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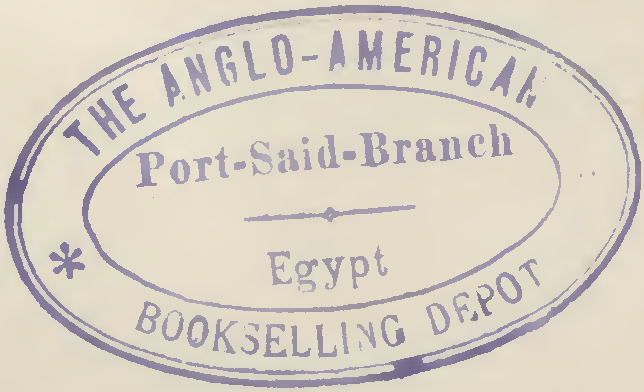
## STRATHMORE BY OUIDA.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



There are depths in Man that go the lengths of lowest Hell, as there are heights that reach highest Heaven; for are not both Heaven and Hell made out of him, made by him, everlasting Miracle and Mystery that he is?

CARLYLE.

Oblivion cannot be hired —SIR THOMAS BROWNE'S "*Urn Burial.*"

Good and evil we know, in the field of this world, grow up together almost inseparably; and the knowledge of good is so involved and interwoven with the knowledge of evil, that those confused seeds which were imposed upon Psyche as an incessant labour to cull out and sort asunder were not more intermixed.

MILTON.

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# STRATHMORE

A ROMANCE.

BY

OUIDA,

AUTHOR OF "IDALIA," "TRICOTRIN," ETC.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1871.

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# TO THE READER.

A PREFACE too often provokes the reader to exclaim against it, what Cowley's silver pen wrote against the little word "but;"—that "it is *ærugo mera*, a rust that spoils the metal it grows upon." Nevertheless, as "but" may sometimes be the precursor of a clearer exposition of an argument, so a preface may perhaps be, here and there, the herald to a clearer understanding between a writer and his public. I have but a few words with which to prelude these volumes; and I do not entreat any critic to forbear divulging the plot in his remarks upon them. It is but a poor work which depends, like a conundrum, on the concealment of its catchword and secret, for the maintenance of its interest: whatever attraction may lie in this romance, I have preferred seeking to centre in the sketching of character, the development of temperament, and the issue of action. If it allure any reader, I would hope that such allurement will rest, not on the skeleton of its outline, but in the manner in which that outline is filled in and coloured.

I have given Strathmore purposely for what he is; a deeply erring man. I trust this will be remembered, and that people will not, therefore, express a supreme astonishment that he acts in consonance with such a character. If I wrote of a blind man, I could scarcely make him walk unerringly by the clear light of day; yet the public sometimes seem to look for such an anomaly, and expect a guilty man to act in all things like a demi-god. I have drawn in Strathmore one who, trusting in his own strength, fell by his own passions. I have screened nothing, excused nothing, palliated

nothing. I have not softened the dark shadows that lie on a dark path. I have simply endeavoured to depict the insecurity of a haughty pride which held itself sufficient shield against all temptation; the inevitable steps by which one sin always leads onward to another; and the retribution, unseen of men, which rose out of the wilful guilt of a self-sustained and too-arrogant life.

If it be objected that in the woman who occupies a considerable place in these pages, crime wears too poetic and graceful a mask, I would answer that it is precisely this disguise in which it steals fatally into natures that otherwise would not succumb to it. Crime in its naked viciousness and coarseness has its least danger, and its open warning; I have sought to show that its darkest depths may underlie a bright seductive surface, as the volcanic line of the earthquake runs under a laughing and flowering landscape. The cruelty and the vices of Theodora did not prevent the loveliness of her face, nor the sway for nigh thirty years of her fascinations over Justinian. Women, perhaps, may resent the portrayal of Marion Vavasour; I regret that their sex has too often shown the truth of it. For the rest, I have no more to add; if there be any favour I would be inclined to ask of my reviewer, or my reader, it would be, not to judge of the work by any scattered fragments, but only as a whole: having followed it to the end, and having brought to its perusal the remembrance that human life is no flower of paradise, but a warped tree earth-stained in its growth, of which, as I have written later on, in the old well-known words:

> sed quantum vertice ad auras
> Ætherias, tantum radice in Tartara tendit.

London, May, 1865.

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# STRATHMORE.

## CHAPTER I.

### White Ladies.

WHITE LADIES did not mean snowdrops, by their pretty old English name, ghosts in white cere-clothes, or belles in white tarlatan. It was only an old densely-wooded estate down in one of those counties that give Creswick his cool chequered shade and wild forest streams, his shallow sunny brooks, and picturesque roadsides; but which, I am told by superior taste, are terribly insipid and miserably tame, with many other epithets I do not care to repeat, having a lingering weakness myself for the old bridle-paths with the boughs meeting above head, the hawthorn hedges powdered with their snowy blossom, and the rich meadow lands with their tall grasses, and clover, and cowslips, where cattle stand up to their hocks in fresh wild thyme, and shadows lengthen slowly and lazily through long summer days.

White Ladies was an ancient and stately abbey, the last relic of lands once wide and numerous as Warwick's ere he fell at Gladsmoor Heath; a single possession—though that lordly enough—where it had been but one among a crowded beadroll of estates which had stretched over counties before they were parcelled out and divided, some amongst the hungry courtiers who fattened upon abbey lands; some among the Hanoverian rabble, who scrambled for the goodly spoils of loyal gentlemen; some, later on, among the vampires of Israel, who, like their forefather and first usurer, Jacob, know well how to treat with the famished, and sell us our mess of pottage at no smaller price than our birthright.

In the days of Monkery and of Holy Church, White Ladies had been a great Dominican monastery, rich in its wealth and famous in its sanctity; though since then the great Gothic pile had been blasted with petronels, burned with flame, and riddled with the bullets of the Ironsides. Yet, when the western sun slanted in flecks of gold through the boughs of the wych-elms, and fell on the panes of the blazoned windows, or the moonlight streaming across the sward, gleamed through the pointed arches and aisles, and down the ivy-covered cloisters, the abbey had still a stately and solemn beauty, given to it in ancient times by the cunning hand of master masons, when men built for art and not for greed, and lavished love in lieu of lusting gold, when they worked for a long lifetime to leave some imperishable record of their toil, and were grandly heedless how their names might perish and be forgot. It stood down in deep secluded western valleys on the borders of the sea, shut in by dense forest lands which covered hill and dale for miles about it, and sheltered in their recesses the dun deer in their coverts and the grey herons by their pools; a silent, solitary, royal place, where the axe never sounded among the centenarian trees, and the sylvan glory was never touched by the Vandal of time and the Goth of steam, that elsewhere are swiftly sapping what Tudor iconoclasts spared, and destroying what Puritan petards left free.

Through the elm-boughs that swayed against the carvings with which Norman builders had enriched the pile; through the tangled ivy that hid where Cromwell's breach had blasted, and where Henry's troops had sacked; through the heraldic blazonries upon the panes, where the arms of the Strathmores with their fierce motto, "*Slay, and spare not!*" were stained, the summer sun shone into one of the chambers at White Ladies.

In olden days, and turn by turn as time went on and fortunes changed, the chamber had been the audience-place of the Lord Abbot, where he had received high nobles who sought the sanctuary because the price of blood was on their

heads, or thriftless kings of Plantagenet who came to pray the aid of Mother Church for largesse to their troops ere they set sail for Palestine. It had been the bower-room of a captive queen, where Mary had sat over her tapestry thinking of the years so long gone by, when on her soft childish brow, fair with the beauty of Stuart and Guise, the astrologer had seen the taint of foreshadowed woe and the presage of death under the soft golden curls. It had been the favourite haunt of Court beauties where they had read the last paper of Spec, and pondered over new pulvillios, and rejoiced that the peace had been made at Utrecht, to bring them the French mode and Paris chocolate, and thought in their secretly-disaffected hearts of the rising that was fomenting among the gallant gentlemen of the North, and of the cypher letter lying under the lace in their bosoms from one brave to rashness, and thrice well-beloved because in danger for the Cause, who was travelling secretly and swiftly to St. Germain.

*Now* the Plantagenets had died out, root and branch, the tapestry woven by Mary was faded and moth-eaten, the Court beauties were laid in the chapel vault, and the oriel-chamber was scented with Latakia, Manillas, Burgundies, and liqueurs, while three or four men sat at breakfast with a group of retrievers on the hearth. The sun falling through the casements, shone on the brass andirons, the oak carvings, the purple silk of the hangings, and on the game and fruits, coffee and Rhenish, that were crowded in profusion on the table, at which the host and the guests of White Ladies lounged; smoking and looking over the contents of the letter-bag, peeling an apricot, or cutting into a foie gras, silent, lazy, and inert, for there was nothing to tempt them out but the rabbits, and the morning was warm, and the shaded room pleasant.

At the head of his table the host sat in shadow, where the light of the outer day did not reach, but left the purple hangings of the wall with the dead gold of their embroideries in gloom behind him. He was a man then of nine-and-twenty or thirty, but who looked something older than he was; he

was tall and slightly made, and wore a black velvet morning coat. His face was singularly striking and impressive, more by expression than by feature—it was such a countenance as you see in old Italian portraits, and in some Vandykes, bearing in them power strangely blended with passion, and repose with recklessness; his hair, moustaches, and beard were of a dark chesnut hue; his mouth was very beautifully formed, with the smile generous, but rare; the eyebrows were dark, straight, and finely pencilled; the eyes grey. And it was in these, when they lightened to steel-like brilliance, or darkened black as night with instantaneous and pitiless anger, that an acute physiognomist would have inferred for him danger, and evil to himself and to others, which would arise from a spring as yet, perhaps, unknown and unsealed; and that an artist studying his face, in which his art would have found no flaw, would have said that this man would be relentless, and might have predicted, as the Southern sculptor prophesied of Charles Stuart, "Something evil will befal him. He carries misfortune on his face."

He lay back in his chair, turning over his letters, looking idly one by one at them, not opening some, and not reading wholly through any; many of them had feminine superscriptions, and scarlet or azure chiffres at the seal, as delicately scented as though they had been brought by some court page, rather than by the rough route of the mail-bag. They afforded him a certain amusement that summer's morning, and Strathmore of White Ladies—this man with the eyes of a Catiline and the face of a Strafford—had no care greater on his mind for either the present or the future just then than that his keepers had told him the broods were very scanty, and the young birds had died off shockingly in the early parts of the spring; that he was summoned to go on a diplomatic mission to Bulgaria to confer with a crabbed Prince Michel, before he cared to leave England; and that one of his fair correspondents, Nina Montolieu, a Free Companion, whose motto blazoned on her pretty fluttering pennon, was a very rapacious "*tout prendre!*" might be a little more trouble-

some than was agreeable, and give him a taste of the tenacious griffes now that he had tired of playing with the pattes de velours. He had nothing graver or darker to trouble him, as he leant back in the shade where the sunlight did not come, glancing out now and then to the masses of forest, and the grey cloisters, ivy-hung and crumbling to ruins, that were given to view through the opened windows of his chamber. His face was the face of a State-conspirator of Velasquez, of a doomed Noble of Vandyke; but his life was the easy, nonchalant, untroubled, unchequered life of an English gentleman of our days; and his thoughts were the thoughts that are natural to, and that run in couple with, such a life. "Born to calamity" would have been as little applicable then to Cecil Strathmore as it seemed to Charles of England, when he and Villiers looked into the long eyes of the Spanish donnas and drank to the loveliness of Henriette de Bourbon. But in those joyous, brilliant days of Madrid and Paris, the shadow of the future had not fallen across the threshold of Whitehall,—neither as yet had it fallen here, across the threshold of White Ladies.

He looked up and turned a little in his chair as the door opened, and the smile that was the more brilliant and the more attractive because extremely rare, lighted his face.

"You incorrigible fellow! the coffee is cold, and the claret is corked, and the omelettes are overdone, but it's no more than you deserve. Won't you *ever* be punctual? We were going down to Hurst Warren at nine, and it's now eleven. You are the most idle dog, Erroll, under heaven!"

"You were only down yourself six minutes ago (I asked Craven), so don't *you* talk, my good fellow. You have been reading the first volume of the 'Amours d'une Femme,' and sending the rabbits to the deuce; and I've been reading the second, and consigning them to the devil, so we're quits. A summer morning's made for a French novel in bed, with the window open and the birds singing outside; pastorals and

pruriencies go uncommonly nicely together, rather like lemons and rum, you know. Contrasts are always *chic!*"

With which enunciation of doctrine the new comer sat down, rolled his chair up to the table, and began an inspection of some lobster cutlets à la Maréchale, taking a cup of creamy chocolate from the servant behind him, while Strathmore looked at him with a smile still on his lips, and a cordial look in his eyes, as if the mere sound of the other's voice were pleasant to him. The belated guest was a man of his own age, or some few years older; in frame and sinew he was superb; in style he was rather like a dashing Free Lance, a gallant debonair captain of Bourbon's Reiters, with his magnificent muscle and reckless brilliance, though he was as gentle as a woman and as lazy as a Circassian girl. He called himself the handsomest man in the Service, and had the palm given him undisputingly; for the frank, clear, azure eyes that grew so soft in love, so trustful in friendship, the long fair hair sweeping off a forehead white as the most delicate blonde's, the handsome features with their sunny candour and their gay sensuous smile, made his face almost as attractive to men as to women. As for the latter, indeed, they strewed his path with the conqueror's myrtle-leaves. His loves were as innumerable as the stars, and by no means so eternal; and if now and then the beau sexe had the best of the warfare, it was only because they are never compassionate on those who surrender to them at once, and whom they can bind and lead captive at their will, which the least experienced could do at one stroke with Bertie Erroll, as he freely and lamentingly confessed. The Beau Sabreur, as he had been nicknamed, à la Murat, was soft as silk in the hands of a beauty, and impressionable as wax when fairy fingers were at work. He had never in his life resisted a woman, and avowed himself utterly unable to do so. Have you ever, known the science that brought Laomedon to grief of any avail against the Lydian Queen?

"Letters! Why *will* they write them?" he said, as he glanced at the small heap of feminine correspondence piled

beside his plate. "It's such a pity!—it only makes us feel bearish, bored, and miserably ungrateful; wastes an hour to get through them religiously, or hangs a millstone of unperformed duty and unexpiated debt about our necks for the livelong day, till post-time comes round again and makes bad worse!"

"Why *will* they write them?" echoed Strathmore, giving a contemptuous push of his elbow to Nina Montolieu's envelope, a souvenir of the past season, with which he could very well have dispensed. "Our Brinvilliers poison us with patchouli paper, and stab us with a crowquill. One might like to 'die of a rose in aromatic pain,' but I would rather not die of three scented sheets crossed! Correspondence is cruel—with women. If you *don't* answer them, you feel sinful and discourteous; if you *do* answer them, you only supply them with ammunition to fire on to you afresh with fifty more rounds of grape and canister. They love to spend their whole morning skimming over a thousand lines, and winding up with 'Toujours à toi!' They love to write honey to you with one pen, and gall about you with another; they love to address their dearest friends on a rose-tinted sheet, and fold it to damn them on a cream-coloured one. Writing is women's *métier;* but it is deucedly hard that they will inflict the results upon us!"

"It's an odd psychological fact that women will write on for a twelvemonth unanswered, as religiously as they wipe their pens, omit their dates, and believe in the acceleration of postal speed by an 'Immediate' on the envelope," put in Phil Danvers from the bottom of the table, helping himself to some Strasbourg pâté. "Some of them write delightfully, though—Tricksey Bellevoix does. Her notes are the most delicious olla podrida of news, mots, historiettes, and little tit-bits of confidence imaginable; she always tells you, too, mischievous things of the people you don't like, instead of scandalising people you do, after the ordinary fashion. Her letters are not bad fun at all when you're smoking, and want something to look at for ten minutes."

"I'll tell her how you rate them! She's going to Charlemont next week. See if you get any more letters, Phil!" cried Erroll.

"My dear fellow, if we turned king's evidence on one another, I don't think we should get any more feminine favours at all!" laughed Strathmore. "Very few of them would relish the chit-chat about them if they'd correct reports from the club windows and shorthand notes from the smoking-rooms. Would you be let in again to the violet boudoir in Bruton-street if Lady Fitz knew you'd told me last night that she had the very devil's own temper? and would Dan be called 'ami choisi de mon cœur,' if Madame la Baronne knew that when he gets her notes he says, 'Deuce take the woman!—how she bothers,' audibly in White's? Try that grilse, Langton—it was in the river yesterday."

"And is prime. It would have been worth Georgie's trolling."

"Georgie lost all her rings last week in the Dee—two thousand pounds' worth in diamonds and sapphires—serve her perfectly right! What business has she with March browns and dun governors?" said the host of White Ladies, drawing a plate of peaches to him. "I cannot conceive what women are about when they take up that line of thing. How can they imagine an ill-done replica of ourselves *can* attract us! A fast woman is an anomaly, and all anomalies are jarring and bizarre. To kiss lips that smell of smoke—to hear one's belle amie welcome one with 'All serene!'—to see her 'bugle eyeball and her cheek of cream' only sparkle and flush for a tan gallop and a Rawcliffe yearling—to have her boudoir as horsy as the Corner, and her walk a cross between a swing and a strut! Pah! give me women as soft, and as delicate, and as velvet as my peaches!"

"Peaches?" put in Erroll. "Ominous simile! Your soft women will have an uncommonly hard stone at their core, and a kernel that's poison under the velvet skin, mon cher Cis!"

"*Soit!* I only brush the bloom, and taste the sweetness!"

yawned Strathmore. "A wise man never lingers long enough over the same to have time to come to the core. With peaches and women, it's only the side next the sun that's tempting; if you find acid in either, leave them for the downy blush of another! How poetic we grow! Is it the Rhenish? That rich, old, amber, mellow wine always has a flavour of Hoffmann's fancies and Jean Paul's verse about it; it smells of the Rheingau! I don't wonder Schiller took his inspirations from it. I say, Erroll, I heard from Rokeby this morning. He doesn't say a word about the Sartory betting, nor yet of the White Duchess scandal. He is only full of two things; La Pucelle's chances of the Prix de Rastatt at Baden, and of this beauty he's raving of, something superb, according to him, a Creole, I think he says—Lady Vavasour! Really one's bored to death with ecstasies about that woman! Have you heard the name? *I* have lots of times, but I've always missed her."

"Vavasour? Vavasour? The deuce, I have—rather!" said Erroll, thrown into a beatific vision by the mere name of the lady under discussion, while he stirred some more cream into his chocolate.

"Who was she?" asked Langton, of the 16th Lancers, who was only just back from service in Bengal.

"More than I can tell you, my boy. I believe it's more than anybody knows. She sprang into society like Aphrodite from the sea-foam. One may as well be graceful in metaphor, eh? You mean a Creole, Strathmore, made a tremendous row at St. Petersburg—came nobody knew precisely whence—hadn't been seen till she appeared as Lady Vavasour and Vaux tooling a six-in-hand pony-trap, with pages of honour in lapis-lazuli liveries, that created a furore in Longchamps, and made the Pré Catalan crowded to get a glimpse of her. Ever since then all Europe's been at her feet!"

"That's the woman!" broke in Danvers. "Oh, she's divine, they say. Everybody goes mad after her, and can't help himself. Scrope Waverley raved of her; he saw her at Biarritz, and swears she's quite matchless. She's the most

capricious coquette, too, that ever broke hearts with a fan-handle!"

"Hearts! Faugh!" sneered Strathmore; and, when he did so, his face was very cold—a coldness strangely at variance with the swift, dark passions that slumbered in his eyes. "My good fellow, don't give us a réchauffé of Scrope Waverley's sentimental nonsense! The man must be weaker than the fan-handle if he be ruled by it."

Erroll lifted his eyebrows, and sighed:

"May be! But the little ivory sticks play the deuce with us when they're well managed."

"Speak for yourself! Don't make your confessions in the plural, that their folly may sound general, pray!"

"Oh, *you*—you're a confounded cold fellow! Wear chained armour, wrap yourself in asbestos, and all that sort of thing, 'larva kisses' wouldn't melt you, and Helen wouldn't move you unless you chose!"

Strathmore laughed a little.

"Why should they? It is only fools who go in fetters. I can *not* comprehend that madness about a woman—to lie at her feet and come at her call, and take her caresses one minute and her neglect the next, as if you were her spaniel, with nothing better to do than to live in her bondage! It is miserably contemptible! What is weakness if *that* isn't one, eh?"

Erroll flung the envelope with the scarlet chiffre, lying on the table within reach of his hand, at his host and friend, as proof and reproof of the nullity of his doctrines.

"Most noble lord! you have the cheek to talk coldly and disdainfully like that, while you know you are in the net of the Montolieu, and Heaven knows how many others besides!"

Strathmore laughed again as the envelope fluttered down on the ground, falling short of him where he lay back in his fauteuil:

"*Bécasse!* that is a very different affair. Nina is a dashing little lawless lady, and knows how to pillage with both hands; one must pay if one dallies with the Free Companions. You

don't suppose she ever held me in her bondage, or flattered herself she did for an hour, do you? No one was ever *in love* with that sort of women after twenty; one *makes* love to them in parenthesis as it were, of course, but that's quite another thing. It is how you lose your hearts, how you hang on a smile, how you let yourselves be marked and hit and brought down like the silliest noddy-bird that ever sat to be shot at, how you go mad after *one* woman, and that one woman with, nine times out of ten, nothing worth worshipping about her—it is that which I can't understand."

"Thank your stars!" said Erroll, softly, and with a profound sigh of envy. "Go about with your noli me tangere shield, and be piously thankful you've got it then. Only the 'haughty in their strength,' et cætera, you know—what's the rest of the scriptural warning?—unbelievers *do* come to grief sometimes for their hardened heterodoxy! This superb Vavasour, I want dreadfully to see her. They say she is the best thing we have had for a long time, since the Duchess d'Ivore was in her first prime."

"She must be the same I heard so much about in Paris last winter; she was passing the season in Rome, so I missed seeing her. She has the most wayward caprices, they say, of any living woman," said Danvers, turning over the leaves of the morning papers; "but the *caprices d'une belle femme* are always bewitching and always permissible. A great beauty has no sins; she may do what she likes, and we forgive her, even with the leopard claws in our skin. The pretty panther! it looks so handsome and so soft; its very crimes are only mischief."

"You haven't been in Scinde, Phil," said Langton, with the grim smile of a campaigner who hears those who have never suffered jest at scars; while their host, rather tired of this breakfast-chat about women, turned to his unopened correspondence, till his guests, having thrown their letters away, to be answered at any distant and hazardous future, having yawned over the papers, casually remarking that that poor devil Allington's divorce case was put off till next ses-

sion, or that there was an awful row in South Mexico, rose by general consent, and began to think of the rabbits.

White Ladies was one of the pleasantest places to visit at in England. A long beadroll might have been cited of houses that eclipsed it in every point, but the Abbey had a charm, as it had a beauty, of its own. In the deep recesses of its vast forest-lands there were drives of deer that gave more royals in one day's sport than were ever found south of the Cheviots. In the dark pools, some of them well-nigh inaccessible, where they lay between gorse-covered hills or down in wooded valleys, the wild fowl flocked by legions. The river, that ran in and out, of which you just caught glimpses from the west windows, flashing between the boughs in the distance, was famed for its salmon, and had in olden days given char and trout to the tables of the monastery, whose celebrity had reached to royal Windsor and princely Sheen, and made the Tudor covetous for the land and water that yielded such good fare. Sport was to be had in perfection among the brakes and woods at White Ladies; and within, even in the very bachelor dens overlooking the cloisters, there were luxury and comfort; while fair women used to come down to White Ladies, sufficiently lovely to rouse the sleeping Dominicans from their graves, as they swept through the aisles of the chapel; and laughter would ring out from the smoking-room, when the men had their feet in the papooshes and their pipes in their mouths, loud enough to wake all the echoes of the abbey, and make the dead monks, lying under the sward, turn in their tombs and cross themselves, at the profanity of their successors and supplanters.

White Ladies was a grand old place, and Strathmore was envied by most of his friends and acquaintance for its possession. It had come to him by the distaff side, from his mother's father, who, failing heirs male in the direct line, had left it to him on condition that he assumed his name. Strathmore bore a close resemblance to his mother's family, whose name he had taken; he had nothing either in feature or in character in common with the easy, inert, sensual, placable,

Saxon Castlemeres, with their Teuton good humour and their Teuton phlegm, but he inherited in every point the type of the Strathmores, that courtly, silent, Norman race, swift and fierce in passion, dark and implacable in hate, keen to avenge, slow to forgive, imperious in love, and cold in hate; and with the features might go the character.

Others do not know, we do not know ourselves, all that lies latent in us, until the seeds of good or evil that are hidden and unknown, germinate to deed and blossom into action, and make us reap for weal or woe the harvest we have sown. If with the countenance, he inherited the character, of those who had ruled before him at White Ladies, there had been little in his life to develop the unroused nature. The darker traits might have died out with the darker times, as the mailed surcoat of steel had been replaced by a velvet morning coat, as the iron portcullis had been put away by a gold-fringed portière, as the culverin above the gateway had been removed for the soft, silken folds of a flag. Lions long kept in a tame life lose their desert instinct and their thirst for blood, so the Strathmores in long centuries of court life might have outworn and lost what had been evil and dangerous in them in the days of Plantagenet, of Lancaster, and of York. Or, if the nature were not dead, but only sleeping, there was nothing to arouse it; things went smoothly and well with Strathmore; he had birth, fortune, talents of a high order; he was courted by women, partly because he was very cold to them, chiefly, doubtless, because he was younger son of the Marquis of Castlemere and master of White Ladies. In a diplomatic career he had a wide field for the ambitions that attracted him—the ambition not of place, wealth, or title, but of Power, the deep, subtle state power that had in all ages fascinated the Strathmores, and been wielded by them successfully and skilfully. Life lay clear, brilliant, unruffled behind him and before him. If there ran in his blood the old spirit of the Strathmores, that had often worked their own doom and been their own scourge, that gleamed from their eyes in the old portraits by Antonio More, and Jameson, and

Vandyke, hanging in the vaulted picture-gallery at the Abbey, and that made those who looked on them understand how those courtly, elegant, suave gentlemen had been swift to steel, and pitiless in pursuit, and imperious in ire,—if this spirit still ran in his blood it was dormant, and had never been wakened to its strength. Opportunity is the forcing-house that gives birth to all things; without it, seeds will never ripen into fruit; with it, much that might otherwise have died out innocuous expands to baneful force. Man works half his own doom, and circumstance works the other half. Yet, because we have not been tempted, we therefore believe we can stand; because we have not yet been brought nigh the furnace, we therefore hold ourselves to be fire-proof! Mes frères, the best of us are fools, I fear! The steel is not proven till it has passed through the flames.

Sooner or later—though they may lie to it long, half a lifetime, perhaps—I believe that men and women are all true to their physiognomies; that they prove, sooner or later, that the index Nature has writ (though written in crabbed, uncertain characters which few can read altogether aright) upon their features is not a wrong nor a false one. Men lie, but Nature does not. They dissemble, but she speaks out. They conceal, but she tells the truth. What is carved on the features, will develop, some time or other, in the career. When Bernini made the prophecy that foretold ill for the heir of England, could any prediction seem more absurd? Yet Charles Stuart wrought his own fate, and the fruit of the past, whose seed had been sown by his own hands, was bitter between his teeth when the foretold calamity fell, black and ghastly, betwixt the People and the Throne. Strathmore's life, cold, clear, cloudless as the air of a glittering, still, winter's noon, was utterly at variance with his physiognomy —the physiognomy which had the eyes of a Catiline and the face of a Strafford! Yet, as time went on, and he passed of his own will into a path which a man stronger in one sense, and weaker in another, would have never entered, the spirit that was latent in him awoke, and wrought his own fate and

wove his own scourge more darkly and more erringly, because more consciously and more resolutely, than Charles Stuart; making him eat of the fruit of his own sowing to the full as bitterly as he of England, who might never have bowed his head to the axe that chill January morning, when a king fell, amidst the silence of an assembled multitude, if the first obstinate error which had seemed sweet to him had been put aside, and the first wilful turn out of the right path been avoided: the turn—so slight!—that led on to the headsman and the scaffold!

## CHAPTER II.

### Under the Shadow of the Elms.

THE rabbits were tame in comparison with the drives for which the forests of White Ladies were famed, and with the bouquets of pheasants that the battues afforded later on in the year; still they were better than nothing, and were peppered *faute de mieux* that day. But the chief thing done by the whole quartette, was to lie under the trees and drink the iced champagne-cup and Badminton, brought there, with a cold luncheon, on an Exmoor pony by the under-keepers about two o'clock; which was, however, as pleasant occupation for idleness on a sultry summer's day as anything that could be suggested, while the smoke curled up through the leafy roofing above head, and the dogs lay about on the moss with their tongues out, hot, tired, and excited, and the mavises and blackbirds sang in the boughs.

"Where the deuce is the Sabreur?" asked Phil Danvers, when the rabbits had been slain by the score, and the chimes of the Abbey, ringing seven o'clock with the slow, musical chant of the "Adeste Fideles," came over the woods, and warned them that the dressing-bell must be going, and that it was time to think about dinner.

"By George! I don't know," said Strathmore. "I haven't seen him for the last hour. Didn't he say something about

the Euston Coppice? I dare say he is gone there after the rabbits; we must have missed him somewhere."

"It's easy to lose oneself in these woods of yours, Strathmore," said Langton, striking a fresh fusee. "The timber's so tremendously thick, and there are no paths to speak of; you never have the wood cut down, do you?"

"Cut down! Certainly not! My good fellow, do you think the woods of White Ladies go for building purposes? I wonder Bertie is gone off like that. Pritchard, have you seen Major Erroll?"

"I see the Major a going toward the coppice, my lord, about an hour ago, when we was beating of the Near Acre—a going down that ere path, my lord," responded Pritchard, the under-keeper.

"Queer fellow!" said Strathmore, as he gave his gun to one of the boys, and lighted a weed. "What did he go off for, I wonder? He must have missed us, somehow."

"Perhaps he's taken a wrong cut, and will wander miserably till the soup's cold and the fish overdone," suggested Danvers. "Lady Millicent is coming to-night, ain't she, with the Harewood people? He'll hang himself if he isn't in time to take her in to dinner; he swears by her just now, you know. The Sabreur's eternally in love! Who isn't, though?"

"*I*'m not," said Strathmore, with perfect veracity. It was somewhat his pride that he had never lost his head for any woman in his life.

"Because you're panoplied with protocols, and sworn to the State! You're a cursed cold fellow, Cis—always were!" interrupted Danvers, with a mixture of impatience and envy. "Bertie *has* lost himself, I bet you. I was benighted once, don't you remember? If he miss Lady Millicent, he'll hang himself, to a certainty! We must ask her for one of her rose ribbons to make the suicide effective!"

"I'll go round by the coppice home, and look for him," said Strathmore. "There are two hours before the people come. I shall be back in plenty of time. Au revoir!—you

and Phil want longer for your toilettes than I do, because you'll dress for the Harewood women!"

It was a splendid evening—clear, sultry, with an amber light falling through the aisles of the trees, and long shadows deepening across the sward, while the wild fowl went to roost beside the pools, and the herons dipped their beaks into the dark cool waters that lay deep and still, with broad-leaved lilies and tangled river plants floating languidly on their surface. Strathmore left his guests to take the shorter cut that led direct to the side-door of the bachelors' wing, and strolled himself through Euston Coppice, a wild, solitary, intricate bit of the park, that had more of the luxuriant forest-growth of parts of Lower Brittany than of the tamer, more cultivated look of English woodlands. Some volcanic convulsion long ages ago had rent and split the earth in this part into a fantastic surface, the gaps so filled up by furze, hazel, and yellow heath, and the rugged sides so covered that the right track might very easily be lost. He walked onward, looking about him; for he thought it possible that Erroll might have missed the right path, and that he might fall in with him as he passed homewards.

Bertie was the solitary person whom Strathmore could ever have been said to have loved. His attachment was very difficult to rouse; in the world, people, specially pretty coquettes, called him without any heart, perhaps without any feeling. It was true that he had never lost his head after any of them; his indifference was no affectation, and his vaunted panoply no pretence; the Strathmores had always better liked state plot and subtle power than the women whose odorous tresses had swept over their Milan corslets, and whose golden heads had been pillowed on their breasts. To Erroll, Strathmore bore, however, a much deeper attachment than beauty had ever won from him—the attachment of a nature that gives both love and friendship very rarely; but when it gives either gives instantly, blindly, and trustingly; the nature that had always been characteristic of the "swift, silent, Strathmores," as the alliteration of cradle chronicles and provincial legends

nicknamed the race which had reigned at White Ladies since Hastings. The friendship between them was the friendship closer than brotherhood of dead Greece and old Judæa—the bright truthfulness, the soft laziness, the candour, the dash, the verve, the hundred attractive, attachable qualities of Erroll's character, endeared him to Strathmore by that strange force of contrast which has so odd a spell sometimes in friendship as in love; and the bond between them was as close and firmly riven as a clasp of steel. They never spoke of their friendship; it was not the way of either of them; it is only your loving ladies who lavish eternal vows, and press soft kisses on each other's cheeks, and swear they cannot live apart over their pre-prandial Souchong, to—slander each other suavely behind their fans an hour afterwards, and sigh away their bosom-darling's reputation with a whisper! They rarely spoke of it; but they had a friendship for one another passing the love of women, and they relied on it as men rely on their own honour, as silently and as securely.

Once, when they were together in Scinde, having both gone thither on a hunting trip to the big-game districts for a change one autumn, to bring home panther-skins and try pig-sticking, a tigress sprang out on them as they strolled alone through the jungle—sprang out to alight, with grip and fang, upon Strathmore, who neither heard nor saw her, as it chanced. But before she could be upon her victim, Erroll threw himself before him, and catching the beast by her throat as she rose in the air to her leap, held her off at arm's length, and fell with her, holding her down by main force, while she tore and gored him in the struggle—a struggle that lasted till Strathmore had time to take aim, and send a ball through her brain; a long time, let me tell you, though but a few short seconds in actual duration, to hold down, and to wrestle in the grip of a tigress of Scinde. "You would have done the same for me, my dear old fellow," said Erroll, quietly and lazily, as his eyes closed, and he fainted away from the loss of blood. And that was all he would ever vouchsafe to say or hear said about the matter. He had risked

his life to save Strathmore's; he knew Strathmore would have acted precisely so for him. It was a type of the quality and of the character of their friendship.

The evening shadows were slanting across the sward, while the squirrels ran from branch to branch, and the chesnuts lying on the mass turned to gold in the western sun, as Strathmore walked along with a couple of beagles following in his track. See Erroll he did not, and he wondered where the deuce he had gone; if he had been absolutely after the rabbits he would have taken some of the men, or the dogs at the least, with him; and it was odd he had chosen that night in especial to be belated, as among the people coming to dine at White Ladies in an hour's time was Lady Millicent Clinton, a beautiful blonde, tantalising, imperious, and bewitching to the highest degree, whom Erroll had watched for at Flirtation Corner, left the coulisses for at the opera, bought guinea cups of tea for at bazaars, and dedicated himself to generally, throughout the past season. He walked onwards, flushing the pheasants with his step, and startling the herons as he passed the pools, till they rose at the bark of the dogs, and sailed majestically away in the sunny silent air. At last, as he went along the confines of the deer-park, towards the entrance of a long elm-walk, half lane, half avenue, that led round towards the Abbey, he saw, leaning over a gate against which his gun was resting, and talking to a woman, Bertie—in quest of other game than the rabbits.

He was at some distance, almost at the other end of the avenue; across which broad lines of yellow light fell through the trunks of the trees, while the elm-boughs meeting above head, thick with luxuriant leaf, threw chequered shadows on the turf below. He was standing by the stile which led into a bridle-path that wound up to the church a mile or so beyond, and was talking earnestly to his companion, who stood on the other side, and who, even at that distance, made a charming picture; much such a one as Aline, when Boufflers toyed with her at the woodland brook under the forests of Lorraine, with the butterflies fluttering above her head, and

the wild flowers hanging in her childish hands. She stood on the lower step of the stile, so that as she reached upwards one of her arms was wound about his neck, her face, soft, youthful, and fair, was lifted to his own, as his hand lingered on her brow, pushing back from it the shining waves of hair, while she nestled closely to him as a bird to the one who caresses it, as a spaniel to the master it follows! It was a scene to be interpreted at a glance, that golden sunset hour under the shadow of the elms;—and *in* those hours who remembers that the sun will set, leaving the dank dews of night to brood where its beams have fallen; that the foliage above us will drop off sere and withered like the "dark brown years" of Ossian, into which we must enter and dwell; that in the grasses the asp is curling, that in the west the clouds are brooding? None remember, mes amis! neither did those who lingered then beneath the elms before the sun went down.

"*That's* his game! By George! I thought it was odd if the rabbits alone made him too late for dinner! I wonder how many he has shot in the coppice. Poor Lady Millicent! she would die of mortification and pique," thought Strathmore, as he looked up the elm-walk at its crossed light and shade, with a smile in which there was a dash of contempt. He had been loved by women who might well have claimed to haunt his memory; proud, peerless beauties, who might well have looked to rouse the swift imperious passion which, *when* they loved—that unloving race!—the love of the Strathmores had ever been; but he had cared for none of them, and this wasting of hours, this ceaseless adoration of women, this worshipping of a mistress's eyebrow, was incomprehensible and somewhat contemptible in his sight. He never was so nearly losing patience with Erroll as when he came in evidence with the perpetual gallantries, the never-ending, ever-changing *grandes passions*, as easily lit as cigars and as quickly thrown aside, that were characteristic of the Sabreur, and his best beloved pursuit. Strathmore would as soon have understood consuming his time in constantly blowing soap-bubbles!—he

looked now with a certain disdainful amusement at them where they stood; then, unseen himself, he turned, and making the dogs quiet with a sign, crossed the avenue, and went along beside the sunken fence of the deer-park by another route homeward, so that he should neither spy upon nor interrupt them.

Such game was Erroll's especial sport, if he found it on the lands of White Ladies he was fully welcome to the preserves undisputed. Strathmore did not envy him either the small amusement of slaying, or the inevitable trouble of the game when slain! A quarter of an hour later on, as he crossed the lawns that lay in front of the Abbey, while the chimes of the bells were still ringing the curfew with low mellow chants and carillons, he heard a step behind him, and as he turned faced the Sabreur, who came along smoking, blandly unconscious that he had been seen in his tête-à-tête under the elms.

"Had good sport in the coppice, mon cher? What did you mean by giving us the slip like this?" said Strathmore, as he swung round and waited for him.

"Pretty good; rabbits were rather shy," answered Erroll, with the meerschaum between his lips, and the most tranquil air of innocence that the human countenance ever wore.

"But la belle *wasn't!*—you seemed very good friends; is she an old acquaintance or a new? Is the game in the bag or only marked; hit or only just flushed? I expect the whole story in the smoking-room to-night!"

A certain dash of annoyance and discomfiture went over Erroll's face for the moment, but he laughed:

"Hang you! where did you see me?"

"Where you were very plainly to be seen! If you make open-air rendezvous, Bertie, you must be prepared for spectators. Who is she? If the game's been found on my lands, I think it is fair I should have an account of it. Is she an old love or a new?"

"Not new," laughed the Sabreur, pulling his Glengarry over his forehead, to keep the sunset glare out of his eyes.

"*Not* new! I thought you gave no more thought to old loves than to old gloves—the gloss off both, both go to the devil! I suppose you found her up last autumn, when you were down here in my place? I was in the East, so I am not responsible for what happened! You might have told me, my dear fellow; *I* shouldn't have rivalled you; pretty peasants never had any attraction for me; I like the *tournure* of the world, not the odour of the dairy. Give me grace and wit, not rosy cheeks and fingers fresh from the churn and the hencoop; the perfume of frangipane, not of the farm-yard. Petrarch might adore a miller's wife—it is not my line—and I think the flour must have made Laura's '*chiome d'oro*' look dusty: I never took a mistress from my tenantry! Who is she, Erroll?"

Erroll sent a puff of smoke into the air, and turned to Strathmore with his gay insouciant laugh, clear as a bell and sweet as a girl's, that had so much *youth* in it:

"I'll tell you some other time. Old story, you know, nothing new in it. We're all fools about women, and she beats any of those we shall have to-night hollow, Lady Millicent and all of 'em!"

Strathmore raised his eyebrows:

"An *old* love! and you're as enthusiastic as that? What must you have been in the beginning! Thank Heaven I was not here. Poor Lady Millicent! sal volatile by the gallon would never restore her if she knew a young provincial, smelling of the hayfield, with a set of cherry ribbons for a Sunday, and a week-day aroma of the cowshed (if not the pigsty), was said by the difficile Sabreur to beat her hollow! —and she a Court beauty and a Lady in Waiting! So much for taste!"

"Pigsty? Cowshed? You didn't see her just now, Cecil; you couldn't!" broke in Bertie, disgusted.

"I saw a woman, my dear Erroll; she was your property, and I noticed no more."

"For God's sake don't suppose me such a Goth that I should fall in love with a dairymaid, Strath!" said Erroll,

plaintively. "She's nothing of that sort—nothing, I give you my honour! Let me clear my character, pray. *Should* I love a 'Phillis in a hazel-bower?' I hate cobwebs, dew, and earwigs; and I can't bear a coarse colour for a woman! I say, don't let out anything about it, though, will you? Don't tell the other fellows; there's no object, and they'd only——"

"Chaff you? Exactly!"

"No! I don't care a straw for chaff," said Erroll, meditatively. "It's only boys who mind chaff, *we* don't. But they might get hunting her out, you see—would, I dare say, *I* should in their place—and I don't want that. I wish to keep the thing quiet. I have managed to do it hitherto; and she would cut up as rough at insult as Lady Millicent herself; you understand?"

"Not very clearly; but it doesn't matter; one doesn't look for perspicuity in love intrigues—nor for reason."

"Hang you! you know what I mean," murmured the Sabreur, lazily.

"You mean, you don't want me to tell of your tête-à-tête, and set the men on to badger you about it when the women are gone? Very well! I'm silent as the dead!" laughed Strathmore. "What a wicked dog you are, Bertie, on my word, though. Country air ought to purify your morals; one naturally sins in cities, but——"

"Inevitably sins in villages! Just so, one's nothing else to do! In town, one sins from sociability; in the country, from solitariness—a safe indication that the soft sins are the natural concomitants of one's existence everywhere, and shouldn't be resisted!"

"Admirable theory!—developed in practice, too, by its preacher, which can't be said of all precepts. Arcadia and the Rue Bréda have more in common than one generally fancied then; but I shouldn't have thought *you*'d have taken to provincial amourettes, Sabreur! However, failing hot-house fruits, I suppose you take a turn at blackberries? What an odd state of existence it must be, not to be able to live

twenty-four hours without finding some woman's eyes to look into!"

"Very natural, I think!—when women's eyes are the pleasantest mirrors there are, and framed on purpose for us. You were never in love in your life, Strath."

"I was never the fool of a woman, if you mean that."

"You've brought over a prima donna, because, in a cold sort of way, you thought her a handsome Roman," went on Erroll, disdaining the interruption—"or you've taken up the Montolieu, because she made a dead set at you; and because one has a Montolieu as naturally as one has a cigar-case or a pair of slippers—or you've made love to some grande dame because it answered a political purpose, and advanced a finesse to be in her boudoir when everybody else was shut out of it; but as for *love*—you know nothing about it!"

Strathmore laughed:

"I know as much as any wise man knows. I know just as much as flavours life—any more disturbs it. I like a woman for her beauty, but I should be particularly sorry to sup in raptures off a single smile, to tie my hands with a golden hair, and to go mad after the shape of an ankle, as you do with a dozen divinities in as many months. A week or two ago you were wild about the Clinton, who *is* worth looking at, I grant you, and now, I dare say, you've lost your head just as completely for little Phillis yonder, with her hands in the butter! My dear Bertie, it's positively inexplicable to me; I can fancy your kissing the lips, if they're pretty ones, of all those goddesses, but I can't possibly understand your caring about the goddesses themselves!"

"Hold your tongue!—and, for Heaven's sake, don't suppose I'm in love with a human churn! Hands in the butter; what an idea!" murmured the Sabreur, disgusted.

"Well! it must be a cabbage-rose this time, conservatory ones don't grow about the home farms. Or if it isn't——"

Strathmore stopped, struck with a sudden thought, and swung round, as they walked under the cloisters, his face as he turned to Erroll softening with that smile which took from

it all that was cold, dark, and dangerous in its physiognomy, and gave to it an almost tender warmth—a warmth that as yet no woman had had the magic to waken there. He laid his hand on Erroll's shoulder with the old familiar gesture of their Eton days, as they came out of the aisles of the cloisters on to the lawn that stretched smooth and sunny before an antique grey terrace, with broad flights of steps hung with ivy, looking down on to thick avenues and long glades of trees, like the terrace at Haddon, where Dorothy Vernon fled in the summer moonlight to the love of John Manners.

"Erroll, I say, it is no entanglement, no annoyance, is it, this affair of yours?"

Erroll threw his cigar away, shook his head, and laughed:

"Not in the least; except—that my conscience smites me a little for it sometimes. That's all!"

