the claim of his friend. *He* would never have suffered that for himself. *She* would never have dared that sin against Cartouche. He gloried suddenly in his name. If he could only have met her first—a man worth a woman’s modelling, not a saint invertebrately blessed—a passion, not a sentiment! Was it too late even now? To gain the whole world in her and lose his soul! She could make an immortal lust of

damnation—cancel eternity to a moment. He thirsted for that moment almost beyond endurance.

What was her power? He had accepted this interview, when thrust upon him, with a cynic mock for its pretence, a tolerant anticipation of the moral drubbing it was to procure him. He knew that, in her regard, not all his brilliant worldly gifts and qualities weighed as one grain in the balance of good things. A word from Louis's lips, a look from Louis's eyes, would have sent him and all his vanities kicking the beam. He could not get behind that essential righteousness. It was impervious to all cleverness, all intellect, all reason even. She was a fool; but a beautiful unattainable fool is as transporting a siderite as any other. Wisdom loved a fool—not for the first time in man's history: he loved her, because her folly was inaccessible by him.

Some say that sex is accident—a chance development; that we are all bisexual within. Woman, prescriptively, is the one to covet most the unattainable, to pursue the most where most scorned, to love most the partner who most abuses her love. But what, if you please, does man? It all turns, in fact, upon the ineradicable human lust for adventure, the weariness of the rut, the reach at something out of reach. Yolande, as virtue, was forbidden fruit to this vice. Therefore he desired her, madly, fiercely; but, at the last, with a saving grace of humour.

He found himself, out of that, presently, and moved towards her, very formal and demure, though his heart was on fire. At a pace or two distant he stopped.

"Madam," he said, "the King wishes you to marry me."

He could see a shadow flutter in her white throat.

"I ask myself, Monsieur," she said softly, "how I have offended the King?"

"Madam," he rejoined quietly, "I told him that you would not marry me."

"I ask myself," she went on, seeming to ignore him, "what I have ever done to justify these shameless solicitations by the shameless." Her frigid self-possession, as a quality of sixteen, was a quite pitiful abnormality. "You are by all accounts, Monsieur," she said, "a student of the world. What is it in a woman that seems to mark her down your legitimate sport? Have I these unconscious attributes? Tell me, only in your own excuse."

"I have said once before, Madam, that you are an angel."

"Then do angels beck, like wantons, at the street corners? I am no angel, Monsieur, and your assurance proves you know it—claims me, through my

own act, to be the butt of your scorn and mockery.”

“If you could see into my heart—”

“It professed to speak once of loyalty to a friend. Hold by your plausible surface, Monsieur. I would not stir those depths, if I were you.”

“Then, Madam, would you leave truth to perish in the mud. My heart is foul, maybe, but there is that to redeem it at the bottom.”

She stirred a little, turning on him.

“Truth, sir! Has it lain buried there since that time when for once it rose to foretell an outrage, which—O, Monsieur! I have not forgotten your words—your last, when you parted from me on—O, indeed, it is possible to accommodate a prophecy—to verify through a confederate a villainy which one has foreshadowed—my God! if *that* is Truth!”

He went as white as stone; he looked as petrified.

“What! Madam,” he said, in a quick, whispering voice; “do you pretend to deem me capable of that baseness?”

He gripped her hand suddenly, so as to make her wince; then flung it from him.

“I scorn you not for your act,” he cried, “but for your cowardice in striving to make me its scapegoat.”

He stepped back in great emotion; and she herself was agitated only a little less. Her young breast rose and fell in hard pantings: the force of her self-control revealed itself in this sudden struggle for breath: and in the end her passion mastered her. She turned a face of lovely fury on him.

“You, Monsieur! the scapegoat?—so wronged and misunderstood?—the poor innocent bearer of other people’s sins? Tell me, are you not that man who came and offered his services—O, God! the slander of that word!—to a soul most wounded in her faith, and therefore, as he thought, most susceptible to the sweet druggings of dishonour? Are you not that man who would have had me break my vows, stultify all that tragedy of renunciation, on the strength of a wicked sophistry? A noble friend to Honour—that man, who, baffled in his devil’s purpose, must revenge himself by instigating another to desecrate the shrine he could not force himself! A friend—”

He put out his hand, and touched her once more—quite gently this time. But there was some quality in the touch the very antithesis of that which had impelled his former violence. The girl faltered under it, and her speech shivered into silence.

“You are mistaken, Madam.” He measured out his words with a soft and

painful accuracy. "If I proposed to commit you to what convention styles dishonour (forgive me for using the word once more) it was in order to save from worse defilement that very shrine at which I worshipped."

She started, and flushed.

"Monsieur!"

"Nay, hear me out," he said, in the same quiet tones. "Even the first of Tabernacles is not soiled in the poor sinner's worship. My heart has always held your image, Madam, the loveliest of its possessions—and not the less because it cherishes a hopeless dream. I would have served that dream loyally for love's sake: I would have given my life and soul to keep it pure. If I thought to persuade it to fly to its natural sanctuary, there was a priority in vows to vindicate my daring. Have you ever considered, Madam, how you broke one oath to love to swear another to dishonour?"

She uttered a little cry—moved a step forward—clasped her hands to her bosom.

"Understand clearly, Madam," he said: "I loved you, and would have yielded you to my friend. I had no alternative, indeed; but that is not to justify your slander of a renunciation, which was at least as holy, according to its lights, as yours. I did not urge your husband to that wickedness. If I hinted to you of its possibility, it was to open your eyes to the truth—to save my dream from a last contamination—to confide it to the shrine the most meet, and the most entitled, to hold it perfect for my adoration. There was no selfishness in that sacrifice. Though it closed the gates of Paradise upon me I was content, so long as the vile thing was shut out with me. I could have heard the singing of your loves within, without a bitter thought. But that you cannot understand. No virtue, in your narrow standard, can exist in worldliness. It must be all one or all the other—vice or sanctity."

She was pale and trembling. She made a little involuntary gesture of her hands, half pleading half deprecating, towards him. He was cold as steel.

"As to this royal crochet of our union," he said quietly—"it turns upon some fancied policy of State, to which I am no partner. I am as innocent of its instigation as of its methods or mistakes. It hinted, a moment ago, that you might be kind to me. I was as incredulous then, as I am convinced now that no tolerance towards sin is possible to your nature. I have worshipped at an exclusive altar, and my faith is construed into a sacrilege. You are insensible, Madam, to the exaltations of a great passion. I do not plead to you: I reject you. Even the weakness of my friend—for he is weak—raises him in my eyes

above your cold, methodic virtue. I do not think you are worthy of him.”

She bowed her head, weeping.

“I know it,” she whispered.

And at that he was disarmed. He stood in great agitation a moment; then burst out suddenly:—

“Madam, Madam, if it is any consolation to you to know, such passion brings a self-redemption. I am not, cannot be the man I was—never again. Spare me that gentle association with yourself—your memory—I’ll persuade the King—Madam, it shall all come right—it—”

His voice broke; he hesitated a minute, struggling with his emotions, then hurriedly left the room.

And Yolande of the white hands hid her face in them, and for long remained shaken with sobs.

CHAPTER VIII

LOUIS-MARIE was really ill, though his complaint, it seemed, baffled diagnosis. He was sunk in an extreme debility, which from a moral had become a physical one. There appeared nothing wrong with him constitutionally; but he dreamt, and saw vampires, and the substance of his eternal illusions figured in “blood-boltered” forms. Nightly they sucked him, and daily his increasing wanness testified to their inhuman appetites. He faded to a frail image of himself, very pitiful in its suggestion of a sick prince of porcelain. Any sudden noise, like the opening of a door, was enough now to make him start and shake with terror. A footstep outside the window vibrated in his nerves for minutes after it had passed. His heart was become a very seismograph to record alarms. But the unexpected entrance of anyone into the room most perturbed him. A furtive aghast look, an artificial rally and instant physical collapse, were the almost certain consequences of such an intrusion. Once, at a chance mention of Bonito’s name, he sunk back in his chair as if under a stroke. Cartouche, who was present and distressfully concerned, attributed his state to a sort of hysterical resentment against that minister of ill-luck, and struggled to overlay some conscious contempt of it with a real anxious commiseration.

“Have you soothed him, reassured him?” he asked of Molly Bramble, when that frail sweet of Nature came down to him to report upon the invalid.

“I have left him asleep,” she said.

He tramped to and fro in the little room, pondering a psychologic problem.

“He fainted when I told him of another loss—a real poignant one that time. Here’s a mere slip of Fortune—a few ducats rolled into the gutter. He’s already recovered more than their equivalent in abstinence. Are these good people so utterly wanting in a sense of proportion?”

“Think what it meant to him, Cherry!”

“And what did it mean, Mollinda?”

“Why, to go a-courting, to be sure, with that in his hand to recommend him.”

“Does he think she needs that form of persuasion? I would not condescend to break *my* heart on such a mistress. He’s no worse off than he was.”

“Well, he mayn’t be. *But how about her?*”

Cartouche stopped, and took the girl’s soft chin in his hand.

“Talk about what you understand, you little village wench,” he said. “You was bred in a cottage, and think in pence. A guinea is your standard of corruption. Noble natures are not bought with gold.”

She did not move: but her eyes, unwinking, filled with tears.

“Thank you for reminding me,” she whispered.

Remorse smote him; but still an angrier, or a worthier, feeling made him stubborn.

“Pish, Mollinda!” he said; “we’ve agreed to compromise there on a better sentiment. That proves you noble too, my girl.”

She looked him fearlessly in the eyes, though her own were like wet forget-me-nots.

“Do you know she’s here—in Turin?” she said.

“No.”

“Well, she is. You needn’t start and let me go. She’s nothing to you.”

“Why should she be? Who told you?”

“He did.”

She gulped, but did not stir.

“Tell me honest,” she said. “Is it for my sake, or for hers, that you’re so anxious all of a sudden to be good?”

He delayed to answer. She gripped him, quickly and fiercely.

“If I knew for certain what I’ve feared,” she cried low, “I’d kiss and cling until you gave me back what I’ve lost—I would, for all it damned us both together.”

She broke from him, and went hurriedly out of the room. Reaching the invalid’s door above, she paused to the sound of a little cry within, hesitated, and entered.

Louis-Marie was sitting up on his bed. His eyes were wide with fever. He greeted her appearance with something like a sob.

“Who is it?” he whispered. “Has he come? My God, don’t keep me in this suspense!”

She hastened to comfort him—the more emotionally; perhaps, because her own heart was very full.

“There’s nobody—indeed there isn’t.”

“I heard voices.”

“It was only ours—Mr Trix’s and mine.”

He sank back, with the sigh of a reprieved soul; but was up again almost immediately, stroking and fondling the girl's hand. His eyes had grown flushed and maudlin out of relief. The sensuous fever of him was uppermost.

"Dear little nurse!" he murmured; "dear kind little Molly! You never fail to frighten the dreams away. I think you could cure me altogether if you would."

She sat on the bed, suffering his caresses, because, as she wilfully told herself, they were lavished on her as another's proxy. Would she could act so indeed, in the manner of those Eastern enchantments of which she had read, and secure that other's compromise without hurt to herself! He was emboldened by her passiveness.

"Molly," he whispered: "if you would only put your face—here, down by mine, on the pillow."

She did not stir. He stole an arm about her.

"We could make it all right afterwards," he said, with a thick little laugh. "If I once had that reason, as I have the power, to mend something I'd done, I think I could face the world like a giant. It's only shadows that upset me. Perfection, I've come to see, was never meant for men. It's better to sin a little, if one does penance for it—better than being a saint. We know that on good authority, Molly, don't we? I'll promise amendment—I will, on my honour—and—and—are you fond of jewels, Molly?"

She slipped from him, and to her feet.

"Are you dreaming still?" she said. "Do you take me for *her*? We don't do these things in our class."

She had had her little revenge, and flushed triumphantly to it. It were supererogation to confess—what he did not know—that she was engaged in these matters to another. But, after all, the creature was a man, and his offence therefore nothing very terrible. Of course, if it had signified treachery to his blood-brother, that were another pair of shoes. But, inasmuch as only the betrayal of his fine lady-love was implied by it—why, the Marchioness di Rocco might very well profit by learning that her supposed pre-eminence in men's hearts was at least open to challenge. A light sentence—as she considered it—was enough to meet this case.

She stood away, panting—a very ruffled little *amourette*, and thrice desirable in those plumes.

"I wouldn't promise on my honour, if I was you, my good gentleman," says she. "'Tisn't much to trust on, when you can speak to me like that, and

you sworn to another. I wonder what she'd think of it all. You'd best go to sleep, and get the better of yourself."

He caught at her, the poor devil, as she was going, all his gauche libertinism snubbed out of him at a breath. The loss of his self-respect was nothing to this sudden realisation of his contemptible immaturity in vice, and of her recognition of it. There is no such crestfallen dog in all the world as your seducer held up to ridicule by his intended victim. He appealed to her abjectly:—

"Don't go—don't! I am so ill. I didn't mean what—what you suppose. My brain is all on fire. He wouldn't allow for that!"

"He? Who?" she demanded, withdrawing from him. He still pursued her with his hands, distraught, half frenzied:—

"You're going to tell him, I know; and he so believes in me. It would be cruel, wicked, to shatter his faith. You ought to think of the demoralising effect on him—and—and I'm not myself, you know that perfectly well. I say and do things I had never thought of once."

"Do you mean Mr Trix?" she said.

"You know I do," he cried. "It would be wicked to tell him!"

She stood conning him gravely a little. There had been no thought of tale-bearing a minute ago in her liberal heart. But now, for the first time, it began to consider that policy, in the light of a possible retaliation on a suspected rival. The "demoralising effect" on *him*, her Cherry, quotha! What, indeed, if she were to try that effect, with the result that it evoked jealousy there, anger, indignation, a declaration of his exclusive and never-foregone property in her, his Molly's, person? It might serve for the very means to dissipate this sad veil of continence which had come to fall between them, and which, only out of the inherent purity of her love, she had agreed to respect. For spiritual relationships, it must be admitted, were water-gruel to this poor Mollinda, and tintured with wormwood at that, when, as in the present case, they carried suspicions of the disinterestedness of the party suggesting them.

Should she go and tell him in truth? No, it wasn't fair to this other fellow, for all the exhibition he had made of himself. But her conscious prettiness was something to blame, no doubt, in that matter; and, after all, he had been guilty of no disloyalty to his friend. Her ethics of the heart were Nature's ethics, founded on a frank recognition of the logic of feminine lures, and the reasonableness of wanting to pluck inviting fruit when one was thirsty. A parched man could not be expected to drink water when wine was going.

Nevertheless, he deserved a measure of punishment, less for his fault than for his mean attempt to escape its consequences. A little suspense, she decided, just a moderate spell on the rack, would do him no harm—might even prove salutary.

“I’ll promise naught,” she said. “It would just amount to my allowing a secret between us; and you aren’t the man for my confidence—no, nor for any part of me. Besides, if you didn’t mean nothing, why should you be afraid? I’ll do as I think fit, and speak or hold as it suits me.”

She whisked away, leaving the adorable fragrance of a dream unfulfilled to clinch the poor creature’s damnation. She did not know, could not know, how thorough that was at this last. She would have been horrified, kind heart, to realise how her balmy breath had blown a smouldering fire into devouring flame; how it had sentenced this victim of “little-ease” to be transferred to the pillory. For indeed in that sorry yoke did she leave Louis-Marie exposed to himself, and, as he thought, to all the world.

There is a form of morbid self-consciousness which is characterised by a perpetual turning inward of the patient’s moral eye. The man subject to it sees—especially during the wakeful hours of the night—his own past deeds and words imbued with a meaning of which they had appeared quite innocent when acted or spoken. He writhes in the memory of mistakes of self-commission or omission, which no one other than himself, probably, is troubling to recall, or is even capable of recalling. What an ass somebody must have thought him under such and such circumstances, is the reflection most distressingly constant to his mind. Nevertheless, while eternally holding himself the irreclaimable fool of untactfulness, he remains to his own appreciation a thing of price, which he himself is for ever giving away for nothing. Modesty is no part of his equipment though he is so sensitively conscious of his own failings. He cannot detach himself from himself, in fact, or, even once in a way, realise comfortably his own insignificance in the serene philosophy of the Cosmos.

So far for his tortured memory of solecisms, real or imaginary, committed by himself. When it comes to the question with him of a genuine conscience-stricken introspection, his reason is in the last danger of overthrow.

Now, Louis-Marie’s was a temperament a little of this order. It was the temperament of a man at once thin-skinned and bigoted, righteous and passionate. It had all the conceit and the sensitiveness of conscious virtue. The fellow could never forget himself, in the abstract sense—believe that

people were not incessantly thinking and talking of him. A morbid diathesis is the inevitable result of such self-centralisation. Acutely sentient, it will learn to inflame to the least thrust of criticism, and to brood eternally over the pointlessness of its own *ripostes*. Then, at last, when it comes to sin, as it is bound some time to do, it will take its lapses with a self-same seriousness as it took its merits. It is always, in its own vanity, a responsible example; people are always regarding it. Its attitude, as a consequence, will become a pose; but by now it is a fair rind hiding a rotting kernel. The devastating grub has entered, and it dare not reveal itself by expelling it. It hugs its disease in secrecy, hoping against hope for some interior process of healing. How can self-centredness heal itself? There comes a day when the last film cracks, and its emptiness stands exposed to the world.

Louis-Marie, abandoned to his reflections, thought that that day had arrived for him. His hollow pretence was on the point of being laid bare; he was to be made the subject of a universal contempt and execration. A moment's temptation had revealed him to himself for the sham thing he was—would reveal him to Gaston—would reveal him, in the certain course of scandal, to Yolande. For ever more now he must be an outcast from social respectability. His life, for all that it was worth, was virtually at an end.

Practically, too, it seemed almost. He fell back on his bed in a death-sickness, and lay there without movement, without conscious thought, for hours.

Cartouche, returning, very quiet and sombre, from his interview with a great lady in the Palace, heard him moaning to himself, as he passed his door, and went softly in. The room was in darkness; only a faint light from the lamps outside fell spectrally across the figure stretched on the bed. He crossed hurriedly to it and bent over.

“What is it, brother? Are you so ill?”

Saint-Péray uttered a little weak cry between terror and rapture.

“Gaston! is it you? I believe I am dying.”

“No, no.”

“I have so waited for you, sinking and struggling to keep above. This load! I can endure it no longer. You are so strong—I seem always to have clung to you—my brother—and you will take some of the burden? Yet how can I ask you! O, my God, my God! to what can I appeal!”

“Why not to my love, Louis?”

“Ah! your love!—there were older claims to it. You don't know—you

know nothing of it all—of what I am and have been—of what I am capable, even, when tempted. Or do you? are your eyes opened a little since—but what does it matter! I will confess everything; I—O, my Yolande! my Yolande!”

“Now hush! and listen—do you attend? I am but this moment come from her.”

“You—O, Gaston! fetch me a priest—I am going!”

“She loves you still—I say, she loves you still. Is not that the best priest—and doctor, too? I will go and fetch *her*.”

The sick man clutched at him frantically.

“And confirm my sentence? You shall not. Though it parts us for ever, I must speak. I could live, I think, if once this load were thrown. Gaston!—”

“I am listening.”

“It was I murdered di Rocco!”

CHAPTER IX

THE burden cast, the released soul ran out and on, babbling, half-delirious, growing in noise and volume, until, flowing to waste, it sunk into the silence of exhaustion.

“I knew—as you all know now—what he intended, and where he was going. I had been informed secretly, and I set out to waylay him. Coming to the point from which he was to cross the glacier, I hid among the stones; and presently I saw him approach. There were great clouds, but a little starlight between—enough to make him sure. On the slope of the moraine a drunken scoundrel, who carried a lantern, veiled till then, rose to greet him. He was the other’s guide and pander—and for whose undoing? O, my God! O, my God, Gaston! Think what it meant—to me! to heaven! and heaven was the coward at the last. It was all for me to do alone—prevent this horror, if I could not persuade it. God sleeps, I think, when the riddles of mortal wickedness get too much for Him: and then He wakes, and chastises weak Nature for its false solutions. It is so easy to say *This must not be*, and ignore the circumstances which will make *this*, and no other, inevitable.

“I saw them meet, I say; and even then I could scarcely believe that upon me, and me alone was thrust God’s responsibility to the maze He had permitted. Yet I had no thought at the first, I swear, but to prevail through gentleness. As I followed them down upon the ice, a prayer was in my heart that, seeing itself discovered and exposed, this sin would come to own itself—would at least deprecate my worst suspicions of it, and, if for policy alone, go the practical way to allay them. I did not know the man—no spark of decency or honour left to leaven his vileness—a liar without shame. How I came upon him is all a dream in my mind. I had pursued the light, now here, now gone, but always rekindling somewhere in front; until in a moment it stopped, and I had overtaken it. He was alone; had just, it seemed, re-lighted the lantern, and was taking breath from the exertion, while it rested near him on the snow. The other had disappeared, and we two stood face to face and alone in the heart of that desolation. I don’t know what I said to him, or he to me—things, on his part, monstrous beyond speaking. His tongue lashed me like a flame—drove me to madness. God should have torn it out; but God

was sleeping. He would scourge me, he said, before he crucified. For he meant to kill me for my daring, and cast my body into a crevasse he pointed out hard by, and whistle up my ghost to follow and witness to his filthy triumph. He was a great man, a great power, a giant of strength and wickedness. But, as he came at me, he slipped, as even a giant may, and I put my knife into his heart.”

The voice, in the dark room, shrilled into a febrile transport; the weak hand was re-playing its ecstatic deed. And the watcher sat without a word or sign, and listened—listened.

“I heard his soul go from him like a hiss of fire—and then the storm burst upon me. It flogged me in a moment into reason; I saw the crevasse stretching at my feet; and I heaved him towards it, and heard him go down. Knife and all he went; and after them I cast the lantern, and then there was nothing more—only my love, my love’s safety, the guerdon of my red hands.

“It was that one thought which saved me, while I cowered and let the storm roll over. Then I returned by the way I had come. I don’t know what guided my footsteps: I knew nothing more until I awoke in my bed to light, and the blast of that mad memory.”

He paused a moment, while his soul seemed to fume on his lips: then burst out once more:—

“A curse upon those who forced the deed upon me—who would have made a wanton of my idol! They are to blame—they are to blame, not I! I struck to keep God’s law immaculate—I was all alone, while He slept; and I struck to vindicate His law. And He awoke, and damned me for my deed—no palm of martyrdom; but torture, the endless torture of a haunted wickedness—agues of sickness and terror—threats, menaces—a guilty conscience. Am I guilty? O, Gaston! where is heaven? ... I lost her that I might save her: her shrine was my heart, and I bloodied it. What she had been to me, not you nor anyone can realise—saint, sweetheart, loveliness—too divine for passion, and too passionate for heaven—God’s earnest to me of immortal raptures. Why, I lived in her—worshipped her. O, my God, my God, Gaston! If she was more to me than heaven, was that a just rebuke to *me* to make *her* foul? ... You all know now, I say, what I knew then. Put yourself in my place—that man—filthy iniquity—no grace of truth or honour—a ruttish beast. O! he was your friend, I know—forgive me—what a friend! I had been stone till then—till it was whispered to me what he designed—stone, with a heart of fire. Perhaps I had built a little on the thought of that year’s respite—a year in which to hold

him at bay while we prayed and prayed for God to intervene. O, a cry to stone!—no hope, no response. When I killed him, I plucked the dagger from my own heart to plunge it into his. Was not that good, even then—to send him to his account, saving his soul those last two mortal sins? Tell me, Gaston, was it not good?”

“It was good and just, Louis—to lose her for ever that you might save her for ever.”

The wild shape on the bed ceased its convulsive transports, while it seemed to meditate the answer. Presently it spoke again, but feebly, as if in a gathering exhaustion:—

“Yes, I have lost her for ever—you mean it, indeed, Gaston?”

“He was her husband, Louis. Will you confess to her? Could she marry you if you did? Could you marry her if you did not? You did right, I say. I take the burden of your conscience as a light one, and commit you to rest.”

“Gaston!”

The poor wretch struggled to express his gratitude and relief. In the midst, his voice trailed into incoherence, and ceased. Cartouche, looking at him, saw that he had topped the crisis and was asleep.

* * * * *

Self-composed, an exquisite *sans reproche*, carrying, sword-like, a sort of sombre blitheness in his speech and mien, the Prefect of Faissigny descended to his duties on the morning succeeding that poignant interview. These were prefigured for him in the shape of a waiting chaise and postillions, bespoke overnight, and attending now in the street outside his windows; and, more intimately, in an early bird of domesticity, who was busying herself with the preparation of some worm-like sticks of bread, and the fastidiously-exacted proportions of a cup of chocolate and coffee. He greeted her with a half-remorseful, half-irritable allusion to her swollen eyes.

“My faith, girl! You look as if you had been fighting in your dreams, and got the worst of it.”

She faced on him bravely.

“And so I have, and so I have—been fighting with my thoughts, and got my punishment. Won’t you kiss them well, Cherry?”

“Put a blister to a blain, child! That would never do.”

She held up her sweet soft lips to him.

“Put it there, then, and show you’ve forgiven me.”

“Forgiven!” he cried cheerfully, and moved away. “I’ve nothing to forgive but a rogue to our compact. Come, bustle, girl, bustle! I must be off.”

She flushed, as if she had been stung; but she obeyed, entreating no more.

“You must go, then?” she said presently—“for real and true, Cherry?”

He shrugged impatiently.

“Haven’t I told you that I’m to receive his keys of office to-morrow from the old Prefect at Le Prieuré, and the *congés* of his staff? *Morituri me salutant*. Shall I be Cæsar and subject to an apron-string? There are rogues waiting to be hung, and conscripts to be plucked and dressed. Be quick, child, be quick, or di Rocco’s murderer may escape me!”

“Cherry!” she cried out aghast—“was he murdered?”

He gave a curious violent laugh.

“The King says so: and the King can speak no lie. Come, I must go.”

She busied herself about his needs and comforts. Once she paused.

“When will you be back?”

“How can I tell!” he answered hurriedly. “What a drag on a restless wheel! There! don’t cry. I shall come again, never fear. I shall—”

He was suddenly ready, and standing fixedly before her, his hat on his head, a heavy cloak over his arm. His voice, his manner, had all at once taken on a tone significant, forceful, imperious.

“I have a thing to say before I go—one last thing. Attend to it well. M. Saint-Péray is asleep this morning. I think he is better now, and will recover. But from this moment the treatment is to be changed—no mending of an idyll any longer; no leading of him that way to hope and sanity. What I set you to do I set you now to undo. The end we once designed has become impossible. Do you understand? *They cannot ever marry now.*”

“Why not?” Her voice was like a death-cry far away.

“She’s not for him, I say. Let that suffice. If he is weak—he may be—be strong for him. He’ll thank you some day. For the rest, bear what I say in mind—they must be kept apart at any price.”

He gazed at her earnestly a minute, pressed her hand, and was gone. She did not follow him to the door. She stood as he had left her, quite silent and motionless. A bee, a whiff of apples were blown in together at the open window. The sing-song of a bell, high up and distant somewhere, rippled in soft throbbings through her brain. A crow cawed in the trees opposite. There was a chair near her, a plain Windsor cottage chair, which Cartouche had bought at a sale to please some whim of hers. She threw herself down at its

feet, and prostrate, as if praying, over the hard wood, fell into a convulsion of crying.

“O, mammy! Come and take your bad girl home to England!”