Strathmore's hand rested still on his shoulder, lying there in the safe, cordial grasp of a friendship warm as the friendship of David for Jonathan.

"*Conscience!* How exceptional you are! The word's out of all modern dictionaries, and *rococo* from use. But what I meant was, if you had any difficulty of any kind—if you need to shake yourself free from any embarrassments—you would keep to your promise and let me serve you in all ways? Remember, old fellow, you gave me your word?"

He meant that Erroll would let him assist him more substantially than by advice. The Sabreur was a man about town, with little more to float him than a good name and a fashionable reputation, lucky Baden "coups" and dashed-off magazine articles; his debts were heavy sometimes, his embarrassments not a few, though on his gay sunny nature they never weighed long; he was, very literally, a "beggared gentleman," though his beggary was as joyous and insouciant a Bohemianism as might be; and Strathmore, who was generous to an extreme, and ascetically indifferent to riches, had always pressed him, and sometimes, though generally with the utmost difficulty, compelled him to accept his aid; without bond or payment.

His hand lay on Erroll's shoulder where they stood at the foot of the terrace steps, and the light from the west fell full upon his face as Strathmore looked at him—it was so frank, so glad, with a smile as bright as a girl's upon it, that many years afterwards Strathmore saw it in memory fresh as though beheld but yesterday.

"Dear old fellow! I know you would! *If* I needed, I would ask you as freely as though you were my brother;" and Erroll's voice was rich and full as he spoke, like the voice of a woman when she speaks of, or to, that which she loves: then he laughed with the gay carelessness of his temper. "But there's no need here; *I*'m not the sufferer. They are not panther griffes, like your Montolieu's or La Julia's, confound her! *I* play the tiger part if there be one in the duo. I say, Strathmore, what a confounded bore your going off to Servia—Bosnia, Bulgaria, where is it? Won't Prince Michel wait?"

"Prince Michel would willingly wait till doomsday rather than see *me*, but the F. O. won't. It *is* a bore; I didn't want to leave till over the First; however, *diplomatie oblige!* and there'll be a good deal of finesse wanted. It is an errand quite to my taste."

"Perhaps you'll see this adorable Vavasour and Vaux beauty on the Continent. Do try!"

"And report her to you, as game worth your coming over to mark or not, as the case may be? Your *paysanne* won't hold her ground long against the Peeress, if she's only a tithe of what Rokeby says. I will make note for you accurately *if* I see her; and I may come back through Paris in the spring. The deuce! it's getting very late. Those people will all be here before we are dressed for dinner," said Strathmore, as he crossed the terrace, entered the house, and went up to his dressing-room that looked out across the pleasaunce and the deer-park that lay beyond.

Lady Millicent came, haughty, lovely, and bewitching, with the Harewood people and several others, to dinner that night at White Ladies, in the great dining-hall that had been

the refectory of the old Dominicans. Where travel-worn pilgrims and serge-clothed palmers, footsore and bronzed by Eastern suns, had sat and supped, telling of miracles of Loretto or persecutions from the Moslem to the listening brethren, pretty women with diamonds glancing in their hair, and smiles brightening in their languid, lustrous eyes, sat at the table, covered with gold plate, and Bohemian glass and delicate Sèvres, with rich fruits and brilliant exotics, and Parian figures holding up baskets odorous with summer blossom, while the wines sparkled pink and golden in their carafes, and flushed to warm, ruby tints in the silver claret-jugs. Where the white robes of the Dominicans had swept, the perfumed laces and silks of their trailing dresses as noiselessly moved; where the Latin chant of the Salutaris Hostia had risen and swelled, the low laugh of their musical voices echoed; where the incense had floated in purple clouds, the bouquet of Burgundies and the perfume of Millefleurs scented the air; where the silent monks had sat and broken black bread in the monarchical gloom of their woodland Abbey, Lady Millicent and her sisters flirted and smiled, and brushed the bloom off a hothouse grape, and trifled with the wing of an ortolan, while the light flashed azure-bright in their sapphires, and the opals gleamed in their bosom. Le Roi est mort. Vive le Roi! So To-day succeeds to Yesterday, and the dead are supplanted and the past is forgot! Where the viaticum last night was administered to the dying, the laugh of the living echoes gaily this morning, and in its turn the laugh will die off the air, and the chant of the tomb will come round again. Such is life and such is death, and the two are ever fused together and twisted in one inseparable cord, the white line running with the black, side by side, crossed and recrossed, following each other as the night the day!

"You incorrigible fellow, what would your wood-nymph have said to you if she'd seen you making such desperate love to Lady Millicent to-night?" said Strathmore, as he and Erroll passed down the corridor to the smoking-room, as the last roll of the carriages echoed down the avenue.

"The deuce!" laughed Erroll. "If they had a lorgnon long enough to let them see any of us when we're away from them, the tamest Griseldis would have little to say to us when we went back to her! Those poor women! they're shockingly cheated."

"They have their revenge, mon cher. If we're their first instructors in mischief, they take to the lesson very kindly, and improve on it fast enough!" laughed Strathmore. "If M. son Mari deceive Lucretia, Lucretia soon turns the tables, and dupes her lord. They are quits with us, and don't want any pity. I wish your luckless wood-nymph had seen you go on with the Clinton to-night! I am curious really to know how you get up the steam fresh every time; now with a duchess, and now with a dairymaid, now with a blonde, and now with a brune!"

"Afin de varier les couleurs!"

quoted Erroll, appropriately, wrapping about him his seed-pearl broidered and sable-lined dressing-gown, dainty and costly enough for Lady Millicent's wear.

"Caramba!" broke in Strathmore. "I have a good mind to punish your inconstancy by betraying your incognita. Such a monopoly of the wild game and the tame birds at once isn't fair. I'll tell Danvers the whereabouts of your preserves."

"No, no! Don't! there's a good fellow," interrupted Erroll, quickly. "You see—it would only bother one—and——"

Strathmore laughed as he opened the door of the smoking-room, and the flood of warm light streamed out from within:

"We don't like poaching in neglected preserves even! I understand, my dear fellow. Bag your big game and your small, make love to your Court belle and your country girl both at once, and just as you like! *I* won't set the beaters after either. Have I not said I'll be silent as death? Entrez! Bah! there is Phil smoking those wretched musk-scented cigarettes again; they are only fit for Lady Georgie or Eulalie Papellori. What taste, when there are my Havannahs and cheroots!"

## CHAPTER III.

### The Vigil of St. John.

It was the Vigil of St. John in Prague.

The stars were coming out one by one in the clear violet skies, that were still yellow in the west with the beams of a setting sun; and the dews of the evening were moist upon the thick foliage of the Lorenziberg and the vineyards of the Anlagen, encircling the city with their fresh green zone. The lights, already lit upon the bridges, were mirrored in the waters of the Moldau, or the Veltava, as it is called by its softer Czechen name that ran like a broad smooth silver band beneath their arches; and the glare from the western skies fell on the gilt crosses of the Teyn church, making them blaze and sparkle with fiery brilliance, while the mosque-like spires of a thousand towers stood out clear and delicate as fairy handiwork in the warm golden haze, as the measured chant of litanies, sung by gathered multitudes, rose and fell with slow sonorous rhythm on the hush of the coming night. For many nights and days before, the hum of collecting people and the weary tramp of tired feet had been heard throughout the city, as devotees of every stock and province had flocked far and near, from wild Silesian forests, from remote Bavarian mountains, from Saxon hamlets buried in their pine-woods, and charcoal-burners' châlets in Moldavian wilds, and Czechen homesteads nestled in their cherry orchards, to the great Festival of Holy Johannes of Nepomuk, at whose most sainted martyrdom, as Legend and Church record, five stars arose and glittered in the waters where the Saint sank, a thousand years ago, and gleamed in golden radiance, heaven-sent witnesses to innocence.

At the Cathedral and in the Platz, before the stars and statue on the bridge, and around the bronze ring in St. Wenzel's Chapel, at every smaller shrine and lesser altar through the city, the dense crowd of pilgrims knelt, all their heads bowed down in prayer, as the numberless ears of wheat in a

corn-field bend with one accord before the sweep of a summer breeze. There is something oddly touching, pathetic, majestic, almost sacred in the sight of a surging sea of human life! What is it that is grand and impressive in a dense silent crowd, collected together, no matter whether that crowd be a mass of troops in the Champ de Mars, the gathering of the people upon Epsom Downs, or a countless assembling of peasants in Prague on a Holy day? What is it? Taken individually, the units of each are unimpressive, grotesque, common-place; a French chasseur, an English touter, a Sclavonian glass engraver, have no sublimity about them taken singly. But in their aggregate, there is that same strange, nameless, mournful solemnity which brought hot, unbidden tears to the eyes of the man who, while the Magi offered libations to the manes of the Homeric heroes, sat on the white throne at Abydos, looking down on the crowded Hellespont, and the countless thousands that were gathered by the shores of Scamander, beneath the shadow of Mount Ida, while the sunlight glittered on the golden pomegranates of the Immortal Guard, and the gorgeous robes of the Thracians fluttered in the winds. Perhaps with him, we vaguely, unwittingly, involuntarily compassionate these vast multitudes, of which in a century there will not be one who has not been gathered to his tomb; and the depth of the sadness lends a sanctity to these crowds, whose goal is the grave, which the chill and shallow philosophies of an Artabanus cannot whisper away: for we too are wending thither in their company, we too must turn our steps from golden Abydos, and lay us down to die at Salamis!

It was the Vigil of St. John. Pyramids of gas-jets flared up to the skies, the Five Stars commemorative of the Saint of Nepomuk glittered on the parapet in the evening air: there was no sound but the swelling melodious cadence of the Latin litanies, chanted by a million voices in solemn and regular rhythm, filling the night with music, full, rich, mournful as the glorious harmonies that peal from cathedral choirs at a midnight mass. And an Englishman strolling through the

city on foot (for no carriages are permitted in the Platz and Bridge at the Vigil and Festival of St. John), looked down on the kneeling multitudes with a smile on his lips, a smile that had perhaps a little of the sadness of the Persian as he gazed down on the Ægean, and more of natural disdain for these superstitions before him, which were but type of the bigotries of a wider world, where difference from *him* is your neighbour's measure of your difference from Deity, and where we are bidden to accept our creed, as in the time of the Molinistes they were bidden to accept the Pouvoir Prochain, by no better rule than that "il faut prononcer le mot des *lèvres* de peur d'être hérétique de *nom!*"

As he strolled down Wenzel's Platz, in the centre of which sprang a tree of gas, with a myriad of burning luminous leaves, that threw their glare on the kneeling devotees as they bowed in adoration before the holy shrines, a carriage that had come into the square against all rule—for the best reason, that the horses had broken away, frightened at the music, the lights, the crowds, and had taken their own way thither, beyond their driver's power to pull them in—dashed down the Platz at a headlong gallop. The crowd of pilgrims were too densely packed to have power to move to save themselves by separation or by flight; they fell pêle-mêle one on another, the stronger crushing the weaker, according to custom in every conflict, calling on Jesus and the Mother of God and Holy Johannes to preserve them from their fate, shrieking, praying, sobbing, swearing; while the horses, maddened by the tumult and the gas glare, tore across the square, dragging their carriage after them like a wicker toy. Nothing less than a heavenly interposition, miraculously great as the Five Stars of Holy Johannes, could save the people in their path from death and destruction; the carriage rocked and swayed, its occupant clasping her hands and crying piteously for help; the horses dashed through the kneeling multitude, knocking down aged men and sobbing children and shrieking women in their headlong course; the oaths and prayers and screams rose loud and shrill, half drowned in the rich

sonorous chant of the litanies from priests and pilgrims beyond, that swelled out uninterrupted from every lighted shrine and blazing altar.

Death was imminent for many—death in the hour of prayer, death on the eve of glad festivity;—the horses, snorting, plunging, flinging the white foam from their nostrils, trampled out a merciless path through the close-packed crowd, and trod down beneath their hoofs what they could not scatter from their road. The blaze of gas, the loud swell of the chants, the glitter of the altar lights, the wild tumult and uproar about them, terrified and maddened them. Death was in their van, and in their wake, for all the multitude kneeling there in prayer; but—as they neared the spot where the Englishman was, who had not moved a yard, and calmly waited their approach, he stood firmly planted, as though made of granite, in their path, and catching them, with a sudden spring, by their ribbons close to the curb, checked them in full flight with a force that sent them back upon their haunches. It needed what he had, an iron strength and perfect coolness; even with these to aid him it was a dangerous risk to run, for if they shook themselves free, the infuriated beasts would trample him to death.

They reared and plunged wildly, flinging the foam, tinged with blood, over their chests and flanks, and into his eyes, till it blinded him with the spray; they lifted him three times up off the ground by his wrists with a jerk sufficient to wrench his arms out of their sockets, with a strain enough to make every fibre and muscle break and snap. Still he held on; they had met their master, and had to give in at last; they were powerless to shake off his grip; and, tired out at last with the contest, they stood quiet; panting, trembling, passive, fairly broken in, their heads drooping, their limbs quivering, blood where the curbs had sawn their mouths, mixed with the snowy foam that covered them from their loins to their pasterns. He let go his hold; his face was pale, and calm, as though he had lounged out of a ball-room; but his eyes glittered and gleamed dark with a swift, dangerous pas-

sion—a passion that was evil. He stretched his hand up, without speaking, to the coachman for his whip; the man stooped down and gave it to him: and, clearing the crowd wide with a sign, he lashed the horses, pitilessly, fiercely—lashed them till the poor brutes, spiritless, powerless, and trembling, stood shaking like culprits before their judge. That merciless punishing done, his passion had spent itself; the horses were broken down to the quietness of lambs, and might have been guided by a young child; letting go his hold on them again, he approached the carriage window, and lifted his hat as carelessly and indifferently as though he were bowing to some acquaintance in the Ride or the Pré Catalan.

"Madame, you must be very much terrified, but I trust you have not been hurt?" he said, in German, to the single occupant of the carriage, who, leaning out, eagerly, and with grateful empressement, stretched to him two delicate, ungloved, jewelled hands.

"Monsieur! Mon Dieu! how brave you have been! You have saved my life—and at the risk of your own! What can I say to you? How can I thank you?"

As the glare from the gas-pyramid near and the lights burning on the shrine fell upon her face, he saw that it was one of rare and exceeding loveliness, and smiled slightly as her warm white hands touched his own, that were aching and throbbing with pain:

"Madame, I am thanked already—*par un regard de vous!* Is there any way in which I can have the honour to assist you?"

Before she could reply, the carriage moved. The driver, a rough, ill-mannered Czech, who wasted no words and no time, started off his trembling horses afresh; he was impatient to be out of the crowd, who, recovering from their terror were swearing bitterly at him in a hundred guttural dialects, and screaming vociferous indignant wrath; and he was afraid, moreover, of the arrival and the fury of police officials. Without awaiting orders, he started off back again through the square, and the carriage rolled away down the Platz, bearing

its occupant out of sight; a broidered handkerchief she had dropped, as her hand met her deliverer's, was the only relic left of her, where it lay on the stones at his feet. The pilgrims, closing over the vacant spot as the vehicle rolled away, crowded round the Englishman who had saved two-thirds of them from imminent death, with impetuous, demonstrative, enthusiastic gratitude, the vivacious Sclavonians calling on the Mother of God and Holy Johannes to bless and reward him, showering down on him a thousand valedictions in harsh Saxon and vehement Czechen; the women holding up their children to look at him, and remember his face, and pray for him for ever; the terrified peasants kissing his clothes in frantic adoration, canonising him then and there, and calling down upon his head the blessing of the whole heavenly roll of saints and angels; while through the multitude ran a breathless whisper, that their deliverer was none other than St. John of Nepomuk himself, descended on earth in human form to save and champion his faithful people, keeping watch and prayer at his Vigil in Prague!

To be canonised was very far from his taste, and the vehement gratitude lavished upon him was an infinite bore. The vociferous worship of the crowds could very well have been dispensed with, and signing them off to leave him a clear path, he pushed them away, and breaking free from their eager clamour with some difficulty, he walked down the Platz, striking a fusee and lighting a cigar as he went—an act that slightly disturbed the pilgrims who had canonised him, and shook their faith as to his saintship: Holy Johannes would never have smoked!

As he moved from the spot, he saw the handkerchief lying at his feet, and stooped and raised it; it was of gossamer texture, bordered with delicate lace; it was subtilely perfumed, and in the corner, broidered with fantastic device, was a coronet and an interlaced chiffre, whose initials were too intricately interwoven for him to be at the pains to decipher them. It was a woman's pretty toy; some men would have kept it in souvenir of this Vigil of St. John when a face so

marvellously lovely had beamed upon them; he was not one of those; it was not his way. For a moment he took it up to thrust it in the breast of his waistcoat, more without thought than from any motive in the action; but as he did so he was passing a pretty Bohemian glass-engraver, whose bright black eyes sparkled with eager longing as her pretty brunette's face looked out from her yellow hood, and she saw the dainty scented handkerchief in his hand. He threw it to her, dropping the little gossamer toy, with its broidered coronet, into her bosom.

"It will please you better than me, little beauty," he said carelessly, as he went on through the thickly-packed crowd, smoking, and not taking in return the caress she would willingly have allowed; as the pilgrims returned to their prayers, closing over the vacant spot, and the chanted orisons, broken off for a while, rose again in slow-measured harmonies, the litanies ringing out into the silent air, the lights burning on the blazing altars, and the dense crowds bowing down before the shrines throughout the city, while the golden cross of the Teyn church glittered in the light of the stars, and the hushed skies brooded in the twilight of the coming night over the towers and the palaces, the river and the vineyards, the lighted altars, and the frowning fortresses of antique and historic Prague.

## CHAPTER IV.

### A Titian Picture seen by Sunset-Light.

"MOUTON qui rêve, are you thinking of Prague and of me?"

A cumbersome Czechen boat was dropping down the Moldau, its sails idly flapping in the sultry June night, in which not a breath of wind was stirring, while the mournful music of some of the national lays broke on the air from a little band of musicians playing in the aft of the vessel, wild, sweet, and harmonious, as though they were the melodies

of legendary Rübezahl and his Spirit Band. The boat was chiefly filled with peasantry going by water to a fair at Aussig, and bright-eyed glass-engravers, with yellow or scarlet kerchiefs on their black-haired heads, were laughing merrily with each other, and casting mischievous glances at the sailors as they passed them. It was such a summer night as you may see any year in Bohemia; the lazy, silent hour when the hot, toilsome, blazing day is sinking into the warm, still, tranquil night; when the peasantry leave their field-work, chanting fragments of Sclavonic songs; when the engravers put aside their little graving-wheels, and lean out for a breath of air from their single window under the eaves; when the cattle wind homeward down the hill-side paths, and in the doorways of the Gasthof, under the cherry-trees, the gossipers drink their good-night draughts of Lager and Bayerisches. The orchards, white with blossom, bowered gaily-painted homesteads; the dark red roofs peeped out of châlets half hidden under hollyhocks; the poppy grounds glowed scarlet, catching the last gleam of the setting sun; and over the rye-fields a low western breeze was blowing from the fir-covered hills as the vessel floated down the stream, passing green wooded creeks, and pine-woods growing between the clefts of riven rocks, and golden glimpses of hazy distance from the banks through which the Moldau wound its way.

"Mouton qui rêve, are you thinking of Prague and of me, mon ami?"

The voice was low, and sweet, and rich—that most excellent thing in woman; and the speaker was worthy the voice, where she sat leaning amongst a pile of shawls and cushions with which her servant had covered the rough bench of the boat, as an Odalisque might have leaned amongst the couches of the Odà, with as much Eastern grace and as much Eastern languor. A *blonde aux yeux noirs*, her eyes were long and dark and lustrous, with a dangerous droop of their thick curling lashes, but her skin was dazzlingly fair, with a delicate bloom in her cheeks; the hair was not golden, nor

auburn, nor blond cendré, but what I have only seen once in my life, the "yellow hair" of the poets, of Edith the Swan-necked, and of Laura of Avignon; the lips were beautiful—a trifle too full and too sensual, feminine detractors would have objected, but Béranger would have sung of them:

> pour ma lèvre qui les presse
> C'est un défaut bien attrayant!

and it was a mouth that surely smiled destruction! It was a face, brilliant, tender, marvellously lovely like a face of Titian or of Greuze, as she leant among her cushions, with a black veil over her hair, thrown there with the grace of a Spanish mantilla; and her white hands lying on the rough wooden edge of the vessel, with their rings gleaming in the sunset glare. Her eyes were dwelling on the face of a man who leant over the boat-side within a few yards of her, and who was looking down into the water, a cigar in his mouth, and his profile turned towards her;—dwelling with curiosity, admiration, satisfaction. A woman appreciated better than a man the peculiar and varied meanings of that physiognomy; women will not often see widely, but they always see microscopically; they cannot analyse, but they have invariably rapid intuition.

"It is a face of Vandyke! so much repose, with so much passion. I like it. It tells a story, but a story whose leaves are uncut," she thought to herself, as she leaned forwards, touched his arm with a branch of cherry-blossoms she held, and challenged him with her laughing words, "Mouton qui rêve!"

He turned; he had not seen her there before, though both had been on board some half hour; and as the light blow of the cherry-blossoms struck his arm, scattering their snowy petals, and her low, soft laugh fell on his ear, he recognised the face that he had seen a few days before in the gas glare of the Vigil of St. John, whose broidered handkerchief he had dropped into the bosom of a Bohemian peasant girl, instead of treasuring it in recollection of one so fair. Such a woman would have won courteous welcome and recognition

from a Stagyrite or a nonogenarian; and he took the hand she extended to him soft, warm, and small, with sapphires and pearls gleaming on its ungloved fingers, lifting his hat to her with answering words of gratified acknowledgments. He had *not* been thinking of her, but Diogenes himself would not have had discourtesy enough to have told her so; and on a summer's evening, dropping down a river in a slow, tedious passage, such a rencontre to while away the time could not choose but be acceptable to any man.

"Ah, monsieur!" she said, softly, as he drew near to her, "how brave you were that night. To dare to stop those horses in full flight!—it was marvellous; it was heroic! You saved my life; how can I ever thank you well enough?—ever show you half my gratitude?"

"Hush, madame, I entreat you!" he said, with a smile, that was rather the calm conventional smile of courtesy than the warmer one she was used to see lighten at her glance. "You have thanked me abundantly; if you do more, you will make me ashamed of having served you so little. Few men would not envy me so rich a recompense as lies in having won the smallest title to your gratitude!"

*La blonde aux yeux noirs* looked up at him searchingly through her silky lashes, and laughed a pretty, mocking, airy laugh.

"Graceful words! but are they *meant?*"

"Ah, madame!" he answered, laughing, as he seated himself beside the fair stranger, into whose path accident had thrown him so agreeably. "Perhaps that is a question that it is always wisest never to ask of any words at all!"

"What an odd man!" thought the lovely Odalisque of the Moldau, letting her eyes rest on the countenance that had for her, as it had for most women, a peculiar fascination, while she laughed again. "Very true! Some women will tell you, monsieur, they do not like compliments—never believe them; it is only that the grapes are sour. *I* like flattery. I live on it as children live on bonbons; if it be not

sincere, it is nothing to me, the blame lies on the bad taste of the flatterers. I must have my *dragées*, and, as long as they are sweet, what matter whether they are real sugar or only French chalk?"

"All offered to *you* must be genuine—you need have no fear!" he answered her—and he meant it. As he looked down on the dazzling incognita, whose insouciant freedom had yet all the grace and charm taught by the breeding of courts and beaux mondes, though critical and very difficult to please, he confessed to himself that he had never seen anything more lovely out of the pastelles of La Tour, or the dreams of Titian, than this young and brilliant creature found thus strangely out of place, and alone, in a Bohemian boat that was carrying a load of peasant passengers to Aussig Fair!

Who could she be?—a lady of rank, laissez faire and untrammelled, amusing herself with the romances and caprices of a momentary incognita; a Princess of the Tuileries, or of the Quartier Bréda; a Serene Highness of some Sesquipedalian-Strelitz, sans state and sans suite; or a Comtesse sans Châteaux (save en Espagne), with a face and a grace more fatal to her prey than her vin mousseux and her skilful écarté? As yet it was impossible to tell, and with a lovely woman so ungracious an interrogation can never be put as the insolent question, "Who are you?"

She looked up and met his eyes bent on her, as the light of the sun setting behind the pine-woods lit up her face and form, as she leaned among her cushions, into Rubens-like richness, with a bright touch of Fra Angelo and Carlo Dolce softness about the tableau.

"How strangely we meet, monsieur, on this clumsy little Czechen boat! I came by water, because the night was so warm; and you came from the same reason? Ah! *C'est le destin, monsieur!* We were fated to meet again."

"If fate will always serve me as kindly I will become a predestinarian to-morrow, and go in leading-strings with blind contentment!"

God help us!—how rashly we say things in this world. Long years afterwards we remember those idle, careless, unmeant words gaily uttered, and they come back to us like the distant mocking laughs of devils!—devils who tempted us, and now riot in their work.

"*C'est le destin!*" she said, smiling, her fair face, with its luminous eyes, looking the lovelier for that beaming coquettish smile. "But, monsieur, you have been my deliverer, may I not ask to know, who is it I have to thank for so daring a rescue as I owed to you in Prague?"

"Assuredly. My name is Strathmore—Cecil Strathmore."

"Strathmore?" she repeated, musingly. "It is a very pretty name, and a good one. Then you are English, monsieur? And if so, you are thinking, of course, what a strange incorrect whim of mine it is for me to be travelling alone with only my maid in a little Czechen boat in the evening? You English are so *raides*, so prudish!"

Strathmore laughed, as he wound the shawls about her that had dropped aside.

"The English are (though I am neither of the two, believe me), but they generally verify Swift's aphorism, that 'a nice man is a man of nasty ideas;' the chill icing is only to conceal dirty water, and they freeze—to hide what lies below! But may not I claim similar confidence, and entreat to know by name one for whom no name is needed, it is true, to make one remember her?"

She laughed, and shook her head in denial so charming that it was worth fifty assents.

"No, I am travelling incognita. I cannot reveal that secret. I like Romance and Caprice, monsieur, they are feminine privileges, and following them I have found far more amusement than if I had gone in one beaten track between two blank walls of Custom and Prudence. It may have made me enemies; but, bah! who goes through life without them?"

"None! and never those who awaken envy. Dulness and

mediocrity may live unmolested and unattacked, but people never tire of finding spots on a sun whose brilliance blinds them."

"Never!" she answered, with a naïve and amusing personal appropriation of his words. "If I had been born plain like some poor women, I should not have had so many *siffleurs;* but then, on the other hand, my *claque* would not have been so loud nor so strong; and the cheers always drown the hisses."

"You have had *siffleurs?* They must have bandaged their eyes, then, before taking so ungracious a rôle! Surely society hissed *them* for such atrocity?" said Strathmore, noticing the dazzling fairness of her skin and the exquisite contour of her form, and thinking to himself, "The deuce! she makes me talk as absurd nonsense as the Sabreur!"

"Of course it did, but *siffleurs* hiss on through all opposition, you know, monsieur——"

"Because it pays them!"

"No doubt. But, what do a few hisses matter, more or less, as long as one enjoys oneself in one's youth—one's delicious, irrecoverable youth? I suppose if I live long enough my hair will be white and my skin yellow, but I do not spoil my present by looking into the future. If it must come, let it take care of itself. It may never come—why mourn about it? Those people are *bécasses*, who work, and toil, and wear away all their good looks, and live hardly and joylessly only to hoard money to buy tisane, and nurses, and crutches, when all the zest of existence is gone from them, and given to a new generation that has pushed them out of their places? Doesn't Balzac say, that whether one sweeps the streets with a broom or the Tuileries with a velvet robe, it comes to much the same thing when one is old; the salt is equally out of the soup whether it is eaten in a Maison Dieu or in a ducal château!"

"Almost thou persuadest me to be an Epicurean!" smiled Strathmore, as he thought to himself, "Who on earth can she be?" and gazed down into her soft, laughing, lustrous

eyes, languid yet coquettish, like the eyes of the women of Seville. "But *I* do not hold with you there, *ma belle inconnue;* to me it seems that with years alone can be gained what is worth gaining—power. The butterfly pleasure of youth can very well be spared for the ambitions that can only be reaped with maturity. A man has only become of real value, and able to grasp real sway, when he is near his grave."

"Ah, for your sex that is all very well, your youth lasts to your tomb, but with us—*nous autres femmes!*—with our beauty flies our sceptre. How can we reign after youth, without youth? You will not care for a mistress who is wrinkled!" cried the belle blonde, impatiently, the impatience of a lovely coquette incensed to be contradicted. "So, you think power the only thing worth having? Then you do not care for love, monsieur, I presume?"

"Well!—I must confess, not much."

It was rank heresy in the presence of so fair a priestess of the soft religion, it was a fatal challenge to the one who heard it, though Strathmore spoke the cold, careless, simple truth, and did not heed whether he offended or piqued a chance acquaintance of the hour by it.

"And yet that man *will* love, fiercely, imperiously, bitterly one day!" thought the Naiad of the Moldau, who, a stranger to him, as he to her, read his character by a woman of the world's clairvoyante perception, as he failed to read hers by a man of the world's trained penetration. "For shame!" she said, aloud, striking him a fragrant blow with her sprigs of cherry-blossom. "If you are heretical enough to feel so, mon ami, you should not be unchivalric enough to say so! Your bay wreaths will be very barren and withered if you don't weave some roses with them. Cæsar knew that. So you admire age because it will give you power; and I loathe it because it will rob me of beauty—what a difference! I wonder how we shall both meet it! But, bah! why talk of these things! The wind will be chilly, and the green leaves brown, and the ground frost-bound in six months' time; but the but-

terflies playing there above our heads are too wise to spoil the sunshine by remembering the snows. *They* are Epicureans; let *us* be so too!"

To such a doctrine, expounded by such lips, it was impossible to dissent. The sunset faded, the purple mists stole on down the slopes of the hills, the west wind rose, bringing a rich odour from the pine forests; the Bohemian musicians, for a few coins, sang airs sweet enough to have been played by the legendary music-demons of a land where Mozart rules; the boat dropped slowly down the stream in the evening twilight, and Strathmore leant over the vessel's side, talking on to his chance acquaintance, and looking down on to the exquisite Titian-like picture that she made, reclining on her pile of cushions, with the black mantilla of lace thrown on her yellow hair, and her dark lustrous eyes gleaming softly and dreamily in the light of the summer stars. He was singularly critical of the beauty of women, and coldly careless of their wiles and charms; yet even he felt a vague dreamy pleasure in floating down the river in the sultry moonlit night thus, with the echo of this sweet silvery voice in his ear, and a face on which he looked in the gloaming, soft as the music that lingered on the silent air. He would not altogether have found the voyage wearisome though it had lasted till the dawn; but—pardieu, mes frères! one never drops *long* down any river, real or allegorical, with a smooth current and Arcadian landscapes, under the shade of pleasant woodlands, beneath which we would willingly linger till sunrise, but that we are safe to be soon startled by the rough grate of the keel on the sand, that breaks the spell for evermore!

It was so now; the boat ground in a shallow bit of the water where red sunken rocks made the navigation troublesome for a vessel so cumbersome, and boatmen so clumsy, as were those who now steered it down the Moldau's course. No harm was done that could be of serious account, but the boat was stuck hopelessly fast between the rocks, and could not proceed to Aussig that night, at all events; while its pas-

sengers had no choice but to remain where they were till the sunrise, or to disembark at a landing-place which was luckily easily to be reached by a plank between the vessel and the shore, where, buried in the favourite cherry orchards of Bohemia, with a gaudy sign swinging under its dark red roof, half hidden in a profusion of giant hollyhocks, with linden-trees in full flower before the door, and the pine-covered hills stretching behind it, stood a little river-side Gasthof. The unknown, into whose society and in whose protection he was thus in a manner forced, laughed brightly, and made light of the contretemps when Strathmore explained it to her. "We must wait here?—very well! I like the smallest soupçon of an adventure. I will dine under those limes. I suppose they can find something to give us; but I must go on to-night if there be a vehicle procurable," she said, gaily and good-humouredly enough, without any feminine repining, as she gave him her hand to be assisted across the plank.

She was not altogether sorry to be able to retain as a *détenu* an English aristocrat, with a face like the Vandyke pictures; who was coldly indifferent to the soft creeds of which she was a head-priestess, and was a renegade and disbeliever in their faith. "Destiny throws us together, monsieur! We must be good friends. Dieu le veut!" she laughed, as Strathmore lifted her from the plank on to the landing-place, while the white soft hands lay in his, and the delicate fragrance of the perfumed hair floated across him, as the lace of her mantilla brushed his shoulder.

"I am the debtor of destiny, then!" he whispered, in answer, noting as she stood by him in the starlight the sweet grace and luxurious outline of her perfect form, that even the dark drapery of her travelling-dress, wrapped about in long voluminous folds, could not avail to hide.

Brothers mine!—it is well for us that we are no seers! Were we cursed with prevision, could we know how, when the idle trifle of the present hour shall have been forged into a link of the past, it will stretch out and bind captive the whole future in its bonds, we should be paralysed, hopeless,

powerless, old ere ever we were young! It is well for us that we are no seers. Were we cursed with second sight, we should see the white shroud breast-high about the living man, the phosphor light of death gleaming on the youthful radiant face, the feathery seed lightly sown bearing in it the germ of the upas-tree, the idle careless word gaily uttered carrying in its womb the future bane of a lifetime; we should see these things till we sickened, and reeled, and grew blind with pain before the ghastly face of the Future, as men in ancient days before the loathsome visage of the Medusa!

## CHAPTER V.

### The Bonne-Aventure told under the Lindens.

CONTRETEMPS generally have some saving crumbs of consolation for those who laugh at fate, and look good-humouredly for them; life's only evil to him who wears it awkwardly, and philosophic resignation works as many miracles as Harlequin; grumble, and you go to the dogs in a wretched style; make mots on your own misery, and you've no idea how pleasant a *trajet* even drifting "to the bad" may become. So when the Czechen boat grated on the land and stuck there, coming to grief generally and hopelessly, fortune was so propitiated by the radiant smile with which its own scurvy trick was received by the loveliest of all the balked travellers, that what would, under any other circumstances, have been the most provoking bore, became a little episode picturesque and romantic, and took a *couleur de rose* at once under the resistless magic of her sunny smile. It was a beautiful night, starry, still, and sultry; the river-side inn stood like a picture of Ostade, hidden in its blossomed limes; the pine-woods stretched above and around, with the ruddy gleam of gipsy fires flashing between the boughs; and with such a companion as hazard had given him, Strathmore could hardly complain of the accident, though he was a man who found the gleam of women's eyes in a cabinet particulier of a

café, or a cabinet de toilette of a palace, far better than in all the uncomfortably-romantic situations in the world, and held that a little gallantry was infinitely more agreeable and rational in a rose-tendre-hung chamber than *à la belle étoile* in a damp midnight under the finest violet skies that ever enraptured a poet.

The little hostelry was already full of travellers. Some English *en route* to the waters of the Sprudel, some Moravians and Bohemians on their way to or from Bucharest or Aussig; and the arrivals from the boat filled it to overflowing, for its accommodation was scant, and its attractions solely confined to its gaily-painted and blossom-buried exterior. There was but one common sitting-room, but one common supper-table, and the guests, whether gräfins or glass engravers, were treated without distinction: a Bohemian Gasthof is about the only place upon earth where you see the doctrine of equality in absolute and positive practice. The Sclavonians, accustomed to it, took it unmurmuringly; the English tourists grumbled unceasingly; preserved (the ladies in especial) a dead silence to companions for whose respectability they had no voucher; scorned the sausage, the baked pie, the cucumber-soup, and the rest of the national *menu*, and solaced themselves with gloomy consumption of hard biscuits from their travelling-bags; while without, under the lindens, on the sward before the door, Strathmore's Albanian servant making a raid upon the Gasthof larder with the celerity of long continental experience, spread on a little table the best fried trout, Teplitz and other fare that the inn afforded for the refreshment of the fair traveller with the Titian face, who, refusing to enter the hostelry, sat on a bench under the limes, leaning against the rough bark as gracefully as amongst velvet cushions, looking upward at Strathmore with her soft Orientalesque eyes, while the leaves and flowers of the boughs swayed against her yellow hair.

She gave a Tokay flavour to the Lager, a Vatel delicacy to the trout, a strange but charming spice of petits soupers to this primitive supper under the limes; an unsuitable but

delicious aroma of Paris to the solitary river-side hostelry in Bohemian pine-woods. "Who could she be?" he wondered in vain; for on that head, under the most adroit cross-questioning, she never betrayed herself. She talked gaily, lightly, charmingly, with some little wit, and a little goes a long way when uttered by such lips. With something, too, of soft graceful romance, probably natural to her, perhaps only learned second-hand from *Raphael*, and *Indiana*, and *Les Nuits d'Octobre;* and Strathmore, though the light gallantries of a Lauzun had little charm for him, and the only passion that could ever have stirred him from his coldness would have been the deep, voluptuous delight, fierce and keen as pain, that swayed Sulla and Cimon, could not refuse his admiration of a picture so perfect as she sat in the light of the midsummer stars, leaning her head on her small jewelled hand, the lime-boughs drooping above her, and the dark, dimly-lit room within forming a Rembrandtesque background, while the river below broke against the rocks, and the heavy odour of the lindens and pines filled the air.

"How cold he looks, this handsome Strathmore, does he dare to defy me?" she thought, as she glanced upwards at him where he leaned against the trunk of the linden when the supper was finished, and while she herself still lingered under the limes as the stars grew larger and clearer in the May skies, and the purple haze of night deepened over the hills. He was the only man who had not bowed down at her feet at her first smile, and his calm courtesies piqued her.

"Do you like music, monsieur?" she asked him, with that suddenness which had in it nothing abrupt, but was rather the suddenness of a fawn's or an antelope's swift graces. Then, without awaiting a reply, without apology or prelude, inspired by that caprice which rules all women more or less, and ruled this one at every moment and in every mood, she began to sing one of the sweet, gay, familiar canzoni of Figaro, with a voice at which the nightingales in the linden-leaves might have broken their little throats in envying de-

spair. Then, without pause, she passed on to the sublime harmonies of the Stabat Mater—now wailing like the sigh of a vesper hymn from convent walls at evensong, now bursting into passionate prayer like the swell of a Te Deum from a cathedral altar. She sang on without effort, without pause, blending the most incongruous harmonies into one strange, bizarre, weird-like yet entrancing whole, changing the Preghiero from Masaniello for one of Verdi's gayest arias, mingling Kücken's Slumber Song with some reckless Venetian barcarolle, breaking off the solemn cadence of the Pro Peccatis with some mischievous chansonette out of the Quartier Latin, and welding the loftiest melodies of Handel's Israel with the laughing refrain of Louis Abadie's ballads.

Out on the still night air rose the matchless music of voice, rich, clear, thrilling, a very intoxication of sound; mingling with the ebb and flow of the waters, the tremulous sigh of the leaves, and the rival song of the birds in the boughs. Those sitting within in the darkened chamber listened spell-bound; the peasantry, laughing and chatting under the low roof of the hostelry, hushed their gossip in enchanted awe; the boatmen in the vessel moored in the shadow below looked up and left off their toil; and—as suddenly as it had rung out on the summer air, the exquisite melody ceased, and died away like the notes of a bell off the silence of the night. She looked up at Strathmore, the starlight shining in the dreamy, smiling depths of her eyes, and saw that he listened eagerly, breathlessly, wonderingly, subdued and intoxicated even despite himself by the marvellous magic, the delicious intricacies, the luxurious richness of this voluptuous charm of song, with a spell which—the moment it ceased—was broken.

"You like music?" she asked him, softly; "ah, yes, I see it in your face. You Englishmen, if you be as cold as they call you, have very eloquent eyes sometimes. Are you not thinking what an odd caprice it is for me to sing to you—a stranger—at ten o'clock at night, under lime-trees?"

"Indeed, no; I am far too grateful for the caprice. Pasta

herself never equalled your voice; it is exquisite, marvellous!"

She laughed softly.

"Do you think so? And yet, I imagine, you are very difficult to please? When I sing some of those airs, the Inflammatus or the Agnus Dei, they make me think of the old days in my convent at Valladarra; how I used to beat my wings and hate my cage, and long to escape over the purple mountains. Why is it, I wonder, that a gloomy past often looks brighter than a brilliant present?—what is there in the charm of Distance to give such a golden chiar'oscuro?"

"Valladarra? Are you a Spaniard, madame?" he asked her, catching at any clue that might enlighten him as to the whence and the whither of the bewitching creature.

"A Spaniard? What makes you think so?"

"Because it is usually said, belle amie, that a Spanish blonde is the greatest marvel of beauty that the world ever sees," said Strathmore with a smile.

She laughed.

"Je vous remercie! Well, perhaps I am Spanish. You would like to know? Ah, bah! what a slander on my sex it is to say that Eve monopolised all curiosity!"

"Curiosity!" repeated Strathmore. "There may, surely, be a deeper interest that bears a better name, madame? When one lights on a matchless gem, or on a rarely lovely foreign flower, it is not unnatural that one may seek to know where it has come from, and where we may see it again."

"You are a courtier, M. Strathmore, and turn your phrases very prettily," said this most *provoquante* of all women, with the slightest possible shrug of her shoulders. "But it *is* curiosity, for all that; and, by all the rights of womanhood, I claim my title to the first indulgence of the privilege. Your name is Strathmore, and your servant calls you 'My lord,' and if asked about your country, you would answer, 'Civis Romanus sum,' with true Britannic bombast, I dare say. Well! England *is* figuratively rather like Rome, for it slays its Senecas, gorges its Vitelliuses, and is often garrisoned by

ganders! But one more thing remains to know. *What* are you?"

Leaning her arms on the table, her chin on her hands, and resting her eyes upon him, she asked the point-blank question with the most charming insouciance and assurance of command; and Strathmore could not fail to satisfy her demand, though he was not fond of talking of himself; his egotism was of a much loftier sort.

"Ah! a diplomatist!" she said, raising her eyebrows. "Mon ami, I know your order: but you will not content yourself with settling internecine squabbles, and writing Cretan labyrinths of words, and being 'sent home,' like an expelled schoolboy, if your two countries quarrel for a split hair, will you? You will want the triumph of the monstrari digito, and the guidance of the helm through stormy waters, and you will pine for the old Medici and Strozzi days, when a stealthy arm could stretch and strike far away in a distant land, and a subtle brain could compass the supreme rule, and wield it, troubled by no scruples."

"Madame," said Strathmore, with a slight laugh, his laugh was usually cold, "if you draw such a sketch of me at first sight—though I don't really deny its accuracy—I fear I cannot have impressed you very favourably?"

"Why so? You are ambitious, by your own confession that you covet age for the sake of power; and ambitious men are all alike. If you had your own will, you *ambitieux* would check at no flights; and if we don't have the Medici and Strozzi secret murders in our day, I am afraid the virtue that refrains from them is nothing very much better than fear of the analytical chemists."

As she spoke, with a certain smile on her rose lips, and in the mocking light of her gazelle eyes, something in this brilliant and witching creature struck upon Strathmore as dangerous—almost as repulsive—and made him think of those women who gleam out from the pages of Guicciardini and Galluzzi, who dazzled all men who looked on them with the shine of their *tresse d'oro*, or the languor of their Southern

eyes, yet whose white hands shook the philtre into the loving-cup, and whose title was "Opra d'incanti è di mala fattura." But the momentary impression passed off as she looked up laughing.

"Bah, M. Strathmore! Ambition is a weary work at its ripest; epicurean enjoyment is far better: 'gather your rosebuds while you may.' Old Herrick is the true philosopher!"

"Spoken by such lips, his theories are irresistible," smiled Strathmore; "only if one has the bad taste not to care much about the roses, how then? There can be nothing for it but to entreat some fair priestess of the creed to take one's conversion in hand."

"But converts have to pass through fiery ordeals; if you are wise you would not brave them. You despise love, mon ami; it will be the worse for you some day."

"I shall have no fear for the future; if I escape to-night untouched, I must, indeed, be clad in proof," smiled Strathmore. But the smile, like the compliment, did not please her; its flattery was contemptuous and derisive of her power. With quick intuition she saw that Strathmore had never been in love in his life, and would have defied any woman to make him so; and she smiled as she leant her head upon her arm, silent for once, playing with one of the lime-blossoms, and knowing that the moonlight was shining on a perfect picture which could not be improved, which might be broken by, speech. Strathmore was silent too; busied in restless, vague conjecture as to who and what this brilliant, capricious, dazzling, graceful creature could be, here thus alone, at night, travelling through Bohemia. While his eyes rested on her where she sat in the starlight, her beauty well befitting the sultry night, that was odorous with the fragrance of the limes and musical with the murmurs of the waters, breaking below against the rocks, the voice of a Zingara broke on his reverie and hers, as a gipsy-girl—one of a party camped among the pine-woods at the back of the Gasthof—drew near the group of lindens in the moonlight; a wild, dark, handsome Bohe-

mian, with a scarlet hood over her jetty hair, and her glittering eyes fixed longingly on the jewels that sparkled on the hands of the fair incognue, as she said, in a compound of Czechen and Romany,

"Will you hear your fortune, fair lady? Let the Gitana tell you your future."