CHAPTER X

DR BONITO sat isolated at a little table in the self-same *Café* where he and Louis-Marie had once before consorted. The table stood well in the middle of the room, and under an uncompromising glare of candles. Thus, and in public, your wise plotter will station himself for security. It is a mistake to suppose that, because his plans are obscure, he will seek obscure corners for developing them. Panels have ears; and even a tree, however solitary on a plain, may be hollow. Dr Bonito sat, for all his stale and fusty exterior was worth, in the light.

Judged by it, he seemed, indeed, too spare a vessel to contain much worth discussion. He was like one of those little sticks of grassini, all crust. Each of the tiny sips he took from a tiny glass of vermouth at his side suggested the threading of a needle. There was no question of breadth or openness in him anywhere. Shrewd, wintry, caustic, he was just as cold, as sharp and as bowelless as a needle—a thing all point and eye.

The latter, visionless as it appeared, never lost account of the minutes ticking themselves away on a dingy clock on the wall. They were Destiny's forerunners to the doctor, few or many; but he had too much wit to question the delays of Destiny. She had to travel by roundabout roads very often.

And she was pretty punctual on the present occasion, arriving in the person of a small, child-faced gentleman, so pacific in expression, that the cloak and brigand's "slouch" he wore were nothing less than an outrage on credulity. He came up to the isolated table, and claimed its tenant in a voice so little and soft that at a yard distant it might have passed for a purr:—

"Greeting to thee, Spartacus, Provincial of Allobrox!"

Bonito's acknowledgment was in like tone, but surly and between his teeth—half purr, half spit:—

"Greeting, Maître-d'Hôtel-in-Ordinary to King Priam—or, greeting, Caius Sempronius Gracchus, illuminatus minor!—whichever you like best to be called by."

"Can you doubt, master?"

"I give myself no concern about it. Sit down, schoolboy."

The little man obeyed, meek and deferential. Bonito cast a supercilious

look at him.

“You grow sleek on plenty, Maître d’Hôtel. Beware! Do you not see the walls of Cosmopolis rising inch by inch to the clouds? We shall put on the roof in a little, and hang our flag from it. How about your office then? There will be no fat sinecures there for such as you.”

“Master, I desire no greater privilege, now or ever, than that of following your footsteps.”

“A pampered pug; a greasy, royal lick-platter. Look at me—Spartacus, Provincial of Allobrox—to thee, as Jupiter to a call-boy! My footsteps, quotha! Art thou not Apician, pug?”

“No, indeed. My gluttony is all for knowledge.”

“Wouldst be content to dine with me day by day on the liberal air?”

“Ay, assuredly, if I could come by it to thy greatness of vision.”

“Wise Sempronius! How, then, am I great to him?”

“How but in all that he lacks—wisdom, precognition—great in everything.”

“Save in my midriff—as I were a King, great in all possessions but that of a Kingdom.”

“The universe is your scroll: the water is your mirror: the wind is your subject.”

“Yes, I am full of that subject.”

“Your mind can traverse empty space.”

“And does every day, I assure you, thinking on my stomach.”

“To me—little catechumen of our order—you figure for Omnipotence.”

“Alack! and I cannot command a meal. Set all this wisdom against one smoking dish, the scrolls of heaven against a bill of fare, and observe my choice. Beef and ale are the Fates we gods are subject to. You fly too high for us. Why, look you, little man, I am so empty sometimes I could think of insulting a swashbuckler, only that he might force me to swallow my own words.”

“Master, if I might—why will you never let me—?”

“What! Omnipotence stoop to be treated by its scullion!”

“The Pope takes Peter’s pence.”

“The Pope?—swine of Epicurus! No more, Sempronius. At least I’ve learned to walk on air—by so much nearer godhead—go great distances on it too—from Epopt to Regent, from Regent to Magus, from Magus to Areopagite. Nay—let me whisper it—in moments of thrilling venture, even

into the heart of the Greater Mysteries, where, supreme and invisible, I take my throne as lord.”

“What! of us all—General of the Illuminati?”

The little man whispered it awestruck, then twittered into ecstasy.

“And why not, great Spartacus, mage and mastermind? What should keep you from even that stupendous goal?”

“Why, indeed, child, I know of no worse obstacle than my poverty. Nor is that to question the pure altruism of our Creed. But promotion to great offices must necessarily depend on one’s material capacity to support them. Reforms, whether to practical republics or moral communisms, require financing; and the long purse will naturally grudge the first credit for that to the short one. To be supreme lord of self-sacrifice, one must be able to exhibit supremely one’s title to the distinction. If that were to be gained by no more than making nobly free with other people’s money, I should have ten thousand rivals to dispute my right to the pre-eminence. And justly. It’s reason, I say, and I don’t complain. Still, the time may come—”

“It must, master; it shall.”

Bonito pondered, with some indulgent condescension, the other’s mild, fanatic face. The creature was but a “minerval”—an Illuminatus, that is to say, having his foot on the lowest rung of that ladder on which he himself stood relatively exalted. But it is pleasant to be apotheosised, even by an insignificant groundling; and the pleasure, though to a philosopher, may lose nothing from the fact of that groundling’s social superiority. For, indeed, if Caius Sempronius Gracchus was not the rose, he could say, with Benjamin Constant, he lived near it. He was a house-steward in the royal palace, in fact, and, as such, a useful humble auxiliary to these forces of anti-monarchical transcendentalism, whose policy it was to titillate the ears of their neophytes with a jargon of classical pseudonyms, and, by endowing mediocrity with resounding titles, to stimulate it to a fervid emulation of its prototypes. Caius Sempronius Gracchus, an enthusiastic, well-meaning little rantipole, could conceive for himself no more flattering destiny than to be some time Tribune under this omniscient Praetor in the coming Cosmopolis. He lived for ever, for all his little albuminous brain was worth, in that cloudy castle. And Bonito found him useful.

This strange man, indeed—who let himself be supposed of the Rosicrucians, a discredited sect, merely to cover his connection with the later and much more formidable Society of the Illuminati—desired wealth only as

a means to his personal advancement in his own mysterious Order. All his plans were directed to that end and to none other. Money, for its own sake, he despised; but money alone could direct his line of curvature towards the heart, the holy of holies, of that great centrifugal force, which, under the name of Illuminati, or the Enlightened, was destined—in its own conception, at least—to revolutionise the political systems of the world.

And what was that heart? And why did its attainment figure so covetable to this close-locked, thin-blooded misanthrope? It represented to him, one must suppose, an ideal of power to which no existing autocracy could afford a parallel—a power to be likened only to the sun of one of those starry systems which his brain had warped itself in considering—a power, the focus of countless satellites humming harmonious worship about it in revolving belts of light—a power, in short, which was vested, solely and indivisibly, so far as mundane affairs were concerned, in the person of the GENERAL of all the Illuminati.

Well, as to this General, this veiled prophet, “old nominis umbra,” mystic, unapproachable. A plain word in season, as to him and his system, must suffice for an irreverent generation. He was a stupendous mystery to his creatures; and was designed to be. Like an unspeakable spider, he commanded, from their middle point of contact, the radiations, with all their concentric rings, of a vast web of political intrigue, every touch on which was communicated to, and answered by, him automatically. He was elected, in the first instance, from amongst themselves, by a council of twelve, called the Areopagites. These were the virtually absolute, analogous to the Roman Decemviri. Thence, in successive gradation, extended the inferior orders: the national directors, each, also, entitled to his council of twelve; the provincials, or magistrates of provinces, having their courts of regents; and the deans of the Academies of priests, or epopts, who were seers and stargazers to a man. Beyond these, the Mysteries diffused themselves by way of the Chevalier ecossais, or first initiate, to the noviciates of illuminatus dirigens, illuminatus major and illuminatus minor, until they touched limit in the simple proselyte or freshman, of whom is a boundless credulity in the forces of secrecy.

That was exacted of him, as were also an unquestioning obedience and inviolable devotion to the mandates of his order—blind faith, in fact. He took an absurd name, foreswore his will, and mastered the calendar of the brotherhood—if he was wise enough. Great folly, to be sure, but folly is

wisdom's catpaw. The gods know the value of gilding a fool's eyes. These Asphandars and Pharavardins, these pseudonyms and Allobroxes (which last, by the way, meant the Province of Faissigny), were only so much harlequin tinsel irradiating the body of a stern purpose. Behind all the glittering foppery was existent a very resolute and far-reaching design—one no less than the universal decentralisation of governments, and the qualification of the world-citizen. It was no small ambition, perhaps, that of aspiring to the generalship of the Illuminati.

And, if Fortune had fooled Dr Bonito by a quibble, money still remained to him the sovereign test of truth. The stars had read him his destiny, for all that that earthly goddess, being earthy, had delighted to falsify their calculations. It was her way. It was his to trust a higher ruling, and to have faith in its verification by the way the stars had pointed. Money, money! by whatever means he must obtain it. His present interview was only a step in that direction.

"Well, well," he said, "the future's in the womb of Destiny. Enough, Sempronius—say no more; but deliver your report. We treat of Paris and of Helen in the Court of Priam."

The other looked cautiously about him before he answered,—

"She'll not have Paris, master: she has refused him."

"What!"

"Yes, yes—the King despite; and out of favour, by the token—she and her father—and retired to her own villa in the Via della Zecca, while Paris has taken his outraged heart to Allobrox, there to vent its dudgeon in our suppression."

"We'll see to that. A fine Prefect! Worthy of such a Priam! But, for the other—she has not refused him, I say."

"She has, indeed."

"Yet he proposed for her?"

"That's certain."

"And enough for me. Acute Sempronius, thou little wise and worming man! We'll have thee on the Council some day. Now, go; I have my cue. Refused him, has she? Well, he'll be gone indefinitely—and time to act. *Vale*, Sempronius!"

CHAPTER XI

MOLLY BRAMBLE was, and had always been, within the pale of her social limitations, a perfectly good girl, sweet, modest and wholesome. Child of a class rather prone, in its maternal admonitions, to awaken a precocious curiosity as to the signs and indications which distinguish the bad male fruit from the good, to put its virgins on their guard against suggestion by suggesting, she was even a little remarkable for her artless pudency. As maid and milkmaid she had invited no offence, guarded her bosom from so little as a sun-ray's wanton kissing, cherished her sweet honour, jealously but simply, within the bounds her state prescribed.

But she had had no arts to negotiate it beyond these, and, when the ordeal came, and she heard it called a lovely superstition by lips adorable in seduction, her innocence must yield it, for the archaism it was pronounced, to that bright masterful intelligence.

It had all dated, alas! from a village wedding—or alas or not alas—she had never thought to give *it* a sigh till now. Zephyr the god, coming over the hill, had taken Chloris unawares amongst her flowers; and the way of a god was not woman's guilt, but joy. Shame could not come to blossom from that divine condescension. For its sake, she had even stiffened to something of a precisian in questions of maidenly decorum.

And now? The sigh, wafted from that distant scene, had overtaken her at last. Those weddings, those weddings! Chaste procurers to the unchaste. How men took advantage—of their feasts and dancings, of beating pulses and warm proximities, of the sense of neighbouring consummations—to plead the dispensations of the hour! Recalling that plea, her god seemed all at once to reveal himself a mortal thing, and subject to the mortal laws of change. She felt no longer secure in him through her own unchanging faith. Her faith was shaken.

The glory of the morning fields; blown blue skies and the squirt of milk into pails; the cosy sweetness of ricks; pigeons, and the click of pattens on dewy tiles; a voice singing, far away in the sunny window of a dairy,

“All the tears Saint Swithin can cry,
Saint Bartlemey's mantle shall wipe 'em dry”—

such memories had but figured hitherto for the dim background, sweet and a little pathetic, to a more poignant pastoral. Now, all of a sudden, they were the commanding poignancy, infinitely haunting, infinitely remote, and for ever and ever, as realities, irrecoverable. Was all St Bartlemey's mantle equal to drying the well of tears which she felt gathering in her soul? The darkness of a great apprehension was on her—a spectre, formless but menacing, in the thrall of whose shadow she saw herself separated by a lifeless dumb abyss from her living past. How had she crossed it unknowing, that deadly gulf? There had seemed to her no break in the continuity of past and present; until, lo! in an instant her eyes had been opened, and she knew herself for a derelict in a desert, crying to a fading mirage.

What had happened, so to blind her eyes, obliterate space, cancel all time? A consciousness of guilt, the very first, stole in to answer. Love, whom she had scorned, had betrayed her—had led her on, revenging that slight, to the very threshold of a brothel, and there abandoned her.

And his *protégé*, for whom he had done this thing? A chawbacon gallant, the very antipodes of the other—but then Love was born in Arcady, and favours a rustic wooer. Poor Reuben's homely image rose before her—heroic hobnails, sentiment in a smock, but honest and clear-seeing within the limits of his vision. Reuben had *seen*, and dared to expostulate—and been smartly caned by Cartouche for his presumption. And Reuben had blubbered—that was fatal. A crying man is always contemptible. Yet in what other way, their relative ranks considered, could he have answered to those flips of Fate? Privilege, in these days, kept the stocks and gallows up its sleeve for the correcting of any such ebullitions on the part of a mutinous commonalty. The odds were disproportionate, and Reuben could only express his sense of that in tears.

Poor Reuben! what had become of him? Cured his harrowed heart, belike, with dressing of Joan or Betty. She wished she knew—could reclaim herself to the past with even that much of certain knowledge, and comfort. How he must hate her memory! She felt very deserted and forlorn.

And all about what? Ask love, when in its nerves it feels the first faint false harmonic jar within a perfect song; forehears the strife of notes which that one cracked seed of discord must come to germinate. Sure ear; sure prophecy; sure sorrow. The sound of M. Saint-Péray's first footfall on her threshold had been that fatal dissonance to Molly. Somehow, by some sad and mystic intuition, she had felt her hymn of happy days a broken sequence

from that moment.

Now, left alone with him, the unconscious ruiner of her peace, she felt she could have endured better to nurse a declared enemy than this nerveless, ballastless ally and patient, whose very infirmity of purpose was her bane. Realising the poor emotional thing he was, how weak in self-control, she could have loathed her task enough without this sudden embargo laid on her prescribed methods. No longer to reassure his indecision—rather to confirm it? Why, that very task of comforting his faint spirit, bidding it on to hope, had been her own one reassurance in a world of doubts! And now—?

O, heart! O, heart! What did this change of policy portend? What had happened to make it so imperative all at once? She could think of no answer but one; and that way madness lay.

Ah! her lord, her gentleman! She knew him well enough to know she knew him not at all. His passions were—had been—for her: his confidences were always for himself alone. Blind obedience was what he had exacted of her, and with blinded eyes she had let him lead her, even across that abyss. She would never learn from him. He loved in parables.

O! Why had this stranger ever come between them, with his sighs and moans and irresolution? It was that same irresolution which was the crux of all. What woman could tolerate a diffident lover—and in the face of a masterful one! She, for her part, would grant how alluring by contrast must appear this puissant rival, Cartouche, her own pretty gentleman—if rival he were. Her whole soul rose aghast to combat the thought; yet, if he were not so indeed, what was his interest in ousting this other from the lists?

“The end we designed has become impossible. They cannot ever marry now. SHE’S NOT FOR HIM. They must be kept apart at any price.”

These positive admonitions scorched her brain: day and night, sleeping and waking they beat fiercely through it. What had M. Saint-Péray done to forfeit his right? Was *she* to serve as catspaw to those others’ loves, and lay a troublesome rival? A treachery beyond conceiving. *“If he’s weak, be strong for him. He’ll thank you some day.”* Thank her? *her* the reward, perhaps, to irresolution for a claim foregone! Had Gaston heard of that scene between them, and chosen, for his own ends, to construe it into infidelity to himself? She could not believe him so credulous or so base, nor fortune so inhuman.

But her poor mad mind dwelt upon the monstrous thought—wrought itself into a frenzy over it—piled fuel on its fuel, in and out of reason. What if it were justified? No disobedience could be too great to counter such a crime!

She had been good, good, good—good, and faithful, and self-obliterating—how utterly she herself had never realised, until these visions of her past had risen to renounce her. What had she not sacrificed for him—home—honour—that dear untroubled land of innocence! had made herself an outcast for his sake. And so to be dealt the fate of the heartless, self-qualified wanton! “O, mammy! mammy!” she wept again, rocking and moaning.

But a fiercer thought rose to dry her tears. This other—this woman—this white witch who had come between her love and her! She had not forgotten a word of his description—no, nor the unspoken words, that eloquence of silence which fills the gaps of speech. Eyes will betray what tongue conceals. She’d seen his look beyond her at some vision; she—

O, how she hated her, hated her! A lily? Well, there were lilies and lilies. The scent of some grew rank at close quarters. Sweet and pure of heart? Sweet candour, indeed, to own oneself an apostate from the faith one’s heart had sworn to—and for a fortune’s sake! Scruples, forsooth? They were the opportunity of the unscrupulous. She’d betrayed her love once: why not a second time?

Love’s an elemental passion in poor Mollindas—no *finesse*, no pose, no self-consciousness about it. They come from near the soil, and follow Nature’s instincts. A mate’s a mate to them; their season is a lifetime. There’s no cuckold in Nature, nor any room for one. Once pledged, the dear doe animal but knows her lord, and holds herself meekly at his pleasure. He may be polygamous; she is never polyandrous: to conceive his condoning, even encouraging, such an offence in her would be monstrous.

Cartouche was no Joseph to his poor Thais. She did not expect him to be. She expected only his recognition of her eternal bond to him. The thought, justified or not, that he was seeking to repudiate his sole title to her, smote her like a madness. The thing was abnormal, horrible, beyond reason. Yet it struck and bit into her brain. Out of it, its torture and its haunting, this meek and pretty song-bird threatened to grow a harpy.

Louis-Marie, lying exhausted on his bed, like one lately released from some rending possession by devils—accepting with shamefaced gratitude the gentle ministrations of his nurse—never guessed how mechanic had grown the touch which soothed his pillows; what bitter scorn of him was expressed in the averted glances of those Saxon blue eyes. For indeed Molly could hardly look at him with safety to her patient reason. *This* the thing destined to her love’s succession! She felt like one, fairy-struck, who has gone to sleep

under a hay-cock, and wakes to find herself in a strange place, the sport of goblin company. Where had her lines fallen! she thought amazed, the sleep, as it were, yet in her eyes—among what poor counterfeits of manhood? Her lines? She had no lines. There was the woeful thing—the lack of the talisman, wilfully foregone, which would have rendered these wiles innocuous.

Reuben had howled when whipped, like a too-forward hound lashed to heel—a natural cry of pain. But his boldness it was that had brought him his chastisement. He would have been at the throat of his mistress's enemy; and his grief had been that his mistress disowned him. Had she once given his stubborn constancy (a pathetic quality she was now for the first time appreciating at its value) the right to protect her, she believed fully he would have answered, hard and ugly, in confidence of the law, the outrage to *his* honour. His tears? Tears shed by an honest lad, helpless and writhing under the heel of tyranny triumphant. What pure water they had been compared with the hysteric weepings of this saintly milksop—of these amateur heroics—of this tragedy, to her protestant mind, of a deposed churchwarden!

And so her thoughts recoiled as if from a sudden adder. What was Reuben to her, any more than was this other—a dull, thick-witted clown? To resent his just whipping? Strike back? Hurt her dear lord? "O, Cherry, Cherry! I never meant it! *Him* to presume and dare! You were merciful not to kill him."

Ah! her own love—her dark young tyrant. "Come back to me, Cherry! Give up the bad white witch! My heart is bursting in its wild great longing!"

Yet, while she hated to look on Louis-Marie, one aspect of him could not but hold her curious observation. "He's better: I think he will recover." Those had been her master's words. Recover? from this death-blow to his hopes? Take on new lease of life from the withdrawal of what had served for that life's one frail support? Yet, it appeared, Cartouche had judged aright. The invalid grew better from that day—more calm, more self-possessed; had ceased to chafe and writhe. What did it mean, if not again that she was offered, the potential salve to a damaged conscience?

A hectic convalescence only, could she but have known it. The wound was there, and angry; only the festering fragment, which had made its intolerable fret, had been withdrawn. Ease had come with confession, and hope from the strong scornful self-assurance of the confessor. It was the interval marking the sevenfold rally of the exorcised demon; but, while it obtained, Louis-Marie knew almost the exaltation of a saint uplifted by a consciousness of heroic self-sacrifice.

Yet pallid throes would take him in the night. Gaston was fearless, Gaston was bold-seeing; but was Gaston quite the man to resolve nice ethical problems? Would Yolande (lost to him: he told himself so, lingering on guilty dreams of her) accept the ruling of such a spiritual director?

The thought was father of many—a week-knee'd generation. He would never dare to put her to that test—not for his own sake; not for hers. For her sake, indeed, to keep sacred her mind's peace, he would be content for ever to bear his burden solitary. An idle resolve, since she was lost to him. Lost, of course—but what if God should hold that self-conscious burden atonement enough? Superfluous macerations were not holy, but distasteful to heaven. Was it not his duty, rather, to give himself to restore her faith in heaven's dispensations? Likely enough she had come to think herself unworthy of him—of him, Louis, who had stood for her belief in Providence. Did he not owe it to her, to God, at the cost of whatever self-renunciation, to reassure her in the ways of faith? Her faith might decline on heterodoxy otherwise.

He had so relieved his own conscience, with the shifting of its burden into that stronger grasp, as almost to have lured himself into the belief that not he, but Gaston, was the one responsible to its past. It needed however but the rematerialising of a certain spectre, grown hazy for a little in that charmed atmosphere of casuistry, to bring about in him a sharp and instant relapse.

One day he was sitting in his room, listening, with shut eyes and drowsy relish, to the voice of one of the two little *cameristas* who comprised the signorina's *ménage*, and who would delight to come and read to him when invited. These were quite excellent little abigails, decorous as Molly could wish; with a taste for the lives of the Saints (male, if possible), and a devotion, of course, for Louis-Marie. He was always a lovely sentiment to such, with his angelic colouring, his piety, his gentle courtesy of manner towards the least of his inferiors. Each of these (pinks of morality within the recognised Italian conventions) adored him, and was never so happy as when bidden up to amuse her paragon with passages from his favourite anecdotes of the Saints.

And thus read Fiorentina, in her shrewd small chaunt:—

“St Pol de Leon took a fancy to travel, and walked over the sea one fine morning to the Isle of Batz. The governor of which, one de Guythure, greatly coveting a silver Mass bell belonging to the King of England, St Pol commandeth a fish of the sea to swallow and bring it thence to him. Which the fish hasting to accomplish, the bell itself on its arrival is found gifted with

a miraculous power to heal, even in some cases more potent than the Saint's own. Whereby St Pol is shown to be of less account than a little silver bell. And thereat he boweth himself to God's rebuke, witnessing how that sanctity, no less than worldliness, shall be caused by Him to over-reach itself in any unjust employment of its privileges."

She stopped—the book dropped into her lap—"Monsignore!" she whispered, appalled.

The invalid was leaning forward, his face livid, his hands grasping the arms of his chair. In the silence which ensued, a voice, a step in the room below, made themselves distinctly audible.

"Bonito!" he gasped; and fell back as if dying.

She flew to him, raised his head, petted and consoled him, feeling the ecstasy of her opportunity.

"There, weep with me, sweet saint!" she said; and indeed, in a little, his tears were mingling themselves with hers. Even this homely heart could compel his soft response. She thought the story was to blame.

"There, there!" she said, as if to a child; "if it has made a mistake in anything, God will forgive it."

But he could hear nothing else than the voice beneath his feet. Inarticulate as it reached him, its tones, slow whispering on his brain, seemed measuring out its madness tap by tap.

Bon—ito!—It—was—Bon—ito—come—at—last!

It was Bonito, true enough; yet, for all the purposes of intrigue, not quite the crude diplomatist a guilty conscience pictured him. He had come, in fact, to condole the English signorina on her threatened estate—come, it seemed, like a suitor, with an offer in his hand, and a flower in his rusty buttonhole. His shoes were tied; his looks commiserating and sympathetic as he could transform them. He was to play a deep part, this old ape of mystics; and Molly was his destined catspaw. Descending from that scene above, we find him already well launched upon his course.

He sits, watchful and guarded. She stands before him, one hand to her storming breast, the other leaned for support upon a chair-back.

"Say it again," she whispered. "Perhaps I didn't hear aright."

Bonito licked his lips.

"He's a suitor for her hand."

She started, as if stung.

“But not an accepted one?”

He rubbed his gritty chin thoughtfully.

“They say he was rebuffed. What then? You women will claim that privilege—once or twice. Persistence, by report, will always carry ye. Perhaps you know. He’s a forceful suitor. You’d do well, by my advice, to forestall the inevitable—drop the old shadow for the new substance.”

She did not answer. He affected to draw encouragement from her silence.

“Think what it may mean to you, if you refuse. A second lease of protection is not like the first. Disillusioned faith’s a half-hearted mistress. Your term will be short—and again will be shorter—until—”

“You damned old dog!”

She made as if to strike him. He sat quite unmoved.

“A prophet in one’s own country,” he said coolly: “I daresay you’ve heard the adage. You’d reject the unpalatable—keep respectable in spite of me. Try it, that’s all—cast upon the mercies of Turin, good Lord! And what do I offer you in place? To be my confederate in divination—chaste Sybilline—sacred through your calling—we’d make a fortune between us in a year.”

She hardly seemed to hear, muttering:—

“Can it be true she’s so heartless—so forgetful—and him sickening to the death for her!”

He pricked alert.

“Him? Who?” he asked low, as if responding to a confidence.

“Who?” she repeated, staring before her—“why, him upstairs—Saint-Péray.”

He rose to his feet suddenly; seized her wrist. Her eyes fastened on him; but he knew his mastery.

“You fool!” he said. “Why don’t you go and tell her so—tell her that he lies here, in the house of Cartouche’s mistress, dying for love of her? Why, if I’d known—the man who lent me money in a crisis—I’d die to serve him. And that other—a dog to treat you so! I’ve no love for him—I own it—and here’s a score paid off. Go at once—while the old glamour lasts—before he’s time to return and urge his suit. You’ll find her in her house in the Zecca—Di Rocco’s. I’ll—”

She threw him off violently. He pretended a furious anger—snatched up his hat—made for the door.

“Rot in your folly!” he roared. “I’ve said my last to you!” and so raged away—confident of the fruit the seed he’d sown should come to bear.

The dusk was falling. In the shadowy room the girl lay flung, face downwards on a chair. To her, palpitating, sobbing, wringing her plump hands, entered Fiorentina.

“O, mistress! What have happened? What have he done to ye? And him upstairs, ever since he heard his voice, crying on ‘Yolande! Yolande!’ to come and save him from a great spider that have got him in its web.”

The other came to her feet, gasping, driving back the tumbled hair from her temples.

“Tell him,” she said, “that if she’s human, he shall have her. Tell him that I’m going this moment to fetch her to him.”

She broke off, catching her breath into a whisper:—

“No, tell him nothing. I’ll bring my own message.”

CHAPTER XII

IF the Chevalier de France was destined a second time to suffer humiliation through his daughter's perversity, that daughter herself was spared the social ostracism which would surely have overtaken one less admired in the shadow of the King's displeasure. The out-of-favour minister, despoiled of his official nimbus, had to borrow what satisfaction he could from the collateral distinction conferred upon him through his relationship with so exquisite and *precious* a creature. That was a very bitter mortification to so arrogant a man; though, to be sure, his exaltation in the first instance had hardly owed itself to his personal merits—a fact which he had no excuse but an impenetrable vanity for overlooking. For the bestowal of the portfolio, it had been plainly intimated to him, was conditional on his leaving his majesty a perfectly free hand to dispose of that of the Marchesa; nor had he been ignorant, even at the first, of the name and reputation of the royal nominee.