The blonde aux yeux noirs, whose head was resting thoughtfully upon her hand, started, and looked up in surprise as the handsome black-browed Arab, who might have sat to Murillo or Salvator, approached her in the moonlight from the wooded shadows of the pine-forests behind them.

"Let me prophesy for you, fair lady! I can look on the palm of your hand and foretell you all things that will come to you; the predictions of Redempta, daughter of Phara, can never fail," chanted the Zingara, in a wild, monotonous recitative, that sounded hoarse and sad in the still summer night as she drew nearer, her eyes glistening longingly on the sapphire rings.

"Non, merci!" laughed the bright incognita, looking upward at the strange picturesque form of the Gitana, standing out in the starlight against the dark woods behind. "I know my past and my present—it is plenty! I do not trouble myself a moment for the future!"

"But in the past and the present lie the seed to bear fruit in the future!"

The words spoken in Czechen sounded ominous and mournful, falling from the lips of the Gitana like an augury of ill; and the other shuddered a little as she heard, though without comprehending, them. "What does she say?" she asked of Strathmore. He translated them to her, and spoke to the gipsy-girl in her own tongue, bidding her move away; but the capricious songstress, whom the fancy of the moment swayed as completely as it sways a kitten or a child, laid her hand on his arm as he stood beside her.

"No, no! don't send her away! She is like a picture of Murillo. Let us hear some of her prophecies first. What

would she say to you, I wonder? I have a great curiosity to know your fate, my lord; the fate of a man who desires age and despises love! It must be an odd one! Come! cross her hand, and let her tell your *bonne-aventure.* Obey me at once! It is my whim and my pleasure, monsieur. Give her some silver and ask her your destiny!"

A lovely woman is never to be disobeyed without discourtesy, and pretty caprices are commands. With the white jewelled fingers lying on his arm, with the perfumy hair shining in the starlight, with the fair dazzling face upraised in the shadow of the linden-boughs, the sternest stoic could not have refused to chime in with her fancy, and please this charming tyrant in her most airy nonsense. Strathmore laughed, dropped a gold coin into the Gitana's brown hand, and, leaning against the trunk, stood awaiting his destiny from the coral lips of the handsome Arab in the silence of the summer night, while the distant lights of the gipsy fires gleamed fitfully through the dark pine-woods. The Zingara looked not at his hand, but up at his face, as the white, clear rays of the moon fell on it—on the aquiline outline of the features and the varied meanings of the physiognomy, on the proud and generous sweetness of the mouth, contradicted by the dark passions in the eyes and the cold straight line of the brows. She looked at him long and fixedly in silence, with a dreamy, vague stare in her own fathomless eyes, while her hands moved over the beads of a string of Egyptian berries:

"There will be love, and of the love sin, and of the sin crime, and of the crime a curse. And the curse will pursue with a pitiless bitterness and an unslackened speed, and when atonement is sought and made, lo! it may turn to ashes and to gall. The innocent may taste thereof, and share the doom they have not woven. Your woe will be wrought by your own hand, and you will eat of the fruit of your own past, and through you will come death. Redempta, the daughter of Phara, has spoken!"

The words fell slowly and sadly on the silence of the night, while the river-waves beat against the rocks with mo-

notonous murmur, and the sough of the wind arose in the pine-forest, sweeping with a sudden chill through the sultry air; and as he heard them, a momentary shudder ran through Strathmore's veins at the destiny that the Gitana vaguely shadowed forth; an irrepressible coldness, like that which comes from the touch of a corpse, passed over him where he stood. And the incognita clung closer to him, her white hand closing on his arm, and her laughing lips turning pale:

"Mon Dieu! what a terrible fate! Send her away. She makes me tremble!"

Strathmore laughed, the impression of the ominous prophecy passing off as soon as it was made; and he threw another gold dollar to the Zingara:

"My handsome Arab! you might have been more courteous, certainly. If you wish your predictions to be popular, you must make them a little more lively. Be off with you! Go and frighten the peasants yonder!"

"Redempta can say only that which she sees," murmured the Gitana, sadly and proudly, as she stooped for the gold where it shone on the turf, and turned slowly away, till her form was lost in the dense gloom cast by the shadow in the woods.

"What a horrible destiny!" said his companion again, not able so quickly to shake off the vague terror with which the sing-song chanting recitative of the Zingara had haunted her.

"She has terrified you?" laughed Strathmore. "I am sorry for that, madame; you shouldn't have tempted prophecy in my behalf. All seers from the religious world to the gipsy camp must make their predictions ominous, or they would carry no weight; and evil is so generally predominant in this life, that to croak is pretty sure to be on the right side."

"Ah, mon Dieu! do not jest!" cried the belle inconnue, with a little shiver of pretty terror. "It is no laughing matter, such a horrible future."

"But it *is* a laughing matter, such a horrible *bonne-aventure*," said Strathmore, smiling, and thinking how lovely she

looked as she shivered with pretty pretended fear, and clasped her hands, on which he noticed a mass of brilliant rings that might have belonged to an empress's toilette-boxes, but which didn't tell him much, since paste is very glittering, and defies detection by moonlight. "She deals in the Terrible—prophets always do, or what sway would they have over their dupes? You should have let her have told yours, madame; she would have given something better to the lines in so beautiful a hand."

"Ah, bah!" cried the incognita, shaking off her superstition with a sweet silvery laugh. "I know my future! I shall triumph by my beauty till that goes, and then I shall triumph by my intellect, which won't go. I shall tread my way on roses, and rule as Venus Victrix till grey hairs come and I have to take to enamelling; and then I shall change my sceptre, and begin écarté, embroglie, prudence, and politics. But I don't count on the change; I am not like you, and do not court Age——"

"Because you are not like me, and need not wait for Age to bring you Power; *your* power lies in a glance of the eyes and in all the 'purpureal light of youth'!" laughed Strathmore. "I fancy our ambition centres alike in ruling men, but—with a difference!"

"You are very secure in your future, despite all the Gitana's foretelling?" she asked him, with a curious glance, half-malicious, half-interested.

"Surely! We can make of our future what we like. Life is clay, to be moulded just at our will; it is a fool, or an unskilful workman, indeed, who lets it fall of itself into a shape he does not like, or lets it break in his hands."

"But one flaw may crack the whole!" said the fair stranger, as Strathmore's valet drew near them to announce the immediate departure of a clumsy vehicle, the only one the Gasthof could furnish, that had been engaged before their arrival by English travellers, and in which, at her urgent instance, Strathmore had taken the sole remaining places for herself and her maid. "Are they starting? I am ready!

My lord, I owe you more gratitude still; how deeply I grow in your debt! But I forgot; if I take these two places, you must remain under that miserable little red roof till to-morrow. I ought not to have done it; *mais—je suis egoïste moi!*"

"No matter! I am most happy to relinquish anything in your service," said Strathmore, as he took the hand held out to him within his own. He did not care about women, but this one was specially lovely and specially captivating, and thrown as she was on his courtesy, he could not refuse it her. "I shall sleep under the pines; it will not be the first time I have camped out, but, I confess, I was tempted to make you a prisoner, madame, perforce to-night, by bidding Diaz let the car go without you. Give me some praise for my self-abnegation!"

His voice was very melodious, and had a softness when he was quite guiltless of intending it, while his features, with their cold, proud Velasquez type, on which the passions that had never been roused still threw their shadow, had always a fascination for women, who, by the instinct of contradiction ever dominant in their sex, always seek to chain a man from whose hands their fetters slip. Her bright, soft, dazzling eyes looked up to his almost tenderly in the light of the midsummer stars:

"I will thank you when we meet again!"

"*When!* But what gage do you give me that we may ever do so? You refuse me any name, any address, any single clue; you oblige me to part from you in ignorance even of——"

"Who I am! The first question you Englishmen ask before you give your hand in friendship, or speak to your neighbour at a table d'hôte," interrupted the bright *capricieuse*, with a low, ringing laugh. "No! I will not give you even a clue. I will be a Chinese puzzle for your ingenuity. When we meet (and we shall; we are both in the world; we are cards of the same pack, and shall some time or other be shuffled together!), I will thank you for all your courtesy and chivalry, and pay my debt—comme vous voudrez! Till then,

you must submit to mystery. I may be a prima donna, a dame d'industrie, a princess incognita, a dangerous Greek—you may think me whatever you like. You will remember me better if you are left in perplexity; your sex always covet the unattainable, and there is a golden charm in mystery that shall veil me—till we meet!"

"But!—what a cruel caprice! what an indefinite probation!"

"Do you good, mon ami! Perhaps you have never had to wait before; I fancy so! There! *they* are waiting, and we must part, monsieur. Adieu and au revoir!"

Tantalising, obstinate, capricious, wilful, wayward, but bewitching; all the more bewitching for that very quintette of faults—she let her hand linger in his where they stood in the shadow, with the moon shining on her upraised face, and the lime-blossoms swaying against her hair, delicately scented as the fragrance of their flowers, as he stooped towards her in farewell: a soft, subtle, amber-scented perfume, such as the tresses of Lesbia might have borne as she came from her odorous bath, or wound the roses amongst them at the banquet—a perfume that as he caught it had something of the same soft intoxication as her voice had carried with it in her song.

Another moment, and the hand that had lain in his, soft and warm as a bird, had unloosened its clasp, and the clumsy covered cart of the Gasthof, laden with its passengers, had rolled slowly from the door beneath the roofing of the lime-boughs, *la blonde aux yeux noirs* leaning out from its heavy tarpaulin, and looking at him with a gay farewell smile—leaving according to her vow, with the golden veil of mystery flung over her lovely, dazzling face, soft with Eastern languor, and bright with the brilliance of youth, that disappeared from his sight as the car, creaking slowly over the moss, was lost in the shadows of the pine-woods as it turned a bend in the hills, and left him behind—alone.

"Who the deuce can she be? Something very out of the common, talking to one at first sight about love, and singing

to the nightingales, au clair de la lune! I never saw a lovelier creature in my life, nor a more nonchalante one; and yet she isn't exactly Quartier Bréda style; she has more the look of a court than a casino. Who the deuce can she be?" wondered Strathmore, as he threw himself down on the moss under the limes, smoking and throwing stones idly into the river that flowed below. He knew most courts and most cities; he lived chiefly abroad, and thought he knew every beauty in monde or demi-monde, sovereigns of the left hand as of the right. The numberless anomalies in this dazzling *inconnue* piqued his curiosity—the first of her sex who had ever so far excited him. Strathmore thought romance simply insanity, and had lived at too thorough a pace to care to twist a chance into an adventure, and make poetic material out of a rencontre with a stranger, as other men might have done. But he thought of her, and of little save her, where he lay smoking, while the river broke against its overhanging banks, and the heavy odours of the pines rolled down from the hills above. And as he mused over the bright capricious mystery that had come and gone suddenly as a swallow comes and goes through the air, and listened to the distant chimes of churches and monasteries, tolling out the short summer hours as the night wore away, to the villages sleeping below, he only thought once, as he caught the gleam of the camp-fires flashing fitfully in the darkness from the gloom of the pine-woods, with the dark lurid glare of a Rembrandt scene, while their flames leapt up through the fan-like boughs of the firs, of the destiny the Zingara girl had foretold him; and then he smiled as he remembered the prophecy the Gitana had made.

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## CHAPTER VI.

The White Domino powdered with Golden Bees.

"NOT seen La Vavasour!—mon cher, you have yet to live!" yawned Arthus de Bellus, Vicomte and Chambellan du Roi.

Cards and gold lay on the table in confusion in Strathmore's room at Meurice's; four or five men had been dining with him, and had been playing baccarat for the last hour or two, as more piquant than the olives and more tasteful than the Burgundies they had trifled with and left.

It was about twelve months since his run down the Moldau; affairs threatening to the peace of the Principalities had kept him much longer than he had imagined, and this was the first night of his arrival in Paris, free for a little time after his negotiations with Prince Michel, though he meant to leave again as soon as the races were run at Chantilly, where his own chesnut, Maréchale, stood a good second for the French Derby.

"*Yet to live!*" he said, lying back in his arm-chair and curling a leaf round his cigarette. "My life don't hang in women's eyes, thank Heaven! I can exist very comfortably without seeing your divine Vavasour for the next twenty years, if that's all, and by that time I suspect nobody will care much about seeing her; your superb Helen will be like most other Helens of a certain age then; décolletée to a disadvantage, ruddled with rouge, jealous of her daughters, and fat (or scraggy), *à faire frémir!*"

"Blasphemer, hold your tongue!" cried Bellus. "What a future for La Vavasour! She would poison herself with a bonbon, or die of a bouquet of heliotrope, before she'd exist for such a degradation!"

"Très cher, she *may* be a spoiled beauty, but she can't change the laws of nature. Briedenbach and Bulli haven't the *Breuvage de Ninon* in their treasury, and to be steeled

against and disenchanted with the loveliest mistress, one has only to remember—*what she will be!*"

"Or—to see what she *is*, sometimes, even will do," laughed the Vicomte. "Full dress, what lovely figures they have! but the embonpoint is dreadfully fictitious with certain divinities we know!"

"And so is the bloom! However, so as they look well that's all they think about," laughed Strathmore. "I always make up my mind, though, to enamel, &c.; I should die of a mistress who was *bête*, and their wit's rarely worth much till they've come to their first touch of rouge."

"The Lady Vavasour is alone an exception; her bloom is her own—as yet; but her mots are perfection. You must see her, Strathmore; she'll make you recant that heterodoxy."

"I don't the least think she will," said Strathmore, giving a spin to one of the gold pieces. "My dear Arthus, I have seen so many of those divine beauties, those dames du monde, those Helens à la mode. I admire them; they are delightfully bred; they are perfectly *gantées*, *chaussées*, *coiffées*, *tirées à quatre epingles;* they are charming to talk to in their own boudoirs, where the light is half veiled, and your eyes are the same; they are admirable when you want a little love *à discretion*, with Cupid delicately scented with *bouquet*, and with pleasant platonics as elastic as india-rubber. I admire them; but I have seen so many; there can be nothing so *very* new in the salons! Your exquisite Marchioness may be the best of the kind, but then—one knows the kind so well! Who was she, by-the-by?"

"Well! nobody knows exactly," said Lyster Gage, of the British Legation, reluctant to admit such a flaw in this idol as that she had not a pedigree to flutter in the face of the world, blazoned with bezants of gold, and rich in heraldic quarterings. "When she appeared at St. Petersburg, you know, she was already Marchioness of Vavasour; it was said that the Marquis had married her in the Mauritius when she was fifteen—those Creoles are women so early. I never heard anything more definite, but his sixteen quarterings

are quite wide enough to cover any deficiencies, and her divine beauty did the rest; she became the fashion at once, and she has reigned the queen of pleasures, caprices, and the salons ever since, here. Her circle is as exclusive as the Princesse de Lurine's; it is only plain women who dare to hint her as "adventuress.' "

"Adventuress!—adventurer! That is the name the world gives any man or woman who dares to be clever, brilliant, or successful out of the old routine! The world must have its revenge! Society falls down before the Juggernaut of a Triumph, but, *en revanche*, it always throws stones behind it. I detest Creoles—those black-browed, lazy, inert women, who have fattened on sugar-canes, and learned to scold slaves instead of to spell! I shall not admire your matchless Peeress."

"Peste!" said the Chambellan du Roi, settling the diamond stud in his wristband. "If you *don't*, you'll be the first man in Europe who's braved her. The utmost any of them can do is to only let their eyes be dazzled, and not lose their heads. As Tilly said of Gustavus, 'c'est un joueur contre qui de rien perdre est de beaucoup gagner.' It is lucky Lord Vavasour is no Georges Dandin!"

"Bah! So he gave her his rank, and gets rewarded with dishonour! It's always the way! That's the common coin in which wives pay their gratitude," laughed Strathmore, with a dash of disgust.

"Dishonour? Fie, fie, Strathmore!" cried the Earl of Lechmere, a good-natured fellow, in the Coldstreams. "Nobody uses those coarse, ugly dictionary words now-a-days, except when one wants to get up a duel. Vavasour's a wise man. They sign a mutual Roving Commission, and don't trouble each other to know where the cruise extends. Besides, madame's amitiés *may* be only friendship; some say so, and swear she's so heartless, that her pretty, dainty brodequins dance fireproof over red-hot ploughshares that would sear tenderer feet to the bone."

"I don't believe in miracles, thank you!" said Château-Renard, of the Guards. "She must get scorched *en passant;*

at any rate. You'll see her to-night, Strathmore, I expect, but if she don't unmask——"

"The sun will stay behind a cloud. Very well! I shall endure it. I never exist on that sort of rays at any time. I'm getting tired, too, of Mondes one confounds so easily with Demi-Monde, and Aristocrates that are so near allied to Anonyma. I should rather have liked those old times when dishonour got a taste of cold steel. *Now*, your husband is as obliging as Galba to Mecænas!" yawned Strathmore. "The lady goes to Baden 'till the gossip's blown over,' and her lord is discreetly silent, and doesn't trouble himself to notice what goes on before his eyes. Unless, indeed, he thinks he can turn the scratch on his scutcheon to pecuniary account, and make out of the crim. con. a neat little sum to stop the hole in his exchequer, or cover his Goodwood debts; *then* he becomes as anxious as his counsel to prove his own dishonour, and takes the co-respondent's money with a chuckling compassion for the poor devil that's bought the damaged article and doesn't know very well what to do with it! That's the style in England, and these Vavasours are 'of us.'"

"*Que le diable te prenne*, Strathmore!" cried Bellus. "Don't be so bitter! *You're* much more fit for the Middle Ages than you are for the present day."

"I think I am. Things were called by their right names then; men sharpened their steel, and struck a straight, swift blow; now they sharpen their pen, and wound in the back, sheltered under a shield of anonymity. Then they had 'honour,' and held it at the sword's point; now they've mock 'morality,' have lawyers to defend it (which is something like giving an artificial lily to a sweep to keep unsoiled), and trade in their shame, and ask for 'costs' for every stain, from a blackened eye to a blasted name! Caramba! this claret is corked!"

"Uncommonly inconvenient times; your favourite ones, though, old fellow," said Lechmere. "One would be in perpetual hot water. Fancy an inch of cold steel waiting for us at the bottom of every *escalier dérobé*, and an iron gauntlet

dashed on our lips every time we laughed away a lady's reputation. Where *should* we all be? It would be horribly troublesome."

"No doubt! We're much wiser now. We chat amicably in the clubs with the husband after leaving madame's dressing-room. I don't dispute our expediency; it's a quality in the highest cultivation in the age; even Aspasia now-a-days takes the Communion to wash away her sins in Sacramental Tent. A propos of Aspasia, Vernon-Caderousse is fettered hand and foot by Viola Vé; she boasts that she will ruin a Peer of France every *trimestre.* Take care of yourself, Bellus!"

"Yes, for she'll keep her boast, the little demon!" laughed the Vicomte. "She might begin with a more profitable speculation than the 'Duca senza Ducati,' as La Marillia calls him; Caderousse is all but 'gone.' I wish he would smash quite; I should bid for that Petitôt snuff-box of his, the Ariadne à Naxos."

"So much for friendship! Take a pinch out of my snuff-box to-day, and bid for it to-morrow; sup with me on Monday, and speculate on my sales on Tuesday. I think you'll have your wish, Arthus. Vé would ruin a millionnaire, and will make very short work of Caderousse. She should net Tchemeidoff; Russians are the best prey; the Rosières revel in their roubles, and the lords of the serfs are the slaves of the serail," said Strathmore, as his guests rose to leave and dress for a bal masqué in the Faubourg St. Germain, at the Duchesse de Luilhier's, an inauguratrix of a thousand modes that passed the time for her own thorough-bred set, and served for talk for half Paris. "What are you all going for? It's so early yet—only twelve."

"Horrid bore!" yawned Lechmere; "but one's on the treadmill, and one must tramp along with it, that's the worst. Everybody goes to the Luilhiers."

"Stay and play, Lechmere," said Strathmore. "You're all off, I do believe, for the sake of this Vavasour. For shame, Bellus; et tu Brute! I *did* think better of you, on my

life. I never dreamt that sort of thing survived in anybody after twenty."

"You haven't seen her," said the Vicomte, pettishly. "Bah! she does what she likes with one."

"A very self-evident fact, très cher! If you like to be slaves of a domineering, lazy Creole, *be* it; I don't understand your taste, that's all; but then I suppose I'm exceptional altogether; I don't like olives, and I don't care about women."

"Quite right," swore the Earl, under his moustaches; "both of 'em make you buy the nice rose flavour with too salt a bitterness."

"I don't know anything about the bitterness, thank God; I never travelled to that stage," laughed Strathmore; "but olives tempt one to drink, and women tempt one to weakness, and when either the love or the brandy's taken too strong, we lose our heads and tell our secrets; and, on the whole, I think two bottles less detrimental than one woman! Wine steals our wits, but Delilah does worse;—because she's a tongue to ask questions."

"Devil take your philosophy."

"Much obliged. I don't wish any devil to take it, male or female, Belphegor or Melusine. 'My mind to me a kingdom is.' I should be specially sorry for any raids to be made on it."

"I bet you fifty to one, Strath, you adore la Vavasour when you see her."

"*I?* This Vavasour tyrant. I bet you a thousand to one I don't even admire her."

"In Naps?—done! It's a heavy bet, mon ami," said Château-Renard, entering the wager in a little dainty jewelled book, a gift of S. A. R. the volage, and somewhat indiscreet Princesse de Lurine.

"And a very safe one for me," said Strathmore, with a slight yawn. "If you don't make your wagers more discreetly, Armand, it's not much to be wondered at that you come to grief at Sartory and Chantilly as you do. Au revoir,

if you will go. We meet again at Philippi, I suppose, in an hour?"

"I promised the Sabreur to give him correct notes of the Vavasour. I must notice her if she comes here to-night," thought Strathmore, as he lay back in a dormeuse before the fire, when he was left alone, finishing his cigarette, while the firelight danced on the marble bronze and ormolu of the mantelpiece, and the gas shone on the gold lying on the table, and on the wines that stood in a dozen decanters on the console. "I can picture her perfectly—a tawny, large, black-browed, voluptuous woman, silent, sensual, handsome, heavy, with a brow of Egypt, a Juno figure, and a West Indian languor. She *takes* because of her luxurious outline and her Creole indolence, and because she's a new style, and has done two clever strokes of diplomacy, by persuading an English Peer to marry her, and a thorough-bred set to make her Queen of the *ton*. She must have been very adroit—these silent, still-life women often cover matchless finesses; nobody suspects them of the manufacture till the web is woven. What could the Marquis be about? However, he was three parts a fool, they used to say, I think, and woman make idiots of wiser men if once they're allowed to have their own way. I dare say his yacht anchored off Martinique, and one day, when he was very hot and very languid, intensely bored, and had drunk a good deal of brandy, this woman had him alone in a verandah, where she lay fanning herself amidst a pile of flowers, with the air scented with pastelles, and everything planned to take him in a moment of weakness, and looked so handsome that she did what she liked with him, and made him say what he couldn't unsay. So much is done in that sort of way; there would be no marriages at all if men kept their heads cool always, but they're taken at a disadvantage, just after dinner, when they're lazy, and would consent to anything, or after the champagne at supper, when they talk nonsense they'd never have committed themselves to at noon; or in the whirl of a waltz, when the turns of the dance turn their heads! If we were always what we are between break-

fast and luncheon, we should never love at all. We're cold after our matutinal mocha, but we're easily fooled after our dinner coffee. What we defy in the morning light, we yield to in the moonlight. Women know that; this Lady Vavasour, I dare say, lured her lord into his declaration when the stars were shining on the mango-groves and on the green sea-vines, or perhaps—more likely—she was a *nouvelle riche*, and brought him money. Men barter their good blood now-a-days; soiling the scutcheon don't matter if they gild over the dirt; we don't sell our souls to the Devil in this age, we're too Christian, we sell them to the Dollar!"

With which satirical reflection on his times, and his order, drifting through his mind, Strathmore's thoughts floated onward to a piece of statecraft then numbered among the delicate diplomacies and intricate embroglie of Europe, whose moves absorbed him as the finesses of a problem absorb a skilful chess-player; and from thence stretched onwards to his future, in which he lived like all men of dominant ambition far more than he lived in his present. It was a future brilliant, secure, brightening in its lustre and strengthening in its power with each successive year; a future which was not to him as to most wrapped in a chiar'oscuro with only points of luminance gleaming through the mist, but in whose cold glimmering light he seemed to see clear and distinct, as we see each object of the far-off landscape stand out in the air of a winter's noon, every thread that he should gather up, every distant point to which he should pass onward; a future singular and characteristic, in which state-power was the single ambition marked out, from which the love of women was banished, in which pleasure and wealth were as little regarded as in Lacedæmon, in which age would be courted not dreaded, since with it alone would come added dominion over the minds of men, and in which, as it stretched out before him, failure and alteration were alike impossible. What, if he lived, could destroy a future that would be solely dependent on, solely ruled by, himself? By his own hand alone would his future be fashioned,—would he hew out any shape

save the idol that pleased him? When we hold the chisel ourselves, are we not secure to have no error in the work? Is it likely that our hand will slip, that the marble we select will be dark-veined, and brittle, and impure, that the blows of the mallet will shiver our handiwork, and that when we plan a Milo, god of strength, we shall but mould and sculpture out a Läocoon of torture? Scarcely! and Strathmore held the chisel, and, certain of his own skill, was as sure of what he should make of life as Benvenuto, when he bade the molten metal pour into the shape that he, master-craftsman, had fashioned, and give to the sight of the world the Winged Perseus. But Strathmore did not remember what Cellini did—that one flaw might mar the whole!

The rooms were filled when he ascended the staircase and entered the first of that suite of superb salons where Madame de Luilhiers gathered about her her own particular and exclusive set, and reigned supreme. Her ball was a replica of a *bal de l'opéra*, with a dash of the brilliance of the Regency, a time the Duchesse loved to resuscitate; scandal, indeed, said that she loved it so well that she enacted the rôle of the Marquise de Parabère with a descendant of Monseigneur d'Orléans; but—*taisons nous!*—scandal is ever indiscreet, and never true, we know, save here and there, when it hits the defenceless, or besmears the fallen, or so delicately stabs our bosom friend that we haven't heart to forswear it! The low hum of many voices, that sound which, subdued and harmless as the musical hum of gnats, yet buzzes away the peace of entire lives, and murmurs death-blows to a myriad of reputations, filled the rooms as he moved slowly through the throng of glittering dominoes, broidered with gold or studded with jewels, while brilliant eyes smiled recognition on him through their masks, and witty badinage was whispered to him by fair incognite.

"Deucedly like life, mon cher—eh? People take advantage of disguise to slander at their ease, and under a mask the dastard grows daring and whispers a scandal, or—what's as bad—a truth! Very like life! Under the domino

how suavely they stab their foes, and unrecognised in the vicinity of his dear friends how secure a man is to overhear them damning his name!" laughed Strathmore to Château-Renard as he passed him in the vestibule, and went on to chat with the Comtesse de Chantal, a bewitching little brune, who had confided to him the colour of her adorable rose domino, and would quickly have been recognised without any other guide than her bright marmoset eyes.

"The domino gives one the privilege of *laissez-faire* and *laissez-parler;* it would be very pleasant if the world were one long bal masqué," said Madame la Comtesse, letting the eyes in question rest on him with coquette brilliance, for Strathmore was much courted by the sex he contemned.

"Madame! I think it *is* one. Who is there in it without a disguise?" he answered her, laughing, as they moved on to the ball-room through the crowd of titled maskers, while the music echoed from the distance, and the lights gleamed on the gorgeous dresses of those bidden to the Duchesse's fête à la Régence.

"Who, indeed! Not even Lord Cecil Strathmore, since he disdains women, yet he flirts with one!" murmured a whisper at his side.

"Who spoke, Cecil?" said the Comtesse, slightly disgusted with the style of the attack.

"Some one of your court jealous of my distinction, madame," laughed Strathmore, as he thought to himself, "I would swear the voice was a woman's," and turned to see who had recognised him with his mask on. Among the crowd of dominoes near, the one closest to him was white, powdered with golden bees.

"*Fi donc!* it was a woman: a man would have attacked *me*, not you," said Madame de Chantal, giving him a blow of her fan, a little jealous of the domino that Strathmore's eyes were tracking; more jealous still, when dexterously disentangling himself from her, he left her with Bellus, and followed the white domino in its swift passage through the crowd, that would have been a crush in any other salons than

those of the Hôtel Luilhiers: followed on an impulse vague and irresistible, as he had never before followed the voice of a woman. With whatever swiftness and dexterity he traced her, she perpetually eluded him; though she never turned her head, he would have sworn she knew he was pursuing her (women, like flies, know all that goes on behind them), and she seemed to take a perverse delight in winding in and out interminable mazes, and in letting him approach her only to escape him; the white folds of the domino, with its glittering golden bees fluttering in the light, ever within tantalising reach, and ever at provoking distance. At last, when he was tired of the chase, and on the point of giving it up, her own passage was obstructed; he pushed hastily forward and overtook her in the Pavillon de Flore, a winter garden, where Louise de Luilhiers had the tropics reproduced under glass in all their Oriental heat and Oriental fragrance, and in which the maskers were moving, amidst the broad leaves and glowing creepers of the East, while the falling waters of innumerable fountains cooled the air, and subdued lights gleamed through the dark tropical foliage, like fire-flies in a palm grove.

"If I disdain all women, I have followed one. Belle dame, whoever you be, I may trust your reproof to me shows some sign of interest in him you condemned," whispered Strathmore in her ear.

Though she had penetrated his disguise, he could not penetrate hers; shrouded in her domino she defied detection, and by her voice he could not recognise her in the least. He only saw, as she turned her head, that her eyes laughed, shining brightly as stars, and that the lovely mouth below her mask had the bloom of youth on its lips, like the soft bloom on an untouched peach.

"Not at all! You are far too presumptuous, and if you disdain all women, you cannot care what one of them thinks of you. You have only pursued me because I eluded you; we beat you best '*en fuyant comme les Scythes.*' Montaigne is perfectly right."

Her voice had a sound in it familiar to him, but not familiar enough to be recognisable in her disguise. She baffled all detection, provocative as were the luminous eyes shining on him through her mask, and the laughing lips, like two roses d'amour, which were all that the envious masquerade gave to view.

"I have pursued you to learn who honours me, by forbidding me to flirt. Presumption or not, belle inconnue, I shall construe its interdict as it flatters me most. You recognised me even in domino; there must be some elective affinity between us!"

"None whatever. I knew you by your eyes, Lord Cecil. What does your legend say?—

> Swift, silent, Strathmore's eyes
> Are fathomless and darkly wise;
> No wife nor leman sees them smile,
> Save at bright steel and statecraft wile;
> And when they lighten, foes are ware,
> The shrive is short, the shroud is there!"

The words startled him, spoken by the lips of the fair mask in the gay salons of the Hôtel Luilhier; they were the burden of a rhyming chronicle, old as *Piers the Plowman*—a wild, dark legend, still among the cradle-songs of his county, and the chronicles of his own household. It was strange to hear here, in Paris, in the gay revelry of the fête à la Régence, words which he thought had never travelled beyond the woods of White Ladies, which he had never remembered since the days of his boyhood! Who could she be who knew him so well?

"Belle amie," he said, bending his head to her as they passed under the fragrant aisles of the winter garden, "you flatter me more and more! I must, at least, have some interest for you, since you know by heart my family legends and the look of my eyes! We cannot possibly be strangers——"

"Perhaps we are enemies!" interrupted the mask, the sapphires gleaming here and there on her domino, flashing

their azure beams in the light. "The instinct of enmity is quicker than that of friendship or of love, you know, all the world through. How did you bend Prince Michel to your will a few months ago?—by playing on the subtlest and surest of human passions—revenge!"

"The deuce! is she a witch or a clairvoyante!" thought Strathmore, fairly astounded. The policy he had pursued had been closely kept, if ever the tactics of diplomacy had been so. Who had betrayed them to this Domino Blanc? Who was this Domino Blanc that she knew them? The only woman who could have penetrated their intricacies was that modern De Longueville, the Princesse de Lurine; but the Princess was a brune, an olive-cheeked daughter of Sardinia, and the delicate chin of the mask, which (save the rose lips) was all he could see of his clairvoyante unknown, was white as the skin of the fairest blonde.

"Did you think your state secrets were unknown, Lord Cecil?" she whispered rapidly, her bright eyes dancing with malicious amusement. "Bah! even a swift, silent Strathmore cannot defy a woman, you see. If we are not good for very much in this world, we are good for meddling and for espionage. We are the best detectives in the world, only we can't hold our tongues —we can't keep the secrets when we have learned them. We are so proud of our stolen nuts that we crack them *en plein jour*, instead of keeping them to enjoy in the darkness of night, as you wise men do!"

"Caramba, madame!" laughed Strathmore, looking down into her glittering eyes. "I think it is a popular error that your sex cannot keep a secret; you guard your *own* most admirably for a lifetime, if you deem it politic; it is only the secrets of others that you betray!"

He had no under-meaning, no hidden innuendo in the satire on her sex, but, for an instant, the bright eyes of the White Domino were clouded and angrily troubled. Perhaps he had struck, without knowing it, on some jarring chord; perhaps she was startled for the moment lest she should have

encountered clairvoyance, *en revanche*. Then—she laughed, a gay, fantastic chime of mellow laughter.

"Those who are wise trust us; those who are unwise pique us by drawn veils and forbidden fruits. A woman is never so exasperated as when she is refused—of course it spurs her to her mettle, and into what is bolted and barred from her she will enter by a chink, coûte que coûte. Seal a letter, and we look into it by a corner; shut a door, and we pass through it by the keyhole; tell us a thing is poison, and we taste it, as if it were elixir. No book is so eagerly read as one you forbid us; no secret is so quickly found out as one you taboo to us. If you do not wish me to learn all about the Voltura embroglio, you will tell me, with a good grace, what private instructions D'Arrelio received from Turin; you were with him this morning!"

She whispered it very softly, where they stood beside one of the fountains, falling with measured murmur into its marble basin, and casting its silvery spray high up amongst the scarlet blossoms and the luxuriant foliage of the Eastern creepers. The Voltura embroglio! that intricate knot of Anglo-Franco-Italian intrigue, whose slightest threads had never been dropped save in the privacy of the most secret bureaux! Who the deuce could she be, and how could she come by that? Witch, clairvoyante, political intrigante, whatever she might be, he would have defied her to have probed that most secret of diplomatic secresies, and to know of a visit paid to the envoy of Turin by a side-door and an *escalier dérobé!* This mystic *magicienne* baffled him utterly! She knew his own movements—she knew his own thoughts—she even knew the secret moves of the great chess-players, who had Europe for their chess-board! Strathmore was piqued, excited, provoked; he had never been so impatient in his life; he could almost have forsworn all the courtesies of masquerade, and have torn off by force the envious black mask which hid from his sight the face of his mysterious clairvoyante, and which shrouded every feature, save the

sweet, sensuous, mutine mouth, that only made concealment the more cruel.

"The sure way to win whatever you wish, and hear whatever you seek, ma belle, would be to promise removal of your cruel mask as a recompense; none could resist such a bribe, let their probity be what it would!" he whispered her, eagerly.

He by no means intended to confess to the accuracy of her Voltura knowledge; it might be but the clever guesswork of a feminine politician, flung out to entrap him haphazard.

"How rash you are!" cried the Domino Blanc, interrupting him mischievously. "I may be wrinkled, haggard, and enamelled, for anything you can tell; I may be a Ninon of seventy, a Du Deffand coquetting in my eightieth year, a female Mirabeau pitted with small-pox and yellow with dyspepsia. Unmasked, I should have lost the charm that only goes with the Unseen. Thank you! I am too wise to part with it!"

"I am anything but rash, and you are anything but wise," persisted Strathmore. "One guesses the perfection of the statue by the little that is unveiled; the beauty of the volume by the grace of the vignette that peeps through the uncut leaves! Enamel, madame, could no more have given the bloom to your lips than their bloom to those blossoms, and those eyes would not be so dangerously eloquent unless they were washed with the morning dew of their dawn!"

"Charming compliments!" laughed the mask, striking him on the arm with the jewelled sticks of her fan. "But you only flatter my beauty to have your curiosity gratified. It is not to see my face, Lord Cecil, but to find out who whispers to you of your tête-à-tête with Arrelio that you would like my mask off. *M. mon diplomat*, I take your flattery at its worth!"

"Then you do injustice to yourself and to me," whispered Strathmore, urgently, tantalised and provoked to the last degree by a woman who knew so much of himself and would

let him know nothing of her. "Your hand alone is insignia and type of what the tout ensemble would be were it only unmasked. Those Titania-like fingers must have face and form to match with them. Do you not think your mask is as cruel as the closest veil of the Odalisque, since, like that, it only shows us enough to make us wistfully dream of all we are denied?"

"Gracefully turned! were it only sincere!" answered the White Domino, her low, musical, mocking laugh echoing softly where they stood by the fountain, where the light of the lamps was shaded by the fantastic ferns and fan-like leaves of the profuse Oriental foliage that drooped around. "But with Lord Cecil Strathmore it is only flattery, adroit and diplomatic, to find out who has the clue to his secret interview with Arrelio! Neither the mask nor the veil are cruelties to you; you care nothing for what they shroud; and as for dreaming of what is denied to you, you would disdain so poetical a weakness, unless the denial involved a state secret; then, indeed, it *might* haunt your sleep a little! Listen, Lord Cecil! I know your diplomacies, see if I know you personally. You are ambitious, but with a singular and lofty ambition, in which wealth has no share. You disdain gold as the *dieu du roture*, and seek power alone. You are cold, and proud of your coldness, as of the polish of steel that has never been dimmed. You prize friendship, but disdain love as the plaything of fools and the dalliance of dotards. You look on life as the clay, and on men as the plaster through whom you, master-craftsman, will fashion the shape that pleases you without a flaw, ductile and plastic to every turn of your hand. You love finesse, sway, dominance; you are independent of sympathy; you are perfectly and presumptuously self-reliant; you have the profound subtle intellect of the old Italian statesmen; perhaps you have their swift, dark, relentless passion too; but, if so, it slumbers—as yet, as it slumbered with them till it was time to strike. You are like the Strathmores of White Ladies, line by line, feature for feature, and with their physiognomy

inherit their character. *Now*, am I clairvoyante or not? Tell me!"

She spoke in a low, sweet whisper, bending towards him with her luminous eyes shining on him through her mask, while the sapphires flashed their azure rays in the light, and the mystical, monotonous music of the fountain murmured on and on, and the scarlet flowers of the Eastern creepers swung against the glittering, snowy folds of her domino. With something of the strange, startled wonder with which Surrey saw his love shadowed out on the Mirour of Gramarye, Strathmore heard his character drawn in the unerring words of the mysterious mask. A moment before he would have sworn that no living creature, save, perhaps, Bertie Erroll, could have known him so well; and the portraiture, exact to the life in every line, startled him as we may have been startled coming suddenly upon an unseen mirror that gives us back our own reflexion in every trait and in a strong light. He stretched out his hand to her, his grasp involuntarily closing on the folds of the domino.

"Clairvoyante or not, you are an enchantress! and I must know who has studied me so miraculously before we part. Unmask, ma belle. I cannot let you go unknown. I will not!"

She laughed the laugh sweet as music, that had something menacing and mocking in its soft, subdued carillon.

"But you *must*, by the rules of all masquerades. I am like Eros, I must be adored unseen; bring light to unveil me, and I shall take wing! Will you lament as sincerely as Psyche? Adieu!"

With a swift, sudden movement, ere he could detain her, the white folds slid from his hand, and she had fluttered away, as though she literally took wing like the Eros she spoke of, floating off under the tropical foliage like some rich-plumaged bird, the gold-flowered domino brushing through the dark glossy leaves as she passed. As swiftly Strathmore pursued; but before it was possible to overtake her, a group of dominoes had surrounded her, and on the arm

of one of them she had passed so rapidly out of the Pavillon de Flore, that ere he could follow she was lost in the throng.

Who could she be? Who could know him so well while she was unknown to him? Her air, her voice, her eyes were half familiar while yet strange, and the mask might have effectually disguised his best-known friend. Yet, as he recalled those who alone could have spoken thus to him, he rejected them all; this mysterious clairvoyante could be none of them. The lost White Domino piqued him. Soft voices challenged him with witty mots, fair maskers kept him talking to them that light, brilliant badinage that women live on, as humming-birds on farina, and bees upon honey; eyes dazzling as hers wooed him tenderly through their masks; but Strathmore was haunted by one woman, to the exclusion of all the rest; he sought her unceasingly through the Luilhiers' salons, but always in vain. The sweet, sensuous mouth, the luminous eyes, the thrilling, musical voice and laugh, which would have had magic in others, were not what piqued him; it was the strange knowledge that she had of himself, the unerring fidelity with which she had sketched traits in his character that he himself even had known but in indistinct shadow till the light of her words had streamed in upon them. Had he believed in clairvoyance he would have sworn to it now!

He sought the White Domino persistently, ceaselessly, through the crowds that filled the rooms for the Duchesse's fête à la Régence—sought her always in vain. At last, giving up in provoked despair his bootless chase of the azure sapphires and golden bees, that only flashed on his sight in the distance to perpetually elude his approach, he leant against the door-way of one of the conservatories, where a breeze reached him, cooling the air that was hot with the blaze of the myriad lights, and heavy with the odour of perfumes and flowers; and stood there looking down the long suite of salons, glittering with the moving throng of dominoes, and holding his mask in his hand, so that the light fell full

upon the peculiar Vandyke-like character of his head, rendered the more striking by the dark violet of his masquerade dress and the diamonds that studded it. He was provoked, impatient, interested more than ever he had been in his whole life—save once—and he was annoyed with himself that he had so mismanaged the affair as to let the Domino Blanc slip from his hands. He was annoyed with himself, and not less so when, as he stood there, snowy folds swept past him, the jewelled handle of a fan struck his arm, and a soft voice was in his ear:

"*Rêveur!* you look like a portrait of the Old Masters! Are you thinking of the Voltura affair, or of me? You will be foiled with both; Arrelio will not sign, and I shall not unmask! Good night, Strathmore! Perhaps I shall haunt your sleep this morning, as I know a state secret!"

The words were scarce whispered before she had passed him! Again she eluded his detention; again, swift as lightning, he pursued her, this all-mysterious and all-tantalising mask; but destiny was against him. The throng parted them, an Austrian Baroness detained him, the trailing folds of a rose domino entangled him; *she* was perpetually at a distance as he followed her through the salons, which she was then leaving on the arm of a black domino to go to her carriage, the golden bees glittering, the snowy dress fluttering, just far enough off to be provokingly near and provokingly distant, as, detained now by this, now by that, he threaded his way through the interminable length of the salons, ante-chambers, cabinets de peinture, and reception-rooms in her wake, and passed out into the staircase at the very moment that she was descending its last step! She had a crowd about her, following her as courtiers follow their Queen, and her sapphires were gleaming and her white domino glittering as she crossed in a blaze of light the marble parquet of the magnificent hall of the Hôtel Luilhiers.

"A white domino, powdered with gold bees!—can you tell me whose that is, Arthus?" asked Strathmore, eagerly,

where he stretched over the balustrade as Bellus came out of the vestibule, while below, with her masked court about her, she passed on to her carriage.

"A white domino with golden bees!" cried the Vicomte. "Pardieu! you have seen her, then?"

"Seen *her!* Seen whom?"

"Did she take off her mask?" went on Bellus, not heeding the counter-question. "Did you see her face? Did you look at her well? What do you think of her?"

"Her! *Whom?* I ask you who the white domino is. Look —quick! you will catch her before she has passed out of the hall. Whose domino is that?"

"*That?* Nom de Dieu! that is HERS?"

"*Hers?* Curse your pronouns! She must have a name! Whose?"

"Peste! Lady Vavasour. You have seen her, then, at last!"

## CHAPTER VII.

### Two Night Pictures—by Waxlight, and by Moonlight.

MARION LADY VAVASOUR AND VAUX sat before her dressing-room fire (which she had lighted in summer or winter), watching the embers play, nestled in the cozy depths of her luxurious chair, with a novel open in her lap, and her long shining tresses unbound and hanging in as loose, rippled luxuriance as the hair of the Vénus à la Coquille. No toilette was so becoming as the azure négligé of softest Indian texture, with its profusion of gossamer lace about the arms and bosom, that she wore; no chaussure more bewitching than the slipper, fantastically broidered with gold and pearls, into which the foot she held out to the fire to warm was slipped; no sanctuary for that belle des belles fitter and more enticing than the dressing-room, with its *rose tendre* hangings, its silver swinging lamps, its toilette-table shrouded in lace, its mirrors framed in Dresden, its jaspar tazze filled with jewels, its gemmed vases full of flowers, its crystal

carafes of perfumes and bouquets, its thousand things of luxury and grace. Here, perhaps, Marion Lady Vavasour, who had rarest loveliness at all hours, looked her loveliest of all; and here she sat now, thinking, while the firelight shone on the dazzling whiteness of her skin, on the luminous depths of her eyes, on the shining unbound tresses of her hair; and on the diamond-studded circlet on her fair left hand that was the badge of her allegiance to one lord, and the signet of her title to reign, a Queen of Society and a Marchioness of Vavasour and Vaux. Her thoughts might well be sunny ones; she was in the years of her youth and the height of her beauty; she had not a caprice she could not carry out, nor a wish she could not gratify. Her world, delirious with her fascination and ductile to her magic, let her place her foot on its neck and rule it as she would; she was censed with the purple incense of worship wherever she moved, and gave out life and death with her smile and her frown, with a soft whispered word or a moue boudeuse. From a station of comparative obscurity, when her existence had threatened to pass away in insular monotony and colonial obscurity, her beauty had lifted her to a dazzling rank, and her tact had taught her to grace it, so that none could carp at, but all bowed before her; so that in a thorough-bred exclusive set she gave the law and made the fashion, and conquests unnumbered strewed her path "thick as the leaves in Vallambrosa."