But his pride was the haughtiest of casuists in all matters touching itself. The end it sought—that is to say the re-investiture of de France, the ancient house, in its former power and possessions—must be held not only to justify, but to glorify, the meanest means to it. Any step, if in that direction, was a step sanctified of its purpose to him, though to take it, he must tread on the mouth of human nature. “Evil, be thou my good!” might have stood for his motto.

And now, to owe what respect it remained to him to command to the affluent graces of the child whose mutinous conduct had deposed him from the leading position! It was intolerable—it was monstrous. His sense of personal wrong stung him to a protest, which, if he could but have comprehended, was the very worst he could have made in his own interests. But vanity is blind.

And that same rebellious child—child, indeed, in her young body's immaturity, in her tragic innocence, in the sweet flower of her face, whose blossoming conveyed such dreams of fruitage—woman, only, in the independence which her heart had wrung from sorrow—what had been her sin? Why, that she had persisted in holding honour something higher than its vestments.

And so de France was tolerated, his fall condoned, for Yolande's sake. She was the hallowed toast of Turin in these days—its nymph-angel—passe-rose—its Dorothea, symbolising paradise in her cheeks. Who would not be a recusant advocate to win one flower from that nosegay of pinks? The story was about. She had refused to sacrifice to the heathen gods, and the King had decreed therefore her social racking. The King! A King of powder and patches. Perish his decrees! Perish also our dear Cartouche, to a babble of lampoons and pasquinades! The pretty mongrel had done sensibly to put his tail between his legs and run away.

Then were withers wrung, heads broken, duels fought about Golden Danae in these weeks of her brief reign. She knew nothing of it all, thanks to her sad self-absorption as much as to her innocence. Torn by women's tongues, wounded by gallants' swords, her reputation gave her no concern save for the wounds herself had caused it. She had no faith, could never have, but one. And she had abused it. Her state, her wealth, her very fairness, poor trappings of her shame—she wore them all as a sinner wears the outward garb of penitence. Sheet and candle they were to her, for token of her public penance. To her the whispering inquisition of the crowds she moved amidst were articulate in nothing but rebuke. Its notes of admiration and of compliment were addressed to deaf ears. She looked kind looks from inward-dreaming eyes; spoke gentle mechanic words of kindness out of a constant instinct; but her sweet body was always like a lonely haunted tenement, shut to the world. Its spirit dwelt for ever away, in a place of solemn crags and shadows.

Waiting, waiting—and for what? That was the tragedy of it all—the hopeless hungering for the fruition of a thing unfructified. When she died, surely this poor ghost of her would become a tradition of the Montverd—a shadow on a rock, a darkness that no sun could dissipate, listening, listening always for the footfall that never came.

“How beautiful are the feet of the peace-givers!” O, Louis, Louis! if thou couldst only be heard coming up the hill to comfort this torn heart with a word of forgiveness! His face rose for ever before her, holy, righteous, denunciatory. Too pure and pious a thing he to presume on God's prerogatives, or not to hold himself from contact with this sin by whom his faith had been contaminated. A dreadful thought—of all wild thoughts the most despairing; that maybe she had darkened this same faith in him; driven him to take the name of God in vain. If only he would deign one word to reassure her as to that! She could be content thereafter, she thought, to go

down into loveless oblivion. Unworthy of him; thrice unworthy in that her mutinous heart had once conceived a dream of him grown masterful out of wrong. That would not have been her Louis, whose ways were always strong in meekness. So waiting—always fruitlessly waiting in spirit on the Montverd, her eyes would seek the unconquered peaks, her ears address themselves to the eternal silence of the valleys—listening for the footstep. It could never, never sound—and yet she listened. That was to be her punishment—endless listening; until, perhaps, she faded into the ghost of dead love's echo.

Yet moments of passion, when the human nature in her rebelled against the intolerable cruelty of it all, were not unknown to her. Then she would dare to think of him as something other than a saint—her chosen, her dear heart's lord, whom wicked sophistries had cast from his right part of fulfilling the woman in her. Then she would cry to herself that she was virgin still—in all but her desecration by a foul convention; was even a thing could be held worshipful by scruples less exacting. It was in these moods, by some moral process (obliquity she thought it, when they had passed), that the figure of Cartouche would rise before her as she had encountered it on the hillside.

Why should it intrude itself upon that thought of a less exacting worship? Answer, her heart's alarm, answering to a look, a breath, the first shadow of a truth. Or answer, truth itself. She knew she had conquered where she loathed to conquer.

Such things must be, and be endured, because they cannot be cured, even in the tiny wound of self-consciousness they inflict, and which will continue to irritate, occasionally, when analogies are in the air. Thus, during these moods, the thought would come—and be hated, duly, for its persecution—that there might even be certain qualities in wickedness worth virtue's acquiring—independence, resolution, force of character, to wit. Not that, for that, she held herself the less insulted in a base regard. But the thought would recur.

And then there came the day when, pale, suffering, reproachful as she fancied it, the face of her love stood out between her and a tumultuous crowd; and in that sorrowful vision all other visions were instantly absorbed and lost.

The shock of it, patent in her stunned manner, had affected anyone less self-centred than the Chevalier. He thought she was frightened by the surge of things, and lent his high arrogance to reassure her. She hardly heard or saw him. *He* was in Turin.

From that moment the desire for the footsteps grew intense. She had hoped, or had told herself she hoped, that he had forgotten her; and, lo! in every line printed on that lonely face she recognised the indelible scoring of her sin. He loved her still, and by every token of his love, stood forth a conscious shame.

She was in deep waters then, and cried to heaven to save her.

It answered with the offer of Cartouche's hand.

We know how that suit sped. But it bore some fruit of tenderness towards a hopeless passion—as how could Yolande be woman and not feel it? And it brought more—a recrudescence in her of those thoughts which touched on the comparative qualities of good and evil. This man—he must have the seed of virtue in him, so to have promised self-redemption by way of a bitter loss. That was strength. Perhaps he had had his excuses, after all. She prayed for him—prayed heaven, moreover, to accredit her with her share in his reformation. He was her Louis's friend—had spoken probably in ignorance of his friend's presence in the city. And he had promised her—

What had he promised? O, love! thou crown and symbol to all time of specious egotism! He had promised, on the virtue of that very suffering she had caused in him, that it should all come right. His strength was in the phrase—the strength of ungodliness; and—she built upon it. While she abhorred his character—had not scrupled to insult and misread it to the vilest conclusions—she built upon its characteristic qualities. Built? What? No consciousness of any building in her, she would have declared. But—“*It will all come right!*” Nay, had it not been, “*It shall all come right?*”? O! how she sighed over her own impotence to stem the masterfulness of these sinful wills! Was she for ever to be their helpless shuttlecock? No hope for her but the cloister.

So, she and Louis-Marie, saintly casuists turning to face one another across a tragic interval, pictured Cartouche, the friend, the lover, for the scapegoat of their love's reparations. Some men *would* make burnt-offerings of themselves. It was not for them, ingenuous in the ways of worldliness, to question the methods of their atonement.

One night she, this dear casuist, had driven home (ah! the bitter irony of the word!) to the Via della Zecca with her father. Great clouds sagged from the sky, bellied over the house-roofs, swelling to their delivery of fire. Moans of their enormous labour shook the air, jarring on one's teeth like glass—a night of heavy omen. Its spirit drove with them, menacing and oppressive.

The Chevalier himself was a thunder-cloud, swollen with sense of injury. He scowled silent in his corner.

They had been at the Italian Comedy (to see *The Representation of a Damned [female] Soul*, and the audience pull off their hats, literally, to St John for his handsome conduct of her case), and thence had driven to a *Conversazione* at the house of the British envoy to the Court of Turin—whence these tears.

The Casa di Rocco reached, the Chevalier alighted, as was his custom, first; but, seeming to remember himself, bowed apart while the mistress of the house descended, and entered the portal. She flushed, but made no comment; and he followed in her footsteps, furious now to vent his chagrin on the least menial slight to his importance. He was very handsomely dressed, and appeared to assume, by every pomp of circumstance, the right of the mastership of the household.

The two were ushered into the *salon*, a room ablaze with tapers, and there left to their august disputations. The tempest threatened very near—vibrated in the windows like the pedal-stops of a vast organ.

There was wine on a table. The Chevalier, offering to pour himself out a glass with a white, not very steady hand, refrained, and looked towards his daughter.

“Have I your permission, madam?” he said. “My natural fatigue must not let me forget that I am a pensioner on your bounty.”

She fanned herself quietly. There was a light in her patient eyes, but he was blind to the warning sign.

“What have I done to deserve this?” she asked softly.

His self-control was a bubble. He dashed the decanter down on the table, and advanced a little towards her, quivering with mortified anger.

“You ask me that?” he said. “Whence have we come this moment? From what circumstances of slight and humiliation to the parent, whose devotion to his child has procured him a return which should make her blush for her ingratitude.”

She was still very quiet. I think she was at length awakening to the irreclaimable selfishness of the man before her; but her disillusionment fought against the last bitter concession to itself. For pity and poor heart’s sake she must struggle still to temporise—not to let go her final hold on duty. She forced a little painful smile; but her honesty would allow nothing to subterfuge.

"If you allude," she said, "to his Excellency the envoy's attentions to myself, I beg you to bear in mind, father, that I was taught a little English by my *gouvernante*, and that doubtless the poor man courted the sound of his native language, though on such imperfect lips."

He smote fist into palm.

"Am I a child to be quieted with equivoque? I speak not of his attentions to you, but of the contempt for myself which they were designed to emphasise."

"O, no, father! Indeed I am sure you are mistaken."

Then the storm broke. Its pressure within him had rushed to relief by any outlet, even a pin-prick.

"And which you tacitly condoned," he screamed. "Have I carried my honour, sensitive to a breath, a hint, a thing high and exclusive, untarnished through all these cursed years of adversity, and not to know when it is impugned? But you will be blind because you desire it—because your personal scruples—sha! are against a paltry sacrifice which would help to reinstate your father in the position which is his by right, and from which he could rise to recover something at least of the ancient influence of his house. No daughter of that or of mine—I say it before God. I am in the mood, I think, to curse you."

She had risen to her feet, ghastly white, but with something born, and in a flash, into her expression which had never been there before.

"I think, if you did," she said, "the curse would be let recoil on a shameful head."

He uttered a terrible exclamation; but she silenced him.

"You talk of your honour. What is man's honour to a maid's? Yet, for your honour's sake, you could sell mine—a father sell his child's! Once you did it, and I was obedient, though it broke my heart."

"I will not listen," he raged.

"You shall listen," she answered. "I could have borne to suffer and be silent—that first irremediable wrong. I believed your honour pledged, and I gave myself to redeem it—you know under what persuasion. But now—having once sold me—me, your child—to dishonour for your honour's sake—to think to trade upon my forfeited self-respect, as if myself, not you, were answerable for it!—to build yourself a name on mine so fallen!—O, shame, shame, my father!"

She quite overawed him. He had evoked the spirit of his house in her to startling effect. He had no answer but oaths and hysteria.

“Woman!” he shrieked.

“I am sixteen,” she said. “You call me as you have made me—is it to my reproach or to yours? But, if I am woman, in her sad name I claim her saddest rights—freedom through martyrdom. I will be independent; I will be mistress of my soul; I will not hold myself a convicted wanton at your honour’s bidding. This man you offer me—this man whom you would bid to cast down my body for a stepping-stone to your own ambition—do you know what he is, has been—his life, his reputation?”

He was silent, but only because his rage grew inarticulate.

“I am not so hardened,” she went on, “but that I can shrink and shudder in the shadow of such a name. *He* to be worthy of me—*me!*—O, father!” (She wavered for one instant.) “Have I not been willing, eager, that you should take everything of mine—everything, everything—only not this one poor possession that I cannot part with, and remain your worthy daughter?”

Her eyes were moist, she held out piteous hands to him. But his passion by now was swelled to a monstrous thing, deaf, blind, suicidal.

“Stand off!” he shrieked, backing from her as if he loathed her contact. “You are worthy of nothing but a father’s curse.”

She shuddered, and stood rigid. In that moment they fell apart, never to be reconciled again.

“I warn you not to speak it,” she said—“not till you know the thing you’ve done, the lives you’ve ruined, the broken faiths for which you made yourself answerable to God when you threatened me with that coward’s act. Before you pledged me I was already pledged—my heart, my soul. You did not know it—I have accepted this heavy punishment for heaven’s retribution on me for that sin of silence. I accept it no longer. Love’s honour and love’s vows would, I know, have counted for nothing with my father. But they still hold me to the past for all my faith is worth. We had met by accident—we had no thought, O! no thought to deceive you—only we delayed, forgetting in our happiness. He was a Monsieur Saint-Péray—a name as noble as the man himself—too good and true for such as we to honour. And I broke my faith to him, and you were the cause.”

He raised his hand, gasping. She went on, before he could speak:—

“I tell you now there is no man, shall never be to me in all the world a man with claims like his. If he would have me, the stained and humbled thing I am, I would give myself, in tears and gratitude, to redeem his broken past. But I am unworthy of him; and you have made me so.”

Then he spoke—a babble of raging words. But his lips forbore the curse—perhaps from real apprehension, perhaps from policy. He was not one to burn his boats, even in a fit of madness. In the end, he fell, quite suddenly, upon self-control, and stood like a shaking spectre of himself.

“Very well,” he said—“it is very well. You are your own mistress. You will wed this man, this saintly paramour of yours, *if* he will consent to make an honest woman of you. I have no more to say.”

“No,” she answered: “you have said the last.”

He stood a moment uncertain, turned, and left the room.

She remained motionless as he had left her—a minute, two minutes: then suddenly was looking about her with a curious quick action of the head.

Hunted! alone! quite desolate! Where could she turn for help, support? O, God! the wickedness—the wickedness! Save her someone!—she could hear the hideous panting of the chase—quite close! she—!

The entrance of a servant restored her to some self-command. The man, after one inquisitive furtive look, dropped his eyes and abased himself.

He deprecated Madonna’s resentment; he had hesitated before intruding himself; but these young women! they were so persistent, so full of self-assurance, so convinced that their missions were imperative. He had done his best to get rid of her, but in vain.

“Of her? of whom?” demands Madonna, quieting her lips with her handkerchief.

He shrugs his shoulders and his eyebrows. The young woman would give no name. She had been waiting for hours. But now, vouchsafed the assurance of Madonna’s refusal, he will go and dismiss her at once and finally.

“Show her in to me here,” says the Marchesa, and the man bows and withdraws.

The little interval, the necessity of self-control in it, brought her to herself. When the visitor was ushered in, she was seated—to all appearance a lovely waxen image of serenity. She lifted her eyes and saw a fair young girl, cloaked and hooded, standing before her. The servant closed the door and shut them in together.

“Well, my child,” she said, affectedly incurious: and indeed it was a child, like herself, whom she addressed. “What do you want with me?”

The glow and splendour of her surroundings must have their foremost influence on Molly, petted loveling as she was. Her senses must gape a little, before the woe and despair in her could find their way to utterance. Then, all

in a moment, the shock of an unforeseen difficulty had overwhelmed her on the threshold of her mission. She uttered an exclamation—"Alack-a-day! she can't speak English!" and fell a little away, in consternation.

"English!" Yolande frowned. The word was curiously ill-timed. She looked intently at her visitor. "English?" she repeated: "Are you an English girl? So? Well, you see I understand you. What is it you want of me?"

"My man."

It came in an irresistible cry, fierce, emotional, from the girl's heart. She gasped after it, actually as if a spasm had rent it forth. Then she bent, and looked, with tumultuous irony, into the other's face.

"Ay," she said, "it's beautiful enough—like a wax doll's—as smooth and as hard, I warrant." But neither the wit nor the passion in her could keep that mood. She stood up again. "I want my man," she cried. "Give him back to me! I was the first with him!"

Yolande, pale and indignant, rose to her feet.

"What is the meaning of this?" she said. "I know nothing of you, nor of whom you are speaking."

"I'm speaking," cried the girl, "of him they call Cartouche. Ay, you may start. It's a name should make you blush for love forsworn!"

Yolande made a swift movement, as if to summon aid. The girl intercepted her, fell at her feet, clung to her skirts.

"No, no. Don't call. Let me speak. I'll be good and quiet, I will, if you'll only listen. I didn't mean no impudence—not to such as you. O, lady!—for dear pity's sake—hear me out!"

"Who are you?"

"I'll tell you, though he kills me for it. I'm his woman—his kept woman. There, you'll not think the worse of him for that. We count for little with the quality, when they come to marry—like a man's brooch, or the buckles in his shoes. We were right enough as a fashion for yesterday; but to-day, when our turn's over, 'tis bad taste even to speak of us. But there's something different here, there is. O, my lady! you did ought to consider it before you rob me of him."

Some terrible emotion, between loathing and pity, was struggling in Yolande's heart as she looked down on the imploring figure. An instinctive horror in her fought against its own understanding—would not believe—temporised with the truth, speaking in a voice of shuddering pity,—

"A woman!—*you*, poor child!"

The other misconstrued her.

“Why not? We can’t pick and choose in our class. But we’re no more blind and deaf than you to what’s the best. Only, if we want it, we must pay. I was just a village girl, and him a gentleman. Don’t you blame him for it. I gave myself to him, and with my eyes open. We know the odds we take. They must marry some day. But to throw me over for you—you whose true love I’ve took and cared for at his bidding, and tried to nurse back into faith and hope of you that jilted him, while all the time you’ve been undermining me with my own! O, lady! haven’t you a heart? To hear him, that other, calling on your name! to know him dying there, and all for love of you, while you dally with this that’s mine!”

She broke down, and buried her face in her hands, weeping. And her listener! Through all that distorted outcry some passion of the truth must penetrate her. Cartouche! At first, only a sense of utter outrage in that name predominated. A libertine! unredeemed and irredeemable! a practising *intrigant*, even in the moment of his suit to her! That at least was clear. She hated herself for that one impulsive thrill of kindness towards him. This ruined life at his door! And he had dared to approach her with such a lie in his heart—to affect repentance—to—Ah! what was that—this thing which was worse than all?

She withdrew her skirts a little. Her hand was ice. Her words fell like snow-flakes, soft and cold.

“You are mistaken, girl. There is nothing—never has been, never could be, between myself and—and the gentleman you named.”

Molly looked up, amazement and incredulity in her eyes.

“Doesn’t he love you?” she said.

The little Marchesa swept her skirts away.

“Don’t touch me!” she whispered terribly. “I am soiled in seeing you, hearing you. The word is fouled upon your lips. O, my God! these vermin in Thine image! Am I like them? Have they the right to claim me to themselves?”

She stamped in fury.

“Leave me! Go to your own! Don’t dare to link my name with his again.”

The girl had risen to her feet. Quite cowed as she was for the moment, a joy was in her heart to hear herself so repudiated in that company. Her worst fears were laid: her venom was turned to honey. She whimpered a little, in a panic half feigned, half felt,—

“There, I don’t want to. I’m going, for sure.” Then a spit of courage came to her—“and I’ll tell the other he may just die for all you care”—and she turned.

But, before she could reach the door, a swift step followed, and a soft white hand, ringed and scented, was placed upon her shoulder. She hesitated an instant, faced round, and the next moment the two, high saint and lowly sinner, were clasped together weeping.

Poor Molly knew her place. She sunk at the other’s feet again, till Yolande knelt beside her, and put her arms about the shameful head.

“Poor child! poor sinful woman,” she said, to a flurry of sighs and sobs. “O, what was I to hold you so apart! But you don’t understand—you can’t, God pity you. The worse for him that killed your innocence.”

“He—”

“I’ll not hear his name.”

“He was my only one; and—and, for your sake, he’s been wanting to make me good.”

“Has he? There’s a way.”

“Maybe. But not the way you mean. That’s closed to such as us.”

“Alas! What way, then?”

“Make yourself impossible to him.”

“I? Sweet saints, give me patience with this poor ignorance! How can I make her comprehend that I could never be more impossible to him than I am.”

“O, yes! you could.”

“There, there, child! How?”

“O, mistress! don’t you know?”

“Know what? Why am I letting you talk to me like this? I’m all groping in a maze. O! haven’t you a father?”

“Yes, for sure.”

“Give up your sin. Go back to him and ask his pardon.”

“You don’t know him. His pride’s above his station. He’d ne’er suffer me again to come anigh him.”

“Wouldn’t he? What a thing’s this pride in men!—a vengeance, not a judge! Fatherless, then! O, O! that’s to be lost and helpless—crying to a void—sinking, sinking; and not a straw to hold by!”

“Ah, hush ye, pretty one—hush ye!”

The Magdalen, with winking wondering eyes, was become the comforter.

She clasped the cold hands within her own warm palms, and mumbled them, and loved their softness. Yolande, her head bowed, sat grieving still a little.

“To look all round, and not to know where to turn—no guide, no help out of this maze!”

She snuffled, and mopped her eyes; then struggled to regain her estate. “There, child! my heart bleeds for you! What is your name? O! I forgot; you haven’t one”—for, indeed, to this sweet orthodoxy, an unchurched passion was a nameless thing—a maiden title forfeited to anonymity.

“I’m Molly Bramble, please my lady.”

She hung her head. The other pursed her lips a moment.

“Well, well, child—we’ll call you as we call our dog or parrot—terms for distinguishment.”

Then the moth plunged for the light, about which she had been desperately fluttering this nervous while.

“You mentioned of your nursing someone? or perhaps I confused your meaning?”

“Ay, did I. You know him. Saint-Péray.”

The other put her away and got hurriedly to her feet.

“*You’re* nursing him! *You?*”

“He brought him to me—told me to; told me to help him back to be a man, and win you yet.”

“Who brought him? Who told you?”

“There: I wasn’t to speak his name.”

“Nursing him? Where?”

“Why, in the little villa that he keeps for me.”

“That he keeps? O, my love, my Louis!”

“Ah, ah! you love him still. You make my heart sing, you do!”

“O, Louis! O, *mon bien aimé! que les artifices des méchants t’ont environné!* You must not be left: you must not stay there: you do not know. The villain! the false friend!”

“O, O, my lady!”

“Is he not? He dared to ask my hand.”

“O! it’s true then!”

“Two nights ago.”

“Ah, me! that explains it.”

“What?”

“Why, what he told me before he left next morning. ‘I’ve changed my

mind,' says he. 'She's not for him no more. What you've said you've to unsay. They must be kept apart at any price.' They were his last words before he went."

"Were they?—those?"

"His very words."

"Yesterday?"

"Yesterday morning."

"O, my child! give up this wicked man, to save your soul!"

"No, I'll stick to him."

"Poor prodigal, enamoured of the husks."

"He said he would be good for your sake. You owe him that."

"For my sake?"

"Ay, even for true love's sake, maybe—though it wounds my heart to speak it. There's a way you could show him."

"A way? I? to what?"

"To mend a wrong. O, dear good lady, I've seen your eyes confess!—never deny it. One marriage brings another—it might, it might even lead to that—O, mistress, mistress!"

"You are mad. You don't know what you say—you know nothing."

"I know your love is dying there for love of you."

"Dying? No, no!"

"Come to him, and see."

"I cannot."

"He must die then. He'll not last till morning else. 'Twas for that I dared this all."

"O, what am I to do?"

"No one need know: a great lady like you."

"You say he'd marry you?"

"I say one marriage brings another."

"O! Sweet saints, direct me! Lead my distracted mind! I cannot come with you, I say!—Wait while I fetch my cloak!"

* * * * *

Fiorentina, bidden to hold her tongue to Louis-Marie, told him everything—under promise of secrecy: how that one was coming in a little to break his brain's web and kill the wicked spider—a physician, maybe: maybe a wise woman; for indeed physicians were not "her," and the signorina had stated

distinctly, in answer to his cries, that she was going that moment to fetch *her* to cure him.

Fortunately or not, he heard her without comprehending. He was lying apathetic by then, quit of the “fellow in the cellarage.” That thundering whisper silenced, all commoner voices served him but as opiates. By-and-by he fell into a doze; and the little *camerista* drew his curtains, and lit his candles, and went below to gossip with her house-mate.

The storm laboured up and over, mingling with the sick man’s dreams. The rush of tempest smote on ice. He was alone in a surging darkness. It cracked, with a roar of thunder, and spilled a dead body at his feet. Madly he strove to spurn the thing—into monstrous-seeming abysses—for all their blackness they were shallow troughs. Or else the glacier rolled like water, and threw it up. He trampled it in fury—it writhed away, reshaping. Then it took to laughing; and the laugh was echoed from hard by—and there was Bonito hiding in a drift. He woke with a scream.

But he was sleeping again, when the little *camerista* hurried up, and looked into his pale exhausted face, and touched some pillows into comfort before leaving him.

Sweet dreams this time, but still of weeping rains. Only they fell softly on a Chapel roof. She was not there beside him, and he wondered why she lingered. Till, glancing at the coloured statue of the virgin, he saw it stir and smile, and stretch out wistful arms to him, and heard it breathe his name—“Louis, Louis!” And it was she herself, descending and coming to him; but, before they could reach and touch, she had vanished.

“Louis, Louis!” Her voice wept far remote, an infinite yearning, faint and always fainter; till suddenly, with a crash, the roof was rent, and a flood of fire rushed in, revealing her—quite close to him—a breathing apparition—all love and sorrow paining her sweet eyes.

He lay and did not stir. “Yolande!” he whispered.

She sighed, and clasped her hands; she answered with the plaint, if not in the words, of love-lorn Madeline:—

“O, leave me not in this eternal woe,
For if thou diest, my Love, I know not where to go.”

She moved, and was kneeling by him, pleading with hurrying sighs,—
“The sin was mine—the sin was mine! And, O! a fruitless sacrifice! So pale, so worn—O, thing without a heart, to have caused this cruel sickness in my love!”

“Yolande!” A wilder thrill gave out the word.

“Louis; if thou couldst still find that in me worth living for! Ah, do not die! I would be so loving and so penitent. Not forward—no. The shame in me’s an ecstasy. I cry to have you humble me.”

“Lily of Savoy—the white lily—and mine!”

A gloating transport whispered in his voice.

“Thine still, dear love; and, for all her shame—inviolate.”

She hid her face to speak it. This was no swooning vision, but reality. No matter whence she had come, or at what instigation—the death-warrant was cancelled. Life at her words flowed back to him, lapped in a sensuous dream. Doubts, fears, proscriptions were all forgotten. His pulses beat to madness: a delirious hunger of her swelled his veins. This sweet fruit of his desire! It were as if the heavy-bosomed grapes, made animate by Love, had drooped of their own pity to the lips of Tantalus. Should he not crush them in his mouth? unquestioning, praising the heavenly mercy, not abusing it with one self-scruple as to his deserts? It was characteristic of him, at least, so to surrender his will to circumstance. He flushed as if intoxicated. He leaned impassioned towards her: “My wife!” he whispered, and drew her to his heart.

She raised her streaming eyes,—

“What you have suffered for my sake—and not the least to find you here.”

“Here, Yolande? the best that could have happened to me.”

“O, my love! you must not say it. It is a wicked house.”

“Yolande!”

“O, God! my saint is innocent! Louis! this man, your friend, and the poor girl—!”

“What of them?”

“They live in sin together—O, my lamb among the wolves!”

Old tremors, old lost scruples seized him at the words. He clung to her.

“Take me away, Yolande. I am so sick and helpless.”

“Yes, yes, my love, my husband! Come with me.”

“No, I am too ill. To-morrow. Don’t leave me, now you’ve come.”