On her first appearance as Lady Vavasour and Vaux, which had been made some six years before this at St. Petersburg, women had murmured at, and society been shy to receive, this exquisite creature, come none knew whence, born from no one knew whom, with whom the world in general conceived that my lord Marquis had made a wretched mésalliance; the Marquis being a man *sans reproche* as far as "blood" went, if upon some other score he was not quite so stainless as might have been. But the world in very brief time gave way before her: with the sceptre of a matchless loveliness, and the skill of a born tactician, she cleared all

obstacles, overruled all opponents, bore down all hesitations, silenced all sneers. She created a furore, she became the mode; women might slander her as they would, they could do nothing against her; and in brief time, from her début by finesse, by witchery, by the double right of her own resistless fascination, and the dignity of her lord's name, Marion Marchioness of Vavasour and Vaux was a Power in the world of fashion, and an acknowledged leader in her own spheres of ton, pleasure, and coquetry. "Woman's wit" can do anything if it be given free run and free scope, and with that indescribable yet priceless quality of her sex she was richly endowed. How richly, you will conceive when I say that, she had so effectually silenced and bewitched society, that in society (save here and there, where two or three very malicious grandes dames, whom she had outrivalled, were gathered together for spleen, slander, and Souchong) the question of her origin was never now mooted. It would, indeed, have been as presumptuous to have debated such a question with her, as for the Hours to have asked Aphrodite of her birth when the amber-dropping golden tresses and the snowy shoulders rose up from the white sea-foam. Lady Vavasour was Herself, and was all-sufficient for herself. Her delicate azure veins were her sangre azul, her fair white hands were her seize quartiers, her shining tresses were her bezants d'or, and her luminous eyes her blazonry. Garter King-at-Arms himself, looking on her, would have forgotten heraldry, flung the bare, lifeless skeleton of pedigree to the winds before the living beauty, and allowed that Venus needs no Pursuivant's marshalling.

She sat looking into the dressing-room fire, while the gleam of the wax-lights was warm on her brow, and played in the depths of her dazzling eyes; a pleased smile lingered about her lovely lips, and her fingers idly played with the leaves of her novel—her thoughts were more amusing than its pages. She was thinking over the triumphs of the past night and day; of how she had wooed from the Marquis d'Arrelio, for pure insouciant curiosity, state secrets that honour and

prudence alike bade him withhold, but which he was powerless to deny before her magical witchery; of how Constantine of Lanaris had followed her from Athens, to lay at her feet the sworn homage of a Prince, and be rewarded with a tap of a fan painted by Watteau; of the imperial sables Duke Nicholas Tchemidoff had flung down à la Raleigh on a damp spot on the Terrace des Feuillans, where, otherwise, her dainty brodequins would have been set on some moist fallen leaves, as they had strolled there together; of the pieces of Henri Deux and Rose Berri ware, dearer to him than his life, which that king of connoisseurs, Lord Weiverden, had presented to her, sacrificing his Faïence for the sake of a smile; of the words which men had whispered to her in the perfumed demi-lumière of her violet-hung boudoir, while her eyes laughed and lured them softly and resistlessly to their doom; of all the triumphs of the past twelve hours, since the doors of her hotel in the Place Vendôme had first been opened at two o'clock in the day to her crowding court, to now, when she had quitted the bal masqué of her friend Louise de Luilhier, and was inhaling again in memory the incense on which she lived. For the belle Marquise was a finished coquette, never sated with conquest; and it was said, in certain circles antagonistic to her own, that neither her coquetries nor her conquests were wholly harmless. But every flower, even the fairest, has its shadow beneath it as it swings in the sunlight!

"He did not remember ME!" thought the Venus Aphrodite of the rose-hung dressing-room, looking with a smile into the flames of the fire, which it was her whim to have even in so warm a night as was this one. "My voice should have told him; it is a terribly bad compliment! However, he shall pay for it! A woman who knows her power can always tax any negligence to her as heavily as she likes. How incomprehensibly silly those women must be who become their lovers' slaves, who hang on their words and seek their tenderness, and make themselves miserable at their infidelities. I cannot understand it; if there be a thing in the world easier

to manage than another, it is a MAN! Weak, obstinate, vain, wayward, loving what they cannot get, slighting what they hold in their hand, adoring what they have only on an insecure tenure, trampling on anything that lies at their mercy, always capricious to a constant mistress and constant to a capricious—men are all alike; there is nothing easier to keep in leading-strings when once you know their foibles! Those swift, silent Strathmores, they are very cold, they say, and love very rarely; but *when* they love, it must be imperiously, passionately, madly, tout ou rien. I should like to see him roused. Shall I rouse him? Perhaps! *He* could not resist me if I chose to wind him round my fingers. I should like to supplant his ambition, to break down his pride, to shatter his coldness, to bow him down to what he defies. Those facile conquests are no honour; those men who sigh at the first sight of one's eyebrow, and lose their heads at the shadow of a smile; I am tired of them—sick of them! Toujours perdrix! And the birds so easily shot! Shall I choose? *Yes!* No man living could defy *me*—not even Lord Cecil Strathmore!"

And as she thought this last vainglorious but fully warranted thought, Marion Lady Vavasour, lying back in her fauteuil, with her head resting negligently on her arm, that in its turn rested on the satin cushions, with that grace which was her peculiar charm, as the firelight shone on her loosened hair and the rose-leaf flush of her delicate cheeks, glanced at her own reflexion in a mirror standing near, on whose surface the whole matchless tableau was reproduced with its dainty and brilliant colouring, and smiled—a smile of calm security, of superb triumph. Could she not vanquish whom and when and where she would?

That night, far across the sea, under the shadow of English woodlands that lay dark and fresh, and still beneath the brooding summer skies, a woman stood within the shelter of a cottage-porch, looking down the forest-lane that stretched into the distance, with the moonbeams falling across its moss-

grown road between the boles of the trees, and the silent country lying far beyond hushed, and dim, and shrouded in a white mist. She was young, and she had the light of youth —love—in her eyes as she gazed wistfully into the gloom, vainly seeking to pierce through the dense foliage of the boughs and the darkness of the night, and listened, thirstily and breathlessly, for a step beloved to break the undisturbed silence. The scarlet folds of a cloak fell off her shoulders, her head was uncovered, and the moon bathed her in its radiance where she stood; the branches above her, as the wind stirred amongst them, shaking silver drops of dew from their moistened leaves on her brow and into her bosom. She loved, and listened for that which she loved; listened patiently, yet eagerly and long, while the faint summer clouds swept over the dark azure heavens, the stars shining through their mist, and the distant chimes of a church clock from an old grey tower bosomed in the woods tolled out the quarters, one by one, as the hours of the night stole onward.

Suddenly she heard that for which she longed—heard ere other ears could have caught it—a step falling on the moss that covered the forest road, and coming towards her; then —she sprang forward in the darkness, the dew shaking from her hair, and the tears of a great gladness glancing in her eyes, as she twined her arms close about him whom she met, and clung to him as though no earthly power should sever them.

"You are come at last! Ah, if you knew how bitter your absence is, if you knew how I grudge you to the cruel world that robs me so long, so often of you——"

Erroll looked down fondly on her.

"Lucille! I am not worth your worship, still less worth the consecration of your life, when I repay it so little, recompense it so ill."

She laid her hand upon his lips and gazed up into his eyes, clinging but the more closely to him, and laughing and weeping in her joy:

"Hush, hush! Pay it ill? Have I not the highest, best,

most precious payment in your love? *I* care for no other, you know that so well."

He stroked her hair caressingly, perhaps repentantly (few men can meet the eyes of a wife who loves them purely and faithfully, after a long absence, without some pangs of conscience, without some contrast of the quality of her fidelity and their own), and kissed the lips uplifted to his own; the love that he read in her eyes, and that trembled in her voice, saddened him, he could not have told why, even whilst he recognised it as something unpurchasable in the world he had quitted, where its strength and its fidelity would have been but words of an unknown tongue, subjects of a jeer, objects of a jest.

"And you have seen none who have supplanted me since we parted; none of whom I need have jealousy or fear?" she whispered to him, with a certain tremulous, wistful anxiety—he was her all, she could not be robbed of him!—yet with a fond, sunny smile upon her face as it was raised to his in the faint sheen of the starlight, the smile of a love too deeply true, too truly trustful to harbour a dread that were doubt, a doubt that were disloyalty to the faith it received as to the faith it gave.

He looked down into her eyes, and pressed closer against his own the heart that he knew beat purely, wholly for himself.

"My precious one! you need be jealous of no living thing with me. None have twined themselves about my heart, none have rooted themselves into my life as you have done. Have no dread! No rival shall ever supplant you, I swear before God!"

He spoke the oath in all sincerity, in all faith, in all fervour, speaking it as many men have so spoken before him, not dreaming what the day will bring forth, not knowing how fate will make them unwitting perjurers, unconscious renegades to the bond of their word, as they are lured onwards, and driven downwards, powerless, almost one would say blameless, in the hands of chance.

And the woman that nestled in his arms and gazed up into his eyes sighed a low, long sigh of gladness. He was her world; she knew of and needed no other.

Then he loosened her from his embrace, and led her under the drooping branches of the trees that hung stirless in the warm air, into the house hidden in the profuse and tangled foliage. Their steps ceased to fall on the moss, their shadows to slant across the starlit path, their whispered words to stir the silence; the woodland country lay beyond calm and still in the shade of the night, the fleecy clouds drifted slowly now and then across the bright radiance of the moon, the winds moved gently amongst the leaves; in the lattice casements shrouded in the trees the lights died out, and the church chimes struck faintly in the distance their hours one by one. On the hushed earth three angels brooded—Night, and Sleep, and Peace.

## CHAPTER VIII.

The Kismet that was written on a Millefleurs-scented Note.

"Meurice's, Paris.

"MY DEAR ERROLL,—To keep faith with you, I must tell you that I have seen Lady Vavasour! Rather, to speak more properly, have heard her, for she was masked, and I saw nothing except, what I freely confess to be, as lovely a mouth and chin as the devil ever gave his special aides-de-camp, the daughters of Eve, for a weapon of slaughter and a tool of perdition. I met her at Madame de Luilhier's bal masqué, and she has her full share of Eve's curiosity; for though, to my certain knowledge, I have never seen her before, nor she me, she informed me of everything about myself, and a little more besides! She repeated one of the old White Ladies chronicles—where could she get hold of it?—and was up to some diplomatic tricks, whose juggling we all thought had been done strictly *in petto*. I suppose the Nazarenes, who lie in the lap of the titled Delilah, let her coax their secrets out

of them. The ass that Samson in all ages ought to smite is Himself! *You* will think her divine, I dare say; fascinating I can very well believe that she is, by the wiles she tried upon me to-night; and she's gifted with the sex's true genius for tantalising. I like nothing I have heard of her, and I should say it is particularly lucky the Marquis is of elastic conjugal principles! I never remember seeing him, do you? I don't envy him his wife, though I admit she is half a sorceress, and has a very pretty mouth; but it is a mouth that would whisper too many infidelities to please me, were I *he!* What the deuce are you doing with yourself? Carlton tells me you said 'you were going out of town—*c'était tout.*' Out of town in the middle of the season! You surely are not turning pastoral, and getting *entêté* of provinciality? The Beau Sabreur a Strephon! What a vision! I dare say a woman's at the bottom of it; but Aspasia was always your game, not Phillis, except, indeed, with that mysterious White Ladies inamorata, whom you wouldn't be chaffed about. But it can't be she, because *that* love's twelve months' old now to my knowledge, and must have been rococo long ago. I will pique Lady Millicent till she badgers you out of your secret. Good night, old fellow. I shall be heartily glad to see you again. When will it be? Can't you run over here? I expect I shall get the French Derby, though Lawton's confounded love of a close finish lost me the English one. The betting's quite steady here on Maréchale, always five to one. I shall start him for the St. Leger, and send him over to Maldon to train through August and September. Nesselrode's a good second. They don't offer freely at all on Tambour, and I half think he'll be scratched. The Abbey's at your service, of course, as it always is, to fill as you like for the First. You will oblige me very much by keeping the old place open, and knocking over the birds, whether I come or not.

"Yours as ever,
"CECIL STRATHMORE."

Strathmore, having written those last words as the morning sun streamed in through the persiennes of his bedchamber, addressed his letter to Major Erroll, 19A, Albermarle-street, London (where that debt-laden Sabreur had a suite of rooms, dainty and luxurious enough to domicile Lady Millicent), and lying back in his chair, stirred the chocolate Diaz had placed at his elbow, and sat smoking, while the smooth Albanian moved noiselessly about, laying out the clothes that might be needed through the day, polishing an eye-glass, rubbing up a diamond, refilling a bouquet-bottle, or performing some other office of valetdom. Carelessly and cavalierly as he had dismissed the Domino Blanc in the letter he had just been writing, the tantalising mystery of the night before was not so easily to be dismissed from his memory.

Lady Vavasour!

For once Strathmore's keen penetration and diplomatist acumen were baffled and at fault; he could fathom neither the means nor the motive of the dazzling Peeress's interest in, and attack upon him. How could a woman, whom he had perpetually missed, and never met during the seven years that she had sparkled through society, know him, as he would have taken his oath his eldest friend could not do, and photograph his character with a realistic accuracy that he himself, limning it from analysis, could barely have attained?

The belle Marquise lying back in her fauteuil, gazing dreamily and nonchalantly at herself in the mirror, with her shining hair falling over her arm, and a smile of superb consciousness on her rich curling lips, might have exercised a mesmeric power of will the night before, so persistently had she haunted him from the time that he saw the last flutter of the snowy folds of her domino. Is there any electro-biology so potent as beauty?

A vague prejudice had associated Lady Vavasour in his eyes with a dangerous and disagreeable aroma; he had mistrusted, without knowing her, this woman who fooled fools at her will; she had been a mésalliance, and he abhorred mésalliances; she was a Creole, and he detested Creoles; she was

a coquette, and he was always impatient of coquettes. If Strathmore had ever wasted his hours in imagining an ideal mistress (which he most assuredly never did), his ideal would have, probably, clothed itself in some form, pure, stainless, lofty, of a soilless honour, and a grave and glorious grace, such as Hypatia, when the sunlight of Hellas fell on her white Ionic robes, and her proud eyes glanced over the assembled multitudes. This malicious mask, this tantalising clairvoyante, was certainly of an order its direct antipodes! But despite all that, perhaps because of it, Lady Vavasour, seen yet unseen, unknown yet knowing so much, haunted him, piqued him, usurped his thoughts; and when a woman does that, what use is it for any man to send her to the deuce, to consign her to the devil? Heaven knows, not one whit! Anathema Maranatha only incenses the sorceress, and the more she is exorcised the more she persists.

To dismiss her troublesome memory, he took up one out of a pile of letters Diaz had placed on a salver beside him. It was a delicate cream-coloured Millefleurs-scented billet, fragrant with the odour of the boudoir, breathing of a buhl writing-case, and a gemmed penholder, and white jewelled fingers; it was only a note of invitation, pressingly worded, and signed Blanche de Ruelle-Courances, asking him to join the party gathered at her château of Vernonceaux, now that Paris was growing empty and detestable, and the country and the vine-shadows were à la mode. The Comtesse de Ruelle was a charming leader of his own set, English by birth and tint, Parisienne by marriage and habit; there was no more agreeable place in Europe to visit at than Vernonceaux, and she always had about her as amusing and as *chic* a circle as the fashion of the two nations afforded. He read the note; not inclined to accept the invitation, but intending to go across the Kohl, in common with most other European Dips and décorés, to the pet Bad of ministers and martingales, congresses and *coups de bonheur*, Chevaliers of the order of honour and Chevaliers of the order of industry, king-like Greeks and Greek-like kings. His weighing of the merits of Baden

*v.* Vernonceaux, and fifty other places open to him, was interrupted by Diaz approaching him from the ante-room:

"M. le Comte de Valdor demande si milord est visible?"

Strathmore looked up, setting down his chocolate:

"To him—oh yes! Show M. le Comte up here, if he have no objection."

The Albanian withdrew (Diaz was soft, sleek, noiseless as a panther, and obeyed implicitly—four inestimable qualities in a valet, a wife, or a spy!), and, in a few minutes, ushered Valdor in; a very young man, not more than four or five-and-twenty, slight, graceful, animated, delicately made, the beau-ideal, as he was the descendant, of those who turned back their scented ruffles, and shook the powder from their perfumed locks, as they went out with a mot on their lips to the fatal *charette* while the tocsin sounded.

"Valdor, très cher, forgive my receiving you *en négligé*," laughed Strathmore. "We don't stand on ceremony with one another. I'm later than usual, and you are earlier. It isn't twelve, is it?"

Valdor looked at his little jewelled watch, the size of a fifty-centime, and answered a trifle *à tort et à travers* as he sank into a dormeuse, and played with *Galignani.*

"If you come out at noon like this, Valdor, you'll soon lose your reputation; you'll tan your skin, disenchant your lady worshippers, and sink among the ordinary herd, who are deep in business before we've had our coffee, and trade in their coupons before we've thought of our valets," laughed Strathmore, noticing his unusual absence of manner, for Valdor was generally the most insouciant of *blondins*, and boasted that he never reflected but on two subjects—the fit of his gloves, and the temperature of his eau-de-Cologne bath.

Valdor laughed too, and stroked his moustaches with a hand as small and as delicate as that which the White Domino could boast.

"It *is* horribly early; friends are great bores in the morning; nobody's mot's good till the luncheon wine has washed it; indeed, I don't think a decent thing's ever said before din-

ner. I'm sure Horace himself was prosy before he had sat down to the *cœna*; wit must have starved of famine on a date! I owe you fifty excuses, Strathmore, for intruding so soon, but —I wanted to see you alone."

"I am most happy to see you, my dear fellow. If you are going to be unamusing, it's the prerogative of friendship to prose, as of marriage to bore one you know; every virtuous thing is dull; a preacher and a prig from time immemorial!" said Strathmore, playing with the dainty Millefleurs-scented note. "What's the matter, Valdor—anything? Are you ruining yourself for Viola Vé, like Caderousse? Has Nesselrode gone lame? Has some *brave du roture* been copying your liveries, or has some ugly Serene Princess fallen in love with you, and left you vacillating between the horrors and the honours of the liaison? What is it, eh?"

"Only this—once for all, I'm ashamed to say I must keep in your debt a little longer——"

"That all!" cried Strathmore, stopping him before he could finish the sentence. "My dear fellow! never trouble your head about such a trifle; I had forgotten it, I assure you; oblige me by doing the same."

Valdor shook his head, the colour in his face deepening, as he tossed the *Galignani* with the nervous gesture of a man embarrassed and mortified:

"I can't forget so easily; I would not if I could. You are too generous, Strathmore; you lend to men who have nothing. I never dreamt I should be unable to pay you; I made sure that by this time—but Lascases refuses to renew my bill; I cannot get money anywhere just yet, and——"

Strathmore stopped him with a gesture, and stretched out his hand; he liked young Valdor, and his own wealth, as I have said, he held in superb disdain, save in so far as it conduced to Power. He gave freely and royally; evil there might be in his nature, but not a touch of meanness; at that time he would have succoured his darkest foe from his purse; the virtues, as the errors of this man, were all naturally in ex-

treme; petty things were not alone beneath him, but impossible to him.

"You would get into Lascases's debt to get out of mine? For shame! Trust your friend rather than that beggarly Jew, surely! You will repay it when you can, that I am certain of; meantime, give me your honour you will never renew the subject unless I do. It was a trifling affair, and you were most welcome to it!"

As he spoke, the generous smile, which gave much of sweetness to his face, came on it, softening what was dark, relaxing what was cold; and Valdor, as his hand closed on Strathmore's, saw all that was best, all that was most attractive, in a nature that was an enigma in much even to itself. He spoke a few hurried words of thanks; he, a bel esprit of the salons and the circles, was now at a loss for speech—now that he *felt;* and Strathmore stopped him once more.

"Not a syllable more about it! If ever the time come that I have to ask *you* to do anything, I know you will do it for me—*c'est assez.* Are you going to Vernonceaux this year, Valdor?"

He spoke carelessly, laughingly, to cover whatever embarrassment the other might feel in accepting his generosity; he little foresaw what the service would be that he would call on his debtor to render him.

"You are? Well! there isn't a more charming châtelaine than Blanche anywhere. She invites me, but I shall go to Baden after the race week," went on Strathmore, brushing a fly off the rose Cashmere sleeve of his dressing-gown. "I shall meet Arrelio there, and you get a man's meaning out of him in chit-chat as you never do in a conference. If congresses were held *en petit comité,* with a supper worthy Carême, they might come to something, instead of ending, as they always do now, in cobwebs and in moonshine. Why do the English always get cheated and fooled in a European congress, I wonder? Not because they *can't* lie, it is the national trade. Because they lie too much and too barefacedly, I think; and no *gobemouche* is ever tricked into even suspecting them of—the truth! A wise man never lies; I don't mean be-

cause he's moral, but because he's judicious: 'On peut être plus fin qu'un autre, mais pas plus fin que tous les autres.' Somebody always finds out a falsehood, and, once found out, your credit's gone! I say, Valdor, do you know my compatriote, Lady Vavasour?"

"Lady Vavasour? Bon dieu! I think I do! What a cold-blooded question to ask anybody in that indifferent way! Who doesn't know her, rather?"

"*I* don't. What sort of woman is she?"

"Peste, mon cher, you ask a folio. I couldn't tell you. She is divine——!"

"Divine? Well! 'a woman *is* a dish for the gods if the devil dress her not,' Shakspeare says; but I think the devil generally has the dressing, and serves up sauce with it so very piquante that it's all but poison; it's a dish like mushrooms, dainty but dangerous; with the beau sexe as with the fungi, it's fifty to ten one lights on a false one, and pays penalty for one's appetite! Is she a malicious woman, your divinity?"

"Malicious? No! Malice is for *passées* women, pinched, sallow, and hungrily jealous; for dowagers who nod their wigs over whist and their neighbours' character; for *vieilles filles* who vacillate between sacraments and scandals! Malice is a vinegar thing that belongs to a 'certain age!'—it has nothing to do with her. She's a little tantalising, if you like——"

"Distinction without a difference! I thought she was! And a coquette?"

"To the last extent!"

Strathmore laughed:

"To the *last!* I dare say!—when women once pass the boundary line they generally clear the ramparts. I suppose the Marquis gives the latitude he takes—just, at any rate. We're not often so on those points; we take an ell, but we don't give an inch. That's the beauty of vesting our honour in our wives; it's so much easier to forbid and dragonise another than ourselves! What a droll thing, by the way, it is, that an Englishwoman piques herself on being THOUGHT faithful to her husband, and a Frenchwoman on being thought

*un*faithful; their theory's different, but their practice comes to much the same thing!"

"They're like schismatics in the Churches, they split in semblance and on a straw's point, but, *sous les cartes*, agree to persecute and agree to dupe! As for Lord Vavasour, he's a detestable gourmand, invents sauces, bores you horribly, and has but one virtue—a great conjugal one!—he never interferes with his wife! He's a semi-sovereign with a lot of parasites, a mauvais sujet with a *ton de garnison*, and just brains enough to be vicious without enough to be entertaining."

"A very general case, my dear fellow! Vice is very common, and wit is very scarce; fifty men make mischief to one that makes mots. We can fill our cells with convicts, but not our clubs with *causeurs*. I wonder governments don't tax good talk; it's quite a luxury, and they might add *de luxe*, since so many go without it all their lives, in blessed ignorance of even what it is! Where does your belle Marquise go this year? I suppose you know all her movements? She must be leaving now."

"Peste! don't you know? I thought you were asked to Vernonceaux?"

"Well! if I be, what has that——"

"To do with it? She is going there too. She leaves Paris to-day."

"*There?*" The word had a dash of eagerness in it, different to the uninterested, careless tone with which Strathmore had asked all his other questions.

"Yes. She and Madame de Ruelle are sworn allies; they are constantly together. Go there and you'll see her. Do, Strathmore; parole d'honneur she is worth the trouble. She is exquisite, and for you, you icicle, she can't be dangerous."

"Dangerous!" said Strathmore, with his most contemptuous sneer. "Thank God, no woman was ever yet dangerous to me; a man must be a fool indeed who is snared by the ready-made wiles of a coquette."

"Antony was no fool."

"No, but he was a madman, and that comes to the same

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thing; besides, Antony must have had very extraordinary tastes altogether, to be in love with a woman forty years old, and as brown as a berry."

"Yes," said Valdor, pathetically, "I do wish, for his credit, Cleopatra had been half her years, and a shade or two fairer. Actium would have been very poetic then."

"Poetic? Pitiable, if you like, as it is now. I say, Valdor—to go to a better theme—those steel-greys of Lee Vivian's went for nothing at the sale yesterday; they were splendid animals, and the pigeon-blue Arab mare was knocked down for five thousand francs! The wines will be worth bidding for, too; he had some of the best comet-hock in Paris. Poor fellow! one drinks his wines at his table one month, and discusses them in a catalogue the next. Ars longa, vita brevis!—one's connoisseurship survives one's friendship; Orestes must die, and Iolaüs must dine! Damon must go to the dogs, and Pythias must season his dishes! Because our brother's in the Cemetery, that's no reason why we should neglect our Cayenne!"

With which remark upon friendship, which was with him as much serious as satirical (since Strathmore was an egotist by principle and profession, habit and nature, and had never had any death touch him as he had never had any life wind round him), he began to discuss the news of the day with his guest, and it was not till Valdor had left that he took up the letter from Vernonceaux again, and drew a sheet of paper to him to answer it now,—by an acceptance.

In the little Millefleurs-scented billet lay, unknown to its writer as to him, the turning-point of his life. God help us! what avail are experience, prescience, prudence, wisdom, in this world, when at every chance step the silliest trifle, the most common-place meeting, an invitation to dinner, a turn down the wrong street, the dropping of a glove, the delay of a train, the introduction to an unnoticed stranger, will fling down every precaution, and build a fate for us of which we never dream? Of what avail for us to erect our sand-castle when every chance blast of air may blow it into nothing, and

drift another into form that we have no power to move? Life hinges upon hazard, and at every turn wisdom is mocked by it, and energy swept aside by it, as the battled dykes are worn away, and the granite walls beaten down, by the fickle ocean waves, which, never two hours together alike, never two instants without restless motion, are yet as changeless as they are capricious, as omnipotent as they are fickle, as cruel as they are countless! Men and mariners may build their bulwarks, but hazard and the sea will overthrow and wear away both alike at their will—their wild and unreined will, which no foresight can foresee, no strength can bridle.

Was it not the mere choice between the saddle and the barouche that day when Ferdinand d'Orléans flung down on second thoughts his riding-whip upon the console at the Tuileries, and ordered his carriage instead of his horse, that cost himself his life, his son a throne, the Bourbon blood their royalty, and France for long years her progress and her peace? Had he taken up the whip instead of laying it aside, he might be living to-day with the sceptre in his hand, and the Bee, crushed beneath his foot, powerless to sting to the core of the Lily. Of all strange things in human life, there is none stranger than the dominance of Chance.

## CHAPTER IX.

### The Warning of the Scarlet Camellias.

WHERE the grey pointed towers of the Château of Vernonceaux rose above the woods among the vine-shadows of Lorraine, the air seemed still perfumed with the amber, still echoing with the madrigals of Gentil-Bernard, still rustling with the sweep of robes à la Pompadour, still filled with the mots of *abbés galants*, and the laughter of pretty pagans of a century ago. For Vernonceaux was near to Lunéville—the Lunéville of Stanislas, of Voltaire, of la belle Boufflers, the *replica* of Versailles, the pleasant exile of forbidden wit, the Lunéville of a myriad memories!

Vernonceaux stood as secluded in its forest as the castle of the Sleeping Beauty—so tranquil and so shaded, that the gay sinners of Lunéville might have been chained there in enchanted slumber, like the Moorish court under the marble pavements of the Alhambra; but if, without, there was a sylvan solitude, broken but by the song of the vintagers or the creak of the oxen-drawn waggon, within, when the Comtesse de Ruelle went there for the summer months with a choice selection from her ultra-exclusive Paris set, there were as much luxury, wit, and refined revelry as ever the Marquise de Boufflers, a hundred years before, had presided over at the little palace of Lunéville.

No sound broke the silence, save the ring of his horse's feet, as Strathmore drove the mail phaeton that had been sent to meet him through the park to Vernonceaux, on his way to the visit for which he had abandoned Baden. There was not a thing in sight but the rich country beyond and the dense forest-growth about him, until, as a break in the wood brought into view the grey façade of the building, a riding party rode into the court-yard by opposite gates to those by which he would enter, looking like some court cavalcade of Watteau, some hunting group of Wouverman's, and breaking suddenly in with life, and colouring, and motion on the solitude of the landscape, as they were thrown out in strong relief against the ivy-hung walls of the château. "I'm in time for dinner," he thought, noticing how well one of the women rode who was teazing her horse with sharp strokes of her whip, and making him rear and swerve, before she sprang from the saddle: the distance was too far for him to make out who she was, and, as he dropped his eye-glass, he wished for a lorgnon.

The saddle-horses were being led off by their grooms, and the first dressing-bell had just rung when he drove into the court-yard. At the moment of his arrival all the world was dressing, and Strathmore, as he went straight to his room, passing along the Galerie des Dames, consecrated from time immemorial to the repose of the beau sexe, heard a hand-

some *brune* coming out of one of the rooms say to another lady's-maid, apparently her sub-lieutenant in office, "Va vîte chercher les camellias roses, dans les serres chaudes. Madame désire des fleurs naturelles, c'est sa *whim* comme disent les Anglais. Ah ma foi!—qu'elle a des caprices, Miladi Vavasour!"

This name was the first he heard at Vernonceaux! *As* he heard it, Strathmore, the last man in the world who was ever troubled by regrets or haunted by forebodings, who ever descended to the weakness of vacillation, or paid himself so ill a compliment as to imagine any step he took, however great, however trivial, could by any possibility be *un*wisely taken, wished for the moment, on an impulse he could not have explained, that he had gone to Baden instead, and left the Mask unmasked, the White Domino unknown. It was the first time a woman had ever influenced him, and he resented the influence. His prejudice against Lady Vavasour came back in full force as he heard her maid order the fresh scarlet camellias! The flowers were harmless, surely, and yet (perhaps it was association with *La Dame aux Camellias!)* with them she reassumed a dangerous aspect, as of a sorceress unscrupulous in her spells, a coquette merciless in her wiles, a woman who lived upon vanity and adored but herself, a creature like the Japan lilac, lovely to look on, but to those who lingered near, who touched or who played with her, certain destruction. By what force of argument he could not have told—trifles play the deuce with us, oddly sometimes, but by some irrepressible instinct, all his old dislike and mistrust of Lady Vavasour came back with that innocent and luckless hot-house order.

"Who are here, Diaz—do you know?" he asked the Albanian, as he dressed after his bath and a cup of coffee.

The inimitable *modus operandi* of that priceless person had mastered the whole visiting-list of Vernonceaux, though he had, on the whole, but about three minutes to himself for the process.

"Marquis and Marchioness of Vavasour, please your lordship," began Diaz.

"A stupid pigeon and a clever snarer!" thought Strathmore, as he held out his wrist to have his sleeve-links fastened.

"Lady George Dashwood and her sister——"

"Pretty precisians, naughty as Messalina, who go to church, like Marguerite, to meditate on Faust!" reflected Strathmore.

"My Lord Viscount Blocquehedd and M. de Croquis."

"One a fool, who writes slangy, burlesqued travels, that sell because hundreds in coroneted carriages drive up to his publisher's doors to get a copy in public and enjoy a laugh in private; and the other, a magnificent fellow, who'd have been fit company for Scipio at Liternum, but who can't send a sheet of copy to press without a 'caution' and a chance of Cayenne," thought Strathmore, perfuming his beard.

"Lady Fitzeden, my lord," pursued Diaz.

"Who gives ball-vouchers for other people's 'unimpeachability,' but couldn't on oath give one for her own!" reflected his master.

"Monsignore Villaflôr and M. l'Abbé de Verdreuil."

"A brace of priests, who have intrigues and absolutions in their hands, make penitents and shrive them, hide the *roué* under the *rochet*, and Cupid in the confessional. I know the race," thought Strathmore.

"M. le Vicomte de Clermont, Lord Arthur Legard, Colonel Dormer, and M. de la Rennecourt," pursued Diaz, in profound ignorance of his master's mental commentary.

"Very good fellows all of them; dress better than they talk, shoot with truer aim than they think, bore one rather at everything but billiards, and bestow more on their hair than on the brains underneath it, *comme il faut* but common-place," said Strathmore to himself, with the contempt of a clever man for men who are only educated, of an ambitious man for men

who are only *à la mode*, of a man who but makes society his stepping-stone for men who never see or soar beyond it.

"Madame de Saint-Claire, H.S.H. Hélène of Mechlin, and Lord and Lady Beaudesert, are here too, my lord," added the Albanian, closing the list. "I think that is all—all I have heard of at present, at least."

"A bas-bleu as mathematical and material as Madame du Châtelet, a babyish blonde with a mushroom royalty and a nursery lisp; a dashing brunette who smokes cigarettes and has led the Pytchley. Well, there will be change, at any rate. Blanche hasn't sorted her guests as she sorts her embroidery silks, in shades that suit; however, good contrasts are effective sometimes. There's nobody I don't know, except the priests and the Vavasours. That's a bore; new acquaintances are much pleasanter than familiar ones; the varnish is fresh, and the gilding is bright, and the polish is smooth, and you only just touch the surface with friends an hour old. Nothing wears so badly, and stands the microscope so ill as Humanity. I suppose because we are all sham to one another, and *les hommes se haïssent naturellement;* so the electro comes off, and the hatred comes out, when we've been some time together," thought Strathmore, as he left his room to go to the drawing-rooms. No one was yet down when he was ushered into the salons, and he threw himself on a dormeuse with his back to a window opening on the terrace, playing idly with the snowy curls of a little lion-dog, who, recognising him, leapt on his knee, shaking its silver bells in a joyous welcome. Strathmore did not care about animals; in truth, I don't think he cared much about anything except—himself! Not that he was an egotist in any petty sense of the word; he would have shrouded no man's light, profited at no man's cost, taken no man's right, but he was self-sustained and self-absorbed; keen personal ambitions were dominant in him, pure personal interests alone occupied him, and the instincts and weaknesses—kindlier if you like, but more general and less viril of most men—had no part in him. He was kind to a dog, for instance, because it was helpless, and he would

have disdained to be otherwise; but to care for a dog's fidelity, to regret a dog's death as he had known Erroll do, were utterly incomprehensible to him.

He sat there some few moments listlessly twisting the ear of the Maltese, while the clock on the console near gently ticked away the time, and pointed to a quarter to nine; he did not hear a step approach towards the back of his chair from the terrace behind, he did not turn and see a figure that stood just within the window betwixt him and the faint evening light.

"Bon jour, Lord Cecil! Are you meditating on the Gitana prophecy, or on the Domino Blanc — which? Or is the Voltura affair absorbing you, pray, to the utter exclusion of both?"

That light, *méchante* voice that had mocked him from the mask struck on his ear like the gay, sudden chime of some silvery bell, and for once in his life Strathmore started! As he rose and swung round, the night under the Czechen limes came back swiftly and vividly to his memory;—how had that voice failed to recall it before?

With the scarlet coronal of flowers on her lovely amber hair, and the light of a sunny laughter beaming in her eyes; framed between the gossamer lace and broidered azure silk of the curtain draperies; a form bright and brilliant and richly coloured as any picture of Watteau's, thrown out against the purple haze of the air, and the dark shadows of evening that were veiling the landscape beyond; there stood the blonde aux yeux noirs of the Vigil of St. John, the White Domino of the fête à la Régence—Marion Marchioness of Vavasour! Strangely enough, he had never even by a random thought connected the two as one. Involuntarily, unwittingly, he stood a moment dazzled and surprised, looking at the delicate and glittering picture that was before him, painted in all its dainty colouring on the sombre canvas of the night; and she laughed softly to herself,—for one brief instant she had startled him from his self-possession. She guessed rightly, that no woman before her had ever boasted so much.

Then Strathmore bent to her with the soft and stately courtesy for which his race of steel had ever been famed—the velvet glove that they habitually wore over their gauntlets of mail.

"I merit a worse fate than the Gitana predicted me, for my blindness in not recognising the veiled picture by its eyes, in not knowing no two voices could have a music so rare! May I ask to be forgiven, though I can never forgive myself?"

She smiled as she gave him her hand:

"You may. You rendered me too daring and too generous a service, Lord Cecil, for me not to forgive you weightier offences than that. I am your debtor for a heavy debt—the debt of my life saved! Believe me, I am very grateful."

The words were few and simple; a young girl out of her convent could not have spoken more earnestly and touchingly than the woman of the world; where more florid, profuse, eloquently-studied words would have been set aside by him as the conventional utterances of necessity, these charmed and won him, these rang on his ear with the accent of truth.

"To secure so high a price as your gratitude most men would have perilled much more than I did," he answered her. "But I had not then the incentive that would tempt the world to any madness at Lady Vavasour's bidding. I had not seen what I rescued, I did not know whom I served!"

She looked up at him from under her black silken lashes as she sank into the chair he wheeled to her, and smiled.

"You compliment charmingly, Lord Cecil (you remember, I suppose, that I said I liked bon-bons), but then, how much is true? You are a diplomatist; it is your habit to speak suavely and mean nothing, it is the *spécialité* that will get you the Garter and give you an Earldom."

"Lady Vavasour—by everything I have heard of her—can surely never mistrust her own power to convert the most sceptical, and do with all men what she would?"

Her attitude, as she sank down into the chair, had all the

soft Odalisque-like grace with which he had first seen her lying amongst her cushions on the bench of the Bohemian boat; and he confessed to himself that this matchless and dazzling beauty, at once poetic and voluptuous, at once gifted with the loveliness of the sérail, and the tournure of the salons, might well play with men, and make their madness at its will.

"Ah!" she laughed—her airy, silvery laugh!—"but I do not profess to deal with people who desire age and despise love; they are not in my experience, or my category. I shall be a long while before I credit any compliment from you, mon ami. Did I not show you how well I knew your character at the *bal masqué?* Was it not sketched, now, as accurately, as any one of La Bruyère's?"

"It was, though it was not drawn altogether *en beau.* It was *so* accurate that it flattered me even by its unflattering points, since it showed that I must have been a subject of interest and of study to my unerring clairvoyante."

A momentary blush tinged her cheek, making her loveliness lovelier, and not escaping Strathmore, though he knew how *grandes dames* can blush, as they can weep at their will, when they need it to embellish their beauty, too well to be much honoured by it. She looked at him with the same glance that had flashed through her mask.

"Not at all! You are much too vain! I only wanted to puzzle you. If my shafts hit home, it was chance, not effort. Hearsay and penetration made my clairvoyance, as they make all. You were no stranger to me by name. I have heard plenty of you from others, though we had never happened to meet till that night in Bohemia. Come! tell me the truth. Do you not think it a terrible escapade to have travelled alone, at night, in that *inconséquent* manner, with only my maid?"

"I think it a '*caprice d'une belle dame*,' which became her far better than the common-place and the conventional, which have nothing in common with her," smiled Strathmore. And for once he paid a compliment that was sincerely meant.

"But why did you so cruelly refuse me your name, and condemn me to pursue '*un ombre, un rêve, un rien*,' in seeking to see again the phantom which had flashed on me, when, had I but known *whom* I sought, all Europe would have guided me to its idol?"

"Very gracefully asked, indeed!" said Lady Vavasour, with a sign of her fan, made eloquent in her hand, as in the hand of a Gaditana of Cadiz. "But, first of all, you never pursued the phantom at all, mon ami. You don't do those things! I wasn't a state secret, and I didn't carry despatches: sequitur, you were courteous to me while we were together because you were well bred, and I was a woman; but you never thought twice about me after we parted, except just that night, when I left you behind to smoke and sleep under the pines, when, perhaps, you said to yourself, 'Blonde with dark eyes—unusual! Travelling alone, too—very odd!' and then dismissed me to think of Prince Michel! Secondly, I refused you my name, because it was my whim to travel incognita; and down the river I dispensed with even my courier. I am as capricious as the winds, you know, and, like the winds, never change my caprices for any one's will!"

Before he could answer her the door of the salon was thrown open, and several people entered—his hostess among others, with that courtly, velvet-shod churchman, Monsignore Villaflôr. Strathmore had to rise, and his place was taken by the priest, who was a courtier, a connoisseur, and a *coureur des ruelles*. The rooms filled; dinner was announced and served as the little chimes of the clock rang nine, and to Strathmore's lot fell Lady George Dashwood, whose soft platitudes had never seemed more wearisome to him than to-night, when they discoursed of chamber-music, old china, Maltese dogs, new fashions, Elzevir editions, and altar-screens, in the same unvarying and perfectly-bred monotone, which had much the same effect as if a humble-bee had been perpetually humming in the flowers of the épergne before him. At some distance from him—too great for any conversation

with her—sat Lady Vavasour; and while keeping up his recitative with Lady George, Strathmore could not choose but look at her, could not choose but think of her—this woman who had been first so strangely thrown in his way, against whom he still felt an unconquerably stubborn prejudice, yet who exercised over him, when he was with her, a necromancy of air, of glance, of tone, that surprised him, incensed him, and yet beguiled him. Had he foreseen his future, he would have flung aside every thought of this bright, brilliant beauty, as he had flung aside her broidered handkerchief into the bosom of the Czechen peasant girl in Prague; but—could we foresee one step before another, would the lives of any one of us be blasted, blundered, full of bitterness, and of evil, as they are? Is not the misery of every life due to the band that is bound fast on our eyes, which the wisest can do little to lift, which makes us feel our way blindly, uncertainly, erringly, stumbling at every step; which is never lifted, save when our faces are turned backwards, and we are bidden to look behind us at the land that we have quitted, which is sown thick with graves; and at the gates that are closed upon us, on which is written "Too Late"?

Amidst the hum of conversation, the bouquet of the wines, the fragrance of the exotics, the numberless murmurs of "Sauterne, monsieur?"—"Château Yquem?"—"Suprême de Volaille?"—"Macedoine d'Abricots?"—"Beignets d'Annanas?" Strathmore throughout dinner let his thoughts be usurped by the dazzling face, with its amber hair drawn slightly back from the delicate temples, in masses and ripples of yellow gold, which was but tantalisingly visible to him through the clusters of gorgeous flowers, and behind the form of an alabaster Ariadne that intervened between her and himself. Is there any separation more exasperating than the length of a dinner-table? I don't believe the Hellespont was half so provoking! Leander could cross *that* if Hero didn't mind receiving him au naturel; but what man, pray, can move from his place at a dinner-party? He must say with Claude Frollo, "*Anakthe!*" submit, and sit where he's put!

Strathmore found the dinner an interminable bore, and felt his prejudice giving way; his judgment in no way swerved from his settled conviction that Lady Vavasour was vain, spoiled, dangerous, and a consummate coquette, bent upon conquest, and not over-careful of her character—a glance told him that; but the rich, glad, luxuriant music that he had heard from her lips under the lindens by the river-side, now sweet as a bird's carol, now sad as a miserere, seemed to ring in his ear again, and he caught himself thinking a poetic sentimentalism worthy of the Sabreur—that she must have some of that music in her soul! Against the White Domino, the malicious Mask, he would have been prepared and steeled; the bright Odalisque of the Moldau, the songstress of the Spring night, took him unawares, and disarmed him.

As the women rose at length and swept out of the great banqueting-hall, where Guises had feasted Valois, she had to pass his chair, the lace of her dress brushing his shoulder, the subtle fragrance of her hair wafted to him like the odour of some hot-house flower. As she did so, a bracelet of cameo dropped from her arm (*really* dropped, she was too highly finished a coquette to need any such vulgar and commonplace ruses); and as Strathmore bent for it and fastened it again on her arm, he noticed how snow-white and polished the skin was, like the skin of the unguent-loving and delicate Greeks, and confessed to himself that the smile on those sweet, laughing lips was the loveliest a woman ever had at command.

"Merci! We leave you, *à l'Anglais*, to olives and repose, politics and cigarettes, solitude and slander. How you will pick our beauty to pieces and legislate for the nations! Adieu!" she whispered, as she passed onward.