“O, I must! Louis!”

“Then I shall die. ’Tis only you can save me—make me a man again.”

“O, love! you kill my heart!”

“To save me, Yolande! To save yourself that new self-reproach if I died without.”

“And if you were to die in spite?”

“O, love! that cried to me to humble it! We will be man and wife to-morrow. I shall live for that—I must. The thought will lay the spectres that would kill me else. Yolande! you will not let me die?”

“O, Louis! let me rather.”

“Come to me, my dear, my love, my wife—there, sweet, my *wife*, this seal upon your lips!”

* * * * *

In the grey of the dawn, cold and austere after tempest, the signorina Brambello hurried forth to procure an accommodating priest. He was easily found, easily bribed, easily persuaded into quick conclusions. The two were joined before the altar of San Maddalena, a dingy chapel in an obscure neighbourhood, and Molly and Fiorentina were the witnesses.

At the end, in the sombre porch, the pale bride turned upon the English girl.

“God, in His mercy, so give thy sin to mend itself—my sister!”

She hesitated an instant, then threw her arms about the other’s neck, kissed her on the mouth, and hanging her sweet head, went with her husband down the steps into the silent street. And his face also was bowed, as he walked feebly beside her.

CHAPTER XIII

CARTOUCHE, released, at the end of a week, from his inaugural business in the Le Prieuré Prefecture, returned forthwith to Turin—and to the re-encountering a problem, whose difficulties, one had thought, he might have studied more profitably at a distance. But a characteristic precipitancy, in deed and word—as much acquired as born of self-reliance in him—compelled him from hesitating on the brink of things. When angels and devils were at contest in his interests, he was not going to miss the excitement, nor the chance of applauding, or perhaps damning, the victors.

But he had had a more wearing time of it than he would have cared to admit, even to himself. He was not apt at moral conundrums; and one had come to consume his peace confoundedly. He felt it always smouldering in his breast, ready to break out into flame at any moment.

And he had really laid out its premises very impartially for his own consideration. He was an eclectic by nature; as, alas! is the case with a number of naughty people. It is unfortunate, indeed, that righteousness so often lacks the sense of humour, which is the faculty for seeing both sides of a question. The want seems to give obliquity such a superiority—though it is a specious one, of course.

He could admit, then, the inevitableness of a deed, which had preserved an honour most dear and sacred to himself. He could not admit a claim to that honour personified, as the price of blood. Louis, the slayer of a woman's husband, could not take that husband's place. Were she, knowingly, to let him, her honour would be forfeit: were he to take advantage of her ignorance, he would be doing a vile thing. She was not for Louis: could never be, in any scheme of moral purifications.

For whom, then? Why, scarcely less vile were he, Cartouche, to seek to take advantage of his friend's hard fortune (It will be observed that he somehow inferred for that problematic vileness its problematic opportunity—the ineradicable instinct, perhaps, of an *amoroso*, experienced in the ways of audacity, to whom a rebuff had always stood, and likely been always justified in standing, for an incitement to fresh aggression).

As to another question, that of his own relationship to the dead man, he

utterly declined to recognise it as one involving his personal interdiction. The marriage had been a mere conditional contract, of the essence of a betrothal, and the conditions had not been observed. No moral prohibition, such as touched upon the forbidden degrees, was implied by it, he told himself: and told himself so, he insisted, merely to emphasise the singleness of his renunciation. He would have the full credit for his self-sacrifice. His responsibility was not to a sentimental scruple, but to his ideal of an immaculate honour in the woman he worshipped.

Remained the question of his attitude towards the murderer of his father, and of his royal commission to hunt down that unknown assassin. Well, he had both discovered and exonerated him; but the offence was still officially *un crime qualifié*. To condone it were to make himself an accessory.

He would condone it, however, since by so doing he testified to his loyalty to his ideal. Yolande's eternal fame should owe him that sacrifice of his duty to his nobler conscience. By so little, at least, he would justify himself in the thankless wardenship of her honour; by so little he would make himself the right to claim her into an association with himself.

So far and so good for his solution of the problem. This dear prize was not for Louis; it was not for him. What, then, was to be its destiny?

There was his ideal. Eternal maid, by virtue of her deathless bondage to the past, she was to exist the unattainable goddess of all desire. He might not reach to her; but he might enforce his own precedence in her worship. He would be the high-priest of that altar, winning to his place by heart's-devotion. He pictured her, a virgin for ever unfulfilled, the flying figure on the vase, and himself, the passionate shepherd, stricken to an endless rapture of pursuit. What sweeter, more idealistic heaven?

“She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss;
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair.”

A pretty, pretty romance! But was it practical?

His soul, at least, flamed out to it. It gave him a mad wild joy to think that circumstance, and by no contrivance of his own, had removed the one mortal bar to its attainment.

Whence, now, and wherefore, his return to Turin—to make himself secure of his transfigured idol—to confirm Louis-Marie, if necessary, in his renunciation of an untenable claim. For knowing the man, he could not but have his doubts of his resolution. So much of him was based on emotion—a

treacherous foundation.

And, for the rest—his own title, by way of redemption, to that priesthood? Why, Molly, of course, was to be included in the transcendent scheme. She was to share his atonement, and be appointed a vestal to the altar of his love. He would pension her off for that purpose; he would—

O, “a mad world, my masters,” where love could not legalise itself without making a scapegoat of somebody!

And there was even another flaw—his promise to Yolande. But he had been obliged to forget all about that.

As he walked, in a sort of sombre self-complacency (as of a martyr about to testify) through the streets, his mind was busy over those first practical solutions of his problem which he was about to face. It would be necessary, he had decided, to inform his friend—restored, he hoped, by now to reason—of the impossible situation which his appointment had brought about, and to urge him to resolve its insuperable difficulties by instant flight. That must be the first step. And, afterwards—?

Alert, perspicacious by instinct, his eyes had become aware, as he moved on, of something oddly inquisitorial, something droll and furtive, in the glances of friends and acquaintances whom he met, whether directed at himself, or slyly interchanged. He affected to pass all by unconcerned, nodding brightly here and there without stop or comment; but he made mental notes, abstractedly stroking his sword-hilt, as if it were a pet terrier’s head. He felt, quietly, a little wicked. His theory of self-reforms, it would appear, halted yet something short of meekness and the second cheek to the smiter. At the corner of a street he ran plump upon Dr Bonito.

The adverb is figurative. The Doctor was always as shrewd an encounter as an edge of north wind. He cut into one’s meditations like a draught. On the present occasion, it seemed, he cut to get home into an adversary unprepared. His lean face kindled to the unexpectedness and opportuneness of the meeting.

“Hail, hail, M. le Préfet!” he croaked, in hoarse glee. “Here’s a magnetic conjunction! What man so much in my mind!—and, lo! I look up; and the man himself! Have you despatched both rogues and measures in your new Province? But doubtless you are returned betimes to assay the truthfulness of the great report. Well, be satisfied; it is true.”

Cartouche balanced on his heel, imperturbably conning the face of his old familiar. He saw enough there to detain him a reflective moment. The two

had not met since their parting “Under the Porticoes.”

“Father Bonito,” said he; “I do not want to possess your mind. You can stick up a bill for a new tenant. I have grown a little particular in my tastes. In the meanwhile, I am only this hour returned to Turin, and greatly pressed for time. What, in a word, is this report, of which you speak and I know nothing?”

The doctor sprawled up his hands in feigned astonishment.

“Gods! I believe he really hasn’t heard it! and the very stones of the town babbling with it these days past. Not to have heard it—the one most interested, with myself—he hasn’t! I’m my own first suitor to his gratitude for this.”

“Well; the devil give you brevity!”

“No, no—one moment—stop! The Marchioness di Rocco, Mr Trix—ah!”

He withdrew a detaining hand, grinned, took off his hat, and mopped his forehead with a ropey clout, eying his halted prey the while.

“A long throw that, Monsieur,” he said; “yet it hooked you. But, to be sure, she’s a killing bait.”

Cartouche, just lifting his eyebrows, vouchsafed him no other answer. He knew his man—was steeling himself quietly against some blow which he felt was preparing, and which he saw would be designed to take him off his guard. Let Bonito, in that case, extract what satisfaction he could out of his manner.

In fact, when the stroke actually fell, his reception of it was so apparently unconcerned as even to deceive the doctor into a doubt of the effectiveness of his own home-thrust, and to aggravate his malice proportionately.

“Yes, a killing bait—a—killing—bait,” he said; and threw his handkerchief into his hat, and covered himself—all deliberately. “Well,” he said, “congratulate me, Mr Trix. He was shy; but—he’s taken her at last.”

Cartouche yawned.

“In the name of patience—who’s taken whom?” said he.

“Who? Why M. Saint-Péray has taken his Marchesa, that’s all.”

“Well, those are news, to be sure.”

“Are they not—eh? He-he! You are looking worn, Mr Trix. I’m afraid you take your new duties too seriously. You shouldn’t forget that all social office is a compromise—a figure representing the balance between good and evil, to lower one of which unduly is to exalt the other unduly. Yes, we’ve married our couple.”

“Have we, indeed? And who are ‘we,’ my Bonito?”

“There! these low levels tell on one coming from the heights. You must be careful of your throat. I notice a huskiness in it already. Why, indeed, save for a natural diffidence, I might say, Monsieur, that ‘we’ stands for ‘I’; seeing that, as a fact, the initiative was mine. In any case, what we were one in desiring is, at this moment, an accomplished thing. The two are married—not, as you may suppose, a union regarded with favour in certain quarters.”

“No; I suppose not. And how did you bring it about?”

“Ah—ha! there’s the marrow! Why, how you flush and pale! I doubt the prudence of exciting you, Mr Trix, in this present turbulent state of your blood.”

“Exciting me? What do you mean? Why should I be excited? Have I been hanging rogues so few as to start at the mention of a noose? Tell me how you managed it, my dear excellent old devil.”

“Well, I will. There are points you mayn’t approve; but the end must justify the means. Listen, then. I could not make our friend eligible in the way I proposed. But still I was his matrimonial agent—you remember the term, it was your own? As such my duty to him, my duty to myself, demanded renewed enterprise on my part. You, who have expressed an eagerness no less than mine to secure this match, will, I hope, condone, even approve, the advantage I took of a report concerning yourself to realise our common wish.”

“A report? What was that?”

“Why, that you yourself was a suitor for the hand of the lady.”

“Yes? and the advantage you took of that same veracious legend?”

“It may have been a legend: it was certainly an opportunity. What did I do? Why—forgive me, sir—I simply went and repeated it, for what it was worth, to the Signorina Brambello, and left the leaven to ferment. The result was quite astonishing. She ran straight off, it appears, in a pet of jealousy to the lady; induced her to return with her to the bedside of her stricken gallant (by which, or thereabouts, it seems our Madam spent the night), and married the two incontinent the next morning at a neighbouring Chapel (called, somewhat appropriately, la Maddalena), giving herself and another for witness. Now, am I to be congratulated or not? A word in season hath accomplished what all your theories of pretty heartenings and reassurances had failed to. You appealed to the signorina’s sympathies; I to a baser but more practical sentiment. Acknowledge who was the better sophist.”

Cartouche clapped him on the shoulder.

“You, you, my Bonito. The credit is all yours, and the triumph. I will not forget it. I will not overlook your part in this happy consummation.”

Bonito grinned.

“Nor your *innamorata*’s, eh, Mr Trix? Egad! she’s a name in Turin to-day. She might command—but, there! these reports are not for my lips.”

“Her price, you mean? Well, she shall have it. Now I must go. I have business which can wait no longer.”

He went off, humming a little song. As once before, the doctor stood conning his receding figure, until it had vanished round a corner. Then he gave a short sudden laugh, and turned to his own way.

“Well acted,” he thought; “and well out of the reckoning, he; and well saved, my own skin—for the present—I’m a little afraid at the expense of the dear signorina’s. But, bah! if the wind were to hold its breath for fear a leaf or two might fall, there’d be no clearing the air in this world of scruples.”

* * * * *

Cartouche walked straight to the little villa in the Lane of Chestnuts. It was a glowing, lustful day. The white curtains in the windows bosomed out to him like love’s own welcome; lizards basked on the walls; the flowers in the garden hung sweet drowsy heads. He was singing still when he reached the door: singing when he greeted Fiorentina with a chin-chuck: he walked, with a song on his lips, into the parlour. She was there, sure enough—a flushed palpitating beauty, with a brave front of greeting, and a quaking heart behind it. He had no idea of making many words about the thing. He stopped in the middle of the room, smiling at her.

“What!” said he: “no kiss for me?”

She had never realised until this moment the fulness of her daring, nor its madness. She gulped sickly, as she crept up to him without a word, and put her lips to his cheek.

He had a purse of gold ready, and held it out to her.

“There are your wages, Judas.”

As if her legs had been knocked from under her, she went down at his feet.

“No, no! He was dying, Cherry!”

“Better he had died.”

“O, don’t condemn me unheard!”

“Did you disobey me?”

“Yes; but—”

“That is enough.”

“O, my God! Am I to go?”

“Yes.”

“Think what it means to me?”

“I am thinking.”

“And you can do it?”

“And I can do it—a hundred times. And worse than that, if you tempt me. Take your price, and go—back to England, if you are wise. Do you see this in my hand? It’s my last mercy.”

He drew away from her, where she lay, cast upon her face and moaning.

“I am going,” he said. “But I shall return in the afternoon at three o’clock. If then I find you still here—understand what I say—your chance to save yourself is past. I’ll kill you on our bed—I mean it.”

A wild desolate scream broke from her throat. He threw the purse down beside her on the floor, and left the house without another word.

At three o’clock to the minute he returned. Not till he had searched into every corner of the villa, would he question the red-eyed *cameristas*, huddled awaiting him in their kitchen. Then he learned that she had gone indeed. They would have besieged his heart with tearful clamour, telling of the scene—its rending piteousness; but he stopped them peremptorily, paid them their wages, double and treble, and dismissed them.

He had already seen that the purse of gold lay untouched where he had thrown it down upon the floor. For all his gripping will, that gave his heart a wrench. He stooped and took it in his hand—hesitated—then, with a curse at his own weakness, thrust it into his breast. He went from room to room, bolting the windows. In one upstairs he paused—so long that ghosts began to stir and whisper in the empty house. Something, he thought, was moving the curtains of the bed to which his back was turned. Little slippers stole from underneath a chair and walked without sound upon the floor. He heard a sigh—it was himself sighing. With a mad oath, he turned and tramped downstairs, resolutely, making all the noise he could. The next moment he had clapped to the door behind him, and was in the open air.

That night, pacing the streets, he passed a hospital for Magdalens. A box, beseeching charity, was in the wall. He stopped, and taking the purse from his breast, dropped the coins from it, one by one, into the slit.

Then he turned and disappeared into the darkness.

PART III

CHAPTER I

WE mortals discuss the world as a subject of our common understanding, and no two of us see it with the same eyes. To Victor-Amadeus the third's, for example, it was a stage for *fêtes galantes*; to the Chevalier de France's a ball fettered to the ankle of an heir-at-law, infamously kept from his inheritance; to those of a certain "little corporal," as yet unaccredited, it was a potential family estate; to Yolande's and Louis-Marie's a reformatory for original sin; to Bonito's it was a footstool to the stars, to Cartouche's an absurd necessity, to Jacques Balmat's a glorious field for adventure.

In 1786 Jacques was the most famous man in Le Prieuré, and for long distances beyond it. In notability he had outstripped all these other claimants to our attention. For he had won his mountain and his wife, and basked in the lustre and the reward of a great enterprise greatly accomplished. Yet he took his reputation modestly, as became one who had looked on Death too often and too close to boast himself superior to that God. He'd propitiated, not defied him. There was something very solemn, very sobering in having gained that awful shadow for one's friend. So he accepted his part without arrogance, but without hypocrisy.

"Ah! monsieur," he said to Saint-Péray, lord-consort to his lady of the Manor: "you should have held on; you should not have lost heart; you should have been with me. There are no heights so inaccessible but that the good God will surrender them to our trust in Him as the first guide of us all. There is no corner of His world of which He hath said, 'Faith shall not enter here.'"

Madame Saint-Péray (she had dropped—flung away, rather—her title) looked up from her needle-work, with a little frown, like an acute accent, nicked between her eyes. She was conscious, on this occasion as she had been on others, of that half protective half accusatory note in the young mountaineer's respectful addressings of her husband, which somehow

touched a corresponding chord in herself. It vibrated on a thought of weakness; it was the tremor in the heart of dying dreams; its first movement in her had been co-instantaneous with the fall of her saint from transcendent to merely human heights. Something of discharm spoke in it; a sense as of an idol convicted of petitioning his worshipper; a sense as of an unwilling accessory to another's secret sin; a sense as of a responsibility incurred where help had been expected. These several emotions she found suggested somehow in young Balmat's tone. Were they common to all sympathetic spirits brought into whatsoever relations with her husband? She feared so. She feared, more, that Louis-Marie liked it to be so. His caressing confidence in all others than himself constituted at once his strength and his weakness. He ruled by sweet dependence, and was satisfied to rule.

There were hints of a certain change in her in these days—signs of an enforced self-emancipation, which, in its process, had a little chilled the texture of her faith. It was, in its moral, like that hardening of the grain which only a close observer can detect in the “fixing” of a pastel. The bloom was a thought less virgin; the eyes less liquid-clear; the lips had tightened to a scarce perceptible primness. Her love was as single, as great, as self-sacrificing as ever. Only it had altered its habit to a sterner garb. It ruled where it had served; it had made a subject of him who had been its lord; it justified itself by every concession to the loved one but that of self-abandonment. And in such implied reproaches as those of honest Balmat's it felt its attitude vindicated. “You should have been with me,” he had said. He should. If he had, if it had been in his nature to be, this twin history of theirs, she believed, had never come to find its tragedy and redemption. Louis at this moment had been her king—her tyrant, even; their parts had never of necessity been reversed.

Of course, in all this, she only skimmed the truth. There was more to be inferred, even than she supposed, from the young mountaineer's tone. It implied, in fact, a troubled conscience, seeking to allay its own suspicions on the strength of a serenity in their object which must surely, it told itself, be incompatible with guilt.

For, indeed, a certain serenity had come to succeed in Louis-Marie the storms and anguish of a former state. His wife's tender ministrations; a year of utter peace, of utter immunity from disturbance in their retreat, had restored him to a measure of self-confidence—even to a point of view something broader than that in which Cartouche had confirmed him. Now he

was inclined to think that his deed had been not only righteous, but heroic; that his bearing of its burden in silence was a saintly discipline; that, in any case, his confiding of his awful secret, like King Midas's barber, to the reeds, had acquitted him of the first responsibility to it. And the last was, after all, his most characteristic comfort. He grew well on it, as a worried schoolboy, quit of his imposition to a merciful parent, forgets his troubles in a moment.

There remained only, to disturb his conscience, the question of his conditional absolution, as decreed by Cartouche. Well, as to that, he had assured and reassured himself, his friend was scarcely matriculated in moral philosophy. But, even were he called upon by him to answer for his act, he had still this to plead—that he had not married Yolande, but Yolande him.

For the rest, slow growing sense of security had come to mend his sickness of another shadow. A year had passed, and it had not yet pursued him to his fastness in the Château di Rocco. He hoped now it never would. He hoped he read, in the social exile which their own mutinous act had decreed upon himself and Yolande, an abandonment of any interest in their further fortunes. God grant they might be permitted to make out their days in peace, justifying—as they for ever strove, and intended for ever to strive to do—in their devotion to their church, in a wide and noble beneficence, their inheritance of a wicked man's possessions. For to this end only had they decided to take up the burden of an estate otherwise hateful to them.

It was a mellow September noon. The three sat under the front of the grim old Château in the quiet sunlight. Far off across the valley, on a level with their eyes, great flakes of silver-white, spangling a golden haze, were the huddled masses of the Alps, no less. Soft and unsubstantial in appearance as the floating iridescences one sees in water, they were still the native home and most austere dominion of primordial rock and ice. It seemed impossible to realise it. The very shadows on their slopes were traced so soft, they were no more shadows than the blue veins in marble, than the blue inter-webbings of running surf. Surely that mist of peaks must be descended cloud, and the changing colours of it the bloom of angelic wings beating within!

Below the sitters' feet terrace declined upon terrace, until, halted against a buttress wall, the cultivated land gave place beyond to stony pastures, which descended to the lower verge of the estate and the great wrought-iron gates of the entrance.

And between, poised high in the mid-ether of the valley, a watching kestrel floated like a leaf.

Madame Saint-Péray, looking up, answered for her husband. Her recognition that neither high achievement nor great failure was ever for this dear weanling of her passion was not to find her loyalty to him at fault—rather to confirm her jealousy for his reputation.

“That is a very right sentiment for a guide, M. Jacques,” she said; “but there may be nobler conquests for duty even than those of mountains. Monsieur owed his life to *me*; and he sacrificed his ambitions to that debt.”

That was the thorn. Then she offered the rose.

“For you, you owed that conquest to your love; and bravely you strove and gained. I hope the dear father recovers himself of your naughtiness?”

Jacques laughed; then essayed his little gallantry. No Frenchman, however primitive, lacks that essential grace,—

“I said, Monsieur should not have lost his heart for the enterprise. I was a dog, an imbecile. What summit could equal that to which his heart attained! I thought myself near heaven as I stood up there alone—the first to get so near. Alas, Madame! Monsieur staying on the ground had already gained it.”

Monsieur, lying comfortably back in his chair, smiled kindly.

“That is very true, Jacques; and I wish I could take credit for the best deserts. But you have not answered Madama’s question.”

“Of Dr Paccard, Monsieur? The old man is almost himself again. He can see his son-in-law at last.”

“It was cruel of you to force him to the summit,” said Madame.

“Why, what would you?” answered the mountaineer. “He would never have believed else; and upon his belief depended my reward.”

“But, by all accounts, he could not see, even then.”

“That is true; but others could. My faith, he was bad! But it was his bargain, not mine, that he should accompany me to witness. He would have given up before we slept the first night on la Côte. There had been enough and to spare already to terrify him. With dusk had come an oppression of the air. Our axes sang like flutes. Suddenly, as I climbed, holding my staff by the middle, it had a knob of light for head—a thing like a luminous bladder, that palpitated, and swelled, and shrunk and swelled again; till, in a moment, it detached itself and floated away, far, far into the shadows, where it burst with a clap like thunder. Then came the lightning, above, everywhere. One blaze struck the ground, right in front of us. It was as if a bucket of fire had been emptied from some window of the rocks. It splashed up and was gone, leaving a stench—*Mon Dieu!* the fish they had been gutting up there were not

very fresh.”

“O, horrible, horrible!”

“Better than that our heads had received it. But I am fatiguing Madame?”

“No, no. Go on. I have wanted so much to hear it from your lips.”

“He slept exhausted, for all his fright, wrapped in my blanket, and moaning for the good roast chicken, which he had ordered at home against his soon return. When he awoke, it was bright calm sunlight, and he had gathered new heart of rest. We went on and up; but his courage soon ebbed, running out at his heels, until, *Mon Dieu!* he was crawling on his belly like a mole. That was laughable enough; but even so, my merriment could urge him no further than the Dôme du Goûter, where he sat down and refused to move a step further. I gave him my glass, and told him to look how the villagers watched us from below, and at Martha herself, the brave child, waving to us with her handkerchief. It was all of no use. I had to leave him and go on alone. The thin air suffocated me. The wind shaved my cheeks, drawing blood from them like a clumsy barber. Every sweep of its razor was a gash. But by then I was mad to conquer or perish. Though it strip me to the bone, I thought, my skeleton shall stand on the summit. And presently, all in an instant, I was there.

“O, Madama! It is something, that, to have seen the stars by daylight. They were all about my head, crowning me. Perhaps their glory intoxicated my brain. In any case, I was fierce now to go and fetch my comrade, and force him to come up and believe. And I went down to him again, and roused him from his stupor, and drove him before me up the heights. He was quite dumb and silly, like a drunken man; but my will was great, and I got him there. He could see nothing; the snow-blindness was in his eyes; he would hear nothing. ‘Take your Martha,’ he said, ‘and let me sleep.’ That was all. How I got him down and home is known to none but God; it is not known to me.”

Louis-Marie, listening in a glow, had caught something of the speaker’s transport. He turned, with kindled eyes, to Yolande. “See,” his looks confessed, “what I have foregone for your sake!” She gave a sudden cry “Ah!” and pointed down. The hawk had swooped into a tree, and re-emerged with a little fluttering life in its claws.

“That is very pitiful,” she said. “I had heard the poor thing singing to his mate but a moment ago.”

Balmat took up his hat.

“He sang of himself, by the token, Madama,” he said—“of what a fine

fellow he was. It is the way with cock-birds. That was a good lesson to me. Be sure, it said, before you start to blow your own trumpet, that an enemy is not within hearing.”

As, having made his respectful adieux, he went down the hill at a swing, the lodge gate clanked at the foot of the drive far below. They saw his diminishing figure halt against another which was approaching. The two appeared to exchange greetings and a few words. At the end, Balmat resumed his way down, and the stranger turned again to the ascent. As he came on, the cuttings of the hill path swallowed him, and he disappeared from view. In the same instant, Yolande, bent over her work, heard her husband get hurriedly to his feet, and glanced up at him. Silks and needles went to the ground. She was by him in a moment.

“What is it—Louis! Louis!”

He was deadly pale; he was holding his hand to his forehead in a lost way.

“Take me in, take me in!” he muttered. “I—I think the sun—ah!—it was perhaps too strong for me.”

He was wild over her momentary hesitation.

“I would not stop to question if you were sick,” he said. She put her arm about him at once, and guided him into the house. Entered into its refuge, a little reassurance, as of a sanctuary gained, seemed to brace him. He moved of his own accord, and towards the stairs, making for the upper rooms. She never released him, until he was lying back on his own pillows. Then he seized her hands and kissed them as she knelt beside him.

“Dear wife,” he said, in great emotion. “I think, perhaps, the sun—and the excitement—of listening. There; I shall be well in a little—only rest—utter rest—I can see no one—no one: Yolande—it would be very bad for me—it —”

She soothed him.

“Why needst thou, most sweet, with me to stand between? If visitor there be, sleep here in confidence; thou shalt not be disturbed.”

A servant’s voice at the door announced that a stranger craved a word with Madame. Madame answered that she would be down in a minute. The invalid uttered a little tremulous cry.

“No, no, at once, in a second,” he urged in extremest agitation. “Think if he were to anticipate you by mounting to this room! My God! I have known him do it!”

“Him!” she exclaimed astonished. “Whom?”

“I have known people do it,” he responded in tremulous irritation—“ill-mannered people. Why do you delay? Do you want to drive me mad? If he comes in here, I will not answer for myself.”

Seeing him so wrought up, she felt it the wise policy to obey. With a last word or two of assurance, she went quickly from the room and down the stairs.

The old corridors, the old house, the old chinks piping-in the draughts which swayed the old tapestries, the old dust which seemed to crawl upon the floors, as if the swarming of their slow decay were for ever being disturbed by ghostly footfalls—in all, this dark old habitation, with its stony echoes, had never before seemed to her so instinct with the spirit of a watchful secrecy. Wickedness hung somewhere brooding in its vaulted silences. The air was thick with omen.

She had to pause a moment to recover herself, before opening the door of the room into which the visitor had been shown. But at last she turned the handle, and entered—and there was Dr Bonito facing her.