"By George! they did not overrate her; and that fool is her husband! Faugh! it is Caliban wedded to Miranda!" thought Strathmore, as he poured some Johannisberg into his glass, looking across at the Marquis of Vavasour. The epithet and the comparison were both somewhat overstrained, it must be admitted; but there are very few men, I think, who, ad-

miring a beautiful woman, are not disposed to think her lord and master a contemptible fellow, and feel very much towards him as you may have felt on a still grey day in September, lounging along by the sunken fence of some splendid preserves of which you have not the *entrée*, looking at the cover and hearing the whirr of the birds, towards the owner, whoever he be, for whom the game's set apart. And when M. le Mari is a muff, or the owner no shot, your sense of injury is very naturally redoubled in both cases, and your animus increased. Envy is a quick match, easily lighted, and needs no spirit added to the wick to make it strike fire and flare into flame.

The Marquis was not a Caliban, and not a fool, though Strathmore, from the eminence of an acute, subtle, and brilliant intellect, chose to call him so. He was a short, plain, grey-haired little man, with small dark eyes, that leered and twinkled viciously; a very sensual mouth, a good deal of wickedness in the upper part of his face, and a good deal of weakness in the lower; a man specially to enjoy taking the world in neatly and slyly, yet a man not difficult to govern by any one who knew his weak points. He had not very many brains, and those he had had been spent chiefly in the study of Brillat-Savarin, and the elucidation in theory of new *plats* and sauces. He had taken no share whatever in public life, had lived chiefly abroad, was principally noted for his dinners, was considered rather an insignificant person by those who stripped him of his strawberry-leaves; but being a very great Personage to the world in general, had the kow-tow performed to him to any amount, threw his ermine over his emptiness, covered all cancans with his coronet, and hushed all whispers with his wealth. He was the Marquis of Vavasour—had livings for which the ecclesiastical saints scrambled and truckled, granting him easy absolution for such superior adowsons, and presenting him with a brevet to heaven, as only a decent return for his rich presentations; he had a considerable amount of family patronage, the eighth cardinal virtue, for which a man will get loved more than for

all the other seven put together; he had a title of the highest rank and longest date; therefore, though chiefly remarkable for gourmandise and a certain monkeyish malice, this inert, obstinate, sly, and rather demoralised gourmet gave the law, had the *pas*, and was held in high honour and distinction by all, save, indeed, by Strathmore, who thought again, as he looked at his lordship, "Faugh! it is Caliban wedded to Miranda!" It was the first time that Strathmore had ever thought a woman thrown away upon a man in marriage—ordinarily his opinion was precisely the reverse! But the Marquis *was* a provocative owner of anything half so lovely as Marion Lady Vavasour, though it must be confessed he was an easy one; the liberty he took he gave, he never crossed her caprices, and there were invariably between them that polite *bon accord*, that cool don't-carish, very-happy-to-see-you never-interfere-with-you sort of friendship which is the popular hue of "marriage in high life," and is decidedly the best and least troublesome it can wear. If you have to look long on *one* colour, let it be a well-wearing, never-dazzling *nuance;* if you have to run in leash, don't pull at the collar, it won't keep your companion from going her pace, and will only gall your own throat for nothing. That discreet, tranquil "friendship" of the Vavasours is an admirable thing; it's like a well-bred monotone, or a well-bred man that smooths over all things and never makes a row. Galba, who shuts his eyes and shakes hands with Mæcenas, is the wise fellow. Menelaus, who raves, can't rouse his friends in *our* day; he'll only get a sneering chuckle from them all, from Nestor in at Boodles', to Amphimachus in at Pratt's, run the risk of a *Times* leader, which is our modern substitute for the pillory, and in lieu of Troy will only obtain—a "Decree Nisi, with *costs!*"

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## CHAPTER X.

### La Belle v. La Belle.

WHEN they entered the drawing-room, half an hour after, the first thing that met Strathmore's eyes was the woman who, more or less, had haunted his memory and excited his curiosity since the May night under the lindens, in the solitudes of Bohemia. Lady Vavasour was lying back in a dormeuse, glancing through George Sand's last novel; the full light from a chandelier above fell upon her, making the snowy camei dazzling, and the scarlet flowers glow; she looked like some rare and exquisite Sèvres figure as she sat there, with her cheek resting on her hand, and the lashes drooped over her eyes, the form perfect as a statuette of Coysvox, the colouring rich and delicate as an enamel of Fragonard. And yet—those cursed camellias! Was it the strange grouping of those scarlet flowers circling the dead gold of her hair that gave to her something startling with all her seductiveness, bizarre with all her beauty, dangerous with all her delicacy; something that made him involuntarily think of Lucretia Borgia, Catharine Medici, Clytemnestra, Frédégonde, Olympia Mancini, Gunilda, in a pêle-mêle chaos of every divine demoniac, every fatal facinatress that the world had seen since the world began; something which struck him with nothing less than aversion for the first moment that the glowing coronal on the amber hair met his eyes again; but which then forced him against himself into a dizzy, blind, breathless, admiration, such as no woman had ever wrung from him.

"That ever such beauty as this should belong to a creature good for nothing but to criticise sauces, smell the bouquets of wines, and gluttonise over green fat!" thought Strathmore, who held all gourmands in contemptuous disdain, and this one especial gourmand in particular, as he drew near her, and sank down in a low chair by her couch, regardless that Lady George looked chagrined, and that Lady

Beaudesert had signalled him with her fan. The bright beauties of his set rather resented his sudden and immediate desertion to another standard.

"Lady Vavasour, may I not trust to hear to-night the voice whose music drove the nightingales to despair under the limes?" said Strathmore, to the chagrin of Monsignore Villaflôr and a host of baser rivals.

She glanced at him under her silky lashes, and that under-glance was the most dangerous in the world.

"No! I sing to nightingales, but not to order, like a prima donna. The birds can appreciate me, the bores can't!" And her ladyship included, in a disdainful sign of her fan, the men whom Strathmore in his pride had classified as "*comme il faut*, but common-place"—a classification, by-the-by, which would fit, I fear, most of the members of "good society."

"But you sang to ME, and you will sing to me again!" said Strathmore, with the calm, appropriative, Brummellian nonchalance of tone that women always like. Women love an autocratic ruler; even your imperious coquettes, believe me, feel the charm, though they won't, I dare say, often own to it!

"Do not be so sure of that! I am not Malibran, whom you can hear any night for five guineas, and I did not sing to *you* under the limes; you are infinitely too vain! I sang *pour m'amuser*, and to scandalise those English women who grumbled at the cucumber-soup, and thought me 'evidently not a proper person!' The English are born-travellers. I wonder why they think it necessary to make one of the *spécialités du voyage*, a compound of ice and acid for every stranger they meet?"

"Because suspicion and reserve are to us what their shells are to cocoa-nuts; they make a little kernel look big, and if there's emptiness inside, conceal it," laughed Strathmore. "But you are very cruel to charge me with vanity. If I be vain, have I not food for it in knowing that I am such a subject of interest to one whose tap from her fan is one of the *cordons d'honneur* of Europe, that she honoured me with

studying my character, learning my preferences, and even making researches among my family legends? Lady Vavasour must not send me to Coventry when I remember the Domino Blanc!"

Her eyes laughed with malicious amusement.

"The Domino Blanc seems to have made a great impression on you, Lord Cecil! but only because she knew of the Voltura affair, and you are curious to know *how* she knew it. No woman ever makes you vain. What you are vain of are things like your conduct of the Murat entanglement, when your chief's *à propos* brain attack so obligingly left you alone to steer through the troubled waters. Now, confess me the truth, were you not glad when Lord Templetown had congestion just at that juncture?"

"I believe I was! If a military man's friend dies who had the step above him, his first thought is 'Promotion—deucedly lucky for me!' His next, 'Poor-fellow!—what a pity!' always comes two seconds after. I understand Voltaire. If your companion's existence at table makes you have a dish dressed as you don't like it, you are naturally relieved if an apoplectic fit empties his chair, and sets you free to say, '*Point de sauce blanche!*' All men are egotists; they only persuade themselves they are not selfish by swearing so so often, that at last they believe what they say. No motive under the sun will stand the microscope; human nature, like a faded beauty, must only have a demi-lumière; draw the blinds up, and the blotches come out, the wrinkles show, and the paint peels off. The beauty scolds the servants—men hiss the satirists—who dare to let in daylight!"

She listened, and laughed her low, silver laugh. This was not the conversation with which her courtiers usually entertained her, but, if only as a novelty, she rather liked it.

"Quite true! It is only here and there a beauty like *myself* who can brave the noontide, and a man who, like *yourself*, can stand the satire, who dare to admit it as true. *I* don't want rouge yet, and *you* don't want ruses yet; but I

dare say we shall both come to them, and then we sha'n't like the blinds up better than any one else."

"Lady Vavasour needing rouge!—it is an impossible stretch of imagination. One cannot realise the doom of mortality thoroughly enough to picture that cheek of child-like bloom ever condescending to the aid of the dressing-box!" smiled Strathmore, his eyes dwelling on the bloom in question, that was softly faint, yet warmly bright, as the flush on a sea-shell.

"But a diplomatist needing ruses is not so difficult! You must condescend to the *blanc de perle* of the bureau—White Lies—or you will forsake your *métier*, or your *métier* you. If I can defy enamel, you won't be able to defy expediency, mon ami!"

Strathmore laughed:

"Enamelling *is* as much in favour in the cabinets as in the cabinets de toilette, I admit, and is very useful in both. Nations suffer for the cost in the one, and husbands for the cost in the other! But, for myself, I don't think I shall ever use the *blanc de perle* you predict. I am of Talleyrand's way of thinking, that the able man disdains so clumsy a tool as falsehood. It is the weapon of the bungler, not of the master. Take refuge in falsehood, and you have dealt a trump into your enemy's hand that he can play against you whenever he likes. The most adroit falsehood is but thin ice that may break any day. The true art is to know how to hold truth, and—how to withhold it; but never to deal with anything else."

"Then you can never humour men, and never flatter them! How can power be obtained without?"

"By using them and ruling them. Men are the wise man's tools, to be commanded, not his mutinous crew to be bribed and pampered!"

She looked at him as he spoke, and saw on his face the look of pitiless power, of imperious passion, of merciless will, that the Gitana had seen as she studied it under the Bohemian stars—that all saw who looked at the portraits of

the Norman Strathmores, when the western sun shone on them through the stained windows at White Ladies—and, while she was fascinated by it, thought to herself how she would soften it, subdue it, break it down beneath her hands, chain it there beneath her feet. Women delight to ponder how "the dove will peck the estridge;" and the keener and fiercer the hawk which is their quarry, the more they glory in blinding him with the dazzle of their silvery wings, and in disabling him with the music of their soft wood-notes! Shakspeare knew that women justified his metaphor, though falconer's lore might not!

"You are very secure of your future," she laughed, while the brilliant light above her head shone down on the waves of her amber hair, and the scarlet coronal that wound round them, in so startling and strong a contrast of colour—a contrast that no beauty less perfect, less delicate, less exquisitely tinted, could ever have borne. "Doesn't the Bohemian's prophecy make you tremble? How horrible it was!"

Strathmore laughed too, looking into the lustrous eyes flashing on him sweetly and softly as an Oriental's:

"Yes! she gave me plenty of melodrame for my money, but I don't see very well how it can come to pass. I'm not a hero of romance, with a mysterious parentage or a hidden murder; I sha'n't make a double marriage, discover a family secret, or take anybody's life in hot or cold blood! All my actions are patent to the world; I fear I shall never do anything to merit Redempta's romantic prediction! But that reminds me, when you talked to me that night, you talked only in French, Lady Vavasour? I thought you were a Parisienne?"

"Of course you did. I would not give you a clue even to my country."

"Which was very cruel, madame! But though you gave me no clue, you gave me a promise, and I must claim its fulfilment."

"*I* gave you one? Indeed! I have forgotten it, then. A year ago is an eternity to be called on to remember. Don't

you like those Maltese dogs? I think they are such pretty snowy things."

"But *I* remember it," said Strathmore (indisposed to turn the conversation from himself to the lion-pups), with a smile that piqued his companion because she could not translate it. "It was, that when we met again you would thank me for my chivalry, as you honoured me by terming it, and would pay your debt—*comme je voudrais!* I am tempted to be an inexorable creditor!"

The lovely mouth made a *moue boudeuse*, but she gave him the look that she had given him under the lime in Bohemia—soft with all its coquetry, tender with all its dazzling brilliance.

"I dare say! Well! what would content you?" she laughed, softly stirring her fan, while its motion floated the subtle fragrance of her hair to him when he leant towards her.

It was a dangerous question for such lips to put to any man! He could scarce have but one answer rise to his tongue within sight and touch of that tempting loveliness—an answer that could not be uttered in the salons of Vernonceaux, to the wife of a Peer, to Marion Lady Vavasour! Strathmore bent down towards her till his voice could reach her ear alone, his eyes darkening with that swift, instantaneous light which showed—to any woman—that the passions he disdained did but sleep, and might yet wake, like "giants refreshed from their slumber."

"Some day, perhaps, I may dare to tell you—not here, not yet!"

The words escaped him before he knew it. As the perfume of her hair reached him, as he met the glance of her eyes, as he looked on her delicate dazzling face where the light from the chandelier shone upon it, this woman's beauty captivated him against his will, and made the blood course quicker through his veins, as though he had drunk in the rich bouquet and the subtle strength of some rare ruby wine, warm from the purple clusters of the South. The faint rose-

blush, that was the most dangerous of all Lady Vavasour's charms, since it was the one which flattered most, and most surely counterfeited nature, came on her cheek, and her eyes met his with a languid sweetness. It was the first whisper of the syren's sea-song, that was to lead by music unto wreck and death; it was the first beckoning of the white arms of Circe, that were to wreathe, and twine, and cling, till they should draw down their prey beneath the salt waves flowing over the fathomless abyss whence there is no return.

Then with one of her rapid, coquettish mutations, one of those tantalising *boutades* that were her most cruel and certain witcheries, she signed him away with a blow from her fan, and laughed lightly:

"Lord Cecil, I have talked to you alone for full ten minutes. I never give any one a longer monopoly. Surrender your place to Monsignore Villaflôr, and let the world in to our conversation."

Strathmore leant back, and nestled himself more closely in among his cushions with calm nonchalance:

"*Pardon, madame!* Monsignore can seat himself, and a signal of your pretty toy will summon the world without my moving. I am very comfortable just now!"

She glanced at him with a sparkle of malicious amusement.

"You are piqued, mon ami, *already!*" she thought, with gratified triumph, as she arched her delicate eye-brows with provoking indifference, and signed Villaflôr towards her. Dormer, Legard, and Rennecourt gathered about her dormeuse the instant the signal permitted them; and for any evidence she gave of remembering his presence, or even his existence, Strathmore might have utterly faded from her memory as she dispensed the mischievous mots, the moqueur smile, the silent dangerous glances that were the war-weapons of the arch coquette whom Lord Vavasour had taken to himself.

She knew that no possible mode of action could have better impressed her on Strathmore's thoughts, the very an-

noyance it awoke in him with himself, retained her in his mind; the momentary tenderness that had gleamed in her eyes, succeeded by the tantalising indifference of her dismissal, he knew them well enough, they were the tactics of a coquette, and he hated coquettes, "women who live on the censing of fools, and spend their time in fooling wise men!" he thought, contemptuously, while, without moving so as to give up his place to Villaflôr, or any one else, he began to play écarté with the Vicomte de Clermont, at a table that stood at his elbow. Strathmore was specially fond of that little witching French game; he was one of the best players in Europe; he liked its tranquil, subtle finesses that were to be enjoyed without stirring from his dormeuse; he liked its keen excitement bought for a few Naps a side, and he was tenacious of his reputation in it. Clermont was almost the only member of the Paris Jockey Club who claimed to equal him, and their écarté was always a sharp contest of skill. Another time he would have gone farther out of reach of the babble of conversation round Lady Vavasour's sofa; now, Strathmore did not choose to let her think she could be any disturbing element at all. It was a dangerous neighbourhood for écarté, or any game that hung on skill, thought, and finesse, where every word of the silvery mocking voice was to be heard, where every echo of the airy laughter rang on his ear, where the fluttering motion of the fan, the gleam of her amber tresses, the glitter of the camei on an arm as white as they, caught his eye every moment. But Strathmore invariably risked danger in little things as in great; he never avoided it, he always disdainfully and self-reliantly lingered in it; it was his strength or his weakness, whichever you like.

He played eight games as scientifically as though he had been in a card-room, with not another face to distract him from that of the king's he marked; and Lady Vavasour, glancing at him, began to doubt her own power. Strathmore leant back, his eyes fixed on the cards he held, his interest centred in the game he played, and she might have been fifty leagues away for any sign she could discover that she dis-

turbed him; the Voltura affair she *might* endure as a rival, states and princes were involved in that, but to be rivalled by écarté, by painted pieces of pasteboard and a few Naps a side!—never! She felt her character at stake—her vanity *was*. (There are plenty of people in this world, my good sirs, besides coquettes, who take the one thing for the other, and when they cry out their reputation's attacked, are in truth only snarling from their wounded conceit!) The eight games had been evenly won and lost, they were four all, and they began *la belle;* the Strathmores of White Ladies had never borne patiently to lose in anything, they were a race that dearly loved dominance, and took it, *coûte que coûte*, like imperious, unyielding Normans as they were; he did not choose that Clermont should beat him; this evening, in especial, defeat would have annoyed him unspeakably.

The luck of the cards had always been with the Vicomte, but Strathmore's play had more than balanced that; it was evident to all those who gathered near the écarté table that the game was in his hands. His hostess from a distance watched him over the top of her fan, while discoursing of turquoise céladon with H.S.H. of Mechlin; her name had some years before been entangled with his own in that gossip which is rife in those hotbeds of scandal, club-rooms and salons; the gossip had long given place to newer slander, yet the woman of the world could not wholly lose the tenderness that still clung about her heart for one whom she knew had never loved her—could not wholly keep down a sigh that rose to the lips, against which the gold-powdered down of her fan was pressed. The Marquis, lying half asleep, pondering on a new flavour for a salmi of woodcocks that he should have tried by his *chef* the first day of the season, looked through his shut lids at him with snarling envy. The Marquis always thought "*plus beau que moi—c'est un tort qu'il me fait!*" and the Norman physique of Strathmore specially attracted his attention. "That man's like a Velasquez picture, but he'll do something very bad some day," muttered Lord Vavasour, comforting himself with the detrimental rider with which

we always qualify an admiration extorted from our envy. Most people in the room watched him as *la belle* began, catching the contagion of a skilfully-contested game, and the excitement of a chance so evenly poised that a single card would turn the scale.

Strathmore himself was entirely absorbed in it, entirely intent on it, keenly, eagerly, resolutely bent on winning. He would have lost fifty times the amount staked on it rather than have lost that game at écarté! He played indifferent cards with such superb skill, such matchless finesse, that *la belle* was all but won, when,—from where she sat near, on her dormeuse, Lady Vavasour leant towards him to look over his hand, to watch his triumph, the fragrance of her hair crossing him like the perfume of some exotic, her lovely lips, whose charm even he had admitted, so near his own that their breath fanned his cheek. He looked up and met her eyes; the dazzling beauty of this woman ran through his veins like subtle fire, and threw him off his guard, as though the air had been suddenly filled with the dreamy intoxicating odour of narcotic fumes, that bewilder the reason and charm while they weaken the senses. He played inadvertently—the wrong card. The false step was not to be retrieved (what false step is?); it gave the game into Clermont's hands, and for the first time for years Strathmore lost at écarté.

For the instant, trifle though it was, he hated the woman who had unnerved him and fooled him, as passionately, as bitterly, as though the wrong card had been some stain on his honour, the lost game some indelible shame on his name! The bad play he had been betrayed into incensed him enough, but that she should have had this power over him incensed him far more.

"I compliment you on your skill, Clermont. You played admirably. You have beaten *me!* They won't believe it at the Jockey Club!" he said, laughing, as he leant back again among his cushions. His annoyance only showed itself in his eyes, that darkened with the swift anger of his pitiless race, though the rest of his face never changed.

"When I came to look on at your victory, it was very uncomplimentary to entertain me with a defeat. I thought you were the best écarté player in Europe," said Lady Vavasour, maliciously, with a slight shrug of her snowy shoulders, and as much tranquil unconcern as though she were innocent and ignorant of having done all the mischief.

"Lady Vavasour, from Paradise downwards feminine interference was never productive but of a losing game for man!" said Strathmore, in the tranquil *traînants* tones in which he always spoke his rudest things.

She laughed softly; it amused her; he had lost his game and she had won hers.

"*L'une belle te perdait l'autre, très cher*," said Rennecourt to Strathmore, as they went to the smoking-room that night, when the women had deserted the drawing-rooms and gone to their chambers and their novels and their charming négligées in the Galerie des Dames.

Strathmore suppressed an impatient oath to himself; the libel, like most libels, was unpalatable because it was true. He hated the woman whose mere touch had so fooled him, and whose sway and whose spells, as he had seen her that night, he had been forced to confess the wildest rumours had not overdrawn. But for all that, though he owed her his defeat at écarté, and loathed her sudden and subtle power over him, as he lay on the couch of the smoking-room that night, while Baden favourites, new caprices of reigning lionnes, the hushed-up affair of the marked cards at Flora Dohla's, in which well-known names were involved, the *dernier débauche* of a Russian Prince, who was startling even Paris, were chatted over with the freedom that's only attained when the papooshes are on and the ladies are off, and is enjoyed like the ease of the dressing-gown after the restraint of the *grande tenue*, Strathmore felt a keener detestation still for his lordship of Vavasour and Vaux, as he glanced at the Marquis (who, wrapped in his luxurious Cashmere robes, looked something like an over-fed monkey, grizzled with age and pampered with eating, as his eyes leered and twinkled at a

*grivois* tale), and thought as he glanced, "Faugh! that Caliban to——!"

It was an envy and an impatience that many before him had smarted under, looking at her lord and master, so made and termed by marital right, and thinking of Marion Lady Vavasour.

## CHAPTER XI.

### The Daughter of Eve in the Garden of Roses.

STRATHMORE very rarely got up early; usually he had his chocolate brought to him, glanced through new novels, read his letters, had his first cigar before he rose, and then lounged down among the latest to breakfast. He was accustomed to say, that your best *causeur* is dull over his coffee; with his cutlets, a man thinks of consols and coupons, and with his anchovy only finds relish for telegrams; in the oil of his sardines his satire is swamped, and as he breaks his plover's eggs he's only good for reading and speaking political platitudes; his head's admirably clear, but his wit isn't ripe. Therefore Strathmore's rule always was, "Do your own business before noon; but don't be bored by your friends till after. In the morning we're all cautious, not convivial: so breakfast and write to your lawyer in solitude; congregate at luncheon, and take *croustades* and conversation together!" It was a very good rule, I think; letters written in the morning never compromise you; mots made in the morning never amuse you; and it was one he seldom broke.

But the morning after his arrival at Vernonceaux, when Diaz entered his chamber to fill his bath, the breeze as it blew in from the windows, which had been partially left open through the hot night, came so pleasantly laden with the fragrance of the rose-gardens, the pine-woods, and the vine-covered hills, that it seemed for once more tempting than his yellow-papered *roman* and his chocolat à la Vanille, which had both a strong flavour of Paris; a flavour than which or-

dinarily *on ne peut mieux;* but Paris, like partridges, may want change sometimes, and pall—as what doesn't, from women to wine?—under the ruinous test of "*Toujours!*" For once Strathmore felt tempted to get up early; and he rose, dressed, and sauntered out by an *escalier* that led, without passing through any part of the building, from his wing of the château down into the gardens below.

"A device of some dainty châtelaine, some *dame des beaux cousins*, for her lover to pass up to her chamber without waking the seneschal, or risking his limbs by climbing," thought Strathmore, as he stood on the grey stone steps looking over at the gardens that lay before him. "Well! we have *escaliers dérobés* still! Licence may have gone out of the language, but it hasn't gone out of the manners; we've learnt to be hypocrites, but we haven't altered our tastes. To advance in Civilisation is, after all, only to perfect Cant. The nude figure remains the same delight to the precisian as the profligate; but he drapes her discreetly in public, while he gloats over her *un*draped *in petto*. Men don't change their natures, only their faces!"

With which, Strathmore sauntered down the steps, and took any way that hazard led him, which was through the bronze trellis-work gates that opened into his hostess's rose-gardens, mazes of blossom, where the birds sang under the roses, and the air was full of the rich fragrance of clusters of crimson bloom, as he strolled slowly along, profaning these sacred precincts, that were as consecrated to ladies as the gardens of Odalisques, with the scent and the smoke of his Manilla. There is something in the freshness, the stillness, the sunny calm of early morning, that has its charm, even when we are least inclined to give way to these things, and most inclined to sneer at them. Strathmore—essentially a man "of the world, worldly"—who lived in courts, clubs, and salons, who had never got up and come on deck to see the sun rise any day that his yacht was at anchor in the Bosphorus; whose manual was Rochefoucauld, and breviary Bruyère; whose life had been spent in an atmosphere scented

with perfumes and pastilles, where daylight was never needed and never remembered, and a purer air would have lacked in excitement; even Strathmore, though nature was not much more to him than to Talleyrand or Grammont, felt the freshness, the tranquillity, the peacefulness of the hour. It was perfectly still and solitary round him, there was not a sound but of the wood-pigeons cooing from afar off, and the wind gently stealing through the fragrant aisles of the rose arcades, while the sun fell on the eastern side of the silent château, and on the terrace, with its grey balustrade covered by gorgeous creepers, that looked like the background of some Louis Quinze picture. He knew no one would have risen except the household at that early hour, and as he walked on, just under the terrace, that was at some considerable elevation above him, a voice startled him as it fell on the air:

"Since when have you become pastoral? I should not have fancied you had had sylvan tastes, mon ami!"

She stood immediately above him, leaning over the stone balustrade; behind her was the ivy-hung façade of the château, with its peaked *tourelles* and its long range of Gothic windows; beneath her sloped the ivy wall of the terrace, covered with the broad leaves of creepers and the profuse blossoms of the twining roses; the whole scene was like a landscape of Greuze or Lancret, and she who completed it added to its colouring of the Beau Siècle where she leaned on the parapet, looking down with a smile on lips that rivalled the half-opened roses. As he glanced upward, her loveliness swept over him like the intoxication of some dreamy perfume, now in the cooler judgment of morning, as at midnight, a few hours before, when the light of the chandeliers glanced on the scarlet camellias. Away from her he could criticise, condemn, displace, defy her; in her presence, with her eyes smiling down into his, with her voice vibrating on the air, he might resent, but he could not resist her. She enthralled him by the senses, so subtilely, so seductively, that she drew him within the charmed circle of her power, even while he hated her for her dominance over him.

"Sylvan tastes or not, would not any one, from an idler to an anchorite, be irresistibly drawn where the early morning proffers such a reward to all those who rise early?" said Strathmore, as he ascended the terrace steps to her side.

He had not seen her, until her greeting made him look upwards. But what man can tell the precise truth to a beautiful woman? She smiled as she gave him her hand, white, small, soft, with the jewels of an Empress upon it; a hand to close gently but surely on the life of a man, and make it its own; a hand to be raved of by poets, and hold sages in thraldom; to be modelled by sculptors, and coveted by courtiers.

"Last night you were quoting from Genesis to show the mischief done by a woman! How can you be so inconsistent as to seek one in Eve's special province of mischief—a garden? A diplomatist tasting the dew of the dawn, and sunning himself among roses!—you *are* an anomaly, mon ami. Is it your lost écarté which has dwelt on your mind, that you are wandering at such an unearthly hour?"

"It is more likely to be remembrance of the one who lost me the écarté!" said Strathmore, bending towards her.

His voice had an unusual softness, his eyes darkened and dwelt on her, fascinated by the voluptuous charm of her beauty, and the confession broke from him unawares. She arched her delicate eyebrows, and looked at him with mischievous amusement, where she leaned against the rose-wreathed parapet.

"Of M. de Clermont! You must be very deep in his debt for him to haunt you!—or perhaps you were meditating some sure, silent revenge on him?—that would be more à la Strathmore?"

"I thank you for the hint and the reminder, belle amie; I *will* revenge myself for the game that I lost on the tactician who threw me off my guard! But the revenge, like the payment I spoke of last night, must wait; it would be too great rashness to risk taking either as yet——"

He spoke softly, and with meaning; her power was winding itself about him, his senses were yielding themselves to

the languid charm, the subtle spell of her beauty; Strathmore, who denied that any woman could be dangerous to him, might have known, then, how dangerous *one* might be! She blushed slightly, softly, and played with one of the rings of her left hand—the diamond-studded circlet that was the badge of her marriage—was it by hazard, or as a warning? Be it which it might, it served to recall to him that the woman he looked on was Marion Lady Vavasour, the arch coquette of Europe.

"I was unaware your tastes were à la Phyllis, Lady Vavasour," he went on, with the smile, slight, cold, half a sneer, which piqued her more than anything, since it perplexed her as to its meaning, and only gave her a vague idea that her game was foreseen, and—defied. "What charm can the early morning have for you? Your preferences, surely, are no more sylvan than mine, and there is nothing to be captivated but the bees and the birds! I have read in some old Trouvère song of a *breuvage* for perpetual youth and beauty, to be gathered from the first dew of roses—can *that* be your mission? If so, we must pity, as under De l'Enclos, generations unborn, who will suffer like us!"

"Don't use the first person!—*you* never suffer," she answered him, toying with the hanging sprays of the roses. "The charm that guided me was what rules me always—the caprice of the hour: I admit no other law! In Paris one never thinks the day is aired till two; but in the country—*c'est toute autre chose*—I heard the birds singing, the scent of the roses came through my windows, and——Ah, Lord Cecil, though we live in the world till we forget it, there are things better than pleasure, there is an air purer than the air of the salons! I am young, I am flattered, I reign, I love my sovereignty—who does not that has a sceptre to grasp?—and still, sometimes I wish that I were a peasant-child, playing with the brown chesnuts under the trees, and catching the butterflies in the sunshine!"

I have said that she had now and then a *tendresse*, a mournfulness, real or assumed; and at such moments, while the lids drooped softly over the black gazelle eyes, and a shadow of

sadness stole the brilliance from her face, she was yet more resistless than in her most dazzling coquetry. Even Strathmore felt its charm, though, now, with the gesture that had recalled to him her title and her ownership, he had steeled himself afresh against her.

"Indeed!" he answered her, with the smile she mistrusted. "The world would scarcely credit you, Lady Vavasour; to play with men's lives must be more amusing than with fallen chesnuts, and to catch Princes and Peers in your net must be more exciting than the child's yellow butterflies! Who shall hope to be content if the envied of all wishes to alter her lot!"

"Ah! mon ami, those who envy us do not always know us. Among all rose-leaves there is one crumpled!" Her voice was saddened, the lustre of her eyes grew languid and softened, and her fingers unconsciously played with the diamond wedding-ring upon her finger, as it sparkled among the roses. Again the action spoke more eloquently than words. Besides her fascination, she tried now a charm more dangerous for him—she claimed his pity! "Look!" she went on, as she took one of the flowers and opened its fresh crimson leaves. "Look! as the rose swings in the sunlight, how lovely it is—the Queen of flowers! And yet, at its core lies a canker!"

"Is it so with *our* Queen of Flowers?"

He asked it involuntarily, bending lower towards her, till he saw the faint sigh with which her bosom heaved, under the gossamer lace that shrouded it.

"Hush!" she said softly, with a light blow of the rose spray on his arm. "You must not ask. I wear the badge of servitude and—silence!"

And silence fell between them; such silence as fell between Launcelot and Guenevere, when the first subtle poison ran through the veins of the man whom Arthur loved.

With a light laugh the silence was broken, as she flung the gathered spray off on the sunny air, and let her white hands wander afresh among the twining blossoms:

"I like roses, don't you? They are the flowers of poetry.

I don't wonder Cleopatra had her couch of them, and the Epicureans loved them showered down as they sat at banquet, and strewn upon the floors ankle-deep! They are the flowers of silence, of revel, of love; the flowers of the Greek poets and the Provence Trouvères; of the chaplets of Catullus and the lays of Chastelâr. Roses are for all time—while they bloom afresh with every summer, how can the earth fail to guard its eternal youth?"

While she spoke, she drew out one of the roses from the rest, crimson, and fresh, and fragrant, with the dew glittering still in its odorous core; and broke it off with its unopened buds and dark shining leaves.

"Is it not worthy Cleopatra?" she laughed, holding it up in the light before her eyes and his—his that followed her as she fastened the rose in her bosom with negligent grace, where it nestled half hidden, half seen, lying against the white skin that the tracery of the lace covered without wholly concealing, and contrasting its snowy beauty with its deep crimson petals. "Come! we have been talking mournfully, and I meant to teach you epicureanism—you who trample aside the roses of life, and covet only the withered yellow laurels of Age and Power. Adieu! I must leave you to finish your solitary promenades; I am going in to my chocolate!"

His eyes dwelt on her, on the rose, where it lay half hidden on her heart, on the hair lit to gold by the sunshine, on the antelope eyes that glanced at him through their black lashes, on the exquisite and voluptuous grace of her form. Though it had fastened fetters on him which had made him this woman's slave for life, he could not have resisted his impulse to follow her then; she fascinated him by the senses, and it was a fascination to which he chose to yield. What evil could lie in it for him? He was strong in his own strength, secure in his own coldness; he believed he could handle fire without feeling its flame; he believed he could let the whirlwind sweep over him, without being stirred by its breath; he believed he could meet the sirocco, and not be blinded, nor staggered, nor scorched by it. Actually, he would have called

the man a lunatic who did these things: metaphorically, and quite as dangerously, he did them all. A scornful self-confidence made at once the grandeur and the weakness of Strathmore's nature.

As Lady Vavasour turned from the parapet and swept over the grey pavement of the rose-terrace to re-enter the château, the snowy folds of her dress gathering up the fallen crimson leaves, and her head slightly turned over her shoulder in adieu to him, he followed her, bending to her with a few low words:

"Who would not learn epicureanism or any other creed from such a teacher? You have given that senseless rose so fair a lodging; do not banish *me* utterly! I am going to my chocolate, too; must I take it in solitude? For the remembrance of our tête-à-tête meal under the limes, let us breakfast tête-à-tête this morning!"

The daughter of Eve had tempted him in the garden of roses, and while yet he might have turned away, he chose to follow and to linger with his temptress.

## CHAPTER XII.

### In Royal Broceliande.

In the breakfast-room every déjeûner delicacy was waiting, ready for such of the English guests at Vernonceaux as it might pleasure to come down stairs early. None had so pleased that morning save themselves, and this breakfast *was* tête-à-tête. He was alone with her, and in that solitude she ceased to be Lady Vavasour, whom he prejudged and mistrusted; she was the songstress, the incognita, the witching waif and stray of the Bohemian lindens. Almost *too* dazzling at night, with its exquisite tint, and its singular contrast of eyes and of hair, her loveliness, losing none of its brilliance, gained much in softness with the morning light. Moreover, you saw then how real was this youth, how wholly from nature this marvellous colouring; for, stream down on her as the

sun would, its strongest rays could never show a flaw or a blemish.

Used to the women of Courts, no woman would have had charm for Strathmore who had not had wit on her lips and a finished grace in her coquetteries, and that nameless air which the world alone gives; the fairest *bourgeoise* beauty he would have passed unnoticed, and rustic loveliness was no loveliness in his sight.

Condemned to love, he would have made his condition like Louis Quatorze, "*qu'on m'aime mais avec de l'esprit!*" Therefore, Marion Vavasour had her subtlest charm for him, in that exquisite grace which empresses had envied her; in that sparkling play which, if it were not wit, sufficed for it from such lips; in that very worldliness which might have chilled as heartlessness men less *petri* with the world themselves than Strathmore was. What had struck him the night before as startling and bizarre, what even in his momentary breathless admiration of her had repelled him, and made him think of Clytemnestra and La Borgia, had gone,—perhaps, with the scarlet camellias!

She was dressed simply, in snowy gossamer folds of muslin, with floating azure ribbons here and there, and the richness of her yellow hair, gathered back in its natural waves and ripples, looked but one soft mass of dead gold now it was unmixed with any colour. There was nothing to mar the spells of her beauty, and those spells she wove to her uttermost witchery as she sat daintily brushing the bloom off a grape, or toying with her strawberries, adding the cream to her chocolate, or touching the tiny wing of some delicate bird.

With all her caprices, her coquetteries, her rapid wayward mutations, she was ever essentially feminine; too skilful not to know that the surest charm which a woman wields over men is the charm of difference—the charm of sex; and that half this charm is flown when Christina of Sweden wears her hessians and cracks her whip; when her imitators of today chatter slang with weeds in their mouths, and swing

through the stable-yards, talking in loud *rauque* voices of dogs with a "good strain!"

They were full an hour alone, and in that hour she led him far on a dangerous road; none the less dangerous because he knew her tactics and deemed himself secure to defy them. She was a coquette, therefore he was armed against her; she was a woman of the world, therefore he could trifle with her with impunity; she was Lady Vavasour, therefore he knew the worth of every smile, the value of every glance, which were but golden hooks flung out by skill to catch and fasten the unwary: so Strathmore reasoned—he who was a man of the world, and would lose his head for no woman!—and in his security lay his risk. For he felt that she had already a certain power over him—the power for which he hated her when he threw down his losing cards at écarté—the power with which her beauty had swept over him as he had come suddenly upon her in the sunlight of the rose-garden; but to have feared it would have been to confess that he might yield to it, and Strathmore held that he could evoke a storm and then arrest it with "Thus far shalt thou go and no farther;" he held that he could let poison flow into his veins and then eject it with "I do not choose to receive thee!"

The disdainful strength of the Strathmores had ever, I say, been their weakness; and the ruin that had come to them had ever been wrought by their own hand; the graven steel of their unyielding race ever the reed that bent beneath them.

The tête-à-tête breakfast was as seductive as any meal ever has been since She of the Golden Shuttle entertained the wanderer at Ogygia. Through the shaded windows the rose-scented air stole fragrantly in, while stray rays of sunlight streamed upon the amber grapes touched by her delicate fingers, and on the crimson rose lying hid in its snowy nest. Her moods were as variable as summer clouds, and her mood that morning was soft, subdued, gentle with all its

gaiety, triste with all its coquettishness, and—it was the most bewitching of all.

"What is your White Ladies like—they say it is such a superb old place?" she said, when her mischievous witticisms ceased, as though tired with their own play and sparkle. "Charlie St. Albans—who told me your family legend, by the way, one day at Biarritz—raves about its beauty. It was an abbey, wasn't it?"

"An old Dominican monastery—yes. It has a beauty of its own, the beauty of that past when men sought rest as we now seek reputation, and found in solitude what *we* find in strife. May I not hope you will some day honour it with a visit, Lady Vavasour, and judge of it yourself?" he answered her, stroking her greyhound; his prejudice against her was quickly fading since he invited her to White Ladies—the daughter of Eve to the ancient Monastery!

She smiled the dazzling smile that had intoxicated wise men to worse than the madness of the opium-eater.

"Perhaps. Some day—some day. Ah, what may we all do 'some day!' You and I may be foes *à outrance* some day —who knows?"

"Foes? Nay, surely not. Did you not tell me 'destiny threw us together, that we must be friends?' *Dieu le veut!*"

"*Dieu veut ce que femme veut, mon ami!*" said the Marchioness, arching her eyebrows. "You know that; and on a man who disdains the love of all my sex I am not at all inclined to waste my own friendship!"

"Why, you had better rather cure me of my heresy in both. What teacher could convert me to her soft doctrines with such success? what rebuke could be at once more merciful and more convincing to me?"

A sadness, almost tenderness, shaded the dark gazelle eyes for a moment as they met his, and she was silent. Lady Vavasour knew the charm of silence when the eyes may be trusted to speak. A moment after she laughed coquettishly:

"Merciful? Perhaps not, monsieur, if I *did* take your conversion in hand."

"True. Perhaps the denial of your friendship is more merciful than its donation would be. Nevertheless, at all risks, I will seek it."

"You love risks?" she said, looking at him with a dash of tantalising malice. Strathmore laughed slightly—a laugh that sounded to her like contempt of her power.

"Well, I confess I do not fear many."

"Nor did Ragnar Ladbrog, mon ami, the northern Scalds tell us; sheathed in his armour of ice, what could attack him? How scathless he went for so long! And yet he came at last to his Hella, and he languished to death in the cave of the serpents. Take warning!"

Strathmore smiled.

"I am not quite so quixotic as the Bersaker, and before I handle serpents I take out their stings! Grasped rightly, no serpent can bite. But surely, belle amie, you do not pay yourself so ill a compliment as to compare the gift of your friendship with the fang of an asp? Though perhaps you are right—it may be as dangerous!"

"But a danger you smile at! Well, take it if you will. Shall we be friends, then, Lord Cecil?"

Her eyes were resistless in their witching softness, and a certain tremulous smile that seemed half born of a sigh was on her lip, as she held out in playfulness, yet in earnest, her white jewelled hand, as she leant slightly towards him. What man could have rejected the hand or the friendship?

Strathmore bent forward and accepted both: as he took the warm fingers within his own and met the glance that dwelt on him as they sat there alone in the shaded light, his pulses quickened, and his own eyes gleamed with something of the swift dark brilliance that she had sworn to lighten there—the dawn of the passion she had vowed to awaken in the nature that, by character imperious and unyielding, deemed itself by a fatal error to be also cold and calm. He released her hand suddenly, and threw himself back in his chair; the doors opened, and with Beaudesert and Clermont there entered Lord Vavasour and Vaux.

"Bon jour, messieurs," said the Marchioness, including her lord in her negligent, graceful salutation. "I suppose you have all been wasting the hours over cheroots and novelettes that I have been giving to the roses. Ah, if you were all to see the sun rise once in a way, what a deal of good it would do you! I will have a Trianon, and then, perhaps, you *will* learn to be pastoral. M. de Clermont, will you milk the cow like the Comte d'Artois? Vavasour, did I ever tell you that it was to Lord Cecil Strathmore I owed my escape that dreadful night at Prague? No? I ought to have done; then you have never thanked him?"

Her husband, thus apostrophised, turned to Strathmore, and addressed his thanks to him, complimenting him with as gracious a courtesy as that pampered, gouty gourmet, whose general manner was guilty of Valdor's impeachment, a "*ton de garnison*," could assume for any mortal. "Singularly striking-looking man—quite Vandyke!" thought the Marquis, while he uttered his gratitude for his wife's rescue; "but I am sure he will do something bad some day—come to a violent death, perhaps. That *physique*—very much so!" Which possibly was a complacent source of gratification to his lordship, as he had just come in on a tête-à-tête.

Strathmore received his thanks with that cold negligence which had the effect of making him cordially disliked out of his own immediate set, and lay back in his chair, playing with the greyhound, and joining now and then in the conversation. He knew that this woman's beauty stole on him despite himself; when her magic was off him he hated her for the food that she had made him give her vanity; but a seductive sensuousness allured him in her glorious loveliness, which, though he rated it lightly, should have made him place distance betwixt him and its subtle temptation—betwixt him and the wife of Lord Vavasour.

A weak man might have done this, and been strong; Strathmore, a strong man, stayed, contemptuous and defiant of the weakness. A man less cool, less keen, less nonchalant of all danger, might have taken warning; he saw no danger

possible in it. One careless, over-confident turn of the hand may mar the whole of the statue which the sculptor deems plastic as clay to his will, obedient to every stroke of his chisel!

The statue that Strathmore at once moulded and marred was his Life: the statue which we all, as we sketch it, endow with the strength of the Milo, the glory of the Belvedere, the winged brilliance of the Perseus!—which ever lies at its best, when the chisel has dropped from our hands, as they grow powerless and paralysed with death, like the mutilated Torso, a fragment unfinished and broken, food for the ants and worms, buried in sands that will quickly suck it down from sight or memory, with but touches of glory and of value left here and there, only faintly serving to show what *might have been*, had we had time, had we had wisdom!

"Well, wasn't I right; isn't she divine, eh?" said Valdor to him that day, as they were playing billiards.

"She—who? My dear fellow, there are half a dozen divinities here who wear the cestus of Venus, or claim it at the least! Be a little more definite!"

"The deuce! Who should I mean? Nobody can hold a candle to her. Vavasour's in luck to have a wife that everybody envies him."

"Dubious luck!" said Strathmore, sticking his penknife through his cabana. "A wife of the first water, like a diamond of the first water, is rather a perilous possession. It's apt to be disputed by too many owners! You can't ever be sure the wards haven't been picked and the casket been rifled!"

"Exactly," said Legard. "Marriage is a disagreeable legal necessity for men with titles and entails, and the best colour for a wife's discreet plainness. No Bramah can protect you so effectually as an ugly choice; besides, I shouldn't think it's bad for yourself upon principle; if Lucretia's unlovely you must relish Lais and her graces all the more. One never enjoys a good omelette at Véfour's so much as after an ill-done one in the Grisons."

"There's something in that," said Valdor, reflectively. "But then—twelve hours with an ugly woman would kill one! Why *are* any of them ugly, I wonder? They were created on purpose for us. What's the good of giving us five out of six, as we don't like them? If they were all such as the Vavasour, now——" And Valdor paused, in mute contemplation of the delicious universal seraglio that might then be commanded.

"The Vavasour's something that comes once in a century. The deuce! how that woman does flirt!" interrupted Dormer, in the tone, half disgusted, half admiring, with which a man might say of some magnificent drunkard, like Piron, "How that fellow does drink!"