CHAPTER II

SHE had seen something of this man before; had heard—to loathe—more of him than she had seen. He was not one to be forgotten, once encountered—least of all by gentle souls. Only her memory of him could not somehow reconcile his past and present habits. A threadbare pedant, dull-eyed and malefic; a godless truckler to the vicious, prostituting his learning for a dog's wages, abject while starving—that was how knowledge and report had painted him to her. Here, indeed, was the frame, but how reinvested! Snuff as of old, seamed the wrinkles of the jaw; but now that wagged upon a lace cravat. The hands were as skeleton and unclean; but rings sparkled on their frowsy knuckles. The brown mouldy duds had given place to a gold-laced coat and breeches of black velvet. There was something evilly potential, something suggestive of chartered mischievousness in the change, she thought: so instinctively do we estimate all human authority by the quality of its cloth.

She curtsied, and stood up frigidly to await his explanation. This sinister vision did nothing to allay the tumult of emotions which had accompanied her from the bedroom. Her heart was foreboding she knew not what; the chill of her manner hid a nameless fear. She could not analyse its nature, nor trace it to its source in herself. She did not know how, during all these months, it had really existed in her as a germ, which had shrunk from its own quickening to some unspeakable disclosure. Whispers, perhaps, half heard and put away; shadows in conscience-troubled eyes, cast down on half-betrays of their secrets—to the faint record of such faint percussions on her soul, maybe, was due that vague sense of uneasiness. And here, all in a moment, the seed in her was stirring—swelling—touched into life by what? and to what monstrous birth? Was this ominous presence accountable for the change—this dark spirit, associated solely in her mind with a dead and gone abomination? What spectre could he be, risen from that grave to curse her later peace? What power in his hand, to have struck her love with terror through that far recognition? For to that recognition, she could not doubt, was due her husband's state.

He did not keep her long in suspense. The old dreary wolf in him was

quick to sharp conclusions. His tooth was his special pleader, and he showed it at the outset, without a thought of compromise.

He just essayed to make a responsive leg to her; but, even in the clumsy act, grinned in derision of his own mockery, and flung his hands behind his back, humping his shoulders bullyingly.

“You know me?” he snapped.

“I have seen you, Monsieur,” she answered.

“I was physician,” he said loudly, “to your late husband. That is something to you. You owe me your present one. That is more to you.”

She held on to herself, bravely, a little longer.

“You asked to see me, Monsieur,” she said quietly. “I desire you will state your business.”

“You or your husband,” he answered. “It is all one to me. Thank my gallantry alone for this precedence. If you scorn it, send for *him*.”

She trembled, in spite of herself.

“Did he see me coming?” he continued. “I have reason to think so. He is shy of greeting me, no doubt; though, to be sure, we are quite old friends and confidants. It is not possible that you are his confederate?”

He saw her, poor helpless quarry, look towards the door; and he laughed out.

“Yes, summon assistance, if you want the truth blazoned. Many or one—it will not change my purpose.”

Then, in her fear, she became the serpent. Her eyes glittered; her lips parted in a conciliatory smile.

“Ah, monsieur!” she pleaded; “you rebuke me rightly for my cavalier reception of a guest. But there are memories—associations—cannot you understand it? that one would fain forget. Yet, if you were my husband’s friend—?”

“And yours, and yours, mistress,” he broke in violently. “Don’t overlook that. You owe one another to me—why should I conceal it? If I had not blown into flame a little spirit of jealousy in the bosom of a certain *chère amie* of—but you know his name—our admirable dear Prefect down yonder —”

She stopped him, flushing intolerably.

“Spare me that mention, at least, Monsieur. It is my humiliation ever to have been associated, even indirectly, with that infamous man.”

He sniggered hatefully.

“Why, it is true, by all reports,” he croaked, “that he has not taken salvation of his disappointment. Knowing him of old, as I do, that miracle, if it had happened, had converted even me, I think.”

“Monsieur!” she entreated, half weeping—“I beg you—”

She checked herself; disciplined her anguish anew; held out fawning hands to him.

“If you want thanks—recognition of that service—O, Monsieur! I am prepared to give them, to make it, to the utmost of your desire.”

“Are you?” he said. “We shall see. Perhaps your gratitude may take something less than full account of my claims on it. We shall see. For there is a deadlier claim yet to come.”

Her tears, her innocence, her beauty, moved him no more than a poor calf’s sobbings might move a butcher. Baiting made meat tender, in the opinion of his day.

She drew back a little.

“A deadlier claim!” she said faintly.

He looked about him a moment, then approached her closely. His evil eyes, his acrid tongue took instant command of her.

“Di Rocco was murdered,” he said.

She uttered a weak cry; caught at a chair to steady herself; stood with closed eyes, and her head fallen back a little.

“Murdered,” he repeated—“only I, and one other, know by whom.”

“What other?”

She did not speak it; but the horror of the question took shape on her lips.

“Your husband,” he said.

She never stirred nor cried out. In the crash of that agony her first instinct was not to betray her love.

He let the thrust sink home, watching, with some diabolical curiosity, the settling of the flesh, as it were, about that cruel wound. Suddenly she moved, and came erect, hating him, his inhumanity.

“Base and wicked! you say it to torture me, because to torture is the lust of devils. I will not listen to you. I will not even understand what you imply. Go, before I have you scourged out of my house!”

He never moved an inch.

“Your house!” he sneered. “Well bought at the price; only you left me out of your calculations—you and your confederate.”

She came at him then, this piety, with set teeth and clinched hands. She

was like a tigress in that instant. But he waved his arm disdainfully, and she stopped.

“Are you not?” he said. “Then the other’s my sole quarry. I’ll make my terms with him.”

“No, no!”

The cry broke from her instinctively; and, having uttered it, she knew her own surrender. Pale and broken, poor lily, she drooped before him.

“Very well,” he said; “then with you. I care nothing for the deed; the terms are my concern. I’ll not be diffident about them. I’ll justify them, on your invitation, to the utmost of my desire. Your husband, mistress, killed di Rocco.”

“O, my God!”

“Why, he had his provocation. The man meant lewdly, and he knew it—knew of his intent, its method and occasion. Ask him, if you doubt me. Ask him what he was doing that night, crouched hidden by the glacier where the other was to cross. Ask him why he followed in di Rocco’s tracks, down upon the ice and further. Ask him why he returned alone, later, and slunk home in the storm and darkness, the brand of that on his forehead which he’ll never rub out to the end of time. O, believe me, I have a hundred eyes for things that touch my interests. This did, and closely. He murdered di Rocco. Ask him, I say, if you doubt me.”

Her ashy lips moved, but no sound came from them.

“Or ask him nothing,” the beast went on. “He did it for you; and maybe you’ll think you owe him that silence. Let him live on in his fools’ paradise, taking beatitude of grace, winning his redemption, as he views it. I’ll not interfere to damn him, so you gild my tongue from speaking.”

“He did not do it.”

“Ask him.”

“What do you want of me?”

“Money. Do you understand? Money. Why, as it is, I’ve arrears to make up. You’d have seen me before, if circumstances hadn’t interfered.”

“If I give you what you want, will you—will you take it in discharge of—of this fantastic—of this debt you say I owe you—now and for ever?”

He leered derisory, crooking his jaw to rub it back and forth with deliberate fingers on which a dozen gems sparkled.

“Will I? This fantastic debt?” he said. “Do you think there is any end to that, while *he* lives? No, no, mistress. I commute no pension paid to my

silence. Why, I'll be frank with you. I'm no common blackmailer for a personal gain. My vileness, as you deem it, aims at a world's redemption. This Augean stable—filth of rotten governments—there's no way to cleanse it but by flood. Pour socialism through the stench. But funds are needed to divert a river. You shall contribute—be great by deputy. I'll not be hard. I'll spare you what I can, so you'll be amenable when I can't."

"You'll come again?"

"Why, I understand you. Better risk all, you think, than face that prospect. No need to. Send when I ask, what I ask, and forestall my visitations. Money's what I want—not lives. I'll not kill my goose with the golden eggs unless I'm driven. You can keep me away."

"Tell me, now, how much you want," she said, like one half lifeless.

* * * * *

It was dusk when, lamp in hand, she stole up the stairs to their bedroom. He was lying asleep, sunk in the reaction from emotion. But the light on his face awoke him. He opened his eyes, drowsily, without speculation at first; but in a moment wide apprehension sprung to them. He half started up.

"Yolande!"

"Hush!" she said. "It was nothing—somebody who had come on business, and is gone. Think no more about it. Husband—dear husband, have you prayed to-night?"

He whispered a negative. She threw her arms about his neck.

"O, Louis, we have been happy during this year, have we not?"

He returned her caresses. But his hands were damp; his throat was stiff; he could not answer. She released him feverishly.

"Get up and pray now," she said. "We have forgotten God in our deep content—forgotten, in our bodies' loves, the blows and anguish which His flesh suffered to redeem them."

He rose, unquestioning, and knelt by the bedside. He prayed that she might not know, that his suspicions might be unfounded, that the burden of that knowledge might never be hers—not that he might find strength to ask her if it were. He prayed and prayed, until the chillness of the night air seized his frail body with a very ague of shivering. Then she, kneeling beside him, was smitten with remorse, and blamed her thoughtlessness, and got him into bed again with all speed, and watched beside him till he was once more warm and restful. Then, his comfort was so great, her beauty so pitiful, he held out

rapturous arms to her, and wooed her to his heart. Shrinking, reluctant, she surrendered passively. Had he not wounded his soul to save hers? How could she deny him the fruits of that wild sacrifice. She was a murderer's wife.

There was even a thrill of ecstasy in the delirium of that thought—a spark of new life struck out of a dead delusion. He could answer to a provocation, after all—for *her*!

But later, when he had fallen into a deep sleep, she rose softly from beside him, and crept to her oratory, and, kneeling on the icy stones before the statue of the Holy Virgin, broke into prayer, and a passion of tears,—

“O, Mother! show me how to love, and yet be clean!”

CHAPTER III

ON a flat open width of the Argentière road, a mile or so to the north-east of Le Prieuré, a little company of astronomers was gathered to gaze at the moon. They carried glasses and instruments; there was not the least air of privacy about their proceedings; the spot selected was open to all. There was an extension in the long tear of the valley in this place, the increased interval between the mountains being occupied by a humpish land strewn with boulders.

About eight o'clock of a September evening, this group of enthusiasts—drinking in lunar obfuscation; its telescopes, like so many glasses brimming with moonshine, tilted to its eyes—was joined by a single individual, whose approach from Le Prieuré, it seemed, had occurred unnoticed by it in its preoccupation. Nor did his arrival affect it now, further than to its tacit acceptance of his company as of that of a recognised kindred spirit.

The newcomer, taking a short tube from his pocket, applied the smaller lens to his eye, and joined in the general scrutiny of that placid orb, which floated over the mountain tops in a liquid mist. Gradually, and scarce perceptibly as he gazed, the others edged about him, until all were within a common focus of hearing. Then one, who appeared to have some precedence of authority, opened his lips, but without removing his instrument from his eye.

“The oracle, great Spartacus—hath it worked?”

“It is working, Ajax.”

“And Paris shall be deposed?”

“In time, in time. We move swifter to that end.”

“Swifter, swifter? But while we gather speed, he strikes like the lightning.”

“Defy him. Art thou not Ajax?”

“Ajax defied the gods. He had a quicker way with mortals.”

“What words, what example are these from a Regent? Is not the dagger alien to our policy? Hast qualified in the tables of our law to no better end than this?”

“Forgive me, Spartacus. I spoke in heat. But this man, he harasses us; drives us from point to point; forestalls our meetings with his devil’s wit, and

rides the country like a scourge.”

“A faithful Prefect.”

“An Alva sunk in vice.”

“He shall be deposed. I say it: Cassandra hath prophesied it: Priam inclines our way. We’ll find a substitute anon more to our tastes. In the meanwhile, the sinews, the sinews, Ajax—they gather in strength—they—”

With the word he was gone—had dropped, slunk like a shadow behind a roadside boulder. The others, inured to all quick evasions and surprises, stood like voiceless statues, conning the moon. The next moment, a little company of horsemen, the hoofs of their beasts muffled, came picking their way out upon them from the black glooms of the stone-strewn hillocks. They drew up in the road, their leader foremost.

“A fine moon-raking night, gentlemen,” he said. “By my faith, a very constellation of enthusiasts! What! is that you, M. Léotade? and armed with nothing more defensive than a telescope? Why, my friend, you can hardly realise the danger of these valleys. I’ll see you home, with your permission.”

Laughing, urging, persuading, deaf to their explanations and protests, he got them apart, and invited each to take the road to his separate destination, while he made M. Léotade his own especial care. In a minute or two the place was deserted. Only Bonito crouched, undiscovered, behind his rock.

“Too good a servant to your master,” he muttered. “But the rod is already in pickle for you, Mr Trix.”

CHAPTER IV

THAT rod, nevertheless, was not to come out of pickle for some six years yet. And, in the meanwhile, Cartouche remained Prefect of Faissigny. For one thing, King's favourites are not easily deposed; for another, the light seat in the saddle is the sure one. Cartouche rode his duties springily, and appeared to take them with only a shade more seriousness than he took himself.

During all this time he ruled his Province with agile, nervous young hands, asking no favour and giving none. An easy subject for defamation, the malignity of his enemies missed no opportunity of distorting in the public view the most harmless motives of his actions. He might, he thought, have cared, under impossibly different circumstances. It mattered nothing to him now. He admired his own character too little, was too little impressed with the disinterestedness of most others, to resent aspersions on it. It would give a certain lady great satisfaction, he was sure, to have her opinion of him so confirmed. That was the only way left to him to prove his regard for her. Truly, life for the future was to be an upside-down affair—a test of wit, not principles.

He had no principles, he told himself; but only a commission—to administer the law, in the first place; to root out disaffection, in the second. He had a whimsical idea of confounding equity with justice, and making an elegant Sancho Panza of himself. As to the other task—that of combating the spirit of an age bent on immense social displacements, on the reconstitution of States, on the launching of democracy's huge engine “down the ringing grooves of change”—he accepted it as airily as if it were one involving just a disputed question of etiquette.

It suggested a gallant picture—that of this slim rake (with death at his heart all the time) facing the rising tide of revolution with not so much as a Mrs Partington's mop in his hand, but only a ribbon of steel there, and a song of gay contempt on his lips. He had little doubt but that the red waters were destined to submerge all Savoy in the end, and beat their crests against the Alps. Well, though he were but a coloured pebble in their path, he would delay them by that microscopic measure. He owed it as much to his own constitution as to the State's.

In the meanwhile slander, nursed by deep policy, convicted him of the seven deadly sins and more. Advoutry, barratry, crapulence, debauchery—one might run down the alphabet of infamies, and leave the tale incomplete. There is no need to. It would be unedifying, and, as a fable, unnecessary.

Alas! that as such, it could even be held plausible in the district; but experience in Savoy put no limit to the infinite rascalities of Prefects appointed to represent a despotic government. As tyranny's proxies, district autocrats, they were potential as Roman Tetrarchs for good or evil. They might honour their offices, and sometimes did; but more often they abused them. The enforcement of conscription, of the imposts, of the many heart-crushing taxes was all in their hands. They controlled the *gendarmérie*, and could substitute a military for a civil jurisdiction on slight provocation. They could hang, fine, imprison, whip, brand, bleed, and grow rich on extortion if they chose.

In Cartouche's time, the Prefect of Faissigny, it was to be observed, did not grow rich. He expended his shameful gains in riotous living, said scandal. Such gangs of chained convicts, again it remarked, had never yet been encountered on the public roads, wending their way to Chambéry and the state prisons. Such a healthy moral condition, it might have added, had never yet obtained in the Province. The majority nevertheless thought him a strong Prefect, if privately a bad man. The evidences for the former were unquestionable, and rather admirable; for the latter, not even circumstantial—but they were admitted. It is the human way to require convincing proof of a man's virtues; but to accept his wickedness on hearsay. There was a vile story—of the Colonel Kirke order—which related of a father's life sold to a child at the price of her honour, and the contract repudiated after receipt. The facts lay in the unconditional offer of herself to the young autocrat by a bold-eyed jade, who had been smitten in Court by the *beaux yeux* of her parent's judge, and of his answering by impounding her for a time, while he despatched the old miscreant to his deserved ending on the gallows.

The truth is that this fable, with others as odious, was no more than a political expedient for procuring the Prefect's downfall and removal. Mr Trix had proved himself an annoyingly sharp thorn in the side of Illuminatism, and that body was for ever wriggling and twisting to get rid of him. It was, as a matter of fact, in a particularly sensitive state during the first years of the young man's ascendancy, owing to an unhappy determination on the part of the Elector of Bavaria to put his heel on its head, which lay in his dominions;

the result being that that same head—Weishaupt, by name, general and brain of the Society—had flicked itself away, none exactly knew whither; leaving to the corporate rest of it the solution of the problem as to how a body was to continue to answer, as a compact international entity, to an unlocalisable brain.

That bitter stroke was, indeed, the beginning of the finish with Illuminatism. The Society survived for some years longer; but more as a local than a universal power. It retained for a time a certain mystic influence on events, until in the end that influence, with many another as inherently socialistic, was absorbed into the elemental energy of the revolution.

A significant revelation, on the seizure of its papers in 1786, was its *rôle* of names. They included “princes, nobles, magistrates, bishops, priests and professors”—men of a condition weighty enough to carry them and their occult propaganda into the very heart of society; to bring their suggestions to bear, even, upon some heads that wore crowns.

There was one of those, pretty vain and silly, which did not fail, you may be sure, to make itself a subject for their practices. It had looked out of the windows of Piedmont on the tide rising down there in Savoy, and, with all the first tentative assurance, and none of the after humility of Canute, had commanded the waters peevishly to retire. They had not: on the contrary they had come determinedly on, until they threatened to find a way through the passes into Piedmont. The King was disgustingly amazed. He heard of peasants refusing to pay their lawful taxes; he heard of bread riots; he heard of a dissemination of pernicious doctrines, such as those which spoke of commonwealths, and the right of the many to exist other than by sufferance of the few. Was this the way to realise his ideal of a piping Arcadia? What were his provincial viceroys doing, so to let corruption over-run his duchy?

Innuendo whispered to him of one of them, at least. His Prefect of Faissigny, it murmured into his ear, was as responsible as any for the subversive creed that justice, to be effective, must be impartial. That gave him thought. He had made rather a pet of this man; although, it was true, his plans for his aggrandisement had fallen something short of their intention. Was he, this Cartouche, making his disappointment the text for a popular dissertation on the fallibility of Kings? He began to wonder if he had misplaced his confidence.

And the gay Prefect himself—the bright siderite of all this conspiracy? Something conscious of the forces at work against him, indifferent to results

and for himself, he continued to administer his office in the way most characteristic of him. He had no ideals nor delusions. Equality to him, in a world nine-tenths asses, was a vicious chimera. He was a magistrate of the crown, and he simply sought to make that respectable in the popular view. The rights of man, in his, were solely to be governed justly. Roguery, in whatever form, must be suppressed. No man should be privileged to tyrannise. He gave practical effect to the loose tenets of reformers, who, obsessed with a personal vanity, could see nothing in them thus presented but a hide-bound reactionism. Many people, it is certain, think less of their own ideals than of the credit they may gain in pursuing them. They are quite blind to them when achieved by others.

Mr Trix's Prefecture in Le Prieuré was a very Court of Barataria. It was flanked by a lofty stone tower, known as the Belfry, which had once formed part of a long-vanished monastery of Benedictines, and was now used as a lock-up, for those condemned to walk the long road to Chambéry. The committed to it seldom had reason to question the justice of their convictions, or to complain of consideration of extenuating circumstances having been withheld. Cartouche, proclaimed a libertine and martinet, had nevertheless a happy wit for justice. He could tell a rascal under a silk frock.

So much for his public life. What surcease of private pain he sought in its incessant action, in that airy yet vigorous administration of his office, might not appear. He was always reckless for himself, for his reputation. He walked like one gaily damned, conscious of his own bond to the devil. What did it matter what *she* thought of him now? What did anything matter in a world where man was held responsible for the resolving of irresolvable ethical problems. He supposed, and rightly, that she felt his mere presence in her neighbourhood to be an insult to herself. What if she were to be told the truth? It could never cleanse her of an indelible stain: it could never restore her to him for what she had been. Sometimes he told himself now that he hated her—that the proof of it was in his indifference to such reports of himself as might reach her ears. Was that a proof? He took pleasure, on her behoof, in refraining from forcing his slanderers to disgorge their lies. Did not she want him wicked? Every nail knocked into his character was a fresh vindication to her of her self-sacrificial love for another.

And there was a worse true story of him, after all, than any his enemies could invent. It was part of the irresolvable problem; but he believed she would answer it, if she knew, with a more utter condemnation of him than

any he had yet suffered at her hands. That he had cast the girl away, because her disobedience to him had wrought an irremediable wrong to another, herself—would that appeal to her, even if in the hot blaze of the truth, for righteousness? She would answer, he knew, that he himself was the one solely responsible for the situation which his double-dealing with the woman most entitled to his candour had created. What justification had she herself ever given him for submitting her to the chance assaults of jealousy? If he had been honest with the wretched child, this climax had never reached its period. And, instead, he had made her the scapegoat of his own deceit.

He had. And yet, if he had not, if he had confessed the passion of his soul to her the victim of the passion of his body, how would that have bettered things for the victim? Would she, made vestal to that altar of his idol, have thought herself well compensated for her jilting? He mocked now at the absurdity of his old conception—Cartouche's was it? or some sick neurotic monk's? High-priest, he? What a figure of elegance, in urim and thummim and with a thing like a flower-pot on his head! He laughed tears of blood, recalling the ecstatic vision. Better to be accursed than ridiculous. Better Louis-Marie should have her, than she be made the sport of such a mummary. He did not blame his friend, week-knee'd robber as he was. He rather admired him, for his unexpected part. Would not he himself have dared all hell to win the passion of those lips—O, God! the passion! Would he not? had he not? He had at least bargained with the devil for her, and had prevailed just so far as that it was made his privilege at last to serve for deep contrastive shadow to that idyll of their loves.

For shadow: and for shadow within shadow? For all this time he knew he was a haunted man. That spirit of lost love betrayed—poor Molly! The blackest gloom in him was due to it. Not the way, he thought defiantly, to light him back to love. He wearied of its eternal presence; yet he could not shake it off. It leaned out to him from the dusk of mountain passes; it flitted before him through the sorrow of infinite woods; it cried to him for help from the hearts of squalid tenements, where villainous deeds were enacting. He had done that thing. It was past remedy—not past clinching his damnation. Why not then rest on that assurance, and cease to agitate both herself and him? Yet, step warily as he might, he could never escape her—that desolate phantom. Crossing beds of gentian, he would tread upon her eyes; the little freshets which he spurned from their wreathings about his feet, were her white arms; the low wind in the pines became her low English voice. Always

faithful, weeping, appealing—never rebuking. God! was not this insatiable hunger in him enough anguish, without the eternal memory of that fruit, which he had plucked in his wanton appetite, and thrown away, just tasted, for the shadow of a sweeter! Not enough, not enough? Then to her hands be it after death to heap the coals upon his breast! He owned their right; would submit to them, and face the eternal ordeal. Only let them refrain now! Was he so prosperous, so happy, as to invite their vengeance prematurely? Torture too exquisite, it was said, became a transport. Did they want to qualify him for that balm in hell?

He execrated the shadow in his thoughts—its endless, voiceless weeping. He told it that he hated it. Let it take solace of his hate, as he of another's. He meant it. Yolande hated him, and that she did was a wrung rapture to him at this last. By so much he had a place in her passions, where any other was impossible. He would never imperil it by controverting his slanderers. Let her think of him as wickedness incarnate, if only she would think of him.

Thus was the last state of this love's agony; while he laughed, bleeding inwardly, and met his traducers on a hundred points of wit.

He had thought, now and then in his prostrate moments, that if he could only once trace home the shadow, he might find it to be, after all, no better than a black-mailing ghost. Supposing good fortune had attended her dismissal? It might; and he have saddled his conscience with a self-invoked incubus. Why not set himself to discover?

He dared not—that was the truth. He was a coward there; he feared the answer. Better even the shadow, than the revelations possible of the thing that cast it. He dared not.

For this reason, and others, he avoided Turin in these days. He was in the city only at rare intervals of time, when officialdom compelled him. Once or twice on these occasions he happened across the Chevalier de France; heard him rail to others of the ingratitude of children. The man had never forgiven his daughter her *mésalliance*; but, nevertheless, in repudiating her, in refusing to visit her, he was only, had the truth been known, making a virtue of necessity. Madame's self-emancipation had taken strict account of his share in the events which had made it peremptory. He had to answer for it, to a daughter strangely converted to new conceptions of duty; strangely altered in many ways. She made him a princely allowance—which he spent *en prince*; she would accept him at di Rocco only on her own terms, and to those he refused to subscribe. He would not submit to the part of a mere honoured

dependant on her bounty, franked by her husband's grace. She denied him any closer rights. Therefore he kept away—it was best for both of them—and maintained his individual state in the Via della Zecca, sneering to intimates of the niggardliness which any promotion to affluence was sure to find out in women, posing as an injured father, enjoying his independence arrogantly in his dull selfish way.

Cartouche longed to insult him—could, indeed, have found plentiful opportunity to do so, had not the fact of his being *her* father withheld him. The Chevalier, on the few occasions when they met, always scowled at him askance, as if to imply how he knew very well that to this bastard, this *faux enfant*, this royal favourite disappointed of his daughter, was to be attributed his own disfavour with the King. But he was let live, for the sake of her whom he traduced.

* * * * *

And so the gay Prefect, with that death always at his heart, and the tongue in his mouth a sword to wound, stood up against the rising tide, fearless before its roar and babble. He was well served by his police—admiring thralls to his courage, his quick wit, his retentive memory. In these days there was not much of secret information, touching the moral health of his Province, which did not reach his ears. Thus, he early learned of Bonito's visit to the Château, and to draw some odd conclusions from its sequel. Their fruit will appear in the course of things. In the meanwhile, it was observed by him that some curious retrenchments reported up at the great house dated from that visit, and were seemingly coincident with a look, as it were also of retrenchment, in Madame Saint-Péray's beautiful face. It had to happen occasionally that he encountered the Lady of the Manor in the exercise of his duties; and, inasmuch as she always disdained at such times to acknowledge, or even to see him, he had ample opportunity for studying her expression. That was beginning to shape itself, he could not but think, on the lines of some gripping inward reserve. It were too much to say that it betrayed any confirmation of the Chevalier's coward accusation; but certainly it looked pinched and drawn, as if the sweet sap in it were somehow souring from its freshness. He wondered.

He wondered still when whispers reached him how Maire and priests, confident almoners of her bounty, were softly complaining of an inexplicable parsimony in a hand once lavish to munificence in charity. His wonder

increased to hear the charge substantiated by her husband.

He had never avoided Louis-Marie; nor had ever put himself in his way. He had held his deed justified, and had told him so. For the rest, he was no precisian in matters of conscience; and if Saint-Péray could reconcile his marriage with his (as, by his growing air of resignation, not to say, of self-complacency, he appeared to be able to do), he had no mind to deny him his lovely provocation. He had never referred to the subject on their meetings—which were rare, because Louis was a dutiful husband. But once, to his surprise, his friend opened upon it voluntarily.

They had chanced upon one another on the road, when each was unattended. Something of an ancient warmth spoke in Louis's greeting.

"Gaston," he said: "we see so little of one another now. Is it because you blame me?"

"*Si on est bien, qu'on s'y tienne,*" said the other chauntingly. "Why allude to it?"