Strathmore sent his ball to make a *ricochet* with a certain impetus, as if the conversation annoyed him, and did not join in it.

"If fifty naughty stories ain't rife about her before next season, I'll bet you a thousand to one," went on Dormer, offering his wager generally, but nobody, it seemed, having sufficient confidence in her ladyship to be chivalrous enough to take it up! "They *do* say it's only flirtation—as yet; and I believe she's as heartless as ice; but she does horrible mischief, if she's never absolutely 'compromised,' and I think *that's* open to doubt! At Biarritz, last year, she played the very deuce with Marc Lennartson; you remember him, don't you, Strathmore—Austrian Cuirassiers, you know? She drew him on and on, made him follow her about like a greyhound, fooled him before everybody, and then turned him off coolly for the Prince de Vorhn, and laughed at him with a blow of her fan. Lennartson had lost his head about her, and he shot himself through the brain! I know that for a fact; nothing but that woman at the bottom of it; and the very night she heard of his death she went to a fancy ball, fluttering about in her diamonds. By Jove! it was too bad, wasn't it?"

Strathmore made a hap-hazard cannon, with his coldest sneer upon his face: the story angered him.

"My dear Dormer! if a man's such a fool as to 'follow a woman about like a lapdog,' whether he goes out of the world or stays in it doesn't matter very much, I think. Yours is a romantic story; it would charm the women, but, *pour moi!* I must fancy there were some heavy debts hanging over Lennartson's head, or some more rational reason for your sentimental finale. I don't credit those things quite so easily."

"It *was* true, whether you like to believe it or not."

Strathmore lifted his eyebrows and dropped the subject; he would have said it did not interest him!

"What a voice of lamentation there was in Rama when Vavasour married her," said Beaudesert, who was betting on the game. "The women had made such hard running on him all over Europe; when the regular troops had always missed fire, it was a horrid blow to have an outside skirmisher knock him over!"

"Of course! Virtuous women love to take in hand the conversion of a sinner when the penitent can give them a coronet; they are very happy to be taken, like soda-water after a debauch, if the debauchee excuses his past orgies with a page in Burke. There wasn't a *précieuse* in England that wouldn't have sold her pure soul to the devil and the Marquis, for his settlements. The morals of monde, and demi-monde, don't differ very much, after all, only the inferior goods are content with Rue de la Paix jewellery, and Lady Vavasour et Cie don't let themselves go under anything less than the family diamonds!" said Strathmore, with his coldest sneer. It gratified him to fling the sarcasm at that marriage of convenience where Helen of the antelope eyes had bartered herself for the gold and the titles of gourmand Menelaus; the flash and sparkle of the diamond circlet he had seen among the roses, added, by its memory, point to his irony.

"Quite right!" laughed Beaudesert. "And when we have to pay such a much heavier price to monde, and get so much better amused by demi-monde, how the deuce can

they wonder we prefer ease to imprisonment, and *laissez-faire* to *il faut faire?*"

"Perhaps they *don't* wonder, my good fellow, and in that lies the essence of their pique and the root of their philippics. If the debatable land's so agreeable, they know very well the time may come when the legitimate kingdoms will be left altogether," laughed Strathmore, as he went back to his game, and, Lady Vavasour not being there to spoil it, won it, as he piqued himself on winning most things that he tried for in life, from billiards upwards.

As he finished it, a servant entered to tell him that the horses were coming round; he had promised to make one of a riding-party at four o'clock, and left the billiard-room with Dormer to obey the summons.

"The pretty panther, how handsome she looks! She has merciless *griffes*, though, and her graceful play's death to those who play with her," said Dormer, under his moustaches, memories of Biarritz rising savagely within him as they passed out of the long gallery leading from the billiard-room into the great hall.

The "pretty panther," as he called her, was just at that moment standing on the grand staircase with some men about her, holding her jewelled whip in one hand, and the violet folds of her habit in the other, the light from the long range of stained windows falling on her, and on the tapestried arras, the damascened armour, and the dark oak carvings of the wall behind her. Strathmore glanced at her, and gave Dormer his coldest laugh.

"Fearfully poetic you are to-day, Will! Have you been scratched yourself?"

"No; but you're about to be."

"*I?* You don't know me much, my good fellow."

"But I know HER, and I bet you five to one that she is trying to play the deuce with you, Strathmore."

"Let her try! I have one bet pending already on that event, but I'm quite willing to take yours too."

"Glad to hear it; but forewarned's forearmed, you know."

"Thank you," said Strathmore, with that negligent coldness which was as chilly as ice, "but when I need counsel I ask for it, my dear Dormer. It is a dish I am not very fond of having offered me."

His eyes had lightened to the swift dark anger of his race; and Dormer, a good-natured, easy, indolent fellow, accustomed to be put down by him, and to be silenced by his sneer, held his peace with an obedience, the relic of their old Eton days; while Strathmore joined the group on the staircase, and, by a nonchalant finesse, displaced the others, who had a prior claim as before him in the field, and leading her out into the court, assisted Lady Vavasour to mount the spirited Spanish mare that he had admired as it had reared with her, when he had seen the riding-party from the distance the previous day. Assistance, indeed, she needed little; an inimitable rider, she sprang, lightly as a bird to a bough, to her saddle; but to have the foot beautiful as Pompadour's placed on his hand, the light weight leant upon him for an instant, the perfumed hair brush near him, the hand touch his as he put the reins within it, the lips softly thank him,—these made a service bitterly envied to Strathmore. As she dashed out of the great gates of the court, the mare rearing and plunging with the fire of its Spanish blood, Lady Vavasour had never looked, perhaps, lovelier, with her delicate cheeks flushed from the exertion of her strength, her light, defiant laugh ringing out, her eyes flashing with impatient *will*. Yet for one moment as he saw her teeth clench tightly, her eyes gather a sinister light, her whip cut the mare with sharp, stinging strokes, it crossed Strathmore's mind that the real instinct, the true pleasure of this soft, dazzling woman might be, after all, Cruelty—the cruelty of the young cat that loves to see the wounded bird flutter and shriek and struggle for its liberty with the blood dabbling the broken wing, and to let it go for one fleet mocking moment, and then to seize on it afresh, till the death-cry rings

sharp and clear upon the air, and its own white teeth tear asunder the quivering flesh.

The fancy crossed him, and the aversion, amounting to almost the strength of hatred, which, mingled with the fascination that Marion Vavasour had for him, flamed up in all its bitterness. "She danced in her diamonds the night that poor devil shot himself!" he thought; "I dare say. What fools men are to let a woman play with them."

But twenty minutes after, Lady Vavasour turned her head towards him with her brightest smile. "Lord Cecil, you are our cicerone; which way leads to the Brèche du Gaston?" And as he spurred his horse to overtake her, and cantered on by her side, the wiser thought was forgot, the danger that was in this woman served but to give piquance to her beauty, as the thorns of the rose which pique those who admire to gather it; and as though she had divined the verdict that his reason was giving against her, she chained him to her side during the ride, and had all that softness of manner which, when she chose to assume it, would have made the testimony of men and angels weigh nothing against Marion Lady Vavasour!

"So, if I come to England this year, as Lady Beaudesert tries to persuade me, you will be prepared to do me the honours of White Ladies?" she said, laughing, to him an hour afterwards, as, having outstripped the rest of the party, they rode through a waggon-way that ran under the shelter of the hills, with the wild vine clustering in rich luxuriance from bough to bough, and the glowing lights slanting in, to turn the moss into gold, and burnish the ripening grapes into bloom.

"But too gladly! Since the Reine Blanche was received there the Abbey will never have sheltered so fair a guest. But Mary Stuart came to us as a captive; you will come as a captor omnipotent! Your sceptre rests on a sway that men cannot break, and your kingdom lies in a power more potent than mailed might——!"

"Ah!" she said, softly and mournfully, "but don't you

know the Reine Blanche had my sceptre and my kingdom too, and yet—her hair whitened and her head was bent to the block! She was a captive at White Ladies? and I dare say my lord of Strathmore was a courtly but a pitiless gaoler, had many a courtier phrase upon his tongue, but never relented to mercy! What a *triste souvenir!* I shall be afraid to come there; perhaps you will imprison me!"

Strathmore bent down in his saddle and loked into her eyes, while his own grew dark and brilliant, and the coldness of his face softened. Was it the warmth flung on it from above by the amber sunlight that was streaming through the vine-leaves and the purpling grapes?

"That I shall be tempted, I would not deny! Who could, who spoke truth?"

The reins drooped on their horses' necks, they paced slowly over the yielding mosses, their speed slackening, their voices softening, under the leafy boughs and the tangled tendrils of the drooping vines; the warm sun fell between the stems of the trees, the leaves were stirless in the sultry air, the birds sang with subdued music in the woodland shadow —and they rode onwards, as in the days of the past, Launcelot and Guenevere rode through the silent aisles and forest shades of Royal Broceliande.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### The Weaving of the Golden Shuttle.

BERTIE ERROLL sat at the head of the dinner-table at White Ladies with other spirits like himself, keeping the house open, as he had been bidden to do by his absent host in the first week of September. Dinner was just over, and the Sabreur lay back in his chair, lazily peeling a nectarine, recommending the Marcobrunn to Langley of the Twelfth, vowing it was deucedly warm, and lamenting pathetically that Strathmore would prefer the click of the roulette-ball to the glories of the open, the pleasures of pair et passe to those

of the stubble, and forsake White Ladies thus perpetually for the Continent.

Some half-dozen men were down with him for the shooting; Strathmore had always bade him look on White Ladies as though it were his own home, to open to whom he would; and they were chatting over their grapes, peaches, and comet wines this warm, mellow September evening, while the last rays of the setting sun fell across Erroll's fair frank face as they slanted through the painted windows of the dining-hall, where the scutcheon of the Strathmores was blazoned, with their merciless motto, "Slay! and spare not!" radiant in gold and gules.

"We don't want women in September," Rockingham of the Guards was observing, with more truth, perhaps, than politeness. "They're delightful in their season, but when we're shooting we're better without 'em. Paullet took Valérie Brown and that lot down to Market Harborough last season, and we were positively ruined by 'em! Champagne suppers at two in the morning, and all the rest of it, put us shockingly out of condition; we were hardly in at a death, any one of us, all thanks to those confounded women——"

"Phyrne *v.* the Pytchley! St. John's Wood morals spoiling Northamptonshire runs! You should write a 'Tract for the Times' on it; a 'Warning to the Pink not to trifle with the Rouge,'" laughed the Sabreur, pouring himself out some Rhenish. "Well, thank God, I'd suffer deterioration any day from that quarter. A bright-eyed brune is better than a brush any day, and two good things can't spoil one another. I say, Phil, did you see in the papers that Jack Temple's run away with Ferrar's wife?"

"Never read the papers, my good fellow," said Danvers. "Froth in the leaders, gall in the debates, acid in the on dits, and flummery in the court news, make an *olla podrida* that don't suit my digestion. Poor Jack! what could he be thinking of? She weighs nine stone, and is shockingly sallow in the daylight——"

Danvers stopped, the dogs gave tongue, the man handing

the coffee round paused in his duty, Waverley looked up from his olives, Rockingham dropped half a dozen almond soufflées on to a terrier's nose, Erroll sprang from his chair: "My dear fellow! By Jove! how glorious!" And, as the groom of the chambers flung the door wide open, Strathmore entered his own dining-hall, unannounced and unexpected.

"Keep your seat, old fellow! You or I, what does it matter which?" he laughed, as he shook the Sabreur's hand, and forced him back into the chair at the head of the table, looking on his old Eton chum with a warmer glance than women had ever won from him, as the other men gathered round to greet him. "How are you all? Who's shockingly sallow by the daylight, Phil? Nobody you've brought down here, I hope, is it? Sit where you are, Bertie. I'm your guest to-night, *s'il vous plaît!*"

With which Strathmore, refusing to take the head of his table, and looking with eyes of love upon Erroll, sank into an empty chair, told the servants to bring him some soup, and sat down at White Ladies as though he had never left it. He had arrived only some half-hour before, but had gone straight up to his own room, forbidding the groom of the chambers to disturb the dinner-party by announcing his arrival.

"My dear old fellow, this *is* prime! How are you, Cis?" said Erroll, lying back to look at Strathmore with an unutterable satisfaction, fully content to give up his *pro tempore* ownership of White Ladies to see his friend back again.

"All right, old boy. You're astonished to see me to-night, Bertie?"

"By Jove I am! I thought you were at Baden?"

"I *was* at Baden. I only left on Tuesday, and shouldn't have left then but I had asked some people here, and given them *carte blanche* to fix their own time, and they fixed it at such a short notice, that I had only just days enough to come over to receive them. It wasn't worth while to write, as I should have come with the mail-bag."

"Are there any women coming?" asked Rockingham, with prophetic *pitié de soi-même.*

"Some. Why?"

"Nothing, only I hate the sex in September," muttered the unlucky victim to Valérie Brown and "that lot" in the shires. "So your Jack of Trumps colt didn't win the Prix du Forêt Noir?"

"No; only came a good third. I rode Starlight myself for the Rastatt; we did the distance very nicely."

"By Jove you did, and gave Ninette a dress of your colours, I saw in the *Post.* How's the pretty *bouquetière?*"

"Handsome as ever. She asked for you, Erroll; I don't think there's one of the Jockey Club who cuts you out with her. She looked very charming in the scarlet and white. A poor devil of an Englishman shot himself on Monday night, after losing his last Nap, but all Baden was too occupied with Princesse Marie Volgarouski's desperate *engouement* of a young Tuscan composer to pay much attention. It's quite Pauline Bonaparte and Blangini over again. She's a striking looking woman, but I don't care for those Petersburg beauties, they're too olive."

"Ah, by George, Strath! you put me in mind," interrupted Erroll, with all the eagerness of a retriever scenting a wild duck—"you said you saw Lady Vavasour in Paris?"

"So I did."

"Well! What's she like? Have you seen her again?"

"Oh yes. She's been staying at Vernonceaux."

"The deuce she has! and you never said so? What do you think of her—how do you like her—what style ——?"

"My dear fellow, don't ask me to describe a woman!" interrupted Strathmore, indifferently. "They are like kaleidoscopes, and have a thousand phases, all pretty for the time, but never to be caught, and always changed when a new eye's on them."

"Hang you!" swore Erroll. "You wrote just enough to *intriguer* one about her, and now shove one off with

an epigram! Come, *is* she the atrocious coquette they all say?"

"All women are coquettes, except plain ones, who make a virtue of a renunciation that's *de rigueur*, and hate their virtue (like most other people) while they brag of it!"

"Confound you! I don't ask about all women, only about one. You set out with a dreadful prejudice against her; you'd seen her at one masked ball, and wrote me word on the strength of it that you thought it particularly lucky that the Marquis was of elastic principles, and that you didn't envy him his wife, because her mouth, though perfection, would whisper too many infidelities to please you!"

A dark shadow of impatient, intolerant annoyance passed over Strathmore's face, and glanced into his eyes for an instant as the sun fell on it, slanting through the "Slay! and spare not!" of the motto blazoned on the painted panes; but there was no trace left of anger as he looked up and laughed slightly.

"I dare say it *is* particularly lucky the Marquis has elastic conjugal principles; it's lucky for any husband who has a handsome wife, and yet likes to live in peace with his brethren. Lady Vavasour is a very exquisite beauty, there's no disputing that; *you*'ll rave of her, Bertie; at the same time, I never heard beauty reckoned as the best guarantee for marital fidelity!"

"The devil—not exactly!" said Scrope Waverley. "The Vavasour's the most abominable coquette—shocking, on my honour, isn't she, Strathmore? Be warm as the tropics on you one minute, and cold as the poles the next."

Strathmore looked at him with his chilliest contempt:

"Perhaps you have suffered! Acrimony generally bespeaks adversity. Not having been the subject of her ladyship's caprices, I cannot compare notes with you, Scrope, nor yet back your experience, though—in your case—I don't doubt any part of them, except that you ever basked much in the tropics!"

Waverley looked sulky as he picked over his olives, not

quite certain how to take the shot that had told in a very sore spot; while Erroll, ever good natured, and who could no more take pleasure in making a man smart than a dog wince, turned the subject, and postponing his own curiosity, asked Strathmore who the people were that were coming?

"Who? Oh, some of the Vernonceaux set," answered Strathmore, taking a Manilla out of the little silver waggon. "The De Ruelles, the Beaudeserts, Madame de Cevillac, your old friend Lady Camelot, and—Lady Vavasour."

He paused a moment before he added her name, but then spoke it indifferently enough.

"The Vavasour!" echoed Erroll and all the other men with him. "By Jove! Strath, you don't mean it!"

"Why should I not mean it?"

"The Vavasour? By Heaven!" ejaculated the Sabreur, stroking his moustache in beatified astonishment. "I thought you didn't like her, Cis?"

"I don't think I ever said so? *De plus*, she invited herself, and reigning beauties are like reigning fashions—one must obey them."

"Does the Marquis come too?"

"God forbid! At least, he comes for a day or two, but only en route to the Sprudel to cure his dyspepsia. Like the Roman, he goes to a bath that he may come back for a banquet."

"And leaves his wife a *droit de chasse* in his absence?" laughed Erroll. "But the idea of keeping that to yourself all this time, letting us talk of her and never telling us! What an odd fellow you are! You called her a sorceress, and said she tried her wiles on you at the Luilhiers' ball. Has she bewitched even *you*, old fellow?"

"Not exactly!" said Strathmore—his tone was more contemptuously cold than he had ever used to Erroll—"but I like beauty as I like a good Titian, a good claret, a good opera, a good racer. Who doesn't? To hear you, Bertie, one would certainly think no woman had ever been entertained at White Ladies since Mary Stuart! If Lady Va-

vasour wished to come here with Beatrix Beaudesert, could I say I wouldn't have her? Besides, I had no wish to say so; she is very charming. By-the-by, Phil, who was that you were talking about when I came in? Who's sallow in the daylight?—most blondes are that, though, after twenty."

He spoke so carelessly, as he lay back in his chair, that not a man present guessed that the name of Marion Vavasour was anything more to him than the names of fifty fair women, who had been, season after season, recipients of the stately hospitalities of White Ladies: except, indeed, Erroll, who looked at him with a puzzled look clouding his clear azure eyes, and drank his coffee in silence. He, the sworn Squire of Dames, who worshipped everything feminine that crossed his path, felt a vague dislike rise up in him against this witching beauty, whom Strathmore denied had had charm for him, and yet who was bidden beneath the roof of White Ladies.

That night, when they had left the smoking-room, Strathmore, sitting alone in his own room, thoughtful yet listless, with a restless indifference which had grown on him of late, and which he had vainly doctored with very heavy betting at Baden, and dangerous *coups de hasard* at roulette, threw open his despatch-box and took out a little note—a note which was not very many lines, which placed his title before his name, and which was chiefly gay, mischievous badinage and pretty command, with but here and there touches of something deeper, and these only deepened to friendship. Yet this letter had sufficed to bring him from Baden at its bidding; it had been looked at many times, where no other note addressed to him had ever served for any other purpose than to light his cigar, and it had a fascination for him which no words written by a woman's hand had ever claimed, for it was signed—"Marion Vavasour and Vaux." Letters have a strange glamour!—with this, the sweet mocking voice echoed in his ear, the smile of the dark antelope eyes laughed into his, the fragrance of the amber hair floated past him, and he flung the note back into its resting-place with a fierce oath—he hated the senseless paper! For he hated the hot, in-

sidious passion that was creeping into his blood, and that, in night and solitude, wreathed round him as the serpent folds round the Läocoon, sapping his strength, and only twisting closer and closer with each effort to thrust it aside; the passion that would make him the slave of a woman, the vassal of a smile, the bond-servant of a kiss!

In the simplest trifles Strathmore was remarkable for an unswerving tenacity to truth, too proud a man not to hold his word his bond even in ordinary colloquial intercourse; yet that night, when denying to Erroll that she had any sway over him, he had for the only time in his life *lied.* It was the first trivial unnoticed step of the downward course that he was even now commencing, as the first unperceived loosening of the snow is the signal for the downward sweep of the avalanche.

Marion Vavasour had a power over him such as no woman had ever gained before her; the strange force with which absolute hatred of her mingled with the charm her beauty had for him, served only to heighten it and give it a sting which excited and enthralled a man whom a tamer or wiser love would never have governed. Strathmore had stayed on at Vernonceaux, voluntarily remaining in the danger, which a weaker man would, or might, at least, have fled from while there was yet time; finding in this new beguilement, this woman's intoxicating loveliness, a spell, subtle and resistless, the same dazzling, sensuous delight as lies in a soft Bacchante of Coustou's golden chisel, or a voluptuous *rêveuse* warm with the rich varied colours of the canvas of Greuze. Constantly in her society, meeting her alone in the freshness of the early morning, strolling with her at evening under the trellised roofing of the vines, bowing to the sway of her coquetries in the salon where she held her gay omnipotent reign, Strathmore did not dispute the "destiny" which she had said had decreed them to be friends.

For him, too, she had her most certain and most dangerous charm: capricious, mutable, scattering her coquetries *à pleines mains*, as the Hours of Corregio scatter their roses;

she had a softness, a sadness, a tenderness, *I* call it—*she* termed it a "friendship"—for and with Strathmore which seemed to bespeak that something warmer than vanity, something deeper than mere pride of conquest, might be awakened in her. Amidst the largesse of adoration that she levied from all who came within sight of her brilliant banner, which fluttered with its audacious motto, "*Je règne partout*," from north to south, from east to west, she made a distinction towards the man who had saved her life at the Vigil of St. John, which gave good ground for attributing a preference that every man, from Monsignore Villaflôr downwards, bitterly envied him as they began to yield place to him as of necessity, and to couple his name with hers in the card-room or smoking-room, when neither he nor the Marquis were present. The latter was the only one at Vernonceaux who never troubled his head which way his Marchioness's caprices might be turning; it was a matter of profound indifference to him, and he dozed, and read French novels, and played écarté, and discussed *l'art de goût*, and let his wife go on her own ways, like a gentleman of breeding who did as he would be done by.

Half hating her, half beguiled by her, one hour accrediting to her all the velvet treachery, the wanton cruelty of the panther; the next, subdued by that charm which he had little wish and less will to resist; one instant, bitterly contemptuous on the witchery that made his pulse beat quicker at the mere fragrance of a woman's hair; another seeking with all the skill the world had taught him, to make the softened glance of her eyes deepen into tenderness;—so the golden shuttle of a woman's power had woven its woof and wound its web around Strathmore, and so he had courted, even while he rebelled from, its enchanted toils. And just at the very moment when the surest meshes of its twisted threads were entangling round him, when he was first beginning to feel it a necessity to be in her presence—just then, Lady Vavasour left Vernonceaux. Without announcement, without preparation, she went; carefully avoiding any *tête-à-tête* farewell, bidding him "*au revoir*" with laughing negligence in a crowded salon, with

an indifference which Strathmore was not slow to simulate in imitation. Yet that adieu, by its very avoidance of him, by its very abandonment of that *tendresse* which she used as her habitual weapon of war, told him, by his experience of women, might equally mean one of two things: that she felt nothing, or—felt too much! *Which?*

The question was left open, and pursued him ceaselessly; nothing in his life had ever haunted him so persistently as that single doubt. I believe that weeks, months spent in her presence, would not have rooted her in his memory so firmly as that well-timed absence, that insoluble uncertainty. Away from her, it was in vain that he contemned, as he did with bitter irony, with pitiless rancour, her coquetries and her caprices; or mercilessly dissected her faults, her foibles, and her fascinations: her power had begun! *Insecurity* is to passion as the wind to the flame—without the cold breeze wafted to it, the embers would have faded fast, and never flared up into life; with the rush of the cooler air the fire leaps into flame, and its lust is not sated till it has destroyed all before it.

The Strathmores of White Ladies had never loved the women who had slept innocently on their hearts, and laid their pure lives within their keeping; the only passion that had ever roused them had been some fierce forbidden desire, and the guilty leaven of the dead race was alive in the man who bore their name and their features. From Vernonceaux Strathmore went to Baden, and if any feeling was strong in him towards the woman whose beauty, when the scarlet flowers bound her amber hair, had made him think of Frédégonde, of Sifrid, of Lucretia, of every living Circe who had drawn men downward by the witching gleam of her white arms till they lost all likeness of themselves, and sank into an abyss whence they could never more rise again into the pure light left for ever at her bidding, he would have said, and perhaps said rightly, that it was—hatred. If pity be akin to love, believe me passion is as often allied to hate! It would slay what it vainly covets; if it cannot kiss the lips it

woos, it would blur them out of all beauty by a blow; what it seeks so fiercely, it loathes for the pain of its own unslaken desire; and what it is forbidden to enjoy, it would thrust away out of its own and other eyes, into the darkness of an absolute or of a living death, with the hatred of Amnon, to the tomb of Heloïse!

Such was the passion now wakening in Strathmore; which, whilst it made him hate the woman who fascinated and blinded him, because he knew that the softness of such hours as that upon the rose-terrace was but a more fatal phase of her brilliant and studied coquetries, were but the shadows which, with a cunning art, she threw in to heighten a dazzling picture; had still made him leave Baden the instant that the note he now flung aside had reached him—the note which accepted his invitation afresh, and selected White Ladies from amidst a hundred other places that were open to the honour of her ladyship's bright and sovereign presence.

In his own room that night he read over the delicate fragrant letter that had made him leave Baden (and would have made him leave Paradise!), and with an oath threw it away from him, as though it were tainted with poison. He hated the mad fool's delight that lay in it for him because her hand had touched it, yet he longed with ungovernable desire to feel that hand lie once more within his own; and Strathmore, who held that he could mould his life like plastic clay into any shape that pleased him, did not seek to inquire whether the clay would break or harden in the fire which was beginning to seethe and coil around it.

As he flung the letter away and rose, he pulled back the curtains of the window nearest him, and threw one of its casements open. He felt impatient for the air, impatient with himself, intolerant with all the world! The night was very hot and he stood looking out for a while into the moonlight. The scene was lovely enough, and the old monastic lands, as far as he could see, were his own; but Strathmore, absorbed in his own thoughts, looked little at the landscape. It was a

mere hazard that the figure of a man crossing the turf caught his eye.

"A poacher as near the house as that; impossible! That Knightswood gang *are* the very deuce for audacity, but even they'd never——" he thought, as he leaned out to get a good look at the intruder; in the clear white light the form, though distant, was distinct enough, and the red end of a cigar, as it moved through the gloom, sparkled like a glow-worm.

Strathmore looked hard at the mysterious shadow, till it had gone out of the moonlight into the deep shade of a cluster of elms.

"By Jove! Erroll, as I live! Another of my tenants' daughters come to grief, I suppose! What a fellow it is; if he's away from Phya of the Bijou Villa, he takes up with Phyllis of the Home-farm! I wonder how cider tastes, faulting champagne? Rather flat, and terribly homely, I should fancy; better than nothing, though, I suppose, for the Sabreur. Well, it's a very nice night for an erotic adventure. Byron's quite right—

> The devil's in the moon for mischief;
> . . . . . there is not a day,
> The longest, not the twenty-first of June,
> Sees half the business in a wicked way
> On which three single hours of moonshine smile—
> And then she looks so modest all the while!

He might have said, too, that in that respect the women who make the mischief are like the moon that looks on it! Chaste Diana of the skies, or of the sex, only veils that she may lend herself—to something naughty!"

With which reflection Strathmore shut the window down and rang for his Albanian, giving no more thought to Erroll's moonlight errand. Long afterwards, when it formed a link in that chain which his own passions forged about his life, the remembrance of this September night came back to him.

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## CHAPTER XIV.

**Feathery Seeds that were freighted with Fruit of the Future.**

"It was a fine moonlight night last night, my dear fellow, and Hampshire 'moonrakers' do go fishing after contraband goods, *au clair de la lune*, but I didn't know *you* belonged to the fraternity, Bertie," said Strathmore, the next evening, as they walked home brushing through the ferns, after a good day out in the open.

Erroll turned with a certain dismay; though in the teeth of a convicted wickedness he would stroke his moustache with the blandest *plait-il?* look of innocence, he was thrown a little off his guard, and confidence was such a habit with him with Strathmore, that it was difficult to get out of it.

"The deuce, Strath, you're as bad as a detective!" he murmured, plaintively. "Where did you see me?"

"Where you were very easily to be seen, my dear fellow, as I told you once before. If you walk about in the open air, as large as life, with a cigar in your mouth, I can't understand how you can very judiciously expect to go *un*seen, myself! What have you got about you, Erroll, to confer invisibility? You seem to expect it as your prerogative!"

"Bosh!" interrupted Bertie, striking a fusee. "But, by the way, my dear Cis, how came *you* to be looking at the moonlight last night? That isn't your line at all."

"Thank God, no! Who will may have the moon-rays for me: we can spend the night much more pleasantly than by looking at it! Who is she, mon cher? Such nocturnal depredations are poaching on my manor-rights; however, I don't grudge them to you. Katie or Jeanneton may make a very pretty picture with a broken pitcher or a gleaner's bundle for Mulready or Meissonnier, but in real life—no, thank you! No Psyche can lie on a hard pallet under a thatched roof. Bah! I thought better of you, Sabreur!"

Erroll laughed and didn't defend himself, but he looked a trifle thoughtful and worried for so insignificant an affair as

a provincial *amourette*, which to that universal conqueror was usually something what knocking over a swallow with a stone, might be to a splendid shot, after the best bouquets of prime battues.

"Don't say anything about it, there's a good old fellow!" he said, carelessly, after a moment's pause—a pause apparently of some hesitation and indecision on a subject on which he seemed tempted to speak fully.

"Did I say anything about the other, last summer? If I were a man, now, who liked cabbage-roses, I should try my *droits de seigneur*, and turn you out from your monopoly. But on my life, Bertie, I don't understand your village liaisons," went on Strathmore, thinking no more about the matter than that Erroll's equal worship of Eros, whether the little god of mischief lived under a lean-to roof, or a ceiling painted after Fragonard, was not his own line of action, and seemed an unintelligible elasticity of taste. "'A Gardener's Daughter' and 'Jacqueline la Bouquetière' look very well in poetry and painting; so do rags and tatters; but, in real life, I can no more fancy making love to them, than taking to a beggar's clothes by choice. Love's born of the senses; then why the deuce take Love where half his senses must be shocked?"

"*L'amour est niveleur!*" laughed Erroll, a little more absent still than usual. "He's the only real republican, the only sincere socialist going, my dear Cis; he won't complain where you take him so long as he has a soft nest in a white breast, and can talk in his own tongue! What do you know about him? You only 'make love' languidly to some *grande dame*, who blinds him with sandal-wood and stifles him in lace; or some Champs Elysées Aspasia, who drenches his wings with *vin mousseux*, smothers him in *cachemires*, kills him with *mots*, and sells him for *rouleaux!* Your god isn't *the* god!"

"My dear fellow, will you tell me in what religion my god is ever *the* god according to my neighbour's orthodoxy?" said Strathmore. "I say, Bertie, didn't you lose a good

deal at the Spring Meetings? I told you that miserable bay was worth nothing."

Erroll laughed gaily.

"I *did* drop a good deal, but I cleared a few hundreds after at Goodwood, that put things a little square. Things always right themselves: worry's like a woman, who, if she sees she's no effect, leaves off plaguing you. Bills, like tears, are rained down on you if they disturb you an inch, but, if you're immovable to both, you see no more of either!"

"Comfortable creed! I never knew, though, that the unpaid and the unloved were quite so soon daunted! But, Bertie, you promised me that—that if——"

"My dear old fellow, I know I did!" broke in the Sabreur. "If I were in any mess for money, I would tell you frankly, and take from you as cheerfully as you'd lend——"

"Parole d'honneur?"

"Parole d'honneur! Won't that satisfy you?"

"No! I want to free you from those beggarly Jews. You might let me have my own whim here. Name any interest to me you like—a hundred per cent., if that will please you —but only——"

"Sign a bond that you'd tear in two and scatter to the winds, or thrust in the fire as soon as it was written! You served me that trick once," muttered Erroll; but his eyes grew soft with a grateful and cordial light as he looked at Strathmore. "Old fellow, you *know* how I thank you; but I can't let you have your whim here, though you're as true as steel, Strath, God bless you! I say, what does Paris think of Graziella? She's not worth half they rave of her in the Guards' Box, and her ankles are so atrociously thick!"

"The deuce they are! She owes everything to her face; her *pas de seul* would never be borne in public, only she's so extremely handsome for a *pas de deux* in private! Carlotta has ten times more grace; but Carlotta got a *claque* against her from the first; she began by being—virtuous, and, though she's seen the error of her ways, the imprudence will never be forgiven her. Virtue is as detrimental in the Coulisses as

Honesty on 'Change! The professors of either soon get hissed down for such an eccentric innovation, and tire of its losing game before the sibilation!"

With which truism upon Life and Virtue, Strathmore walked on through the ferns, talking with Erroll of the topics of the hour, from the *carte* of the coming policies of Europe, to the best site for a new tan-gallop. That evening, as they strolled homewards in the mellow sunset, smoking and chatting, while Our Lady's bells chimed slowly and softly over woodland and cornland, over river and valley, in the Curfew chant, was the last hour in which they enjoyed, untainted, the free, frank, *bon camarade* communion of a friendship that was closer than brotherhood and stronger than the tie of blood. It was the last before a woman laid the axe to its root.

And even now their conversation lagged, and their voices dropped to silence, as the thoughts of both were occupied by her whom neither named—Erroll musing with an impatient curiosity, a prophetic prescience of distrust, on this sorceress-beauty which men attributed to the Marchioness of Vavasour and Vaux, yet which his friend averred had assailed him no more than the lifeless perfection of some Titian chef-d'œuvre; and Strathmore thinking of the hour, now near, when her hand should touch his, when the light of her eyes should glance on him again, when his own roof should shelter the loveliness which was fast shattering to the dust the proud panoply of his chill philosophies, and whose seductive sweetness had stolen into his life unperceived, from the first night that he had looked by the light of the spring stars on the *blonde aux yeux noirs* in Bohemia.

That evening Lady Vavasour drove through Paris; she had been staying with the Court at Compiègne, and was here but for a day or two in her favourite residence, which was peerless among cities as herself amidst womanhood. She and Paris both brilliant, sparkling, proud, without rival in their path, with their days one brilliant *fête de triomphe*, and their

sovereign sceptre wreathed with flowers, suited and resembled each other—the Queen of Cities and the Queen of Fashion! And if in the Past and Future of the woman, as in the Past and Future of the city, there were cruelties which teemed with the ferocity of the tigress, lustful vanities which rioted with the licence of a Faustina, dark hours in which the Discrowned tasted of the bitterness of death, with both the Past was shrouded, and the Future veiled.

Paris, fair and stately, lay glittering in the sunset, with its myriad of lights a-lit, its song, its revels, its music; and Marion Marchioness of Vavasour and Vaux drove through the streets, her moqueur smile upon her lips, her silken lashes lazily drooped as she mused over a thousand victorious memories, her delicate form wrapped in costliest silks and laces, the very crowds doing homage to her as she passed through them, and they turned into the streets to glance after the loveliest woman of her day.

The carriage with its fretting roans, its mazarine-blue liveries, its outriders *à la Reine*,—for she passed through Paris with well-nigh as much pomp and circumstance as Montespan or Marie Antoinette,—halted before the doors of her hotel, and the people thronging on their way to the Boulevards and the Cafés-chantants, turned to gaze at the superb equipage, and more at the loveliness which lay back upon its cushions, negligently indifferent to their gaze.

Among the crowd was a woman, a gipsy, at whom a Quartier Latin student, who lived on a pipe and three *litres* a day, and dreamt of high art when he was not drunk with absinthe, looked, thinking ruefully what a model she would have made had he had a sou to give her; for as the double light of the sunset and the *réverbères* fell on her, her vagrant dress was Rembrandtesque, and her olive features had the dark, still, melancholy beauty of an Arab's—that mournful and immutable calm which Greek sculptors gave to the face of Destiny and of the goddess Demeter, and which on the living countenance ever bespeaks repressed but concentred passions. And this woman, mingling among the passengers

that thronged the trottoir, drew nearer and nearer the carriage as it stopped before the Hôtel Vavasour.

The horses pawed the ground impatient, the outriders pulled theirs up with noise and fracas, the Chasseur lowered the steps, and Lady Vavasour descended from her carriage, sweeping onwards with her royal, negligent grace, the subtle perfume of her dress wafted out upon the evening air. The Bohemian had drawn near; so near, that as she stretched forward this vagrant obstructed the path of the English peeress, and her heavy, weather-stained cloak, covered with the dust of the streets, all but touched the scented gossamer laces and trailing train of the Leader of Fashion!

"*Chassez-là!*" said Marion Vavasour to her Chasseur, as she slightly drew back;—she, for whom sovereigns laid down their state, and before whose word bowed princes of the blood, to have her passage blocked by a beggar-woman!

The Chasseur, obedient, struck the gipsy a sharp blow with his long white wand, and ordered her out of the way.

She fell out of the path, and Lady Vavasour went onward up the steps of her hotel, and passed at once to her own rooms to make, still more elaborately than usual, her dinner toilette—S. A. R. le Prince d'Etoile and his Eminence the Cardinal Miraflora dined with her that night, and ere bringing down royal stags she loved to know that all her weapons were primed and burnished. As she sank into her couch, and resigned herself into the hands of her maids, she tossed carelessly over the hundred notes that had collected in her absence, and were heaped together on a Louis-Quinze salver, chased by Réveil; she glanced at this, threw that carelessly aside, till she had dismissed dozens, scarce reading a line; at last over one she paused, with amused triumph glancing away the languor from her eyes, and a smile playing on her lips—a smile of success; while as she looked up from the letter to the face reflected in the mirror before her, the thought that floated through her mind was a fatal truth:

"My cold, proud Strathmore, who dared to disdain the power of woman!—you own it now, then, at last!"

And underneath the windows of her stately hotel the Bohemian still lingered, as though loth to leave the place, while the crowds brushed past her, and the carriage and the outriders swept away. When the blow of the Chasseur had struck her, and he had ordered her out of his path like a cur, the fixed, immutable melancholy of her face had not changed: she had spoken no word, made no sign, only her teeth had set tightly, and the light as of a flame had leaped for one moment into her eyes; this had been all. She lingered some moments longer, while the rush of the throngs jostled and moved her unnoticed: then she passed slowly away, walking wearily and painfully, with her head bowed, as the daylight faded, and the gas in the lamps glared brighter; while amidst the gay babble and the busy noise of Paris, her lips muttered to herself in the mellow Czechen patois of her people:

"My beloved! my beloved! Redempta has not forgot thee, Redempta will yet avenge thee! Her hireling struck me, at her bidding, like a dog—*that* was not needed *too*. Patience!—the lowliest stone may serve to bring to earth the loftiest bird that soars!"

## CHAPTER XV.

### The Charm of the Rose.

"She is divine—but she will destroy him!"

They were uncomplimentary words, and very harsh ones, for that devout adorer of the beau sexe; but as Erroll stood leaning against the doorway of the portrait-gallery at White Ladies, and looking down it to its farthest end, where Lady Vavasour was seated, while Strathmore bent towards her, on the morning after her arrival, a jealousy towards this woman stirred in a heart which never harboured any acrid thought or unjust envy to any living thing.

Is a man ever leniently disposed towards the woman whom his friend loves? Very rarely. She is his rival, and in lists, moreover, in which he can oppose nothing to her power. She

supplants him, she invades his supremacy, fifty to one she is the cause of dispute between them; and he will see no good in this soft-skinned intruder, this dangerous Nazarene: unless he does what is worse—fall in love with her too!

And Erroll twisted his moustaches, and muttered to himself the first unflattering and mistrustful words that he had ever uttered of a lovely woman, Bertie being generally given to deny at all odds that the Ceinture could ever strangle; or the "Drink to me with thine eyes!" ever be an invitation to a cup of poisoned wine. Yet what he looked at was matchless, and dazzled his eyes even while he swore against it.

"Hate her!"—the germ of hatred might lie in it, but all of impatience and aversion, that had crossed and checked the witchery she had for Strathmore, were swept away the moment that he touched her hand and received her beneath his own roof. She came—the beauty of Paris, the Queen of Fashion—where before her Mary Stuart had languished a captive, and in ages yet farther the ascetic Dominicans had dwelt, thrusting away from them, with the throes of an unnatural struggle, the mere thought, the mere memory, of her sex. She came to White Ladies with the rest of a gay, dashing, fashionable party from his favourite Paris set; and the advent of Royalty could not have been received there with more splendour than was the Sovereign of the Salons. The State chambers were given to her, where the White Queen and the Winter Queen had closed their soft Stuart eyes in slumber before her, and where none save crowned heads till now had been laid.

The witchery of this woman was on him, and to lend éclat and honour to her I believe Strathmore would have dissolved pearls in his wines, or scattered diamonds *à pleines mains*. He did not realise it; told it, he would not perhaps have believed even yet; but the web woven by the golden shuttle was drawing its charmed toils tighter and tighter about him, and he was fast becoming the slave of Marion Vavasour: doubt had but bound him closer, absence had but riveted her chains; and Lady Vavasour laughed softly to herself when on the

night of her arrival she drew her hands through her amber tresses, as she leant her head on her arm and looked at her face in the mirror, thinking, "My cold Strathmore! you are *my* captive now!"

Was it love that she felt for him which set her heart so strongly on this triumph? It is as easy to follow the wayward flight of a bird on the wing, or an April wind's wanton vagaries as it blows over field and flower, as to sift the reasons of a woman's will—of a coquette's caprices!

"That is your best friend, Major Erroll, isn't it?" she asked Strathmore, when they stood together in the deep embrasured window of the picture-gallery, her eyes glancing at the Sabreur, where he leaned against the doorway.

"My best indeed! You have been introduced to him?"

"Oh yes, you introduced me last night. I was anxious to see the only person out of the whole world to whom you are not indifferent! What charm has he about him?"

"What charm? Dear old fellow! None, save the gentlest nature and truest honour that I ever found in any man. He has the strength of a lion and the sweetness of a woman; he is game to the backbone, and frank as a boy!"

She raised her eyebrows. She was a little impatient of the warmth of his tone and the sincerity of his praise; a tyrannous, victorious woman is jealous of all influence not her own; and perhaps she foresaw here a power that might be opposed to hers. Lady Vavasour, with a woman's swift, unerring instinct, guessed that Erroll would be against her, in exact proportion to the sway she exercised over his friend.

"*You* admiring warmth of heart and the candour of boyhood, Strathmore," she said, maliciously enough. "Why don't you cultivate them, mon ami, if you think them so admirable?"

At her tone all the strange, sudden hatred of her, which now and then flashed so ominously across the passion which was growing on him for this woman, stirred into life afresh for a moment; he smiled slightly, the smile which made his

face sneeringly cold, and gave his eyes the look that, in a dog or a horse, we call *dangerous*.

"I am an Athenian, Lady Vavasour: I may admire what I fail to practise. Life makes us all egotists and dissemblers; but we may honour the nature which is such true steel that it resists and escapes the corroding. Erroll's is the only one *I* know which has done so."

Her impatience at Erroll increased. With the quick wit of her sex, she saw at once that Erroll would undermine her power if she did not undermine his, and she changed her tactics accordingly. She looked at the Sabreur, letting her lashes droop over her eyes, and lend them that glance of softened interest which was the most delicate flattery such eyes could bestow.

"I can believe it; his face tells one so. How singularly beautiful a face it is, too; a woman might envy him his golden hair and his azure eyes!"

And for the first time in his life, as he stood beside her—not for the praise of his personal attractions, such petty vanity and envy Strathmore was far above—but for the softness of her look as it dwelt on him, the softness which with imperious jealousy he loathed to see wake for any save himself, an ill-feeling stirred in him towards the man whom he loved closer than a brother. And Lady Vavasour glanced at him and smiled, amused and content; she had sown the larvæ of the cankerworm that would eat away friendship! It is a work at which the hands of women ever love well to be busy.

She had done enough to please her, and with one of her graceful, antelope-like movements she turned and looked upward at the portrait above her.

"Ah! a Vandyke and a Strathmore. Really you are wonderfully like one of those old pictures animated into life, Lord Cecil! My lord is quite right; he says you are a walking Velasquez. There are the eyes, 'fathomless and darkly-wise,' of the legend; you have them and the portrait has them; and in both they never soften, even to a woman!"

As she spoke, her own glanced at him with their most

enchanting mischief, and Strathmore, subdued to the charm of her will, bent towards her:

"Looking down on *you*, the very portraits of the dead might soften their glance. How then shall any living man have power to resist? Have you not heard that the Strathmores of White Ladies have often disdained all, only as their doom, to madly and vainly covet—one?"

And it was as he whispered those words that Erroll, not catching even the sound of his voice, but seeing the meaning warmth upon his face, the gaze which Strathmore fastened on her, muttered, *sotto voce*, "She is divine; but she will destroy him!"

Into him, too, entered—with a nature as different to Strathmore's as the summer to the winter, as the sunny unruffled lake to the deep and silent sea—the subtle poison of Marion Vavasour's beauty, mingled with a warning and prophetic hatred of her power.

There was a large party gathered by this time at the Abbey, and the hospitalities she had recently quitted of a Bourbon at Neuilly had scarcely been more brilliant than those which welcomed her at White Ladies. There was Blanche de Ruelle, that haughty dark-eyed beauty, who, amidst all the homage she received, treasured bitterly and wearily the memory of the love once whispered by a man whom no love had touched—who was now her friend and her host. There was Beatrix Beaudesert, that dashing *brunette* who led the first flight in a twenty minutes' burst up wind, and never funked at any bullfinch or double that yawned in good Northamptonshire; but could have cleared Brixworth Brook, and won the Grand Military, were the sex allowed to enter either for the Steeple Chase or the Service. There was the Comtesse de Chantâl, who wove half the intrigues of the Tuileries, while statesmen and diplomatists wound her floss silks, and who brewed *embroglie* for the Western Powers in her dainty Sèvres coffee-cup. There was pretty Lady Alaric, who was so very religious, and went on her knees before her

missal-like prayer-book before she floated down to breakfast to commence the flirtations, which always pulled up *just* short of a court and a co-respondent; of an error and an esclandre. There was Lady Clarence Camelot, leader of the most exclusive of the thorough-bred sets, who was cold and still as a rock-crystal, and proud as any angel that ever fell by that queenly sin; but whose nature was sweet as the sun of Sorrento, and whose heart was as mellow as a Catherine pear, for the few who had the fortunate sesame to either. There were these and others at White Ladies, but Lady Vavasour outshone them all: she was the Reine Regnante, and she used her sceptre omnipotently, and far eclipsed those whom most women found it a hard matter even to equal.

The Marquis—who came thither, *en route* to Spa, for a few days, chiefly because the venison and the char out of White Ladies' woods and waters had had such a celebrity for centuries that he was curious to test their reputed superiority—was blessed with the most gentlemanlike indifference to his lovely wife's vagaries. He knew she was always flirting with somebody—*who*, didn't matter much; perhaps when he did think about it, his chief feeling was a certain malicious pleasure in seeing so many of his fellow-creatures chained, and worried, and fooled, by the seductive tormentress whom he had let loose on the world, with her *droit de conquête* legitimatised by his coronet. The Marquis was a philosopher, and the very husband for his wife: their marital relations were admirably ordered for the preservation of peace and friendship; they saw little or nothing of one another (the secret recipe for conjugal unity), and, by mutual consent, never interfered, he with her *caprices de cœur*, nor she with his "separate establishments." When he had first married, people had said his lordship was madly *entêté* with his bride; but that inconvenient folly had departed with a few months' wear: and now—he was proud of her loveliness, but wisely and placably negligent on whom that loveliness might shine; a wisdom and a placability never more needed, perhaps, than now at White Ladies.

"Lookest thou at the stars?
If I were Heaven, with all the eyes of Heaven,
Would I look down on thee!"

The words were very softly whispered, as Strathmore stood that evening on the terrace. It was late; the stars were shining, and the murmur of the waters flowing onward under the elm-woods was heard plaintively and monotonously sweet, as Marion Vavasour, whose whim was every hour changing, and who laughed at all feeling one hour, only to assume it most beguilingly the next, left the drawing-rooms, where she reigned supreme; and strolled out for a brief while in the summer night, followed by her host. The white light of the stars fell about her, glancing on the sapphires and diamonds that glittered in her hair or sparkled in her bosom, and shone in the depths of her eyes, as she raised them, and looked upwards at the skies above, where, here and there, some cloud of transparent mist trailed across the brilliance of the moon, or veiled the swift course of a falling star. She laughed, toying with the closed autumn roses that twined round the balustrade.

"Strathmore! you would do no such thing! If you had the eyes of Heaven, they would all be bent in watching conferences you cannot join, and in reading despatches you cannot see! There are three things no woman rivals with a man who loves any one of them; they are a Horse, a State secret, and a Cigar. We may eclipse all three, perhaps, for a little while, but, in the long run, any one of the triad outrivals us."

He bent lower towards her, with a soft whisper:

"Do not slander my sex, and belie the power of your own. Have there not been women for whom men have thought the world itself well lost?"

"There have been fools, mon ami; and that is how *you* would phrase it if you were out of my presence and in the smoking-room, and anybody advanced the proposition!" she laughed, with that *moqueur* incredulity with which at Vernonceaux she had so constantly tantalised and provoked him.

"Fools? It would be rash to call them so. Manuel was no fool, yet he found his Isles of Delight sweeter than the din and clash of triumph, and the fall of conquered citadels. Alcibiades was no fool, yet he found to look into the eyes of Aspasia better than the sceptre of the Alcmæonidæ and the wisdom of the Schools!"

Three months ago Strathmore would have sworn never to utter such words, save in derision: but now, as he stooped towards her in the stillness of the night, it was not either in jest or flattery, that he spoke them; the roses had the perfume for him with which they had wooed Manuel in the Isles of Delight; the eyes had the power to which the soft Greek had bowed and sunk. For with every year the roses bloom, and with every age men love!

Her sweet mocking laugh rang in the air—the laugh which had enthralled him under the lindens of Bohemia, and from behind the mask of the White Domino.

"*What!* you who acknowledge but one love—Power; and covet but one boon—Age; confess so much as that! You must be very suddenly changed since three months ago; your eyes, a Strathmore's fathomless eyes, actually soften at the mere memory of Aspasia!"

Her eyes laughed up into his, her hand touched his own where it wandered among the roses; the sultry air of the night swept round them, only stirred by the dreamy splash of fountains, and the rise and fall of her low breathings. He had no strength against her in such a moment, nor did he seek, or strive, or wish, to have.

"Changed? If I be so, the sorcery lies at your door. It is not the memory of Aspasia which evokes the confession; the daughter of Hellas has bequeathed her glamour to one who uses it to the full, as fatally, and as surely!"

A smile trembled on her lovely lips, which became half a sigh, while her hand absently toyed with the sapphire cross that glittered just below her throat.

"Ah-bah!" she said, with a laugh, whose gay mockery had in it for the first time a *timbre* of constraint, as of light-

ness assumed but unfelt. "I do not believe in such sudden converts; I do not receive them into my creed! Strathmore, am I, who read you so well while you were yet unknown, likely to believe in your suave words so quickly? Remember! I am clairvoyante. I know the sincerity of every one who approaches me, and I know the worth of your words, my diplomatist! I shall be a very long time before I accord to you the honour of any belief in them."

"If you be clairvoyante, you will no longer disbelieve; you will see without words what your sorcery works. You must know your own power too well to doubt it!"

Know her own power? In every iota! and she knew it now; knew that this man, who was steeled in his own strength, and held himself far above the soft foolery of passion, was fast bending to her will, fast drinking in the draught which she tendered to his lips, fast succumbing to her feet, to lie there, bound, and powerless to free himself from bondage; letting his life drift on as she should choose to guide it; losing all, forsaking all, risking all, so long as he could look upward in her eyes, so long as her white hand would wander to his own! Know her own power! Truly she did, and used it without mercy, without scruple!

Her eyes looked up and dwelt on his with the mournful languor which gave to their dark brilliance the softness as of unshed tears; the mockery of her smile faded; and the lips seemed charged with some unuttered whisper, as the roses she toyed were charged with the heavy sweetness of the clinging dew. If ever woman loved, Strathmore could have sworn she loved him then; and the scorching sweetness, the dangerous delight of a forbidden passion, stole over him, and swept round him, in the sultry air of the night, only heightened by the strange hatred of the power which enthralled him to her will, which ever mingled with the madness that was stealing on him. He bent towards her, his breath fanned her hair, his hand touched hers where it rested among the flowers, and touched—the diamond circlet that chilled him as with the chill of ice. It recalled to him that

this woman was but fooling him; that this woman was Marion Vavasour! And as their hands met, she drew her own away; while a faint sigh stirred her heart beneath its costly lace.

"Hush! If they be not the words of flattery, they must not be the words of friendship! How beautiful the night is! I do not wonder that poets love it better than the day. The sunlight is for haste and care, and for men's toil and labour, and for the fret of daily life; but the night, when the flowers are closed, and the cities are silent, and the stars look into the chambers, where the living sleep peacefully as the dead, and shine upon the rivers, till the suicides who have sought their refuge wear a calm smile on their cold lips—the Night is the noon of the poets—the Night is for rest, for dreams, for——"

"*Love!*"

The word which paused upon her lips he uttered for her; and the soft rebuke, the gesture with which she repelled him, and recalled to him that there was a boundary which the language of homage must not pass, to the woman who was a wife, enthralled him more than any art she could have called forward, since in his ear it whispered:

"The woman who fears your homage, fears herself!"

As she spoke dreamily, mournfully, with that occasional earnestness which, when it succeeded her caprices and her brilliant mockery, had the charm of the Italian evening that follows on the dazzling day, Strathmore uttered, with a meaning new upon his lips, the word which had been his derision and disdain; the word before which she paused; the word which all the voices of the voluptuous night seemed to re-echo around them, while the moonlight streamed on the uncovered limbs of sculptured marble that wore all the repose of sleep, and the stars gleamed upon the winding waters, white with the snowy burden of innumerable lilies. Love! Strathmore would have flung away that word in disdain if spoken to him in the coldness of reason, in the pauses of judgment; but the insidious passion to which he gave no name, but which in her presence swept over him like a scorch

of a sirocco, *was* love; love, if you will, in its most soulless, love in its most sensual, form, but that form the most alluring, the most dangerous, in which it ever steals into the life of man.

She shrugged her snow-white shoulders and pouted her lips with a *moue* of pretty contempt, while at the same time the faint sigh which was so little in unison with her beauty, yet gave it so rare a charm, heaved the sapphires where they sparkled in her breast.

"Bah! that is the 'pastime of fools,' too, and no more suits our world than the other. We do not believe in it; we only mimic it. It may do for Undine among the water-lilies yonder, but we have no faith left for those childish idyls. They are *contes pour rire* for us; we have outgrown them! Who loves in our world?"

For all its mockery the question was one of pitiless danger, spoken by her, as she leaned against the balustrade in the moonlight, gazing down on to the dark masses of foliage sheltering beneath; while her eyes were heavy as with some indefinite regret, as she pressed against her lips the leaves of a rose she had disentangled from the rest, which was wet and fragrant with the night dews. His lips brushed her hair, his breath fanned her brow, his words were whispered softly and wooingly:

"To answer you would be to risk rebuke afresh. The truth would neither lie in words of flattery nor of friendship."

"Then—those words must not be spoken!"

The reply was but like the cold breath which fans the embers into fire; uttered while her eyes dwelt on his without rebuke, while her lips parted with a breath that was so near a sigh, while half in sadness, half in coquetry, she silenced him with a light, fragrant blow of the roses, the words in their very forbiddance gave fresh fuel to the dawning madness they rebuked. In that moment he would have staked his life that he was loved by the woman he coveted, as he of Israel coveted the loveliness on which the eastern

sunlight fell, making it in his sight, while yet it was unwon, more precious than palace treasure, or kingly sway, than the good word of man, or than the smile of his God!

She turned from him with one of the swift movements which had the charm of the antelope's grace, turned as a woman might from the danger which she dreads and fears; the jewels in her hair glancing in the starlight, the rose that had been pressed against her lips, falling on the marble.

"Let us go in!—we have given time enough to the night, we must give the rest to the world."

"And while the world claims you, even friendship may at least claim this?" said Strathmore, as he stooped, and lifted from the ground the rich fresh rose which had rested against lips as fair and fragrant as itself. She laughed her gay mocking laugh; but her eyes were saddened still as she glanced at him while he held back the heavy draperies of a window for her to re-enter the drawing-rooms.

"Ah, I know you too well: to-night the roses are taken in flattery; to-morrow, withered and faded, they will be flung away with a mot! You are a man of the world, Strathmore, and all you prize is power. There is no State secret in the core of that rose."

"But there is a secret more fatal in the charm of the lips that have touched it."

Strathmore's eyes darkened as he spoke with the imperious and reckless passion she had rightly judged would be the only love to which he would ever waken, and which she had vowed to arouse in this man who held himself sheathed in an armour of proof; his words, losing the softness of suave compliment, were hoarse with a deeper meaning, and as he followed her he thrust the rose into his breast —the delicate leaves that had gained value in his sight, because her lips had touched them!

That night he drank deep of the delirious draught of a woman's witchery; that night, as he paid his gold to the Marquis, at écarté, he loathed the man who had bought her beauty with his title, and claimed her by right of ownership,

as he claimed his racing stud, his chef de cuisine, his comet wines!—he loathed himself for having him at his table and beneath his roof; for chatting the idle nothings of familiar intercourse with him; and bidding the friendly good night of host to guest, to the man whom he hated with the dark hatred of the Strathmore blood, which was ever stronger than their wisdom, and deeper than their love, and closer than their honour. True! We seat our foes at our board, and welcome what we hate to our hospitality, and eat salt with those who betray us, and those whom we betray; wronged Octavia smiles as she receives Cleopatra into heir house, and Launcelot shakes hands in good-fellowship with Arthur, the day after he has writ the stain on his friend's knightly shield! It is done every day, and he was accustomed to such convenience and such condonation; but Strathmore, when once roused, was a man of darker, swifter, deeper passions than the passions of our day, and the leaven of his race was working in him, beneath the cold and egotistic surface of habit and of breeding. As stillness fell that night upon his household, and sleep came with the hush of the advancing hours, and he stood in the silence of his own chamber, hating the husband, coveting the wife, knowing that both were now beneath his roof; he thought of her where, like the Lady Christabel,

> Her lovely limbs she did undress,
> And lay down in her loveliness:

till, with an oath, he pressed the broken rose-leaves to his lips with a fierce kiss where her own had rested on them, and hurled them out away into the darkness of the night.

Already—did he love this woman?

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## CHAPTER XVI.

"At her Feet he bowed and fell."

"I CONGRATULATE you on your fresh honours, old fellow. Bomont writes word the ministers have selected you for the Confidential mission to——. Ticklish business, and a very high compliment," said Camelot, one morning at breakfast, when Lord Vavasour had left for Spa, and his wife had been some weeks the reigning Queen at the Abbey.

Strathmore went on stirring his chocolate.

"Bomont has no earthly business to tittle-tattle Foreign-office secrets; however, since he's let it out, I may confess to it."

"You accept, of course? You must leave at once—eh?"

"The affair's been on the tapis some time. I always knew I should be selected to succeed Caradoc. Try that potted char, Lady Beaudesert," answered Strathmore, avoiding direct answer to either of Camelot's inquiries, while among his letters lay one which selected him, in a juncture of critical difficulty, to occupy a post which older diplomatists bitterly envied him, and which gratified his ambition and signalised his abilities to the fullest. Questions and congratulations flooded in on him from the people about his breakfast-table, among whom Lady Vavasour was not; she usually had her coffee in her own chamber.

"You will draw us into a war, I dare say, Strathmore," laughed Beatrix Beaudesert. "You dips love an embroglio as dearly as journalists love a 'crisis'; and your race are born statesmen. Your *berceaunettes* must have been trimmed with Red Tape; and you must have learnt your alphabet out of Machiavelli's Maxims! You're not like Hamlet; you specially enjoy the times being 'out of joint,' that you may show your surgical skill in setting them right."

"Of course," laughed Strathmore. "If half a million slaughtered gets a General the Garter, what does he care

who rots, so long as he rises? Man's the only animal that preys upon his species, and for his superiority calls himself head of all creation. The brutes only fly at their foes; *we* turn on our friends if we get anything by it!"

"*Fi donc!*" cried Madame de Ruelle. "You have just received the Bath, and are appointed to a post which all the diplomatic world will envy you. You ought not to be in a cynical mood, Strathmore. It is those with whom life goes badly, who write satires and turn epigrams; a successful man always approves the world, because the world has approved him!"

"True, madame; but at the same time there may be a drop of *amari aliquid* under his tongue, because the world has approved other people too!"

"Dear old fellow, how glad I am!" said Erroll, meeting him in the doorway a quarter of an hour afterwards. "My K.C.B.! a discerning nation does for once put the right man in the right place. On my word, Strath, I *am* proud of you!"

"Thank you!"

The two monosyllables were odiously cold after the cordial warmth of the other's words, and Strathmore crossed the hall without adding others. He was conscious that he could fling away power, place, fame, honour, if one woman's voice would murmur, "Relinquish them—*for me!*" And the consciousness made him bitter to all the world, even to the man who was closer than a brother.

"The deuce! How changed he is! It is all that woman's doings, with her angel's face and her devil's mischief; her gazelle's eyes and her Marcia's soul!" muttered Erroll.

"*Vous avez l'air tant soit peu contrarié, monsieur!*" said a voice behind him, half amused, half contemptuous, as Lady Vavasour, having just descended the staircase, swept past him, radiant in the morning sunlight; her silk folds trailing on the inlaid floor, and the fragrance of her hair scenting the air. Perhaps she had heard his words?

Lady Vavasour, however, could very admirably defy him and his enmity, and anybody or everybody else. She played utterly unscrupulously, but equally matchlessly, with Strathmore; now avoiding him, till she made his cheek grow white and his eyes dark as night with anger; now listening with a feigned rebuke, which made it but the sweeter, to the whispers of a love, that while she chid, she knew how to madden with the mere sweep of her dress across him.

She was a coquette and a voluptuary. She loved with the shallow, tenacious, fleeting love, such as Parabère and Pompadour knew, while romance still mingled with licence, as their best *pointe à la sauce.* Strathmore's nature was new to her. To first rouse, and then play with it, was delightful to this beautiful panther; and she did both, till a very insanity was awakened in him. *Love* is by a hundred times too tame and meaningless a word for what had now broken up from his coldness as volcanic flames break up from ice. It was a passion born entirely from the senses, if you will, without any nobler element, any better spring; but for that very reason it was headlong as flame, and no more to be arrested than the lightning that seethes through men's veins and scorches all before it.

She heard of his appointment to conduct the mission to —— as though he were her brother, in whose career she was fraternally interested, and nothing more; and spoke of his coming departure to Northern Europe as if it were a question of going into the next county for a steeplechase or a coursing meeting.

"Ah! you are going to ——?" she said, tranquilly, when she met him in the library, trifling with a new French novelette. "It will be very cold! Give my compliments to M. le Prince de Vörn; he is a great friend of mine, though he is a political foe of yours. His wit is charming!"

Strathmore, standing near her, felt his face pale with passion to the very lips as she spoke. She had wooed, while she repressed; she had tempted, while she forbade his love, as a woman only does who knows that she has conquered

where conquest is dear to her; and now—she heard of his departure for a lengthened and indefinite term as carelessly as though he told her he was going to visit his stables or his kennels!

He tried vainly that day to meet her alone; she avoided or evaded him from luncheon to dinner with tantalising dexterity. Letters to write, a game of billiards, chit-chat in the drawing-rooms—one thing or another occupied her so ingeniously, that not even for a single second did she give him the chance of a *tête-à-tête.* She knew he sought one, and pleasured herself by baffling and denying him, while her insouciant indifference tortured him to fury. Ambition had been the god, power the lust which alone had possessed him; with both within his grasp, he would now have thrown both from him, as idly as a child casts pebbles to the sea, only to feel the lips of Marion Vavasour close upon his own!

That night there was a ball given at White Ladies, one among the many entertainments which had marked her visit; it was to be, according to her command, a *bal costumé,* and as Strathmore went to dress he caught sight of the azure gleam of her silken skirt sweeping along the corridor to the State chambers. He crossed the passage that divided them, and in an instant was at her side; she started slightly, and glanced up at him:

"Ah! Lord Cecil, you try one's nerves! really, you are so like those Vandykes in the gallery, that one may very pardonably take you for a ghost!"

Strathmore laid his hand on her arm to detain her, looking down into her eyes by the light from above:

"I have sought a word alone with you all the day through, and sought it vainly; will you grant it me now?"

"Now? Impossible! I am going to dress. The toilette is to us what ambition is to you, the first, and last, and only love—a ruling passion strong in death! A statesman dying, asks, 'Is the treaty signed?' a woman dying asks, 'Am I *bien coiffée?*'"

Laughing, she moved onward to leave him, but Strathmore moved too, keeping his hold on her hand:

"Hear me you must! I told you once that I did not dare to whisper the sole guerdon that would content me as the reward you offered; *now* I dare, because, spoken or unspoken, you must know that the world holds but one thought, one memory, one idol for me; you must know—*that I love you!*"

The words were uttered which, old as the hills eternal, have been on every human lip, and cursed more lives than they have ever blessed. And Marion Vavasour listened, as the light gleamed upon the lovely youth which lit her face, and her eyes met his with the glance that women only give when they love.

"Hush, you forget," she murmured (and chiding from those lips was sweet as the soft wrath of the south wind!)—"*I* must not hear you."

But the eyes forgave him, while the voice rebuked: and Strathmore's love, loosed from all bondage, poured itself out in words of eager honeyed eloquence, with every richest oratory, with every ardent subtilty, that art could teach and passion frame. To win this woman, he would have perilled, had he owned them, twenty lives and twenty souls, and thought the prize well bought!

She listened still, her hand resigned to his, a warm flush on her cheeks, and her heart beating quicker in its gossamer nest of priceless lace; stirred with triumph, perhaps stirred with love. Then—she drew from him with a sudden movement, and laughed in his face with radiant, malicious mockery:

"Ah! my lord, you have learned, then, how dangerous it was to boast to a woman that you had but one idol—Ambition; that you desired Age, and despised Love! The temptation to punish you was irresistible;—you have learned an altered creed now!"

The silvery laughter mocking him rang lightly out upon the silence, and, ere he could arrest her, she had entered her chamber, and the door had closed. He stood alone in the empty corridor, stunned;—and a fierce oath broke from his

throat. Had this woman fooled him? The echo of her words, the ringing of her laughter, stung him to madness; the taunt, the mirth, the jest flung at him in the moment when he had laid bare his weakness, and could have taken his oath that he was loved, was like seething oil flung upon flame. He swore that night to wrench confession from her of her love, or—or—— He grew dizzy with the phantoms of his own thoughts. But one resolve was fixed in him; to win this woman, or—to work on her the worst revenge that a foiled passion and a fooled love ever wrought.

As he passed out of the State corridor and turned towards his own chamber he came unhappily upon Erroll.

"Is it you, Strath? I want a word with you; may I come in for ten minutes?"

"*Entrez.*"

Strathmore's voice sounded strange in his own ears; he would have given away a year of his life to have been left alone at that moment.

Erroll followed him into his chamber, however, noticing nothing unusual, for Strathmore, with Italian passion, had more than English self-control; and Bertie, who had had bad intelligence of a weedy-looking bay on whom he had risked a good deal for the approaching Cesarewitch, came as usual to detail his fears and doubts, and speculate on the most judicious hedging with Strathmore. With a mad love running riot in him, and a fierce resolve seething up into settled shape, Strathmore had to sit and listen to Newmarket troubles, and balance the pros and cons of Turf questions as leisurely and as interestedly as of old! Apparently, he was calm enough; actually, every five minutes of restraint lashed his pent-up passion into fury.

The Newmarket business done with, Erroll still lingered; he had something else to say, and scarcely knew how to phrase it.

"Will all these people stay much longer?" he began; "they've been here a long time."

"I don't tell my guests to go away," said Strathmore,

with a smile. "Besides, the pheasants just now are at their prime."

"The pheasants! Oh yes, but I was thinking of the women. To be sure, though, you must leave yourself in a few days; I forgot! When must you start for——?"

"It is uncertain." The subject annoyed him, and he answered shortly.

Erroll was silent a moment; then he looked up, his eyes shining with their frank and kindly light:

"Strath, you wouldn't take wrongly anything *I* said, would you?"

"My dear Erroll! what an odd question. I believe I am not usually tenacious?"

"Of course not; still I fancy you'd let *me* say to you what you mightn't stand from another man; I hope so at least, old fellow! We have never been on ceremony with one another yet; and I want to ask you, Cis, if you know how yours and Lady Vavasour's names are coupled together?"

He could not have chosen a more fatal hour for his question!

"Who couples them?"

The words were brief and quietly said enough, but Strathmore's hand clenched where it lay on the table, and an evil light gleamed in his eyes.

"Oh, nobody in especial, but more or less everybody," answered Erroll, carelessly, whom the gesture did not put on his guard. "Your attention to her, you know, must be noticed; impossible to help it! Naturally the men joke about it when you're out of hearing; fellows always will."

"What do they say?"

The words were quiet still, but Strathmore's teeth were set like a mastiff's.

"You can guess well enough; you know how we always laugh over that sort of thing. Look here, Strathmore!" and Erroll, breaking out of the lazy softness of his usual tone, leant forward eagerly and earnestly, "I know you'll take my words as they're meant; and if you wouldn't, it would be a

wretched friendship that shirked the truth when its telling were needed. If you called me out for it to-morrow, I would let you know what everybody is saying—that you are infatuated by a woman who is only playing with you!"

Strathmore leaned back in his chair, fastening his wristband stud, with a cold sneer on his face; it cost him much to repress the passion that would have betrayed him.

"The world is very good to trouble itself about me; if you will name the particular members of it who do the gossiping, I will thank them in a different fashion."

"The better way would be to give them no grounds for it!"

"Grounds? I don't apprehend you."

"You do and you must!" broke in Erroll, impatiently; this smooth, icy coating did not impose on him. "Whether your heart be in the matter or not, you act as though it were. You are becoming the very slave of that arch coquette, who never loved anything in her life save her own beauty; you, who ridiculed everything like woman-worship, are positively infatuated with Marion Vavasour! Stop! hear me out! I have no business with what you do; true enough! I am breaking into a subject no man has any right to touch on to another—I know that! But I like you well enough to risk your worst anger; and I speak plainly because you and I have no need to weigh our words to each other. Good God! *you* must have too much pride, Strathmore, to be fooled for the vanity of a woman!"

He stopped in his impetuous flood of words, and looked at his listener, who had heard him tranquilly—a dangerous tranquillity, thin ice over lava-flames! Strathmore only kept reins on the storm because it rose to his lips—to betray him.

"Pardon me, Erroll," he said, slowly and pointedly, "I will not take *your* words as they might naturally be taken, since you claim the privilege of 'old friendship;' but I must remind you that friendship may be both officious and impertinent. The office of a moral censor sits on you very ill; attention to a married woman is not so extraordinarily uncommon in our set that it need alarm your virtue——"

"Virtue be hanged!" broke in Erroll, impetuously. "You don't understand, or you *won't* understand me. All I say is, that hundreds of fellows will tell you that Marion Vavasour is the most consummate coquette going; and that as soon as she has drawn a man on into losing his head for her, she turns round and laughs him to scorn. What do you suppose Scrope Waverley and all that lot will say? Only that you have been first trapped and then tricked, as they were——!"

"Thank you, I have no fear! Lady Vavasour makes you singularly bitter?"

"Perhaps she does; because I see her work. Near that woman you are no more what you were than——"

"Really I must beg you to excuse my hearing a homily upon myself!" interrupted Strathmore, as he rose, speaking coldly, intolerantly, and haughtily. "As regards Lady Vavasour, she is *my guest*, and as such I do not hear her spoken of in this manner. As regards the gossip you are pleased to retail, people must chatter as they like, if they chatter in my hearing I can resent it, without having my path pointed out to me; and for the future I will trouble you to remember that even the privileges of friendship may be stretched too far if you overtax them."

While he spoke he rang the bell for Diaz, and as the Albanian entered the chamber from the bath-room, Erroll turned and went out without more words. He was angered that his remonstrance had had no more avail; he was hurt that his interference had been so ill received, and his motive so little comprehended. Like most counsellors, he felt that what he had done had been ill-advised and ill-timed; while Strathmore, indifferent to how he might have wounded a friendship which he had often sworn worth all the love of women, was stung to madness by the words with which Erroll had unwittingly heaped fuel on to flame. Men saw his passion for Marion Vavasour! He swore that they should hopelessly and longingly envy its success.

The fancy ball at White Ladies was as brilliant as it could be made; the great circle at the Duke of Trémayne's, the

people staying at Lady Millicent Clinton's, and at other houses of note in the county, afforded guests at once numerous and exclusive, and the Royal women who had been visitors at White Ladies had never been better entertained than was Marion Vavasour. As he received them in the great reception-room known as the King's Hall, that night, women of the world, not easily impressible, glancing at him, were arrested by they knew not what, and remembered long afterwards how he had looked that evening. He wore the dress of the Knights Templars, the white mantle flung over a suit of black Milan armour worked with gold, and the costume suited him singularly; while it yet seemed to bring out more strongly still the resemblance in him to all that was dark and dangerous in the Strathmore portraits. His face was slightly flushed, like a man after a carouse; his wit was courtly and light, but very bitter; his attentions to the women were far more impressive than his ever were—he might have been in love with all in his rooms!—but his eyes, dark with suppressed eagerness, and with a heavy shade beneath them, glanced impatiently over the crowd. Every one had arrived, but *she* had not yet descended; his salons were filled, but to *him* they were empty! This was no light, languid love, seeking a liaison as a mere pastime, which had entered into Strathmore for another man's wife; it was the delirium, the frenzy, the blindness, in which the world holds but one woman!

At last, with her glittering hair given to the winds, a diadem of diamonds crowning her brow, snow-white clouds of drapery floating around her, light as morning mist, and her beautiful feet shod with golden sandals, she came, when all the rooms were full, living impersonation of the Summer-Noon she represented. A crowd of *costumés* followed her steps, and murmurs of irrepressible admiration accompanied her wherever she moved; there were many beautiful women there that night at White Ladies, but none that equalled, none that touched her. The golden apple was cast without a dissent into the white bosom of Marion Vavasour; and at

sight of her his reason reeled and fell, and his madness mastered him, as it subdued him of Brocéliande before the witching eyes and under the wreathing arms of Vivien,

while the forest echoed Fool!

His face wore the reckless resolve which was amongst the dark traits of the Strathmores when their ruthless will had fixed a goal, and underneath their calm and courtly seeming, the fierce spirit was a-flame which made them pitiless as death in all pursuit. His eyes followed the gleaming trail of her streaming hair, the flash of her diamond diadem, with a look which she caught, and fanned to fire with one dreamy glance of languor, one touch of her floating drapery. And yet, even while the passion devoured him, he hated her for its pain—hated her because she was another's and not his! Do you know nothing of this because it has not touched you? —tut!—the forms of human love are as varied and as controlless as the forms of human life; and you have learned but little of the world, and the men that make it, if you have not learned that Love, often and again, treads and trenches close on Hate.

It was as though she set her will to make her beauty more than mortal, and goad him on till he was as utterly her bond-slave as the Viking whom, as the Norse legend tells, twenty strong men could not capture, yet who lay, helpless and bound as in gyves of iron, by one frail, single thread of a woman's golden hair. That night his passion mastered him, and all that was most dangerous, in a nature where fire slept under ice, woke into life, and set into one imperious resolve.

It was some hours after midnight, when he passed with her into a *cabinet de peinture*. The wax-radiance streamed upon her where she stood like some dazzling thing of light, some dream of the Greek poets, some sorceress of the East, some diamond-crowned Priestess of the Sun. In the stillness of the night they were alone, and her eyes met his own with a glance which wooed him on to his sweet temptation. Ambition seemed idle as the winds; fame he was ready to cast aside like dross; at the most brilliant point in his career, he was

willing to throw away all the past, and cut away all the future, so that her voice but whispered him "Stay!" His honour to the man who had been a guest beneath his roof, the bond which bound him to hold sacred the woman whom his house harboured, were forgotten and left far behind him, drowned in his delirium as men's wisdom is drowned in wine. He saw, remembered, heeded nothing in earth or heaven save *her*. And she knew the meaning of his silence as he stood beside her.

"So you will leave England very soon, Strathmore?"

The words were light and ordinary: but her word is but a tithe of a woman's language; and it was her eyes which spoke, which challenged him to summon strength to leave her; which dared him to rank ambition before her, and claimed and usurped the dominion which power alone had filled! It was the eyes he answered, only seeing in the midnight glare the fairness of her face.

"Bid me stay for *you*;—and I resign the Mission to-morrow!"

"What! desert your career, abandon your ambition, give up your power, and at a *woman's* word, too! Fie, fie, Lord Cecil!"

The sweet laughter echoed in his ear, and her face had all its witching mockery as she turned it to him in the light.

"Hush! My God!—you know my madness; you shall play with it no longer. Bid me stay, and I give up everything for you! But you must love me as I love; you must choose to-night for yourself and me. If you are fooling me, beware; it will be at a heavy price! Love me;—and I throw away for you, honour, fame, life, what you will!"

The words were spoken in her ear, fierce with the passion which was reckless of all cost; broken with the love which was only conscious of itself, and of the beauty that it adored. His face was white as death; his eyes gazed into hers, hot, dark, lurid as the eyes of a tiger. This mad idolatry, this imperious strength, made love new to her, dear to her, as its costliest toy to a child; a richer gage of her power, a stronger

proof of her dominion. A blush warm and lovely, if it were but a lie, wavered in her face; her eyes answered his with dreamy languor; the diamonds in her breast trembled with the heavings of her heart, and even while she hushed him, and turned from him, her hand lingered within his.

He knew that he was loved!—and his whole life would have been staked on that mad hour. His arms closed round her in an embrace she could not break from; he wound his hands in the shining shower of her amber hair; he crushed this soft and dazzling thing which mocked, and maddened him, against the chill steel of his armour as though to slay her. Burning words broke from him, delirious, imperious, half menace, half idolatry, born of the strong passion, and the sensuous softness, of which his love at once was made.

"I sacrifice what you choose, for you; or—I hate you more bitterly than man ever hated! *Friendship* between *us!* My God! it must be one of two things—deadliest hate, or sweetest love!"

He paused abruptly, crushing her with fierce unconscious strength against his breast, gazing down into the face so fatally fair. Her eyes looked into his with all their eloquence of loveliness; her amber hair floated, soft and silken, across his breast; and his lips met hers in kisses that only died to be renewed again, each longer, sweeter, more lingering than the last.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### The Axe laid to the Root.

"YOU have written!" she said, softly, looking up into his eyes.

The whisper was brief, but as subtle and full of power as any words that ever murmured from Cleopatra's lips, wooing him of Rome to leave his shield for foes to mock at, and his sword to rust, and his honour to drift away, a jeered and worthless thing, while he lay lapped in a woman's love, with no heaven save in a woman's eyes.

It was some hours past noon on the morrow of the *bal costumé;* she had not yet left the State chambers. Her hair was unbound, folds of azure, and lace of gossamer texture, enveloped her; and she lay back on her low chair, resting her cheek on her white arm, and letting her eyes dwell upon his.

"You have written?" she murmured, softly, her hand lying in his, her lips brushing his brow.

For all answer he put into her hand a letter he had just then penned—a letter to decline the appointment offered to him; to refuse the most brilliant distinction that could have fallen to him; in a word, to resign the ambitions his life had been centred in, to destroy the career, and the goal, of his present, and his future!

Her head rested against his breast while she read it, her eyes glancing over the few brief lines which gave up all power and honour, the world and the world's ambitions, and flung away life's best prizes at her bidding, as though they were empty shells or withered leaves. And a smile, proud and glad, came upon her lips. Even she had scarcely counted on binding him thus far to her feet;—on chaining him thus utterly her slave. She read it, then she lifted her eyes, now sweet with the light of love, her warm breath fanning his cheek.

"You will not regret it, Cecil? Are you sure?"

"Regret! My Heaven! what room have I to dream even of regret *now?* My whole future would be a willing price paid down for one hour of my joy!"

The last words were spoken in a madman's heedless, headlong love! He stooped over her, spending breathless kisses on her lips, and passing his hands through the golden scented hair which floated on her shoulders. Every single shining thread might have been a sorcery-twisted withe that bound him powerless, so utterly he bowed before her power, so utterly he was blinded to all that lay beyond the delicious languor, and the sensuous joys, which steeped his present in their rich delight.

An hour afterwards, Strathmore descended from the State chambers by a secret staircase which wound downward to the library. He listened; the room was silent; he looked through the aperture left in the carvings, by those subtle builders of the olden days, for such reconnoissance by those who need secresy; it was empty, and, pressing the panel back, he entered. As it chanced, however, in the deep embrasure of a window, hidden by the heavy curtains, Erroll sat reading the papers; and, as he looked up, he saw Strathmore, before the panel had wholly closed on its invisible hinges, that were screened in a mass of carving. Erroll knew whence that concealed passage led.

"Why was she not dead in all her demon's beauty before ever she came here?" he muttered to himself; for Erroll had grown jealous of Marion Vavasour; and had, moreover, strange stray notions of honour here and there, better fitting the days of Galahad than our own.

"You here, Bertie!" said Strathmore, carelessly, very admirably concealing the annoyance he felt, as Erroll looked up from his retreat. "What's the news?"

"Nothing!" yawned the Sabreur, stretching him the *Times*. "They notice your appointment for——; very approvingly, too, for the Thunderer. When do you go, old fellow?"

"I do not go at all," Strathmore answered briefly. He was aware it must be known sooner or later, and, in the reckless rapture of his present, ridicule, remark, or censure, were alike disregarded.

Erroll looked quickly up at him:

"*Not go?*"

"No. I have requested permission to decline the appointment."

There was a dead pause of unbroken silence; then, with a sudden impetuous movement, Erroll rose, pushing back his chair, and flinging his fair hair out of his eyes with a gesture of impatient anger:

"Good God! Strathmore, have you sneered at every love all your life through only to become a woman's slave at last!"

The swift dark wrath of his race glanced into Strathmore's eyes. At all times he brooked comment or interference ill; now he *knew* himself the slave of a woman, and while in the sweet insanity of successful love his serfdom was delicious, and its bondage dearer than any liberty that had ever been his boast, the words were still bitter to him. To any but his friend they would have been as bitterly resented.

"That cursed coquette!" muttered Erroll between his teeth, as he paced impatiently up and down. "What! she enslaves you till you wreck your whole future at her word, let all the world see you in your madness, and forget your honour even under your own roof!"

The words broke out almost unconsciously; he was rife with hatred for the woman who had robbed him of his friend, and grown more powerful with Strathmore than honour or ambition; than the present, or the future; than the ridicule of the world, or the triumphs of his career.

Evil passions passed over his listener's face, flaming into life all the more darkly because the accusation bore with it the sting of Nathan's unto David — *the sting of truth.*

"By Heaven! no man on the face of the earth, save you, should dare say that to me and live!"

Erroll looked up, stopped, and halted before him, his sunny blue eyes growing cordial and earnest as a woman's:

"Dear old fellow, forgive me! I had no right, perhaps, to use the words I did, but we have never stopped to pick our speech for one another. No!—hear me, Strathmore. By Heaven! you *shall!* Your honour is dearer to me than it ever will be to anyone, and I only ask you now to pause, and think how you will endure for the world to know that you are so utterly a coquette's bond-slave that you lie at her beck

and call, and give up all your best ambitions at her bidding. I am sinner enough myself, God knows, and have plenty to answer for; but no passion should have so blinded me to honour, let her have tempted as she would, that the wife of an absent guest should have ceased to become sacred to me, while trusted to my protection, and under my own roof!"

He stopped: and a dead silence fell again between them. They were fearless and chivalrous words, built on the code of Gawaine and of Arthur; and the spirit of the dead Knights, and of a bygone age, broke up from the soft indolence and easy epicureanism of the man, and found its way to just and dauntless speech; but speech that on the ear which heard it was useless as a trumpet-blast in the ear of a dead man, as little heeded and as powerless to rouse! The sting which lay in the Prophet's charge to him of Israel lay here; but here it touched to the quick of no remorse: it only heated the furnace afresh, as a blast of wind blows the fires to a white heat.

For one instant, while Erroll's glance met his, Strathmore made a forward gesture, like that of a panther about to spring; then with all that was coldest, most bitter, most evil in him awake, he leant back in his chair, with a smile on his lips.

"An excellent homily! Perhaps, like many other preachers, you are envious of what you so venomously upbraid!"

Over Erroll's face a flush of pain passed, as over a woman's at a brutal and unmerited word.

"For shame! for shame!" he said, hotly. "You know better than to believe your own words, Strathmore! I do not stand such vile inuendoes from you!"

Strathmore raised his eyebrows, his chill and contemptuous sneer still upon his lips; his anger was very bitter at all times when the velvet glove was stripped off and the iron hand disclosed, which was a feature of his race.

"*Soit!* it is very immaterial to me! Pray put an end to

these heroic speeches. I have no taste for scenes, and from any other man I should call an account for them under a harsher name."

"Call for what account you will! But does our friendship go for so little that it is to be swept away in a second for a word about a woman who is as worthless, if you saw her in her true light, as any——"

"Silence!" said Strathmore, passionately. "I bear no interference with myself and no traducement to her! End the subject, once and for all, or——"

"Or you will break with a friendship of twenty years for a love that will not last twenty weeks!" broke in Erroll, bitterly. It cut him to the quick to be cast off thus for the mere sake of a capricious coquette; from their earliest Eton days they had had no words between them till now that this woman brought them in her train!

"It is the love which appears to excite your acrimony!" laughed Strathmore, with his chilliest scorn; that swift, keen jealousy stirring in him which is ever the characteristic of such passion as his, even in its earliest hours of acknowledgment and return, and which permits no man even to look wishfully after its idol unchastised.

As sharply as if a shot had struck him, Erroll swung round, righteous indignation flushing his face, and his azure eyes flashing fire.

"For God's sake, Strathmore, has your mad passion so warped your nature that you can set down such vile motives in cold blood to my share? I have no other feeling than hatred for the woman who befools you. *That* I will grant you is strong enough, for *I* see her as she is!"

"Most wise seer and admirable preacher! Since when have you turned sermonizer instead of sinner?" sneered Strathmore, coldly, the dark wrath of his race gleaming in his eyes. "It sits on you very ill!"

"Sermonizer I am not, nor have I title to be!" broke in Erroll, his gentle temper goaded fairly into anger; "but still in your place of host I might have paused before I violated

the common laws of hospitality and honour to the wife of an absent man, let her have been my temptress as she would!"

In another instant words would have been uttered which would have cut down and cast away the friendship of a lifetime; but the door of the drawing-room opened.

"Are you tired of waiting, Major Erroll? Never mind! Patience is a virtue, if, like most other virtues, she be a little dull sometimes!" said Lady Beaudesert, as she floated in—a picture for Landseer—with a brace of handsome spaniels treading on the trailing folds of her violet habit.

Her presence arrested, perforce, the words that were rising hot and bitter to the lips of both. But when the axe is laid at the root, what matter if its work be delayed a few hours, a few days, a few months? The tree which would have stood through storms is doomed by it, and will fall at the last!

The words Erroll had spoken that day had been just and true ones: but, like most words of truth in this world, they had been rash, and idle as the winds to carry one whit of warning, to stay for one hour's thought the headlong sweep of a great passion. Now that she had, like himself, forgotten every bond of honour, and cast aside every memory save the indulgence of a forbidden love, the semi-hatred which had so strangely mingled with Strathmore's fatal intoxication had gone: and with it the last frail cord which had held him back from falling utterly beneath the sway of her power. If in the bitterness of an unwelcome love he had been her slave, in the delirium of a permitted one he was more hopelessly so still. Erroll's charge of having violated the laws of hospitality stung him for one instant to the quick; but the next it was forgotten, as her smile lighted upon him, and her silvery laugh rang on his ear! He weighed nothing in the scale against her; he cast away all to stay in the light of the eyes where his heaven hung; he remembered nothing but the exultant joy which lay in those brief, yet all-eloquent words: "he loved, and was loved!"

She held him in her fatal web, as Guenevere held her Lover, when the breath of her lips sullied the shield which no foe had ever tarnished, and her false love coiled with subtle serpent-folds round Launcelot till he fell. But in Marion Vavasour would never arise what pardoned and purified the soul of the Daughter of Leodegraunce: those waters of bitterness which yet are holy — Remorse and Shame.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### Guenevere and Elaine.

THAT night, when the men had left the smoking-room, and all was still, Bertie Erroll quitted the Abbey by one of those secret entrances which had been known to him, as to Strathmore from their childish days, and took his way across the park, treading the thick golden leaves under foot. A bitterness and depression were on him, very new to him, since he usually shook off all care, as he shook the ash off his cigar. After such words as had passed between them, he would not have stayed an hour under any other man's roof; but he loved Strathmore well enough not to resent it thus, though the breach in their friendship cut him more hardly than the sneers which had been cast at himself, as he paced on through the beech woods, that were damp and chill in the silent night, with white mists rising up from the waters in thin wreaths of vapour.

At some distance, just without the boundaries of White Ladies, a light glimmered through the autumn network of brown boughs and crimson leaves, from the casement of a cottage which stood, so shut in by wood from the lonely road near, that it might as easily have been overlooked by any passer-by, as a yellowhammer's nest on the highway. Its solitary little beam shone bright, and star-like, through the damp fogs of the chilly midnight; like the light which burns before some Virgin shrine, and greets us as we travel, way-

worn and travel-stained and foot-weary, down the rocky windings of some hill-side abroad. The simile crossed Erroll's mind, and perhaps smote something on his heart; it *was* the light of a holy shrine to him, but one from which his steps too often turned, and one which now reproached him.