"Because I cannot bear to think I have lost your respect. Gaston, I must always hold that of more worth than—than some others do."

Cartouche smiled.

"You are looking very well under the infliction, Louis. That is the moral of your loss."

The young man broke out eagerly,—

"She was losing her faith in God: only I could restore it. I have always so longed to tell you. You know it was not the money! The first condition of our union was that it should be given all away—that curse turned to a blessing. I have never touched a penny of it—have never claimed the right to; only as her almoner. And now! O, if that dead man's hand should still be on it, buying her soul to his in vengeance!"

"What do you mean?"

"I think I must always have someone to hold to, Gaston. You were so strong. I don't know what I mean. Only now, when I ask her, for my own charities—often—Gaston, she says she has none to spare—no money—she!"

"She is a better business-man than you, that's all. It doesn't surprise me."

"Perhaps. God bless you, Gaston!"

"Certainly, if He will. But I haven't many dealings with Him. *Bonne chance*, old friend!"

Cartouche set his private agents to work; but the information he sought was long in coming to him. And in the meanwhile the tide rose up and up,

under an ever more lowering sky, and the snarl of coming tempest shook the black waters. But, slow as the years drawled on for those up at the Château, to Cartouche they racketed past like a Dance of Death.

CHAPTER V

AT the lower end of the Via del Po, where it debouched upon the river, stood, nicked out of the north side of the street, a little Square of houses known as the Court of Doctors. The buildings in this Square—for the most part unoccupied—were very high, very narrow, very crazy, and so few in number that no more than two or three of them counted to any one of its three sides, the fourth lying open to the stream of fashionable traffic which flowed by it all day.

Quidnuncs had always been a power in Turin; whence this one-time appropriation of a niche to their worship. The Court of Doctors, in its present aspect, was said to date from the Regency of Madame Reale—daughter to the fourth Henry of France, and wife to the first Victor-Amadeus of Savoy—to whose politic superstition it had been indebted for a sort of unofficial charter. For what destinies foreshadowed, for what poisons brewed, for what villainies set bubbling in crucible and alembic within its precincts its past history was responsible, only its own dark heart might know. To this day the atmosphere of that sunless well of brick seemed brassy with chemicals; its doorways emitted a faint stale scent of drugs; an air of stagnant mystery overhung its pavements. But it was mystery grown unnegotiable. The moon of its prosperity had set; black decay hung brooding on its roofs; the ministers to its former notoriety were flown. Not that empirics were fewer than of yore in Turin, nor less potent in their persuasions. But traps for credulity, like traps for mice, miss of their efficacy after a few score, or a few hundred captures; and the bait must be laid down in some other place and form.

There was one building in the Square, however, which of late years had been infinitely successful in reclaiming to itself a full measure of its own past fame, or infamy. This house stood, on the north-east side, one of three compact whose rears were to the river, from whose swift waters only a rotting wharf, sinking in sludge and slime, divided them. In front, panels of starry devices—suns and golden orbs, reeling in strange elliptics on an azure field—betokened the particular business of the house's master, while they gave the building itself a meretricious distinction over its frowsy neighbours.

This was, in fact, the mystic abode of Spartacus, the famous seer—to

whose *séances* all Turin was thrall in these days—and of his lovely Sibyl Cassandra. They did a roaring business between them there—if any such term may be applied to methods quite cavernous in their secrecy.

Thus, anyone seeking converse with the soothsayer, must commit his destinies to darkness from the outset. He approached the black Egyptian door, and, after a pause to rally his sinking heart, knocked thereon. No sound of footstep answered him from within; but all in a moment the door itself gaped an inky mouth, engulfed him, and closed again noiseless on his entombment. He strained his eyes through pitch—in vain. Not one tiniest theft from darkness could they compass. Suddenly a label sprang to light on a wall—“*Ascend.*” He saw a stairfoot; stumbled upwards between bat-wing hangings; the light shut behind him. At the turn of the stair another glowed out suddenly—“*Ascend*”—directed him on and vanished. A third time this occurred, committing him to a short passage, along which he slunk, until, lo! “*Greeting!*” flashed out an instant before his eyes, was as instantly extinguished, and, halted with strained breath and prickling skin in a close vault of night, he realised that he had gained to the inner Arcanum—the unholy of unholies.

That was a lofty attic room, panelled all round its walls (to confess its properties) with tall mirrors hidden behind black curtains; but those were so controlled, that all or any one of them, answering to a noiseless drop and pulley worked from without, could be made to gather softly away, revealing, unrecognised by the fearful visitor, the lustreless glass behind. One curtain, however, concealed a mid-wall alcove, a cimmerician cavity in which stood a tripod of cunning construction. For under its chafing-dish burned perpetually a concealed lamp, which kept the metal above it at a heat sufficient, at need, to ignite spirit cast upon it, or even gums and aromatic resins, the effect being as of a very immaculate conception of fire. But the dim blue flame thus evoked was of a luminosity just enough to reveal to the terrified observer the pale shadows of misbegotten horrors about him—his own reflection, if he had but known it, in such uncurtained mirrors as were not exposed to the direct rays of the burning naphtha; but, so it seemed to him, a film had been withdrawn, in the silent rising of the draperies, from his own mental vision.

Crystal globes there were, moreover; strings of phosphorescent balls, which could be made to travel hither and thither on invisible wires; webs of luminous thread; entanglements of all sorts at command, the wizard himself, like a livid spider, poised in their midst. But, even so, great Spartacus despite,

his skill and compelling magic, it is doubtful if, with all, the abode of mystery had won for itself any exceptional notoriety, had it not been for its loveliest mystery of all—that Hebe, who called herself Cassandra, and dropped flowers of prophecy from sweet lips, offering, it might be, asps in roses. She it was that, like a caged nymph butterfly, brought the males to beat their wings upon her crystal prison, scattering about it an incense of golden meal.

One dark evening, in the Spring of 1790, two gentlemen, coming rapidly down the Via del Po, turned into the Court of Doctors and stopped before the Wizard's door. They wore masks and dominoes. They were both small men, one lean and the other plump. The plump man was by many years the junior of the lean one. He was also by several social degrees his inferior, being no more, indeed, than our friend Caius Sempronius Gracchus (*alias* the Vicomte di Mirobole) house-steward to his Majesty; while the other was his Majesty himself, no less.

"Is this the place, then?" muttered Victor-Amadeus, drawing a step back. He looked pinched and harried, like some little *petit-maître* of a Frankenstein pursued by a monster of his own creating. "My heart beats, Mirobole," he said. "I think I fear the test."

M. Mirobole clasped his fat hands and opened remonstrant eyes.

"Ah, sire!" he said. "Condescend to deem one truth better than a multitude of conjectures. These hundred shadows on your heart! What if he show you how one tree may cast them all—branches of a single hate, which, if severed at its root, the sunshine shall be yours again without a fleck!"

"You have certainly a reassuring confidence in your Magician, Viscount," said the King with a smile. Then he sighed. "Well, I have only to reveal myself if he presumes too far. Lead on, my friend."

M. Mirobole knocked instantly, and softly, on the tomb-like door. It answered with a startling unaccustomed promptitude to his summons; but his Majesty, never having visited here before, was without suspicion of any collusion implied in that show of eagerness to secure him. Forcing himself to resolution and treading on the heels of his companion, he stepped within the black jaws, which snapped immediately on their prey.

Almost simultaneously the tablet on the wall shone out. Craving his royal charge's close attendance, the Viscount led the way upstairs. He was familiar with the mysteries of the place; though, to be sure, there was no mystery in it all to be compared with that of his own blind faith in the charlatan its master. Presently the two were committed, scarce breathing, to the dark "operating"

room.

“I do not like it,” whispered the King suddenly.

There was certainly nothing very likeable in that profound gloom. It was so dense, so gross, as to appear palpable to him; sooty cobwebs seemed to stroke his face; he swept his hand over it disgustingly.

“Understand,” he muttered, in angry agitation, “that you are my mouthpiece; that I will not be betrayed; that—Ah!”—he gave a little jerk and shriek—“something touched me!”

On the instant, light glowed out in the room—or rather diluted darkness than light—and in the same moment an apparition showed itself.

Bonito, in black skull-cap and black skin-tights, his unearthly face and long white hands showing in the gloom like detached members, made a sufficiently ghastly spectacle. Even the little Vicomte, accustomed initiate, could never surmount a certain terror of him under such circumstances. And the present ones found him exceptionally nervous.

“Hail, Spartacus!” he whispered, his voice fluttering like a leaf. “Thou seest before thee a petitioner.”

“For what?”

The soothsayer’s face seemed to hang, a livid intent blot, in the darkness, its lips alone alive.

“For the truth.”

“Canst thou not, then, conceive it save out of Magic? The truth walks in the sun.”

“Nay, but if the sun’s eclipsed? We come to thee to light a candle to the truth obscured.”

“We, sayst thou?”

“I speak for him beside me here.”

“What is his name?”

“Why, were not to withhold it to honour best your skill? Shall Spartacus show no better than the Egyptian’s guile, fitting his prescience to his subject once identified. Name him, quotha! What need? Wiser is Spartacus.”

“Yet not so wise, it seems, as M. Mirobole.”

The King started violently.

“Knowest thou me, too, Magician?” he muttered.

“Ay, Monarch,” answered the pale lips; “and thy purpose in seeking me.”

“Sancta Maria! Tell me, then, what is that.”

“For light on an ancient prophecy.”

“It is true. God in heaven! What prophecy?”

“It occurs in the Almanac for 1700 by Duret de Montbrison; wherein it is stated that in the year 1792 the Monarchy of Sardinia shall suffer an eclipse.”

The King was trembling violently. He regarded the soothsayer by now with a fearful reverence.

“Tell me, Magician,” he said. “The courses of the heavens are, I know, inexorable. Yet may not the results of their forecastings, where directed upon perishable things, be nullified, if those objects be withdrawn? The shadow of its ages ceases from the felled tree. May it not be so?”

“It may be, King.”

“Fatality creeps on me. The land is thick with threatening voices. I am like one in the dark, hearing whispers all about me—not knowing where to strike and where to withhold. If I could but tell the shadow—where it lies—and uproot the tree! Whence threatens this eclipse? Show me the place, if thou lovest rich reward.”

The Wizard, looking upward, raised both his white hands. There floated into the dark above him luminous twin spheres attached, like a two-fold bubble.

“Seest thou those?” he said. “The one is Piedmont, the other is Savoy. So are the hemispheres of the human brain—of which one is dedicate to the fiend, and one to God. Between them is that eternal strife for precedence which we call man’s dual personality. But in the encroachments of either upon either, who is to distinguish between the sources of good and evil. This tree may stand in Piedmont or Savoy. Answer for which, Cassandra!”

With the word, she was there before them. The curtain over the alcove had silently risen and revealed her. The flame in the tripod, going up like a blue draught, shot her tawny drapery with streaks of emerald. A broad cincture, heavy with large green stones, was looped about her hips. Her bare arms and bosom rounded into soft violet shadows. Amid the chestnut loopings of her hair a coil of little jewelled serpents shone entangled. She was lovely in her face—life blooming out of death—her lips incarnadined with lust of sorrow—large eyes of tragic blue. The King looked on her, fascinated.

“Priestess,” said the Wizard, in a hollow voice: “answer, if of thine inspiration thou mayest, whence threatens the shadow of this Kingdom’s foretold eclipse?”

As he spoke, there came out of the darkness a string of little stars, of softest radiance and many colours, which took noiseless flight about the

Sibyl's head, and circled there in wondrous convolutions, faster and faster, until they seemed to whirl like lashing snakes. Then, in a moment, one of a red tint poised itself above her brow, and the rest fled away and were extinguished.

His Majesty, flaccid with awe, was by now in a condition to believe anything. And the priestess answered—in that old soft English voice. Poor Molly's broken "Frenchings" had by now mended themselves wonderfully; but no call to shriller accents could spoil the quality of the throat which uttered them.

"I see a figure down in Faissigny," she cried—"the figure of a man. It standeth in the sun like other men, and like other men doth cast its shadow. But, lo! the shadow of this man swells outward from his feet, onward and ever onward, until it engulfs the whole Province, laying it under tribute to his darkness."

"The Prefect!" muttered the King. He saw his confirmation here of some black suspicions.

"Ask her," he said, trembling, to the Wizard; "is the figure that of mine own Prefect of Faissigny?"

"Thou hearest, Cassandra?" said Bonito.

"Ay," she answered; "it is the man!"

The King uttered an ejaculation, and lifted deploring hands.

"What motive in this monstrous thing?"

"The motive," said the Sibyl, "of resentment, for a reward once promised and withheld; the motive of man's ambition, which is ruthless; the motive of one whose nature it is to betray all trusts confided in him."

She really believed, poor girl, on the misrepresentations of *her* employer, that Cartouche was conspiring to overthrow *his*.

The King smote his thigh.

"He shall die," he cried.

Bonito saw, though he did not, how Cassandra started at the word.

"Nay," he said hurriedly; "the Fates are not to be propitiated with blood. Uproot the tree—not fell it."

"But the shadow, Magician," said the King peevishly—"how it hath spread already, sowing the ground with insurrection!"

"That crop would but grow lusty with his blood. Nay, I know not but that only to uproot him might not precipitate the eclipse."

"My God! You falsify the parable."

“The parable was thine own, King.”

“What am I to do?”

He was jerking and mowing in a fever of petulance.

The Wizard turned to his priestess.

“Shall nothing, then, arrest this darkness, stunt its growth, and nullify the prophecy?”

“One thing—one man alone,” she answered impassive. Indeed she was only repeating a lesson.

“What thing?” he said.

“To plant another instant in his place, while yet the ground gapes wide from his uprooting.”

“What other?”

She held her hands palm downwards over the chafing-dish. Instantly a lurid smoke rose from it, and in the midst appeared upright letters of fire, which spelt the name Léotade. She raised her hands, and the letters sunk and disappeared (in one piece).

The King muttered the name, evidently at a loss. But the Pythoness, with tranced eyes fixed upon some imaginary figure before her, pointed, her shoulder level with her chin, and spoke its qualifications,—

“I read a healing sweetness there, as of a pine tree taken from some harsh plantation, and put to root within its native soil. The man is of that Province, strong and honoured—no stranger from beyond its bourne, like him that hath planted its pastures with dark hate and shadow, looking to reap the storm. O, name! in thy bright influence I see the clouds dispersing, the darkness leave the land, the eclipse become no more. Pass on in silence!”

The final words seemed as if addressed to some ghostly scene-shifter. She had vanished in their utterance, and the chamber was recommitted to its shadowy glooms.

Shaking with agitation, the King turned upon the Magician.

“Let this Léotade, this sound health-giving tree, supplant the other. I say it, and will see it done. I know him not—what matter! Truth shall be vindicated.”

Bonito laughed grimly.

“Not so easily, O, King! are the powers of darkness despoiled. This Prefect will not budge at thy command.”

“He will not?”

“Why, of what texture, think you, is this same shadow that spreads from

before his feet—this shadow of thine eclipse? Is it not woven of black sedition, which ever answers slavishly to him its master, obedient to his least gesture? He'd have a fine dark following, did he once turn him to the sun of monarchy, and march to overwhelm it. Why should he budge? And yet maybe I could induce him."

"How? Your words fall on me like a pitchy rain, heralding that Egyptian darkness. Before God, how?"

"I'd put a spell on him, a loathing of his office. I care not. Go thine own ways, for me."

"Nay, good Spartacus, wise Spartacus—thou must help me here indeed."

"I care not, I say. I say, strike at him openly, if you will, and see him bristle through all his hulking shadow like a boar."

"I will not. I will have it your way."

"Well, if you like, give me the warrant to dismiss him, and appoint this Léotade in his place—him or another; what concern is it to me? Only I could so take him with mine art, he'd greet this chance as of a release from bondage—construe it into his resignation offered and accepted—abandon his following, leaving it to die of an atrophy, like a body whose brain is withered."

"If you could do this thing, and earn my lasting gratitude!—dispel that darkness, and be like Moses honoured with burnt-offerings. I'll send thee on the warrant. In the meanwhile, take this in earnest of my debt to thee."

He threw a purse upon the floor—it struck weightily—and turned and left the room with Mirobole. A minute later the door below had shut upon them.

Bonito, with a loud snigger, touched a spring in the wall which acted on the curtain of the alcove, folding it up and away; and, striding to the tripod, took some hidden powder from beneath it, which he cast into the pan. A glowing flame shot up immediately, lighting the whole place, and he called out in ecstasy: "Cassandra, ma belle prêtresse, ma petite!"

She came out from a little room hidden behind the further curtain, and stood up motionless between their inky folds.

"We have won!" he cried boisterously: "we are partners in this triumph! Ministers of Fate, what a triumph! Mine own nominee elected; the other deposed and disgraced. Savoy is ours: we will cross the Alps ere long. Rejoice with me, child! Thine enemy lies low—thou art avenged."

"Yes, I am avenged," she answered dully.

He looked at her shrewdly.

“Art thou not satisfied?”

“You will not hurt him else, Bonito?”

“Why should I? He stood in my way; he will stand no longer. That is enough for me.”

“But you will not hurt him?”

“Hurt him, hurt him? Thou art tenderer of him than of his doxy. Look how you smile on while I bleed her—no pity there. And she’ll have to bleed the more for this—we take new life of it—no bottom to our need for funds. She’ll have to bleed again, I say, and make you fresh sport. No tenderness there.”

“You will not hurt him?”

“Plague on the parrot! Why should I hurt him?”

“Swear it.”

“Why, I will. Let him go free, for me, to beggary. I swear it, there.”

“Remember that.”

She dropped the curtain, and was gone.

CHAPTER VI

HE had done this thing for her—had stained his hands with blood to keep hers clean—had darkened his own soul that her soul might shine the purer for that shadow. What was her debt to him for this great self-sacrifice? How could she pay it, and not condone his sin?

So we pass to Yolande and her mortal problem.

Poor child so straight in candour as she was, no compromise with facts seemed possible to her nature. She must tell him all or nothing.

And if she told him all—revealed her knowledge of his crime—made herself its accessory thereby? He'd answer, would he not, "That leaves me no alternative. Sweet love, for sweet love's sake, I must acquit you of this shadow of complicity—give myself up, and vindicate your spotless fame before the world"?

Would he not? She told herself he would; deafened her ears to her own heart's whispered treason; would admit no justification for it in the evidences of a slandered character. Could one so un-self-reliant, so irresolute, so much the whimpering prey to circumstance as circumstance had seemed to paint her Louis, have braced himself to do that deed? The deed was there to answer her—to answer, triumphantly too, that by very reason of itself that saintly soul was convict of a heroism of which its meek patience had once seemed incapable, and which, in its revelation, had found the woman in her secretly exultant over the angel. Was that so indeed? Had his fall from grace made him dearer to her than ever his perfection could?

A dreadful thought, for which she paid to herself and God with anguishes of penance. But she could not control it, nor lay its unrighteous shadow. How could she, when father to it was the wish that what it implied of manly strength in him would answer to her confession of that dark knowledge, were she to make it, by an instant surrender to the law?

She could not tell him, then; and, so, what other course? No mid-way steering for this whole-hearted heroine—no hints, no tell-tale sighs, no tearful looks askance to haunt him with half-truths; no lagging partner snivelling unspoken resentment of her burden. She'd bear it all and bravely, the weight, the heat and pressure of the day, and cheer him, smiling, on to self-

redemption. That be her mission—by ways of healing grace to guide him to that summit he would never attain alone. Man's responsibility might be to the civil laws; but woman's was to love. For love he'd saved her; love should save him. The rest was for his confessor.

Conceive this poor soul, then, with her monstrous self-imposed burden—never to be put down—facing the steep of life! If her feet would sometimes falter, her eyes grow strained with agony beneath it, her heart never admitted by one false beat a sense of disproportion in their loads. To fend him from the truth, while hiding from him that she knew it; to pay his debts to vile extortion, and suffer the stigma of a parsimony which appeared to grudge him the means to realise their compact of a boundless charity; worse, to suspect sometimes that he guessed her knowledge of the truth, and was content to build upon her loving hypocrisy his house of later peace, was content to let her live the lie while he enjoyed its fruits—these things were the hardest of her task.

Another grief she suffered; but that, she told herself, was in heaven's withholding of a greater. She was thankful for it—thankful as a martyr, whom great pain has numbed from further feeling—thankful that in all these years no child was born to them to bear the heritage of its father's sin. And while she praised heaven for its mercy, the starved woman in her hungered for the milk of motherhood, and, fading on that deprivation, made her task of youth a burden. Yet she must bear that too, or pay the penalty to love estranged, since only the gifts of motherhood could compensate for youth and beauty bartered against them.

So she must be young and sweet in spite of ageing conscience; must sing about her duties; must smile away those shadows in her husband's eyes which she sickened to think were the reflections of her own enforced avarice, her waning beauty, her barrenness.

A sordid destiny for this child of lovely purity; this Yolande of the white hands; this lily light of truth.

And to work out in what unnatural atmosphere—transplanted into what lifeless soil?

She was the mistress of a Golgotha, an old dark windy necropolis, whose massive gates her husband's hands had closed for ever, shutting her in to consort with its ghosts. In di Rocco had perished the last of his name; in him, the old blotched trunk, his house's life, slow withering to its roots, had sunk for ever. The branches long were leafless. To her, a stranger, had befallen the

heritage of death.

She could have administered it, have justified heaven's severe choice of her as receiver in that estate such ages bankrupt in charity, have wrung a sombre joy even from dispersing its evil accumulations, had not Fate thus imposed upon her this awful seclusion, paralysing her hands. As antique graveyards are sometimes made the sporting-grounds for little feet, so had she once pictured to herself the joy of budding life at play in these stony corridors and empty gardens, redeeming them from the melancholy of great wrong. It was not to be; and for the withholding of that lovely mercy she could only give heaven praise—give it with weeping eyes in solitude, and, elsewhere, with a bright countenance turned to her husband.

Did he find that inscrutable, nevertheless? Was he so far from sharing her thankfulness for that grace denied as that he could visit upon her—in those shades of altered intimacy, those reserves in confidence, those nuances of alienation which only love can detect—his secret disappointment? She prayed that it was not so; prayed, also, that, in the enforced restraints she must put upon his charities, his sweet and reasonable nature would look for no baser motive than necessity. She was always frank with him as to the extent of what she could command (exclusive of Bonito's periodic drains upon her, and those of her father, a creature scarcely less abominable), and held all within those limits at his pleasure. Rather she should be whispered for parsimony than that his generosity should suffer in its name. He was so good, so bounteous, so utterly improvident for himself. Though he would not claim one penny that was hers, there was no question of his acting as her almoner. Indeed the money was no more hers than his, but in trust to both of them for God's good business. She was, by heaven's grace, but the acting paymaster; and so long as she might bear the whole burden of that duty, she was content that he should enjoy its credit. The question was one between her and love alone; its very exclusiveness made its bliss.

Yet sometimes in her moods of desolation, when, for all her prayers and self-reassurances, that sense of their estrangement would glow a more definite gloom, and the problem of her double life smite sickly on her heart, a dread doubt would arise in her as to the sureness of her guidance of this afflicted soul. The physically blind are apt to become the morally blind, intent only on their self-interests, some people say, because of the consideration with which pity hedges them—of the licence which it allows them for their infirmity. What, then, if love in pity had so rallied this stricken life as to lead

it to regard itself as a persecuted thing—a thing privileged, through its own helplessness, to presume on the self-sacrifices of others for its sake? Louis's apparent obtuseness to the meaning of the atonements her sweet example exacted of him, his apparent ignorance of any provocation to them caused by himself, filled her, when in these moods, with amazement. Had he lost all sense of responsibility to his own deed, in her voluntary acceptance of its consequences? That were to assume that he guessed her part, and could justify it to himself on the score of his own infirmity—an obliquity which surely could not be held to vindicate her self-sacrifice before heaven. Yet sometimes the assumption would arise, to hurt her cruelly—even to sting *her* to a momentary revolt. He *could* not be really ignorant of her burden—*must* have surmised some coincidence between Bonito's visit and the instant restrictions she had been forced to put upon their expenditure. His terror of the man's presence on that day; his slow and shaken convalescence from the date of it—these were evidences of his knowledge hard to be discredited. And that, in the face of it, he could expect of her a pledge of their full confidence; could imply a reproach of her for her barrenness!—O, that were an addition to her load beyond her human endurance. The mere shadow of its oppression killed her heart—drove her in her agony to blow cold upon the little chill which already spoke their differences. And then the reaction would come.

He had done this thing for her; and she had accepted the burden of its consequences. She had prayed, prayed that even as he had saved her out of silence, so might she save him. And this was her heroism—to deprecate his blindness as a wilful vileness.

Then, poor child, she would call herself a wicked traitor to her lord, blame her own foul suspicions, and seek by loving demonstrations to atone. Her wistful guiles to win his favour, her rehearsals for his sake of that old forgotten part of tranquil innocence, her gratitude for only half-thawed acknowledgments, were moving things to witness. How could she dream her Louis guilty of this monstrous meanness—the man who had dipped his hand in blood to keep hers white? His first terror of that apparition had been real; he had afterwards accepted her word for its being an illusion. He always trusted others' assurances: that very weakness it was which made him so lovable. So lovable, so lovable; and she had let her wicked heart condemn him! Could he have recovered from the shock of that visitation so utterly as he had, if he had seen in her the ever-present hostage for his immunity from

deadlier hauntings? Her whole protecting knowledge of him was to answer; and it answered piercingly remorseful. No dear soul, it said, had ever less power than Louis-Marie for affecting to ignore the influences of a present depression. Yet Louis-Marie, the terror once laid, had rallied—had even come to recover something of the serenity of his earlier innocence. Why should he not, indeed? She thought, with heart-felt joy, it spoke his peace made with God; and, so justified of her burden, was more frenziedly determined than ever to hide her bearing of it from him, while she smiled and smiled under its load, impersonating out of torture her own untroubled youth. Alas! blind Love—who yet perhaps deserves scant pity! For did he not put out his own eyes!

Now she saw, and was rejoiced to see, as the months drew into years, his soul relax upon an ancient sweet security; the spectre of his fear grew less and less; his natural goodness mature into the full fruitage of its blossoms' promise. So peaceful did he grow, so seemingly unvexed by apprehensions, so confident in his demands upon her charity for others' sake, she was sometimes moved to wonder if, after all, she were not being made the victim of a hellish conspiracy—if he had really committed the crime with which villainy had charged him. But as often she recalled Bonito's words—"Ask him, if you doubt me"—and that she dared not do. The answer might destroy at a blow the whole structure of his soul's redemption, which her self-obliterating love had patiently built up for him year by year. Fruitless all her devotion then; useless that cementing of its bricks with her own heart's blood. He had come to be nearer heaven now than she, raised on the altar of her sacrifice. She had lied to save him. Should she risk his soul at the last to save her own?

Divinely steadfast to her purpose, she kept her way. Her sweet eyes shone inspired to it. Though she were lost by holding to it, *he* should win to harbour. What greater love could woman show? If God would forgive her for that—concede her the mercy to creep into heaven, lost in her dear saint's shadow! For he was her saint again—twice beatified through his fault. He had been guilty of his one worldly lapse for her—had done outrage to his nature that hers might suffer none. Was not such sin the prerogative of consecration?

So, with an unfading resolution, through days of exaltation and depression, through drear heart-burnings and the agonies of misunderstandings not to be explained, through poignant ecstasies and thorns of non-fulfilment, she strove

unfaltering—until, lo! there came a time when all her struggles seemed in vain; when, bursting from the thicket, her bleeding feet stood halted in an instant, not before the dear meadows they had hoped, but at the base of a monstrous God-veiling cliff.

That year, the heavens themselves had seemed to speak the omens of disaster. From its opening they had poured down incessantly from sooty reservoirs a torrent like the deluge. The season was an abnormally mild one, if any such term could be applied to tempests of wind and water, overwhelming, inexplicable. The ice in the mountains, cracking and answering under the assault, boomed an unceasing cannonade; the land slid down in continents; trees were tossed in flood-water, like sprouts boiling in a saucepan. And to all this descending hubbub the rising of a human tide seemed to leap sympathetic. The waters of unrest were gathering force and volume; the dark hour of Savoy was drawing near; the Prefect had hard ado to keep his feet.

Then at last came a period of respite, when the powers of darkness seemed to sleep exhausted; and the sun came out, and the waters sounded peaceably on the hills, and Spring opened its drowned eyes and preened its dragged plumes.

One day, when all the land was glowing in a noontide rest, a servant came to inform Madame Saint-Péray that his excellency the Prefect of Faissigny craved the honour of a word with her alone. She opened her eyes in amazement.

The Prefect! Impossible! The man could not have heard aright.

But the man was not mistaken. M. le Préfet, it would appear, had foreseen this reluctance on Madama's part to grant him that honour, inasmuch as he had impressed very earnestly upon the messenger the importance of an occasion which could thus excuse his presumption in calling upon one with whom he was unacquainted.

Madama's cheek flamed as she rose; her lips set tightly; she looked an inch taller than her wont.

"Thank you, Benoît," she said. "I will go down to him."

CHAPTER VII

HE bowed to her gravely as she entered. She responded with the iciest salutation. Throughout their interview they both remained standing.

He noticed, with dark ruth, how wan her face had grown, how sharpened from its blunt youthful curves, how prematurely aged even—like a late-blown lily, shrunk, in its first lovely opening, to a freezing wind. The nearer thereby, the more pathetic, to his own barren passion. He could claim his pallid kinship with this sorrow, as never he might have done with insolent felicity. He was so changed by love, he could have prized dead beauty in this woman above all the living graces of her happier sisters. Had she waned like the moon, his arms had lusted for the last shred of her.

His heart beat thickly. For whatever reason, he was to have speech with her once more—was to reclaim her to some interest in his own. So that that might be, he cared little how she wounded him.

“You asked to see me, Monsieur,” she said frigidly. “I am here. To what importunate circumstance, may I ask, do I owe this—yes, this insult, Monsieur, of your visit?”

She had hardly intended to be so explicit; but her indignation took her, irresistibly and on the instant, off her feet. Cartouche slightly shrugged his shoulders.

“Importunate, Madame?” he said. “You shall judge. I come as Prefect. The insult is official.”

His eyes, fastened on her, feeding gluttonously after their long abstinence, saw how she started slightly at his words—how she looked at him in sudden fear. To whatever offensive motive she had thought to attribute his visit, the possibility of its impersonal character had evidently not occurred to her. He was become master by that disillusionment; and would have been less than human not to have recognised it—not to have held her frightened heart fluttering for one moment in his hand. It was fierce ecstasy to feel it beat—to have it own him lord of itself through terror—if only he might reassure it in the end, and release it to fly away on wings of poignant gratitude!

She struggled for the self-composure to answer him after his kind.

“I have no right, then, Monsieur, to resent it. The law exacts its privileges,

however represented. You come, I am to understand, on business. Business, Monsieur, demands the fewest words to be effective."

"That is perfectly true, Madame," he said quietly. "This of mine, though its processes have extended over years, is summed up in a sentence. You are in the habit of sending, periodically, large sums of money to one who is well known by me to be conspiring against the Government."

She stood as rigid as stone. Every atom of colour had fled from her face. He longed to cry out on its moveless agony, "O, woman! on the merit of my hopeless passion, believe in me, trust in me! I am here to save, not ruin!" But he must strike deeper, before he could seek to heal.

"This fact, Madame," he said, "has been made known to me through the ordinary secret channels of my office. It is indisputable. I do not ask you to dispute it. I ask you simply, I give you the opportunity of answering privately, a single question. Does M. Saint-Péray, who is my friend, identify himself also with this movement? Is he, in short, in your confidence in this matter of your supplying it with funds?"

She tottered towards him, holding out frenzied hands.

"O, no, Monsieur! O, no, no!"

He knew it all now; he had her at his mercy; for one moment this soft cruel thing should yield herself to his will, its abject slave. He lingered out the rapture, as one condemned to death might hang on the lips of his soul's love. His dark cheek flushed; he backed before her approach, unresponsive.

"You reassure me, Madame," he said coldly. "I had been concerned for him, I own. It is enough that friendship has helped to exculpate, where a closer relationship, it seems, had found its better interest in deceiving. For the rest, you are doubtless prepared, for yourself, with a sufficient answer to the law."

"The law!"

She whispered it, aghast.

"As its representative, Madame," he said, "I have no choice but to demand one of you. You can refuse to give it, referring your defence to a public occasion." (He would not see how her anguish entreated him.) "In that event, I make my bow, my apologies, and I withdraw. The issue then is very simple. You will be called to account for your subsidising of a dangerous conspirator against the State, and will probably be put on your trial with him. As Prefect of this Province, I can guarantee the case at least an impartial hearing. My presence, Madame, does not insult the law, however offensive it may be to

the criminal.”

She hurried nearer to him—broke out, and down, in an instant.

“Before God, Monsieur! You must believe me—you must. I know nothing of this man’s use of what he wrings from me; I am not his confederate, but —”

He interrupted her, sharp and sudden,—

“But his victim.”

She cried: “O, Monsieur, Monsieur! O, my God!” and buried her face in her hands.

Now at that his gluttonous moment passed. Henceforth his heart was hers to sport with. It had only played the tyrant hitherto to nurse to ecstasy its own compunction. He spoke in a strangely softened tone,—

“He is black-mailing you?”

“No!” she cried, looking up in quick miserable panic. “I have not said it.”

He smiled slightly.

“No need to. Well, I suspected as much.”

She seemed to strive to speak; but nothing came from her.

“I say,” he repeated, “I suspected it. Do I not know this man of old, his craft, his villainy—how he will go long ways about to reach an end—traverse the world to stab an enemy in the back? Most to be feared when most he feigns benevolence—Bonito—that old dreary misanthrope to play the Benthamite! Why, I never doubted but that he had his deep reasons for scheming to marry you to—I never doubted it, I say, Madame; and here’s the proof. He was playing for hush-money.”

She stared at him, as if her very soul were paralysed.

“How he discovered the truth?” he continued—“by cunning or coercion? —” He paused, questioning her at a venture with his eyes. She made no answer; and he went on, shrugging his shoulders: “Like enough ’twas he himself who laid the train—who first supplied the insidious damning information to my friend, and—but it matters little; he discovered it.”

He questioned her face again. Still she was silent.

“If I had guessed in time,” he said, in a deep passionate voice, “this should never have been. It shall be no longer. Madame, I have twice before offered you my services, and twice been rejected with scorn. Once again I lay them at your feet. It was for this, in truth, I sought you. I entreat you, do not refuse me.”

It was not in her nature to do justice to this man. So far as his devotion

touched her, it was to nothing but a sense of humiliation. The thought uppermost in her mind was of his cognisance, not his chivalry.

“You know?” she whispered. Her white lips could hardly frame the words.

“I know,” he answered. “He had confessed to me before you married him.”

An irrepressible moan came from her, pitiful, heart-rending. He broke upon it passionately,—

“I told him, what I tell you now—that, on my soul, he had done right; but that, having done what he had done, the prospect of his union with you had become impossible. To me, though what I am, the thought was horrible. Believe me, Madame—before God, believe that I had no thought of myself in so urging him.”

She drew a little away. Her eyes were already freezing to him. But his emotion made him blind.

“I am not to blame for what followed,” he hurried on. “The villain—that same dog Bonito over-reached me. He took advantage of my absence to practise on one—there I will not pain you with the record. You know who came to you. She had been warned by me against abetting him she nursed in any designs upon your ignorance. I do not blame *him*. If you can do me any justice in your woman’s heart, you will guess why. He staked his soul against a chance for which I would have sacrificed a thousand heavens. But, with her—it was different. She paid for her temerity with my curse.”

He ended, greatly agitated. His eyes were lowered before her. He did not see the new abhorrence of him spring and flame in hers. He did not see how the majesty of her womanhood rose to answer and reject him.

“You cursed her for my sake, Monsieur?” she said quietly.

“If you will have it so,” he answered low.

“And this, her suborner, her confederate;—you say he shall trouble me no longer?”

“Not while I have hands to strike, and teeth to hold.”

She sprang away from him.

“That I have fallen to this!” she cried—“To be asked to approve myself the instrument of that poor creature’s ruin! to applaud the wicked deed and crown the doer of it with my gratitude! Would you murder also for my sake—smear the feet you profess to worship with a fellow-creature’s blood? O, go from me, go from me, Monsieur! you are horrible in my sight. We take the burden of our sin—will atone for it as heaven wills. Better a hundred cruel witnesses than one advocate like you. She thought to save your soul, poor

child, by winning it to justice done to hers. ‘One marriage brings another’—those were her pretty words—and so for your requital of her love. Love! O, I am fouled in having heard you—humbled myself before you. Go—say—do what you will, Monsieur. We refuse your help! Why will you for ever impose your hateful favours on me?”

He listened to her, standing quite still and ghastly pale. Then he bowed slightly, and walked to the door. Turning at it, he spoke,—

“I have made it my mission in life, Madame, to protect the shrine of my devotion from sacrilegious hands. No scorn, no misconstruction, no wounding hate will deter me from that purpose while I live. The idol of it shall owe me, at least, that debt of fidelity. If she hungers for the opportunity to retaliate, as debtors will, there is the precedent of Lazarus in heaven to reassure her. I will be sure to call to you for that drop of water, Madame.”

He opened the door, and was gone.

She stood quite motionless for minutes after he had left her; then suddenly flung herself, exhausted, into a chair. No grace, no pity towards him was in her heart. If they had been possible to its pure narrow code, his parting words, in which she read a scoff at religion, would have alienated them finally.

For hours she lay in wretched thought, half-hypnotised by misery. No tender sprig of hope could ever again be hers. Her uttermost fears were confirmed. He had confessed his guilt. The road stretched dark and endless now before her.

The house was deadly quiet. She was quite alone, and very desolate. Louis-Marie had gone into France, on business concerning his patrimony, and would not be back for some days. She had not even God to help her.

With dusk, as she still lay unstirring, came a quick step, which she recognised, in the hall outside. She caught herself up, making some effort towards composure, as it hurried towards the room in which she sat; and the next instant young Balmat entered.

He shut the door upon the servant who had announced him. He was so agitated, so breathless, that he could scarce stammer an apology for his freedom. He came towards her, hat in hand, at an eager run. His eyes were shining, his chest heaving in the prospect of some wonderful announcement.

“*Mon Dieu!* Madama, Madama,” he whispered excitedly: “What news! Christ in heaven, what news!”

She rose, trembling. Her heart, she felt, could not bear much more.

“What is it, Jacques?” she said faintly.

Balmat, iron-nerved, made but a sorry Mercury.

“It is only,” he said, “that the Marquess your husband was murdered—that is little—there was more than one of us had suspected it—but by whom? God be praised for enlightening us—for vindicating the innocent—it has all come out; and who do you think is the guilty one? No other than M. le Préfet himself, who is lying at this moment under arrest. Ah, ah! what have I blundered, great oaf! Madama, Madama!”

* * * * *

That same night an express was despatched by Madame Saint-Péray to her husband in France, bidding him, for reasons of her own, not to return until he heard further from her.

CHAPTER VIII

THAT sunny forenoon on which Dr Bonito (carrying the King's Commission in his pocket, and M. Léotade, whom he had taken up by the way, on the seat of the chaise beside him) came posting down the valley into Le Prieuré, found the whole village in a flutter of excitement, which the apparent opportuneness of his arrival was presently to inflame into a fervour.

Alighting at the doors of the Prefecture, and conning, acidly sardonic, the perturbed faces which, gathered about him, sought to reconcile this frowzy magnifico with an earlier familiar figure, he was conscious of a moral agitation in the atmosphere, which at first he was inclined to attribute to some shadow of the truth having run before him. But in that he was wrong. The announcement of his mission, when it was made, took the populace like a clap of wind at a street corner. The village staggered in it; then rallied hurriedly to appraise its significance. For the moment the fact was important only in its relation to another more instant and insistent. The two combined ran up the public temperature to fever-heat.

M. le Préfet, it appeared, was absent at the time—opportunistically for M. le Préfet, in the light of a certain amazing discovery. There were those, indeed—a boon friend, a sympathising official or two—who would have liked to urge, by secret message, upon M. le Préfet, wherever he might be found, the wisdom of confirming his own absence, practically and for ever. But no one knew where he was. For the rest—M. Léotade being long identified with the popular movement, and personally a local favourite—the change, *per se*, was accepted with an easy resignation. Events, to be sure, had made such a change problematically inevitable. The wonder was that it had come to occur at the intensely psychologic moment. For how could a Prefect, shown guilty, though on circumstantial evidence, of a startling crime, be made to bring about his own arrest? The advent of the newcomers had resolved that difficulty. Mr Trix was M. le Préfet no longer.

The story, as poured by agitated officialdom into the ears of Dr Bonito and his *protégé*, was soon related. That very morning, it appeared, a goatherd, emerging from the woods over against the ice-fall of the Glacier of the Winds, had been halted petrified before a sight, the like of which had surely

never before astounded human vision. For there, embedded in one of the toppling glassy pinnacles, hung poised, before the very eyes of the man, a human body.

Dumbfounded, he had presently taken out his spyglass, to inquire more closely into this wonder—only to recoil aghast before the revelation it brought him. The obscene thing, huddled in semi-transparency, appeared squatting like a great toad. There was something horribly unseemly in its attitude—an extravagant pose of limb, which in a mass of its bulk was sickeningly abnormal. It might have been an arm flung over its head, until one saw that it ended in a boot. Its face, twisting from under anywhere, came very close to the surface of the ice. It looked as if flattened against a window, grinning out on the observer. As he, that observer, had brought its features into focus, he had uttered a startled cry, and leapt back. *The face was the face of Augias, Marquess di Rocco.*

There was no mistaking it, by anyone who had once been familiar with its loathed enormity. The man had stood staring and trembling before it, in a deadly fascination. Possibly it was due to the phenomenal weather that the glacier had thus early yielded up its secret. At any rate it had yielded it—the murder was out.

Yes, and literally murder, it appeared. The dead, slowly travelling down through these years, had claimed at last to be his own damning witness. Even while the onlooker gazed spell-bound, the great ice-turret had tilted over, sunk, torn away, and, still holding to its secret in the main, had gone shattering and waltzing down the slope until it had brought upon against a heap of brash. Whereupon, seeing it settled for the time, the peasant had girded up his terrified wits, and pounded down into the village, half-demented with his news.

He had been heard with incredulity; his urgency had compelled his listeners; in a little, half the village was trooping up the moraine. One of the party, the place being pointed out to him, had descended hurriedly upon the glacier to investigate. The venture was not without peril; death was for ever thundering down in the wash of that icy weir. But he had succeeded in reaching the spot in safety; and the next moment a strange cry was carried from him to the watchers on the moraine. Then they had seen him running furiously back to them.

Young Balmat it was. His face was death-ashy; there was an exultant fury in his eyes; his breath hissed from his lungs.

“It is true,” he had gasped: “and he was murdered! The knife is still sticking in him. *I know that knife well—it was M. le Préfet’s.*”

It was this news which had run down into Le Prieuré, carried by those who were despatched thither for ropes. Within the next hour or two, the block containing the body, like a hideous mass of spawn, had been salvaged and drawn to the edge of the moraine. Then all, who had the stomach to look, might satisfy themselves.

Even as the tale was ended into the ears of Dr Bonito and the other, there came down the village street a hushed and solemn company bearing its awful burden. Silence sowed itself before them, even as if Death walked there, scattering his grain. They carried it to the Church, and laid it on the stone floor of the vestry. There it rested alone, like an infected thing shut away into quarantine. Not a soul would approach it, when once it was delivered to the law.

And how did the law accept its trust? Sourly, as represented by Dr Bonito. This ugly visitation, indeed, was the least agreeable to his schemes. He saw on the instant how, were Cartouche to stand convicted of the crime, his own hold on Madame Saint-Péray would be loosened for ever. If, on the other hand, he were to reveal a certain secret, of which likely only he and the deposed Prefect were cognisant, the indictment of the actual murderer would end, only the more certainly, his chances of extortion—perhaps, even, would be used to claim him as an after accessory to the deed. He was in a villainous quandary, that was the truth. This accursed accident had confounded all his plans.

And to increase his perplexity, the new Prefect—who once secure in his promotion, was already showing an aggravating tendency towards self-importance and independence—betrayed what he thought was an unwarrantable officiousness in taking the matter promptly and masterfully into his own hands. He had Jacques Balmat brought before him at once.

“You have no doubt,” he demanded, “that this body, so astonishingly brought to light, is the body of the late Marquess di Rocco?”

“No doubt whatever, Monsieur.”

“Nor that Monsignore met his death by foul means?”

“Not even he, Monsieur, could resist the full length of that blade. It lies buried in him to the hilt.”

“And it is by that hilt that you identify it?”

“Precisely so, Monsieur.”

“How?”

“It was familiar to me of old, as to many others, in the hand of M. Trix, Monsignore’s *protégé*. The haft was of jade, surmounted by a golden rat’s head. It was Monsieur’s hunting-knife, well-known.”

“Granted that the knife was Monsieur’s, there remains the question of a motive.”

“It is not for me to suggest one. Monsieur, at least, it is to be believed, foresaw no advantage to himself in the event of his *padrone*’s marriage. It was whispered, indeed, that he had every interest in preventing it. The two came to words, it was reported, on the subject of a settlement—compensation—what you will. That was just before Monsignore’s disappearance. M. Trix also had disappeared—it would seem opportunely. I know nothing more than that. I repeat only to Monsieur the common gossip.”

Gossip, to be sure; but quite reasonably damning. That evening, Monsieur the ex-Prefect, returning unconcerned to the village, was arrested in the street, and conveyed to the prison of the Belfry. He had still friends; there had been voices timely to warn him; he had laughed them away unheeding. Here, perhaps, was to end his part in that pantomime of necessarianism which men played to the gods. He hoped, in the transformation, that he would be found worthy to be made a harlequin. But he was not sure, judged by his present fooling at Fate’s hands, that he was not destined for pantaloon. He took his deposition and the rest with an imperturbable coolness and good humour.

And apart in the dark church lay the body of his father—a hideous thing. Yet there was one, as inhuman though living, who, moved by a sardonic curiosity, could be found to dare the terrors of that mortuary. In the dead of the night Bonito, candle in hand, stood to look upon the corpse. What he saw is not to be described. The ice had preserved it as whole as when, seven years before, it had plunged into the crevasse—as whole, but—It had enclosed as it had caught it—a thing writhed and racked obscenely—a horrible thing like a Guy-Fawkes. They had chipped its glassy prison away from the dead form. In the warmer air, the frosty glaze remaining had already melted, and the body lay in a pool. It looked as if it were struggling to relax its contortions; to settle into the lines of an ancient repose. Sometimes it actually moved. The terror of the suggestion woke no responsive thrill in the watcher’s nerves. He was as stoic, as callous as a Mongol—not unlike one, indeed, in feature and temperament. He bent down, searching with his candle flame. Yes, there was the rat’s head fastened into the shattered breast—gleaming on it, like Death’s

own order. There was even a stain of red about its teeth.

He stood up, frowning, grating his chin.

“The same,” he thought—“No doubt about it. What am I to do?”

The lines on his harsh face deepened.

“If I were to see her—bid her a last price, a great price, a fine sufficing price against my keeping silence at the trial? Would she agree—close—see him condemned unwinking—damn herself to *this*? Is the venture worth? How now, di Rocco?”

The dead man seemed to nod up his head.

CHAPTER IX

“THEY had exchanged tokens. He had parted with this knife to your husband. It is the damning link, to which I’ll swear. The Court is my Court, and my testimony will be final. I hang your Louis, Madame—twist a saintly neck to save a rake’s. Well, let it be. Women have these *penchants*.”

His vile innuendoes passed her by. White, withered in the scorching blast, the exaltation of her purpose kept her still erect, and steadfast to the end on which she’d staked her soul. Herself, in that foredoom, counted no longer for anything. She would save her love, her saint, though all the dogs of hell combined to pull him down.

Dusk was trooping up from the valleys. The sun-lit distant peaks budded from it like flower-spires in a fading paradise. As point by point they misted into vapour, so eternal darkness seemed to claim her to itself. In a little she would be quite alone. A child’s laugh, coming up faintly from the road below, smote on her heart like a death-cry. She started involuntarily; then stood stone-still. It was fearful to see tears running down a stone face. But each syllable of her voice, when she spoke, was as if carved and rounded.

“A worthless life; but innocent of this. He will not speak, you think—reveal the truth?”

“Not unless *you* bid him.”

“Ah!”

Even her loathing of that emphasis—of all that it implied—could wring no more from her. He conned her pitilessly.

“But say that he did—a palpable subterfuge to escape the halter. I’ll swear I saw the knife on him that very day.”

She hardly seemed to hear him.

“Worthless,” she continued lifelessly; “but I would not have him suffer—not for—you say he may be saved, once sentenced—given the means to escape?”

“I say I can procure one an order to visit him—no more. Appearances must be kept. The Government still counts, though in Savoy. What then! ropes are cheap; nights dark; the window of his prison is unbarred. They reckon on a precipice to hold—safe enough, not counting helpful friends—and lovers.

Once over the border and in France, he's safe—may snap his fingers at us, so long as he stays there. Give me what I ask, and you shall have the order."

"O, not for me!"

"For whom, then, mistress? No, no—none else. I wash my hands of all collusion. You entreat me for a friend—or better; my kind heart yields. The permit shall be an open one—made out to bearer. I'll promise that much. Confederate with whom you will. I'm not to ask nor know. Those are my terms. Take or leave."

"My ruin."

"Well, it's a large sum, I confess—worth a saint's ransom. If you think not, you needn't sign the covenant. It's true your estate's of a constitution to heal itself of even such a wound; and there's no heir for you to nurse, or nurse it for. But please yourself."

"Give me the paper."

With a hand stone-steady she put her name to it.

"And here's in acknowledgment for need—signed Léotade, and countersigned," said he, and held the order out to her.

She made no movement to take it; he threw it at her feet, and, without any sign of triumph or emotion, left the house.

She heard the door clang on him. The sound seemed to snap some fibre in her brain. Suddenly she was hurrying up and down, laughing, weeping, imploring,—

"No, no, it was a jest—I have let myself be frightened by dreams—the sky is all full of laughter at me. They don't do these things—not to the very young. O! little baby! Why didn't you come?—my little unborn child—I was too young to bear even a little child—too easily deceived—it would have killed me, and I should have gone to heaven. Such a jest!—heaven for me?—Children, children, don't laugh! I heard you down in the road—Look, though I'm not a mother, I can bear secrets—monstrous, horrible things. Don't come near me—I should cry and cry to see your terror. I said, Don't come near me—don't—My God! they are not children at all! Louis, Louis, save me! I did it all for you!—Louis!—"

She struck blindly against the wall, and sank down moaning at its foot.

CHAPTER X

THE trial of Mr Trix, ex-Prefect of Faissigny, for the murder of his patron, made a tremendous stir, not only locally, but throughout the Cisalpine Kingdom of Victor-Amadeus. It was really a trial of strength between the forces of revolt and those of reactionism—a tug of war between Piedmont and Savoy, with the Alps for toe-line. But from the first there was no doubt as to the issue. Wind, muscle, new blood, self-confidence, were all in favour of the Savoyard champions, while the acclamations of a whole nation, their neighbours and backers, thundered in their ears. Opposed were the degenerates of an effete *régime*; themselves not without a spitfire courage, but in physique no match for this new vigorous young Demos—for this bristling force suddenly sprung into life from seed of dead dragons' teeth. To Savoy this opportunity to assert its virtual independence came at the ripe moment with the means to point the right moral. Cartouche offered himself providentially for the rope with which to test the relative haulage values of Progress and Conservatism. That was his obliging use at the moment.

He was not personally unpopular, save with the Illuminati, and other such fanatic extremists; and he was arraigned on a popular charge—that of having destroyed an enemy of the people. But he stood convicted of privilege—was an autocrat's nominee—and the question at issue was not one of popularity but of principle. The severe justice of the people—now first coming into evidence—had to be vindicated; prejudice and partiality and other dynastic prerogatives had to be suppressed. Wherefore the matter was held to turn not so much on the guilt or innocence of the prisoner, as on the necessity of making an example of a King's favourite. Liberty, Justice and Equality, as representing in the bulk the new heresy of humanity, were unanimous in demanding the sacrifice of this scapegoat to the sins of his class. He was offered up, in the public esteem, long before he was sentenced.

And the worst of it for reactionism lay in the absence of an effective retort. It could not move for the pardon of the prisoner, if convicted, without appearing to hold him justified of the worst offence against itself. On the other hand, to surrender him to judgment by default, would be to admit the right of popular jurisdiction. So it endeavoured to temporise, weakly, by

citing the parties in the case to appear before the Criminal Court of Turin; whereupon le Prieuré answered by bringing the prisoner to immediate trial, and sentencing him to be hanged incontinent in its own market-square before the church.

So much for the political aspects of this *cause célèbre*. The private and personal only ceased to be subordinate to them with the certainty of the democratic victory. Then at last general interest began to concentrate itself on the scapegoat.

He proved himself, in one way, to be a disappointing scapegoat—lent himself to be done to death with scarcely a show of resistance. It appeared as if he recognised his doom for a foregone conclusion, and was determined to accept the clamour for his aristocratic blood as a sign of an improving taste on the part of Jacques Bonhomme. He signified his disgust of any rudeness directed at himself; but was always ready to applaud, and retort on, the least essay of wit. During the brief course of the trial, he always seemed more concerned for his coat than his character, for his pose than his peril. Sometimes his dark eyes would take eager stock of the gloating audience, as if they sought among it the evidences of some sign or hope beyond their expectations; but as often he would seem to rebuke their credulity with a little laugh and shrug, and would recompose himself, with a weary insouciance, to the fatigue of the business.

The little Court of the Prefecture was crammed on the fatal day. In addition to clerks, advocates, public representatives of the Government and private reporters for the King, so many idle visitors, attracted by interest or curiosity, had latterly flocked into Le Prieuré, that the accommodations of Justice were hard set to find standing room for all. The place, indeed, was an inferno; but, luckily for its unclean spirits, quick evidence against, and short shrift for, the prisoner were timely in releasing them.

The leading interest, before the appearance of the accused, centred in the *pièce de conviction*, which lay on a green baize-covered table before the President. It had been necessary, for obvious reasons, to withdraw the blade, seven years hidden, from the body of its victim. That lay in the churchyard under consecrated ground; while a second grave was already morally digging, in the unhallowed acre, for its murderer. If the fact might be held, in any degree, to justify the indifferent attitude of the defence, it was as certain that it vindicated in all its impartiality the “severe justice of the people.” Six foot of earth was as much the right of an aristocratic as of a vulgar assassin.

In the meanwhile there was the gold rat to show his teeth, and the red rust on the blade to suggest a horrible intimacy with the inner processes of the crime. They must suffice for curiosity until the appearance of the prisoner.

Monsieur the ex-Prefect, dished up at last to a ravenous company, surveyed the Court as he had always been wont to survey it, with a manner as from the chair rather than from the dock. He was perfectly cool and self-collected—dressed as for a gala—white-handed and sweet-scented—a fastidious macaroni—self-consciously *caviarre* to the general.

“Proceed, M. le Président,” he said. “I will venture to suggest to you the values of a dramatic brevity. I am entirely at your service—and the hangman’s.”

Dr Bonito, sitting slunk out of observation below the presidential chair, watched, across the room, the effect of this entry and rodomontade on a veiled female figure, which, standing among the spectators, had from the first caught his attention. Dull-sighted to all the world of beauty and sentiment, he was keen-eyed enough where his own appetites were concerned. He had early marked down this figure for his consideration, as a carrion-crow ogles a nesting rook. Its presence in this place did not surprise him. He might have wondered more if a case, so far-reaching in its sensational attractions, had failed to produce this apparition among many less interested. His curiosity was chiefly exercised as to its object in attending—whether from lust of triumph over, or from an inalienable infatuation for, a ruined betrayer. But he could gather nothing from its immovable attitude.

The Court took Monsieur the ex-Prefect at his word. Its processes were sharp, brief, and dramatic. By four o’clock in the afternoon it had sentenced the excellent *petit-mâitre* to his last dressing at the hands of the executioner.

Balmat had testified staunchly to the ownership of the knife; and the prisoner had applauded his evidence.

“Well spoken, Jacques. Thou art as upright a witness as a guide, Yes, the knife was mine.”

He had been advised by the President, M. Léotade, to sheathe his tongue.

“It is a weapon thou hast sharp reason to fear, Prefect,” he had answered.

There was some recapitulation of former evidence, which it is unnecessary to detail. Among others, the drunken rogue Target had been called, and Margot, his daughter. To all, it may be supposed, the drift of the inquiry was morally evident. They were summoned to condemn the prisoner—not to acquit him. It was very curious. Bonito, when it came to his turn, sniggered

over the manner in which Fate had accommodated itself to his scheme of a persuasive magic. He recalled how he had engaged himself to put a spell on this man, so that he should volunteer a loathing of his office. He had not aimed at the moment at more than his deposition, which, so enforced, might have entailed troublesome consequences. Now, whatever ensued, Cartouche counted politically no longer. Whether he were hanged, or allowed to escape, he had ceased from the running. The gods had played into their oracle's hands.

It was with a sense of this triumph upon him that he had risen to clinch the prisoner's condemnation. His evidence was necessarily the most damning of all, turning as it did upon the question of motive. Every thin measured word that drew from him pulled the knot tighter about the foredoomed neck. He told of the prisoner's anger over the projected union; of his fruitless plans to betray his patron; of his disinheritance and dismissal despite; of his suggestive words to himself, when they had met later in Turin. Finally, he also swore to the knife.

Cartouche, smiling, shook a finger at him rebukingly.

"I will meet thee on that issue some day, old comrade."

He would speak nothing in his own defence.

He was proud to have deserved a thousand hangings at their hands, he said. He was indifferent on what indictment that truth was brought home to the world. For himself, he only regretted that he had left unhung among his enemies so much intelligence as was able to formulate a plausible reason for destroying him. They were not altogether such fools as they had appeared. A little wisdom made revolution a dangerous thing. He had foolishly hoped that he had eliminated the last of it, since it had hidden itself so successfully from him. Now he must congratulate that little on its taking him effectively, unawares, behind his back. But he warned it to seek a cleverer substitute for himself than M. Léotade.

M. Léotade in consequence had much pleasure in committing him viciously to the gallows.

Bonito, when the sentence was pronounced, stood up to watch its effect upon the veiled woman. She was nowhere to be seen. An hour later, the ferment and excitement having locally subsided, and the precincts of the Court been redelivered to quietude, he put the knife—which he had begged and secured—into his pocket, parted amicably with his colleagues, and set out on foot and alone for his lodgings. These, to suit his secretiveness and his

parsimony, no less than his democratic unpretence—were in a little smithy on the Argentière road. He had put up there on the occasion of his former visit. There were conveniences about the establishment of Jean Loustalot, “Forgeron et Vétérinaire.” For one thing, loafers were not tolerated in its neighbourhood, for the reason that Jean—a suspicious saturnine man, of few words and lowering aspect—could not endure that idleness should borrow a lounging zest from his labours, as if he were a cursed puppet-man. For another, he was a soaker, of the solitary unsocial type, and, given the means, could always be persuaded—whenever his room was to be preferred to his company—to withdraw into the little dwelling-house at the rear of the smithy, and there drink himself swiftly and silently into insensibility.

Anticipating, in the present instance, an occasion of the kind, Dr Bonito provided himself, on his way out of the village, with a flask of spirits, which he deposited with the knife in his pocket. He then walked slowly on, with an air as of one who was loitering in the expectancy of being joined by a comrade. It was, in fact, no engagement with him, but a premonition having all the force of one. And the event came to justify it; though later than he had looked for. The encounter only happened when he was hard upon his destination. Then instantly he was conscious that a figure was waiting for him in the dusk of the road-side.

He paused a moment. Darkness like a precipitate was beginning to settle down into the valley. From the distant village came an excited bee-like murmur. Ahead of him, some fifty feet, a welter of shapeless light, the ring and clang of an anvil, marked where the smithy stood within a clump of trees. High up on the hill opposite twinkled the lights of the Château di Rocco. He took it all in; squeezed his lips between finger and thumb; and jerked himself suddenly forward. As he passed the expectant figure, he addressed it,—

“Wait, while I get rid of Jack Smith. I will call to you in a little.”

He went on, and entered the forge; took the flask from his pocket; held it up before the eyes of the panting Cyclops.

“I have a visitor, Jean. I want to be alone.”

The man, who had been softly manipulating the bellows, ceased of his hold on the instant. The handle, the fire, his brow, all went down together. With no more than a hoggish grunt, he seized the flask, and disappeared. Bonito went to the door, and called softly.

The fire had fallen so low when she entered, that they were only phantom darknesses to one another; but he kept a shrewd eye, for his part, on the

undulations of the gloom which was addressed to him. He was the first to speak.

“So, you decided to follow, Priestess, and to satisfy yourself of the reality of your vengeance. I had half looked for you, I confess. Your presence in the Court did not surprise me.”

Her silence, something in the atmosphere of her regard, warned him to be vigilant and watchful.

“It was strange,” he went on, “how circumstances rushed to complicate my simpler purpose. Call it coincidence, if you will—’tis but another term for Providence. I’ll show you why—show you good reason to be grateful for the course that things have taken.”

“Do you know what I have in my hand?”

Her whisper came like a snake’s hiss through the darkness. It was his turn to be silent.

“I have my finger on the trigger,” she said. “I give you a moment to answer. Have you forgotten what you swore?”

“No.”

“Not to hurt him—and you have taken his life?”

“No, I say.”

“—As I am going to take yours.”

If soulless courage be a virtue, he could boast that one. He never flinched before the crawling horror of that unseen death. His voice, as he spoke, had not altered by a note, a tremor, from its accustomed harshness. Yet, all the while, he was desperately enough calculating his chances.

“That’s as you will,” he said. “Only I’d advise you hear me speak first. All considered, I’ve done my best for you.”

She gave a little wrenching laugh.

“Well,” he said: “Will you listen?”

“I’ll listen,” she answered. “I can aim better, being silent.”

“Make sure of me then. His life stands behind mine. Ah! does that shake you? Now, be reasonable, if you can. Was the glacier my creature, and coincidence in my pay? I might never have opened my lips, and they would have convicted your Cartouche a dozen times without. The people cried for him.”

“You knew the truth.”

“What if I did! Do you bear in mind how for years we have made a fortune out of its suppression?”

"I know how you have, dog."

"I have kept you in comforts, Priestess—at least, I think, in comforts. No more of those, if our parts were once confessed; but straw and chains and rods, and a stone bed in Penitenza. The oracle would fall with the priest. What will you do when you have killed me?"

"Go to her up there, and tear the truth out of her throat, or end her too. He sha'n't die unavenged—my God! do you hear me?"

"Melodrama, melodrama! Well, if you prefer it to the prose of commonsense! But for that, he might be saved yet."

He heard how her breath caught at the word; and his own found relief in a little silent snigger.

"The truth?" he said. "She'd not yield it, to save a sinner at her saint's expense, though you dragged out her tongue with pincers—I know the stubborn fool. But, grant she were to—what benefit to you, when they hanged you for my murder?"

"My neck for his."

"Melodrama, I say. I say there's a better way for you. Why, look you, I might have warned him, let him forestall his enemies, escape to France; and so, a condemned outcast, he had been lost to you for ever. Now you can save him—go with him, if you will, and win back his old passion out of his new gratitude."

"*I can—I? O, God! if I might!*"

"I say you may. There, throw down your silly weapon. Our principles confirmed, your fool's life counts with us for little. I'll give you proof. I've already put it into the hands of her up there to deal with it as she will."

"*Her? His life?*"

"His life."

"*You put it?*"

"I."

"She hates him."

"Maybe. But she keeps a conscience."

"What have—?"

"Why, can't you understand that, the man convicted of the crime and hanged for it, my draughts on her would be dishonoured—she were a bank stopped payment. Fine reason, to be sure, for my seeking his destruction. I calculated better—I calculated on her conscience, I say—a perverse organ in a woman; but it stuck at his death, just that. It served me to commute my

pension, so to speak—to exchange her the means to save him, once condemned, against a little bond—a promissory note—it's here.”

He tapped his breast significantly.

“To save him!” she repeated stupidly.

“Why,” he said, “I told her ropes were cheap, nights dark—that there were no bars to his window; and I gave her an order made to bearer for a private interview with him.”

“She's got it now?”

“Unless she's used it already.”

“If she has! You've ruined her, I suppose—thank God for that!”

“I did my best. But the soil's fruitful. The forest will rise again from its burning. If you'd be beforehand with her—claim his first gratitude—!”

He stopped; a little swift rustle had passed him, and he was alone.

He listened a moment; uttered a small dry chuckle; and then bestirred himself to get a light. He knew where the lamp hung on the wall, and in a little had kindled it. Looking, well-satisfied, round and about him, his eye caught the glint of a pistol lying on the forge. He took up the weapon, and examined it curiously. It was primed and loaded. She *had* meant it, then? He had been a little sceptical; but now he congratulated himself on his escape. He put the thing into his breast pocket. It was better out of the way, in case of accidents. She might return upon him, with God knew what fresh aberration in her brain.

The night air came in, chill and searching, at the open hatch of the door. He blew the smouldering ashes on the forge into a glow, and fetched a stool and sat down, leaning against the brickwork, to think things pleasantly over. He had no fear of being disturbed from without. Neighbourliness was the last thing encouraged by M. Loustalot. The smithy was no rendezvous for gossips—least of all after dark, when its remoteness and its master's reputation made it a spot anathema.

His thoughts pursued his visitor. He wondered if, her mission accomplished, she would in truth succeed in winning back that errant passion to herself. On the whole, he rather hoped she would. It would serve to kill two birds for him with a single stone. She would keep Cartouche away, and Cartouche her. Neither, once escaped, could afford to return. That would be as it should be. He himself was in need of her no longer—had wanted, in fact, only a convenient pretext for dissolving their partnership. Here—his usual luck—that had offered itself opportunely. The sum, for which he held the

Saint-Péray's bond, was so large, that its investment would justify him in an immediate retirement from business. He had no desire, at the same time, to hamper it with the burden of a Sibylline pensioner. And so—yes, he hoped the two would escape together, never to reappear in Savoy. He had every confidence in their being permitted to. Even in a democracy it was no good precedent to hang a Prefect; any more than it was its good policy to alienate, at the outset of its campaign, by the vindictive sacrifice of its first prisoner taken, the sympathies of the temperate among reformers. He believed that Le Prieuré, in the person of its new Prefect—though intentionally uninspired by himself—saw this clearly, and would be satisfied with its moral triumph, since, whatever the real facts, the execution would be given a political complexion. He believed that, though the girl should carry into the prison a rope ladder bound about her waist, its visible presence on her would be winked at.

Winked at, forsooth! The thought tickled him. What a deal of winking there had been here from first to last. The association of ideas brought the knife to his mind, and he fetched it from his pocket and examined it curiously. There had been nothing but a morbid sentiment in his desire to secure it for himself. It gave him a gloating pleasure now to finger the long blade, and to think how the smears of its rust were the very dried essence of di Rocco's heart. What secrets it might speak, through its seven years' intimacy with that corrupt organ! "Wouldst thou not rejoice to utter them into mine—hard in—fast in?" he croaked, grinning, and apostrophising the rat's head, as he held it out before him. "But there's none to wield thee at the last. Bonito—poor old scorned and wronged Bonito—stands the victor and immortal!"

He had no taste for bed, in the present tingling poise of things; but presently, lost in ineffable altitudes of star-dreaming, he dropped into a doze where he sat, his head fallen back upon the forge.

* * * * *

"Give me the order. You've not used it? Say you have, and I think I shall kill you."

"I've not used it—not yet."

"Not yet? You beast without a heart! You kissed me once—on my lips—I'd tear them weren't they his! So you'd have let him die but for me!"

In the melancholy half-light of the room the two women stood facing one

another. Here was tragedy in white and red—blood and spirit in gripping combat. It was veritably, in its aspect, in its significance, a struggle between life and death. The issue hung upon a word.

“O, my sister! I love too!”

It was death that spoke, flinging herself with a heartworn cry at the other’s feet.

A poignant pause ensued; the body of hatred strained and trembled; a cry issued from it; and, lo! out of the husk of the Pythoness, a cracked and scaly mask, came the soul of Molly Bramble. And the next instant the two poor creatures, as once before, were weeping and rocking in one another’s arms. They mingled their tears and speech incoherently.

“Poor soul! O, what a life! I deserve to be whipped, and more, for having helped it to its misery. But, there! we each struck for our own.”

“Did you help to it? Why not? he cursed you for my sake!—and I would have let him die. No, no—I didn’t mean to; but to go to him—myself!”

“There,—I understand. You’ve always held by Providence, poor fond simple thing!”

“Haven’t you? You’ve not changed in all these years—only to grow more beautiful. O, sister! tell me you’ve been good!”

“I’ve never shamed my love—a bitter struggle not to. I’ll say no more.”

“Take the order—quick. You may save him yet—his soul most of all. When he hears—My God! You’ll betray my Louis!”

“Not us! What’s a sin or two charged falsely against my Cherry! He’s known a’ many such; and laughed at them. I must get a rope.”

“It’s here—it’s waiting for you.”

“O, you dear woman!”

“—A thing of Spanish silk—as light as gossamer and as strong as a cable—a hundred feet of it.”

“What it must have cost!”

“It will go round your waist, under your petticoats. Come, while I fasten it. O, be quick! We mustn’t lose a minute. Leave it with him, and come back to me. Tell him there’ll be a horse waiting ready saddled for him in the road beyond the gate. You can join him later.”

“I’ll come back—never fear. I’ve that to tell you. That beast Bonito—”

“You know him? O, my sick head—of course.”

“We’ll be even with him yet. There I’m all twittering to be gone.”

“Go, then, in God’s name. Let them, for pity’s sake, have no suspicion of

you. O, I doubt you can play a part!”

“Do you? Sweet innocent! There, I’ll not ask you for a kiss.”

“O, come to me, woman—woman! Love me; forgive me! We are one in our despair.”

“Despair you—I won’t. It shall all come right.”

“Don’t leave me! Why don’t you go? Every second’s precious. There, cover up your face—your sweet strong face. I shall be dead before you return. Don’t speak when you do until I bid you. I shall know by your looks how you have sped. There, it’s fastened. Make him turn his back.”

CHAPTER XI

So, the end was near at last! And here, high up among the flying winds and shadows, like old Stylites on his pillar, he stood poised to take his flight. Not self-glorified like that grim evangel; but none the less a martyr to his faith. A martyr, he! He could join in the mad laughter evoked by that image—the laughter of damned spirits down in the basement. It came reeling and echoing up the stairs to him—the old Belfry stairs. To what would he descend those next?

There was a frightful humour in the prison nomenclature of his time and country. Speranza, Purgatorio, Costanza, Pazienza, Penitenza—such were the mocking names they gave their noisome cells, like eating cubicles in a devil's cook-house. They spelt a devouring cruelty. The moral of them all was shattered nerves. They substituted filth and misery for the old "first question," and were scarcely, by design, less demoralising. He who entered one of them had always this much more than his trial to face—the weapons of his brain blunted against self-defence. They were careful to dull and befoul the wits committed to them.

Cartouche's cell, by comparison with custom, was an angel's loft—a fitting hutch for pigeons, he told himself—wherefore, perhaps, it was called Il Paradiso. There is always, at least, an advantage in having the upper berth. It had once been actually the belfry of the tower, though the holes where the great beams had entered into the walls were now plugged with bricks. The old lights, too, across which the luffer-boards had stretched, were all filled in save one. That gaped unglazed and unbarred. He might escape by it if he would. The wall below went down clean and precipitous seventy or more feet to the pavement.

Yet—after his doom was pronounced—he was tempted more than once to take the plunge—to jump and cheat the gallows. There was something, perhaps, even a little characteristically attractive to him in the thought. To trick his enemies out of their triumph—to despoil them of their vulgar profits won of a gentleman, an ex-Prefect, a Court favourite! There was a gambler's whimsey in the reflection—always not a little of the *chevalier d'industrie's* calculating recklessness in his attitude towards his fellows. Towards all save

one. She was his saving faith. To her strict soul self-destruction was a deadly sin, hopelessly damning. To leap would be to leap for ever out of her thoughts, her prayers. He could not do it then. He'd wait and hang, to win a place in her remorse. That was his only hold on her at last. It even gave him an exquisite joy to believe he was secure of it—secure in his utter abandonment by her to the fate from which she might have saved him only at the uttermost cost to herself. He would not have it otherwise—not be cheated of that place by any barren compromise of hers. None could suffice him in this pass—only his life for her and hers. He'd give it without a murmur.

For the rest, he told himself he did not much care. Life was a farce without this Yolande—impossible with her. It was strange how his thoughts clung about that one figure. It was only of a woman, bigoted and foolish—not even now with beauty supreme in her to redeem the lack of liberal qualities. And she could let him die upon a falsehood—her piety was not proof against the last temptation. So much the madder, truer lover she! He worshipped not her, perhaps, but love in her. He worshipped her, at least—would die to save her.

What was his life worth! Sometimes, leaning looking from his window, old dreams would come to him—a far back retrospect, like that which opens out its vista to the drowning. He could see a little figure at the end, leaping in green sunlight. It came dancing along, and jumped into his breast. He wept, nursing it—nursing the little image of himself. “If she could see me now!” he thought. And yet he was no traitor to his father's memory. The old dog had been kind to him. “Sanctity and self-indulgence!” he sighed. “I could never tell the decent way between. Only she might have taught me.”

His view commanded the market-square. He wondered when they were going to begin. The people went their busy way below, seemingly unconcerned. They looked squat things—ridiculously foreshortened—Lilliputians to the giant he felt himself to be by contrast. Why should he let such absurdities hang him? No matter, so he died for her.

Always she. The other's claims he hated. She vexed him in the night with her eternal weeping. Weeping, weeping, for an irremediable sorrow? What use in this invertebrate lament? Let her come and save him, if she wished to prove herself the nobler soul. Not that he would concede her that triumph. But he loved deeds, not tears—would rather that love defied than petitioned him. And so one night she came.

It was pitch dark without. He had been dozing on his pallet; but some cessation in the sentries' monotonous tramp across the landing, to and fro,

brought him wide awake. The door opened, and shut again. Something was in the room. He listened curious.

“Cherry!” whispered a voice.

He was on his feet on the instant. The shock had half unnerved him. He stood straining his eyes, his elbows crooked, his heart hammering.

“Who are you?” he muttered.

He heard her panting softly—weeping. Then he knew it was she. He made a mad effort to compose himself—to stand up in the breach this sudden ghost had torn in his defences. The voice sighed on,—

“O, love! don’t you know me? Cherry, I have come to save you.”

“Not you?”

He could not help his tone—would not, if he could.

She gave a little very bitter cry.

“Hush! speak low! She sent me.”

“Yolande?”

“Yes. O, my God!”

He felt for her, touched her in the darkness. His heart was on a sudden kind and pitiful.

“Poor child! poor child! How did you hear—come—find the means? These long years—I’ve no right to ask you of them.”

“No need to, neither. They find me what I always was—your woman. Well, I’ve got a rope about me. Will you take it?”

“Not I.”

“O, O! Why not?”

“Owe my life to her whose life I’ve ruined.”

“*She* found the rope, I say; and the pass to let me bring it to you private—paid for it, too.”

“Paid? Whom?”

“Bonito. There!”

“Paid Bonito?”

“With a bond that just spells her ruin. He’s got it on him now.”

“I understand. Where is he?”

“At Loustalot the blacksmith’s. I left him there not two hours since. I went to kill him, Cherry, for what he’d done to you; and, to save his life, he sent me on to her. She’d only lain close a bit for lack of such a messenger. And I’m to say there shall be a horse waiting for you in the road by the gate.”

“Give me the rope.”

“Let me have your hand—only that. There, it’s on the floor. Put it away somewhere till I’m gone.”

He obeyed, and groped his way back to her—felt for her poor face, and took it in his hands. She stood quite passive.

“Molly, I’m not worth a thought.”

Only her low heart-rending sobs answered him.

“Thank God,” he said, “we cannot see one another’s faces—never shall again.”

“Cherry!”

“Yes, call me that.”

“Cherry, mayn’t I hope? I’ve been good.”

“I may not, Molly.”

“She told me to—to save your soul. Perhaps when you’re gone away, and safe? I could wait until you changed to me.”

Her words wrung his heart. This child, so true and faithful to him to the last! and his own immeasurable baseness to her—in thought and deed alike! What could it matter now? Let love be still a casuist for love’s sake.

He put his arms about her; set his lips upon her face, with some new rehearsal of an ancient passion.

“Before God, Molly, if I live, I will marry you.”

* * * * *

An hour later he stood at the window, waiting to descend. The rope was in place; he had fastened it to a beam; deep mid-night slept upon the village.

“She has done this thing for me,” he thought—“given the bond—risked all to right her fault. What else or greater could she do? God make her happy!”

CHAPTER XII

BONITO, startled out of dreams of immortality, returned to earth with a shock. *Something—somebody had spoken to him!*

Even so—taken by surprise, his wits momentarily confounded—habitual wariness kept him stone-still where he lay, his head dropped back upon the forge, while he strove desperately to excogitate his right answer to the situation. For the instant of his waking had been one with his recognition of the voice—and of a flaw, moreover, in his own policy. The consequences were facing him at once, and tremendously. He knew that his life at this moment hung upon a word.

“Where is the bond, I say? Will you wait for me to cut it out of you?”

Still he made no answer. The sooty beams in the roof seemed to undulate above his half-closed lids as the light pulsated in the lantern. He thought he saw the pin-point eyes of innumerable spiders watching him from their secret places. They affected him curiously; he could not concentrate his thoughts while they held him so intently. There were some means he possessed—he was certain of it—for retort or self-defence, could he only recall them. But those eyes held him from the effort. While he was still in a mortal struggle to escape them, the voice spoke again, quick and damning.

“What use in this pretence? I know thee—never so wide awake. Thou dog! O, thou ineffable dog! to wring it from her ruin! That once for last was once too many. Down you go!”

Still he lay as silent as death, though a pulse of life—it was plain enough—went shadowing up and down on his strained chest.

“Not?” said Cartouche horribly. “Do you know what’s here, Bonito?—the pretty little jade and golden toy? What Providence dropped it at your feet! It wakes strange thoughts in me to hold it in my hand again—the throats it split, blood lapped—all honest sport so long as it was mine. Will you not give me up the bond, lest her pure name put to it be soiled? Well, then—no ‘law’ for you—not to be thought of where she’s concerned. I’d come to kill you, beast—just my hands against yours—and behold! you’ve given me a weapon!”

With a leap, like whalebone released, the figure was on its feet and screaming: “Help! help! *à moi*, Loustalot! The prisoner—he’s escaped—

Help!”

A cry as useless as desperate. He himself had paralysed the drunkard’s hand—had closed his ears. Even as he uttered it, he was down—doomed—saw the blade whisked up—last in whose heart! A mortal shudder seized him—and then all of a sudden he remembered. He tore something from his breast. Even as the knife descended, a shock and spatter of fire leapt from his hand, and Cartouche reeled and fell.

Not too late, perhaps, yet! Dropping the reeking pistol, he tried to pluck the rat’s tooth from his throat. It held like a vice. Fumbling with it feebly, and ever more feebly, his fingers relaxed, half rose again to grip the agony, and so, poised mid-way, crooked and stiffened slowly.

For a minute silence reigned on the fallen echoes of that tragedy. Then the ex-Prefect stirred. He was bleeding horribly. The wound in him was numb; only his every limb seemed faint with sickness. He crawled to the dead thing, and with shaking hands searched it, and quickly came upon what he sought. Rising, by a superhuman effort, and supporting himself against the forge, he found her name and put his stiff lips to it. They left a crimson wafer—his sign manual—“this is my act and deed.” Some ashes yet smouldered on the hearth. He blew them into a glow—the blood pumping from him, regularly, to each beat of the bellows—and thrust the paper in, and saw it go in flame. Then, tottering for the open door, he sunk down upon its threshold.

The lights of Di Rocco twinkled on the hill-side. They found him, sunk against the lintel, with his dead eyes fixed upon them.

AFTERWARD

THESE shadows pass; yet to what possible redemption through that blood? Had it not been said that “whoso sheddeth man’s, by man’s shall his be shed.” It was not for that poor sinner to usurp the divine prerogative. Those for whom he suffered must still expiate as they had wrought.

Far on I see them moving—the devoted woman still shadowing the weak man. The old order has passed away, and they with it. The Kingdom of retaliation has risen on the Kingdom of despotism. Savoy is bound with a red ribbon to the republic; its people shout for France; its rulers are betrayed to her. One day these two go to the scaffold.

It is a last mercy that they are permitted to go together. So her life’s purpose shall find its consummation. What sorrows, what disenchantments have been hers in these years of her fading beauty, of her hopelessness for herself, only God may know. They have never affected her steadfast resolve. She has given herself to save her saint for heaven.

Up to the very last her patient lips are shut to him on all that she has done and suffered for his sake. His passage shall be bright and confident. She kisses him and sends him to die before her.

Only then for the first time she seemed to realise what she had done. He had passed in, and the gates were shut between them for ever. They say that she dropped where she stood, and had to be carried under the knife.

[The End]

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTES.

Minor spelling inconsistencies (*e.g.* foresworn/forsworn, Goodbye/Goodbye, etc.) have been preserved.

Alterations to the text:

Add TOC.

Assorted punctuation corrections.

[Part I/Chapter V]

Change “to mend what you have helped to *marr!*” to *mar*.

[Part II/Chapter V]

“these delicate *nouances* of taste and selection” to *nuances*.

[Part II/Chapter XII]

(“O, Louis! O, mon bien aimé! que les artifices...”) italicize French text.

[Part III /Chapter IV]

“stood up against the rising *ride*, fearless before its roar” to *tide*.

[Part III/Chapter V]

“Cassandra, ma belle *prêtesse*, ma petite!” to *prêtresse* (French for “priestess”).

[Part III/Chapter VI]

“those *nouances* of alienation which only love” to *nuances*.

[End of Text]

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A ROGUE'S
TRAGEDY ***

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