He passed under the drooping heavy boughs, and over the fallen leaves, across the garden of the little cottage, drew a latch-key from his pocket, opened the door, and entered. A light was left burning for him in the tiny cottage entrance, which was still as death; he took the lamp in his hand, mounted the staircase noiselessly, and turned into the bed-chamber upon his left. It was small, and simply arranged, but about it, here and there, were articles of refined luxury; and half kneeling beside the bed, as she had lately knelt in prayer, half resting against it, in the slumber which had conquered the watchful wakefulness of love, was a young girl, delicate and fair as any of the white lilies that had bloomed one brief hour, to perish the next, on the lake-like waters of White Ladies. Her head rested on her arm, her lips were slightly parted, and murmuring fondly his own name, while

> her face so fair,
> Stirred with her dream as rose-leaves with the air.

His step was too noiseless to awake her, and he stood still gazing on her in that slumber in which Life, becoming at once ethereal and powerless, escaping from earth, yet lying at man's mercy, so strangely and so touchingly counterfeits Death. And while he looked, thoughts arose, filling him with vague reproach; thoughts at which the women he had just left, the women who knew him in intrigue, and in pleasure, and in idle flirtations, would have bitterly marvelled, and as bitterly sneered. The world in which we live knows nothing of us in our best hours, as it knows nothing of us in our worst!

They were in strange contrast!—the dazzling beauty of Marion Vavasour, on which he had looked a few hours be-

fore, with a sorceress-lustre glancing from her eyes, and rare Byzantine jewels flashing on her breast; with this fair and mournful loveliness, which was before him now, hushed to rest in the holiness of sleep, with a smile like a child's upon the tender lips, and with a shadow from the lamp above falling upon a brow so pure that it might have been shadowed by an angel's wings. They were in strange contrast!—and he stood beside his Wife, as Launcelot stood and gazed upon Elaine, while the pure breath of a stainless love was still upon his soul, and while the subtle power of Guenevere only stole upon him in the fevered, vague phantasma of a fleeting dream, unknown and unadmitted even there.

He stooped over her, and his lips broke the spell of her sleep with a caress. She awoke with a low, glad cry, and sprang up to nestle in his breast, to twine her arms about him, to murmur her welcome in sweet, joyous words.

"Ah, my better angel," he whispered, fondly yet bitterly, as she rested against his the cheek which still blushed at his kiss, speaking rather to his own thoughts than to her, "why are men so doomed by their own madness, that they sicken and weary of a pure and sacred love like yours, on which Heaven itself might smile; and forsake it for a few short hours of some guilty passion, that is as senseless as the drunkard's delirium!"

And she believed he only spoke but of the sweetness of their own love, pitying those who had never known such, and smiled up into his eyes.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### The Silver Shield and the Charmed Lance.

"Is he to monopolise her for ever? He's kept the field a cursed long time," said a Secretary of Legation, dropping his lorgnon, one night at the Opera in Paris.

"The deuce he has!" said his Grace of Lindenmere.

"Madame is marvellously faithful; and they say he's as mad after her now as when he first——"

"*Taisez-vous!* A scandal six months old is worse than dining off a *réchauffé*," broke in the Vicomte de Belesprit. "A naughty story is like a pretty mistress; charming at the onset, but a great bore when it's lost its novelty. All Paris chattered itself hoarse over their liaison last December; what we want to know *now* is—when will it come to an end?"

"I dare say you do," chuckled the old Earl of Beaume. "But the succession there would be as dangerous as to the Polish Viceroyalty; a smile from her would cost a shot from him."

"Ah!—sort of man to do that style of thing," yawned the Duke. "Don't understand it myself, never should. But he's positively her slave—actually."

"Plenty of you envy him his slavery; white arms are pleasant handcuffs," laughed Lord Beaume. "But that woman's ruined him, and, what's worse, his career. He gave up the special mission to —— because it must have taken him where her ladyship could not go! A man's never great in public life till he's ceased to care for women!"

"Which is possibly the cause, sir, why the country, looking to you for great things, has always looked in vain?" said Lindenmere.

The Earl laughed, taking out his tabatière; he was good nature itself, and his Grace was a privileged wit, *c'est à dire*, one of that class who have made rudeness "the thing," and supply the esprit they lack by the impudence they love! The fashion has its conveniences—it is difficult to be brilliant, but it is so easy to be brusque.

Those whom they discussed were Lady Vavasour and Strathmore.

Their love had been the theme of many buzzing scandals the autumn before, when, on leaving White Ladies, she had returned to Paris accompanied by him; but the buzz had soon exhausted itself, and the liaison had become a fact generally

understood, and but very little disguised. His place and right had been long unchallenged, however bitterly envied; and whatever rumour had said of her capricious inconstancy, as yet she had showed no disloyalty to her lover, whatever she showed to her lord. Either she really loved at last, or her entire dominion over the man who had scoffed at the sway of women satiated her delight in power; for no coquetries ever roused the jealousy, fierce as an Eastern's, which accompanied his passion, or flattered the hopes of those who sought to supplant him. If any magician had had the power twelve months before to show him *himself* as he had now become, Strathmore would have recognised the revelation, as little as we in youth should recognise our own features could we see them marked with the corruption they will wear in death.

Men who have been long invulnerable to passion ever become its abject bond-slaves when they at length bend down to it. Ambition was lulled to forgetfulness in the sweet languor of his love; had he been offered the kingship of the earth he would have renounced it, if to assume its empire he must have left her side! This man, who had long believed that he could rule his will, and mould his life, as though he were, god-like, exempt from every inevitable weakness or accident of mankind, had sunk into a woman's arms, and let the golden meshes of her loveliness enervate him, till every other feeling which might have combated or rivalled her power was drowned and swept away. Passion, often likened by poets unto flame, does thus resemble it—that, once permitted dominion, it can no longer be kept in servitude, but, mastering all before it, devours even that from which it springs. The strength which he had boasted could break "bonds of iron even as green withes" had ebbed away into a voluptuary's weakness: and under the even, brilliant, modern life he had led through these eight months in Paris, there had rioted in him the same guilty love which revelled in possession of the Hittite's wife, the same keen jealousy which slew Mariamne for a doubt in the days of old Judæa!

Lady Vavasour sat that evening in her loge at the Opera,

Strathmore in attendance on her, as he had been throughout the winter wherever she went, the Duc de Vosges and Prince Michael of Tchemidoff her visitors, for the *entrée* to her box, closely as it was besieged, was ever a privilege as exclusive as the Garter. Scandals, badinage, dainty flattery, choice wit lying in a single word, rumours which answered the "Quid Novi?" asked as perpetually in Paris as in the Violet City, circulated in her box; and she sat there in her dazzling youth, shrouded in black perfumed lace, like a Spanish gaditana, with the diamonds flashing here and there and gleaming starlike among her lustrous hair. Her coquetry of manner she could no more abandon than could a fawn its play, than a sapphire its sparkle; but, as I say, she never had fairly aroused that deadly jealousy which lay in wait within him, as a tiger lies ready to spring; though Strathmore, whose love was a sheer idolatry, as enthralled by her now as in the first moment when his kiss had touched her lips, begrudged every glance which fell on another.

"Strathmore has the monopoly now; how long will he keep it?" said the Duc de Vosges, as he left her box, while S. A. R. the Prince d'Etoiles entered it. "There are women who have *no* lovers perhaps (at least for our mothers' credit we all say so), as there are women who use no rouge; but when once they begin to take to either, they add both fresh every day!"

"Peste!" said Arthus de Bellus, pettishly, "he has had it a great deal too long. He must have bewitched her in his old English château! If a whole winter is not an eternal constancy, what *is?*"

"And this is May!" pursued the Duc, reflectively; "but those Englishmen are resolute fellows; they hold their ground doggedly in battle as in love; there is no shaking them in either——"

"*Vrai*—! There is only shooting them in both! If one picked a quarrel with my Lord Cecil, *par hazard*, and had him out——"

"He would shoot *you*, mon cher, and stand all the better

with madame for it," said the Duc, dryly. "Strathmore is the crack shot of Europe; he can hit the ruby in a woman's ring riding full gallop—saw him do it at Vienna!"

"Look, Cecil! There is your friend!" said Marion Vavasour, lifting her lorgnon to her eyes and glancing at the opposite side of the house.

"What an indefinite description!" laughed Strathmore, lifting his slowly. "We all have a million of friends as long as we are happily ignorant of what they say of us!"

"*Tais-toi* with your epigrams! All social comfort lies in self-deception, we know that," she laughed, with that glance beneath her silken lashes which had first fallen on him under the midsummer stars of Prague, and which still did with him what it would. "There is your friend, your brother, your idol—the Beau Sabreur, as you call him—I hope he will not be shot like his namesake, Murat; he is far too handsome! Look! it *is* he yonder, talking with Lord Beaume!"

"Bertie! so it is. What has he come to Paris for, I wonder?"

Strathmore's eyes lightened with pleasure, and his brightest smile passed over his face as he recognised Erroll; his attachment to him was too thorough to have been cut away by those words, even bitter though they were, which had been exchanged between them in the cedar drawing-room at White Ladies.

She, glancing upward at him, saw the smile, and this woman, rapacious, exacting, merciless, with the panther nature under her delicate loveliness, permitted no thought to wander away from her, allowed no single feeling to share dominion with her! And she prepared his chastisement.

"What is he in Paris for? To see me, I dare say! *N'est ce pas assez?* Go and tell him to come here; he will not venture without," she said, carelessly, while she leaned a little forward and bowed to Erroll with an *envoi* from her fan, for which many men in the house that night would have paid down ten years of their lives.

How well she knew her lover, and knew her power over

him! The smile died off Strathmore's face, the dark, dangerous anger of his race glanced into his eyes.

"Pardon me if I decline the errand. I am not your *laquais de place*, Lady Vavasour!" he said, coldly, as he leaned over her chair. The answer was too low for those who were in the box to hear it.

She glanced at him amusedly and shrugged her shoulders slightly:

"Many would think themselves flattered by being even *that!* Since you are refractory, there are others more obedient. M. de Lörn, will you be so good as to tell Major Erroll he may come and speak to us here? There he is with Lord Beaume."

Lörn left the box on his errand, and Lady Vavasour turned to D'Etoiles. She was the reigning beauty of Paris still; none dared to dispute with her the palm of pre-eminence. Sovereign of fashion, she bent sovereigns to her feet, created a mode with a word, and saw kings suitors to her for a smile. She must have surely, they thought, loved Strathmore strangely well, with more than the fleeting, capricious passions rumour accredited to her, that she allowed him so jealous and undivided a sway over her; or—perchance it was that "the dove" still loved "to peck the estridge," to tame this imperious will to more than woman's weakness, and see this man, who boasted himself of bronze, grow pale if her glance but wandered from himself!

"For shame!" she murmured to him, as he bent for an emerald which had fallen from her bouquet-holder. "How rude you were. Do you not know my motto is Napoleon's: Qui m'aime me suit!"

"Yes," answered Strathmore, unsatisfied and unappeased; "but I do not see why you should care to be followed by so very many!"

She struck him a fragrant blow with her bouquet of stephanotis.

"If a vast crowd follow ever in vain, is it not the greater honour to be singled from so many? *Ingrat!*"

The idolatrous passion that was in him for Marion Vavasour, which bound him to her will, and made him hold his slavery sweeter than all duty, pride, or glory, gleamed in his eyes as he stooped towards her in the swell of a chorus of the "Puritani," which drowned his words to any ear save hers:

"Ay! but love grudges the idlest word that is cast to others, the slightest glance that is bestowed elsewhere. There is no miser at once so avaricious and unreasonable!"

"Unreasoning indeed! You are much more fit for the days of Abelard and Heloïse than you are for these. No one loves so *now*—save ourselves!"

For the sweetness of the last word, as it lingered softly on her lips, murmured in the swell of the music, he forgave her the arch mockery of the first; and the sirocco of jealousy which, once risen, never wholly subsides, lulled, and passed harmless away for the present.

Meanwhile, in Lord Beaume's *loge*, Erroll received his message; received it with so much reluctance, almost repugnance in his tone and on his face, that the Comte de Lörn, who had only known him a Sir Calidore for courtesy and a very Richelieu for women, stared at him and shrugged his shoulders.

"Peste! the greatest beauty of the day sends for you, and you are no more grateful to her than this! And one must stand very well with her, too, to be invited to her box."

"I have no desire to 'stand well' with Lady Vavasour," said Erroll, impatiently, forgetting how strangely his answer must sound, for memories of this woman as he had last seen her at White Ladies stirred up bitterly within him; about her, and her alone, passionate words had passed between him and the man he loved; through her, and her alone, that blow had been struck to their friendship, from which friendship never rallies, howsoever dexterously the wound be healed.

"So much the better for you, for nobody has a chance of rivalling your friend, it seems. Allons! you will hardly send

her such a message back as that?" said the Frenchman, as he thought, "Ah-ah! the fox and the grapes!"

Erroll wavered a moment, uncertain how best to evade her summons: he felt an invisible reluctance, in truth; did it not seem too exaggerated and cowardly a word, almost a dread to enter this woman's presence? He recognised her sorceress power, and feared it; he knew her influence over Strathmore, and resented it; he believed it wisdom to shun, foolhardihood to brave her; he abhorred her nature, and he acknowledged her loveliness. Down at White Ladies, even whilst he had hated her for the dominion she exercised over Strathmore, and loathed her for the wanton passions she veiled beneath her delicate and poetic language, her soft and refined grace, he had felt the dazzling charm of that divine beauty sweep over and stagger him, as though her eyes had some necromantic spell.

Now, with all the stories that were rife of the utter bondage in which she held Strathmore, abhorrence is scarce too fierce a word for what Erroll felt for Marion Vavasour. Had there been a plausible pretext for leaving the house to avoid her he would have taken it; already on his lips was an excuse to Lörn for his attendance to her *loge*, when, as she leaned forward to lorgner the prima donna, her glance met his, and he saw her, with the diamonds glancing in her bosom and her hair, and her lustrous eyes outshining the jewels. He hated her, condemned her, feared her, approached her with aversion; but that enchantment which Marion Vavasour exercised at will over temperaments the most diverse, hearts the most steeled to her, stole upon him as the syren's sea-song stole upon the mariners of Greece, though they turned their prow from the fatal music; as the fumes of wine steal perforce upon a man, though he refuse to put wine even to his lips!

It seemed impossible to evade her summons; he turned and followed the Comte de Lörn, as in this life we ever follow the slender thread of Accident which leads us to our fate.

"What has brought you to Paris? Anything special?" asked Strathmore, when Lady Vavasour, having given him a smile and a few words of negligent graceful courtesy, continued her conversation with D'Etoiles.

The hot words that had been passed between them had been allowed to drop into oblivion by both—freely forgiven by the one who had had right on his side; not so freely by the one who had been in error, for it was one of the worst traits among many darker that belonged to men of his race and blood, that a Strathmore *never pardoned.*

"My uncle's illness," answered Erroll. "He was knocked over at Auteuil by paralysis; they telegraphed for me some days ago, but this is the first time I have left him. It will prove a fatal, they tell me, though perhaps a lingering, affair."

"My dear fellow, I must be 'extremely glad and vastly sorry' in one breath—the first for your inheritance, the last for your uncle!" smiled Strathmore. "Poor Sir Arthur—I wonder I never heard of it; will he last long?"

"He may die any day; he may linger on for many months; so the doctors say at least, but they always hedge admirably in their prognostications, so that, whether their patient be cured or killed *they* are always in the right! I fear there can be no chance for him."

"Fear, Bertie!—on your honour, now?" said Strathmore.

All the old baronet's estates were willed by him to Erroll (his title he naturally succeeded to); a property not extensive, but of high value to a cavalry man in debt and in difficulties.

"On my honour! What will come to me will set me free in very many ways; but to rejoice in a man's death because you reap by it, would be semi-murder."

"My dear fellow," cried Strathmore, "we all break the Decalogue in our *thoughts* every hour with impunity, and in our acts, too, if we're not detected:

> Le scandale du monde est ce qui fait l'offence,
> Et ce n'est pas pécher que pécher en silence!

Tartuffe's the essence of modern ethics!"

"Ethics! Murder! Death! Quelle horreur! What *are* you talking about?" interrupted Lady Vavasour, catching fragmentary sentences, and turning her head, with her eyebrows arched in surprised inquiry, as the Royal Duke bowed his congé and left her to go to the box of a scarcely more notorious, though a less legitimate lionne, who had not a coronet to leaven her frailties. "What horrible words to bring into my presence! Are you going to quit the world and organise a new La Trappe, Major Erroll?"

"Not exactly! Though truly there are living beauties that might drive us to as fatal a despair as the dead loveliness of the Duchesse de Montbazon awoke in the Trappist founder!" answered Erroll, almost involuntarily.

The eyes that dwelt on him, the subtle spell that stole about him, seemed to wrench homage from him to this woman in the very teeth of his aversion and his condemnation of her, as if to justify the taunt and the suspicion that Strathmore had thrown in his teeth at White Ladies, and to make him by his own words prove himself a liar!

Strathmore's eyes flashed swiftly on him, and a contemptuous smile came upon his face. The thought that prompted it did Erroll as rank an injustice as evil judgment ever wrought in a world where its wrong verdicts are as many as the sands of the sea, and its restitutions so tardy that they are rarely offered, save—to the dead.

Marion Vavasour smiled—her moqueur, radiant, resistless smile.

"Well, it is a proof of woman's omnipotence that love for her was even the cause and the corner-stone of the most rigid monastic establishment that ever abjured her! Have you been long in Paris?"

"Only a few days. I am staying in attendance on an invalid relative at Auteuil."

"Auteuil! Ah, we go there in a week or so to my *maisonette.* We shall be charmed to see you, Major Erroll, whenever you can make your escape from your melancholy duty."

He bowed, and thanked her. For the few words of invitation many peers of France and England would have laid down half the trappings of their rank! He acknowledged them, but chillily; he could not pardon her for her work; he could not forgive her the estrangement between him and the man he held closer than a brother; he could not see Strathmore under the dominance, and by the side of the woman who ensnared and enslaved him, without bitterness of heart. He read her aright, this sorceress, who could summon at will every phase of womanhood; and his instinct and his reason alike allied to give out against her an uncompromising verdict.

With but cold courtesy he made his adieux, and left her box as soon as it was possible to do so, having satisfied the bare obligations of politeness her message had entailed on him. And yet, despite all this, as Erroll drove away from the Opera towards the Maison Dorée that night, the remembrance, which involuntarily uprose to him, of a pure and childlike loveliness, dedicated solely to him, which he had often watched when hushed in the repose of a sleep whose very dreams were haunted by no other image, and murmured of no other name than his own, was rivalled and thrust aside by what he strove to put away from him—the memory of the glance which had just met his, like the blinding rays of a dazzling light. Strong and close about him was the treasure of a warm and holy love; but if even such a love be a silver shield in hours of temptation to the man who wears it (though rarely, I deem, is it so, as poets picture and as women dream), it could not ward off the charmed lance of Marion Vavasour's fascination. Her memory followed him through the gas-lit streets to the Maison Dorée; her memory haunted him still when he left the laughing companions of his opera-supper, and drove through the grey dawn of the early June morning back to Auteuil. Are we masters of our own fate, or are we not rather playthings in the hands of circumstances and chance, floated by them against our will, as thistle-down upon the winds that waft it? It is an open question! Half

the world mar their own lives, and the other half are marred by life.

"Now, Cecil, what cause was there for you to look as stern as Othello, and to assert that you were not my *laquais de place* to-night, when I merely paid an ordinary courtesy to your friend because he *is* your friend? You are as jealous as a Spaniard, and as ungrateful—as a man always is for that matter, so there is no need for a simile!" said Lady Vavasour that night, after her own opera-supper, when Etoiles, the Duc de Vosges, and others who had formed her guests at that most charming of all *soupers à minuit*, had left.

The light shone down upon her where she leaned back on a dormeuse, her perfumed laces drooping off her snowy shoulders, and the diamonds glancing above her fair Greek-like brow. They were alone; the Marquis was as polite a host to Strathmore as the Marquis du Châtelet to Voltaire; and Strathmore bent his head and kissed the fragrant lips that mocked him with such sweet laughter.

"Ma belle! there is cold love where there is no jealousy! Love waits for no *reason* in its acts; it only knows that it hates those who rob it of the simplest word, and is jealous of the very brute that wins a touch or a smile!"

She laughed as his hand pushed away from her a little priceless toy dog, gift of the Prince d'Etoiles, which had nestled in her lace.

"I tell you you are fit for the old days of Venice, when a too daring look was revenged with the dagger! Nobody loves so now; we are too languid, and too wise; and two years ago you would have sworn never to love so yourself, Cecil."

"Even so. But two years ago I had not met *you*."

"No. How strangely we met, too, those summer evenings in Bohemia! I told you it was Destiny."

He smiled.

"My loveliest! I do not think there is much 'destiny' in this life beyond that which men's hands fashion for them-

selves, and women's beauty works for them. But if fate would always use me as it did then, I would never ask other guidance."

She laughed, that soft low laugh, which in its most mellow sweetness has always a ring of triumph and of mockery difficult to define, yet ever menacing in its music.

"It was destiny! Let me keep to my creed. Bah! Life is governed by chance, and each of us, at best, is but a leaf that drifts on a hazardous wind, now in the sunlight, and now in the shadow; and the winds blow the leaves hap-hazard together, for evil, for good, whichever it be."

And Lady Vavasour laughed again at her own careless philosophies; a true epicurean, life had its most golden charm for her, and turned to her its sunniest side; her foot was on the neck of the world, and the world lay obedient, and enraptured by its enslaver; Emperors obeyed a sign of her fan, how should Fate ever dare to turn rebel against her?

Then that sadness, which gave to her gazelle eyes their most dangerous sweetness, came over them; she assumed by turns, and at will, every shape and caprice, now heartless and *moquante* as the world she reigned over, now tender and full of thought, as the women of whom poets dream in their youth.

"Ah, Cecil! I have taught you a better love than the Age and the Power you once coveted? And yet—who knows?—perhaps Ambition was the safer and the wiser, though not the more faithful, mistress."

His eyes dwelt, with all the passion which she had awakened in him, on the living picture before him, on which the light of the chandeliers shone, enhancing all its wondrous brilliance of tint, and its rare grace of form. His idolatry outweighed the world, shrivelled ambition as a scroll of paper shrivels in the flames, and filled his past, his present, and his future, only with Herself!

"I do not know—I do not care!" he said, passionately, whilst his lips were hot against her cheek. "For the love you have taught me, I would barter life and sell eternity! Ambi-

tion—it is dead in me! *You* are my world. I have forgot all others."

God pardon him! It was fatally true. And she looked up softly in his eyes, his slavery was sweet homage to her power, his insanity precious incense to her vanity; and as she knew that she was all the world to him, so she whispered him he was to her. She had vowed him so many times, with her enchantress tongue, her fragrant lips, her eloquence of eye and word—so she vowed him now.

"Ah, Cecil!" she murmured, with that caressing sweetness which was as resistless as the song of the serpent-charmer, "we do not love the less, but the more, because the world sometimes robs us of each other, and would sever us if it could by its laws!"

## CHAPTER XX.

### Bella Demonia con Angelico Riso.

THE Bosquet de Diane was situated midway between Auteuil and Passy, in one of the most charming retreats of those pleasant places; nestled among sycamore and lime-woods, catching from its terraces a distant view of the spires of Paris, and a nearer of the windings of the Seine, with a paradise of roses beaming in its gardens, and the luxury of a *sérail* lavished on its interior. Hither, in the sultry heats of early summer, when the thermometer was 38 deg. Réaumur, came Marion Lady Vavasour after a lengthened Paris season, with a choice *cohue* of courtiers and guests, to head a circle scarce less brilliant than that adjacent at St. Cloud; to pass her mornings, forming new sumptuary laws and despotic edicts of fashion; to frame fêtes à la Watteau in her rose-gardens, or in her private theatre; to spend her time as became the Marchioness of Vavasour and Vaux, and the Queen of Society.

As it chanced, joining the grounds of her *maisonette*, lay the grounds of a cozy bachelor-villa, that had been long in-

habited by an old English *bon viveur*, who, with very good taste, preferred Auteuil, and all to which Auteuil lies near, to his own baronial hall down in the dulness of Shropshire, where there was not a decent dinner-party to be had nearer than twenty miles as the crow flew.

The *bon viveur* was Sir Arthur Erroll, and the villa was, naturally, the Paris residence of his nephew, who had been summoned when a fit of paralysis threatened a sure, though a gradual, death for the baronet. The windows of the villa looked on to the glades of lindens and the aisles of roses, which formed the choicest portion of the grounds of the Bosquet de Diane; and, sitting in Sir Arthur's sick chamber, Erroll had full view of the Decamerone-like groups which strolled there in the luminous evenings, and had ever before him, as Lady Vavasour moved in the moonlight or the sunset radiance through the arcades of her orangeries, or down the length of her terraces, a living picture which united the rich glory of Giorgone with the aërial grace of Greuze. Perchance this constant, yet distant view of her, was more dangerous than closer neighbourhood; through it, perforce, she haunted his solitude, and usurped his thoughts.

Of necessity detained at Auteuil, he could not shut away what rose before his sight almost as regularly as the evening stars themselves. He avoided visiting at the *maisonette* as much as he could possibly do; to have constantly refused would have been to place himself in the absurd light of *censor morum* to Strathmore, and fostered rather than disabused the jealous error into which Strathmore had fallen, regarding the motive of his interference, the autumn before, at White Ladies. Still he went thither very rarely; but he could not walk through the Bois, or drive down the Versailles road, without encountering her carriage or her riding parties; and, when he sat beside the open casements of his uncle's chamber, he could not refuse his admiration to the brilliant and graceful form surrounded with her court, which came ever within his sight, when she swept slowly along the marble terraces, or beneath the avenues of her rose-gardens in the starlit

summer night. He ceased to wonder at Strathmore's infatuated passion—he ceased to marvel that, for this woman's loveliness, he flung away fame, time, ambition, everything that had before been precious to him, like dross; and, almost unconsciously and irresistibly, Erroll ceased also to care to drive over to dine at the Café de Paris, and sup in the Bréda Quartier, as he had done hitherto, but stayed, in preference, to sit beside the window of an old man's sick-room, with some opened novel, on which his eyes never glanced.

Perhaps Lady Vavasour perceived how markedly her own invitations were refused, yet how surely a lorgnon watched her from the balcony of Sir Arthur's villa that was visible through the limes; or perhaps she divined and resented the verdict her lover's friend gave against her? "Major Erroll is very rude. I have asked him to dinner three times, and he has three times 'deeply regretted' &c. &c.—*Anglicè*, refused! I have shown him courtesy for your sake, Cecil; now show him resentment for mine. I will *not* have you sworn friends with the man; he does not like ME!" said her ladyship, laughingly, one morning to a lover with whom her word was law, and who thought, as two scenes at White Ladies arose to his memory, "Perhaps he but likes you too well!"

The few phrases sufficed to sow afresh the doubt in Strathmore's mind, and increased the coolness that had come betwixt him and Erroll, whom Marion Vavasour treated with an absolute indifference, though occasionally she watched him with something of that curiosity which a flattered, spoiled, and beautiful woman might well feel for the only one who had ever dared to show her his disapprobation, and been proof against her charm; and occasionally her eyes lighted and dwelt on the rare beauty of his face with a look which meant—it were hard to say what—perhaps a challenge.

"Major Erroll, pray why do you persistently shun us?" she asked him, suddenly, forsaking the negligence with which she had hitherto habitually treated him, as was natural from

a proud and courted beauty to a man who had ventured to be ungrateful for her condescensions, and to show tacit rebuke of her conduct, without the prestige of a high rank to excuse him the insolence. It was one of those days when he had been compelled to come to the Bosquet de Diane, invited too publicly as he encountered them in the Bois, when riding there with one of Louis Philippe's equerries, to be able to refuse without drawing comment. They were for the moment almost alone, as they strolled through the gardens after dinner under the arcades of roses, while the starlight shone down on her, burnishing her hair to its marvellous lustre, and glancing off the Byzantine jewels above her brow, while the shadow of the night, half veiling her beauty, gave it a dream-like softness. She knew so well when it was at its rarest and its most resistless!

"Shun you?" he repeated. "Lady Vavasour can surely never do herself so little justice as to deem such a rudeness to her possible?" Courtesy demanded the reply, and he gave it only coldly.

"I deem it possible because it is the fact," she laughed carelessly. "Come, I never am refused or kept waiting, why do you do it?"

"It is much honour to me that you should even remark a discourtesy if I have been guilty of it," he answered, coldly still. He condemned and abhorred the nature which he read aright in her, and yet—his voice softened despite himself as he looked down upon her.

"You answer by an equivoque? For shame! I never permit evasions. Say frankly, Major Erroll, the truth—that you dislike me!"

As she spoke she turned her eyes full on him, their liquid darkness laughing with a light as of amusement that any mortal could be found so mad as to defy her power, so blind as to resist such loveliness; a light that flashed on him with its dazzling regard, challenging him to treasure hatred if he could, to preserve defiance if he dared, to Marion Lady Vavasour.

"Come," she repeated, a haughty nonchalance in her attitude as she turned her head towards him, while she swept through the fragrant aisles of her gardens, but with a mocking, amused smile about her lips—"come! the truth now, you dislike me?"

"Say, rather, Lady Vavasour, that I dread your power, and that—since you ask for frankness—I perhaps condemn its too pitiless exercise, its most pitiful results!"

They were rash and daring words to the pampered beauty, who heard the truth as rarely as a sovereign in her palace! They were spoken on the impulse of a frank nature and a loyal friendship, as Erroll's clear eyes turned on her steadily, with the first reproof that any living being had ever dared to offer to Marion Vavasour. From that moment his fate was sealed with her.

The glance she first gave him was one of grand amazement, of haughty indignation; then this woman, in whom was combined every fairest phase of woman's witcheries, and who could assume at her will any lying loveliness she would, looked at him with a faint blush wavering her cheek, and her lashes slightly drooping over her eyes, that lost their malicious laughter, and grew almost sad.

"Then you are unjust, and err in hasty judgment, a common error of your sex," she said, gently, almost mournfully. "Bah! you might as well condemn the sun that shone on the Ægean, because the blind and the unwise bowed down to it as God! You are prejudiced. *N'importe!* when you know me better you will not do me so much wrong."

And for the moment, as he listened, he forgot that she who spoke was the arch-coquette of Europe, was the avowed mistress of Strathmore; he forgot that those words on her lips were a graceful lie without meaning, only uttered as the actress utters the words of the rôle she assumes for the hour. They stood alone in the starlight, about them the heavy perfume of the roses that roofed the trellised aisle and strewed the path: and as she leant slightly towards him in the shadow, while her eyes seemed to glisten, and her rich lips to part

with a sigh, words broke from him unawares, wrenched out against his will by this woman's sorceress' charm.

"Let us know you as we may, you do with us what you will! Lady Vavasour, for God's sake take heed—have mercy—you hold a fearful power in your hands!"

His tone bore more meaning than his speech, which was rapid and broken, and his prayer, in its very warning, only bore fresh incense to her triumphs. Her eyes dwelt softly on him, and the warm hue still lingered temptingly, flatteringly, on the cheek that had no charm so perfect as its blush. Then she laughed gaily as she turned away, the Byzantine gems gleaming in the star-rays. "Power? Bah! over an hour's rest, a moment's pique, an evening's homage! *C'est grand' chose!*"

With this careless, coquettish mockery she left him, and was joined by Strathmore and the Duc de Vosges; and Erroll, turning suddenly away, strode down the rose-walk in the moonlight at a swift, uneven pace, not to return to the Bosquet de Diane that night. Twelve months before, he had sworn, in that certain remorse which comes to all men when they return to one who has been faithful to them in absence, with a reading of fidelity which they have never followed, that no other love should ever supplant or efface his Wife, sworn it in all sincerity, believing that he should guard his oath sacred and unbroken. She was very dear to him still, dear as our purer thoughts, our better moments, our most holy memories are dear to us; he loved her fondly, truly, deeply; yet, the holier love was but a frail shield against the unholier, which swept on him with a sirocco's strength, hated yet insidious. *Mes frères!* did ever yet the silvery wings of your better angel so wholly enshroud you, that they made you blind to the laughing eyes of the bacchantes that beset your path, and banned from your sight the wreathing arms and wooing lips that lured you into error? Never, most surely, out of the happy fables of women's credence, and of poet's song.

POWER!

It was the idol of Marion Vavasour's religion, in one form;

as in another, ere she had supplanted it, it had been her lover's. She warped and used it pitilessly; and though she had disowned it, never exercised it more capriciously and mercilessly than over Strathmore, now that she had set her foot on his bent neck, and bound him into slavery. No toy was so dear to this tyrant as the imperious and unyielding nature she had bowed like a reed in her hands! No pastime so precious to her as to show, by a hundred fresh ingenuities, how pliant as straw to her bidding was the steel of his will and his pride!

"From whom is that letter, Strathmore?" she asked one evening in the rose-gardens, her favourite haunt, where she sat with him, the Duc de Vosges, and an English Viscountess.

The letter just brought him was from a British minister arrived in Paris for a European congress, and he passed it to her; his will had sunk so absolutely into hers that he neither seemed conscious of her dominion or his own degradation.

She arched her delicate brows as she read.

"This evening? You cannot wait on him this evening. We play 'Hernani.'"

"I fear it is impossible for me to avoid going; you see what is said," he answered her. "The Earl would take no excuse in a matter of so much import——"

"He *must* take it, if I choose you to send him one. You cannot go, Strathmore; I need you specially."

"But indeed, since he does me the honour to desire this interview, I could not refuse it without marked slight, not alone to himself, but almost to the Government at home."

Lady Vavasour made a *moue moutine.* She knew a lovely woman is never lovelier than when she will not hear reason.

"The Government? What is that to me? You are to play Hernani, and that is of far more consequence!"

"But I assure you——" began Strathmore, while Lady Mostyn listened amusedly, and he caught a smile on the face of the French Duke that he bitterly resented: his rivals

Strathmore kept utterly at a distance. *She* had him in thraldom, but they had not.

"Well? what? I cannot have my theatricals disarranged to pleasure your Earl, especially as he is a person I most particularly dislike. What would be the consequence, pray, of your neglecting his summons?"

"I have said, it would be little less than an insult to Allonby in his ministerial capacity, and——"

"Insult him, then!" cried her ladyship, with charming nonchalance. "And après?"

Strathmore stooped towards her and lowered his voice for her ear alone.

"Après? Very natural offence from him personally, and great injury to my own future career, from neglecting the opportunity he affords me."

"*Galimatias!* I cannot have my tragedy spoiled for the Ministry's farce," she answered aloud, with a slight shrug of her shoulders. "You must send an excuse to the Earl, or"—and she dropped her voice—"if you insult me with divided allegiance, Cecil, I shall receive none. You used to boast Age and Power were all you coveted. You may go back to your old loves if you disobey *me*."

Perhaps it was that she felt jealous of her old rival, Ambition; perhaps it was merely to see her own power in its wanton completeness; but her eyes dwelt on him with the glance that, from her to him, commanded all things.

"Well!" she asked impatiently, "do you obey Lord Allonby or me? Which? I never share a sceptre."

A flush passed over Strathmore's face almost of anger; the look he caught on the face of Vosges reminded him for once of how completely he—a courtier, a diplomatist, a man of the world, who had sneered with his most bitter wit at love and all its follies—had become the slave of one passion, weak as water in the hands of one woman!

"Well? Which?" asked Marion Vavasour, with her charming petulance, and by the light in her eyes he knew that his capricious imperious tyrant would perchance resent

disobedience in this trifle on which her will was set, more than a far heavier disloyalty. And so great was his idolatry, that even with lookers-on at his degradation, he—who had held his will as bronze, and had boasted his self-dominion as omnipotent—let her rule him even in this wanton caprice.

He bowed his assent to her:

"What Lady Vavasour wishes is a command."

It was a strange oversight which, for a mere frivolous tyranny, made Lady Vavasour detain him that night at the Bosquet de Diane.

An hour afterwards, when the sun had sunk, and the ladies had re-entered the *maisonette* to dress for dinner, Strathmore, at her request, remained behind them, and took his way to the stables to look at her favourite mare, which had been lamed in exercising that morning, and which she would not leave solely to the care of stud-grooms and farriers.

It was dusk, and the second dressing-bell had rung, when, as he returned from the stables through the thick shrubberies which filled that part of the grounds, he stumbled against a female form, which crouched upon the ground in a position so suspicious of some thieving design, that he laid his hold upon her clothes, and bade her get up with no very gentle epithet. The woman shook his grasp off by a rapid movement, rose with a spring like a young doe, and stood confronting him, without any sign of guilt or fear, though her gipsy look, and dusty dress, confirmed him in his opinion that her errand lay towards any costly trifles, or loose jewels, which the open windows and vacated rooms of the *maisonette* might let her make away with undetected.

She did not seem to hear the words he spoke to her; but her eyes dwelt on him curiously and earnestly, while a smile, half melancholy, half bitter, played about her lips; and as he scanned her face in the fading light, he recognised in its dark Murillo beauty the Bohemian woman who had taken his gold, and prophesied his future, under the Czechen limes. The prophecy and the prophetess would alike have

been long forgotten, but for the one who had heard and seen them with him.

"What!" said the Zingara, in the Czechen patois, her mournful and monotonous tones falling dreamily on his ear —"what! the love is born already?—the yellow hair has drawn you in its net so soon? Take care! take care! Your kiss is not the first, nor will it be the last, on her lips——"

"Peace to your jargon!" broke in Strathmore, imperatively, catching enough of the words to incense him. "What are you doing here, an idle vagrant prowling about to steal?"

She threw herself back with a proud fierce gesture, the blood staining her bronze cheek, and a sinister light flashing in her eyes, that were darkly brilliant as those midnight stars from which, in olden days, her ancient race had prophesied to kings the fate of empires; by which now, in a strange travesty of their old fame and faith, they babbled to peasant-girls of love-predictions. "Steal!" she muttered in the Czechen dialect. "Steal—from *her* house! I would not drink a stoup of water that was *hers*, to save myself from dying."

The words were so fiercely spoken, that Strathmore, catching them imperfectly, thought he must have mistaken a language which, though known to him was unfamiliar, and laid his grasp upon her afresh.

"You must give some very good account of yourself, or I shall turn you over to the gendarmes. You are in private grounds at nightfall, and are here on no honest errand."

She turned her eyes on him half haughtily, half mournfully, with the same gaze with which she had studied his face under the Bohemian limes, and unconsciously his hand relaxed its hold and left her free. The regard, while it shamed the suspicion which accused her of low theft, struck him with the same chill as when her vague words had traced out his future in Bohemia. An artist would have given that look to the changeless and fathomless eyes of the Eumenides.

"I have no need to thieve," said the Bohemian, quietly

and proudly, "and my errand I will not tell you—now. In a little time, when you hate where you still love, you may share it—not yet. The sin is fair in your sight, and the kiss is sweet on your lips to-night; when the sin bears its curse, and the kiss has turned to gall, come to me; Redempta will show you your vengeance."

She turned swiftly, and had passed away in the gloom through the trees before he could arrest her; taking advantage of the pause of involuntary hesitance which he made, as he debated with himself whether this woman was a maniac, or whether again he might not have misunderstood the Czechen dialect, rendered doubly unfamiliar as it was by the gipsy patois she employed.

His eyes vainly sought her in the twilight. She was out of sight; and, disinclined to enter on the chase himself, he passed into the house, and apprising some of the servants that a beggar-woman was loitering suspiciously about the grounds, bade them have diligent search made for her. His order was obeyed; but the Bohemian was nowhere discovered. She had made her way through the twilight like a night-bird, and left as little trace of her path.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### The Brooding of the Storm.

"HERNANI" was never better acted at the Français than it was in the Marchioness's private theatre that sultry midsummer night. So many people were staying at the Bosquet de Diane that no other audience was needed, and save one of the Royal Dukes from St. Cloud, Erroll was the only *externe* guest. A little note with but half a dozen lines in it had been sent over to Sir Arthur's villa, signed "Marion Vavasour and Vaux." That very morning Erroll had vowed to leave Auteuil as soon as his uncle's death or recovery released him, and while forced to remain there to go no more to the *maisonette;* but—l'homme propose, et *femme* dispose! The few lines of

gracious courtesy and airy raillery on his eremite tastes invited him that evening, and broke asunder all his freshly-forged resolves!

From her bijou theatre, of which Lady Vavasour was singularly fond, actors and audience met again in the supper-room, decorated à la Louis Quinze, where she loved to revive the petits soupers that came in with the Regency and went out with the Revolution. These suppers were a peculiar charm of the Bosquet de Diane, and to-night one of the most brilliant of them followed on "Hernani," at which the sparkle of the wit might fairly have vied with the mots of Claudine de Tencin, Piron, or Rivarol; at which the Duc de Vosges, regarding his hostess, began to ponder that the advice of Arthus de Bellus might after all be the best, and that it would be well to shoot a lover whom there seemed no chance of supplanting; and at which Erroll's mots were so sparkling and his spirits so high, that some of the men there wondered to themselves if he were bent on eclipsing Strathmore.

The supper lasted long, every one loth to leave a table at which he was so well amused, and with the introduction of those perfumed cigarettes which Lady Vavasour permitted to be smoked in her presence, and which scented the air with a delicate Oriental odour, fresh jeux de mots seemed introduced, and it was very late when the Bourbon Prince took his departure. Son Altesse Royale was always cordially gracious and *en bon camerade* with Strathmore, whom he detained now at the door of his carriage, saying some last words relative to the Sartory Stakes, for which their horses were respectively entered; and when he rolled away, Strathmore stood outside the house a few moments, while Lord Vavasour left the entrance-hall after accompanying the Duc to his carriage. The air was pleasant, for the night was very sultry and oppressive, as with the near approach of a tempest; it reminded him of the one, now near twelve months past, when the first words of love had passed his lips to Marion Vavasour, and he had thrust into his breast the crimson leaves that had been pressed against her lips; it was she only of whom

he thought now as he paced up and down, while the dawn broke above the woods to the east. His passion had this characteristic of a worthier love—that its success had not weakened, but tenfold strengthened it, and her memory alone filled his thoughts now in the hot, hushed stillness. She was his! and he would have driven out of his path the boldest that had dared to seek her love, he would have revenged with death the fairest rivalry, that had dared to usurp his place.

Some twenty minutes might have gone by when, as he turned to re-enter the *maisonette* by one of the French windows which stood open to the piazza, the figure of a man came between him and the moonlight, he did not see whether from the villa or the grounds, though a moment after he recognised Erroll. They met as the one left, and the other turned to enter, the house, met for the first time alone since the day at White Ladies, when words about a woman, rash on the one side, bitter on the other, had laid the edge of the axe at the root of their friendship.

In a clearer light, or when his own thoughts had been less preoccupied, Strathmore must have noticed the change that had come over Erroll in the short half-hour that had gone by from the time of the Duc's departure, when he had been laughing and talking at the supper-table with all his usual gaiety, and even more than his usual wit. Then, his mots had sparkled through the conversation, dropped out in his soft, lazy voice, and his laugh had rung as often and as clearly as a young girl's—now, his face was haggard and lined, and as he pulled the Glengarry over his eyes his hand shook slightly, like the hand of a man who has been drinking deeply, which was scarcely the case with him, since he had never left the society of titled women.

Strathmore, however, did not observe this; it was very dark just then, as the clouds swept over the moon, and the lights from Lady Vavasour's villa, which were streaming full in his own eyes, dazzled them, while Erroll stood with his back to their blaze.

"I thought you had left us, Bertie. Have a cigar?" he

began, holding out his own case. "What a hot night, isn't it? There's a storm brewing. We shall have it down in half an hour."

"It looks dark," said Erroll, briefly, as he struck a fusee.

"Mild word! How sweetly those limes smell; rather oppressive, though. I will walk across the grounds with you to Sir Arthur's; how is he to-day?"

"Not much better."

"Well, really that tyrannous old gentleman has lived quite long enough," laughed Strathmore, as he moved down the terrace steps. "I want you to have that Hurstwood property, the timber is magnificent. What do you think of Milly Mostyn?—lovely figure, hasn't she? Only, unluckily, some wicked fellows *do* say it is sadly fictitious, and disappears when her maid disrobes her."

"We're often tricked in that way," laughed Erroll. But the laugh was forced, and he pulled his cap down over his eyes as they walked on under the limes and across the lawn of Marion Vavasour's rose-gardens, Strathmore talking to a spaniel of hers, that had run after and leapt upon him—a beautiful creature with a collar of silver bells. Erroll glanced at the spaniel as they strolled on in silence farther, and a bitter, haggard smile came on his face. "She caresses you to-night—she will caress me to-morrow—and a German Prince or a French Duc the next day!"

Strathmore laughed slightly; his laugh had a peculiar intonation; it was not often that it warmed, but rather chilled.

"Poor Bonbon! How severe you are on her. What has she done to deserve such philippics?"

"Nothing! She merely made me think that she strangely resembles—her mistress!"

"Her mistress!" repeated Strathmore. He hated to hear the name of Marion Vavasour spoken by any. "Your remark is open to an odd construction, Erroll; what do you mean by it?"

Erroll swung round and paused where they now stood, under the limes in the midst of Lady Vavasour's gardens, no-

thing near them but the night birds, which swept with a swift rush through the foliage, fleeing to refuge before the storm —nothing watching them but the quick lustrous eyes of the dog, that glanced rapidly from one to the other.

"Strathmore! do you believe *now* in the love of that woman as you did twelve months ago?"

"To the full."

The answer was mild as yet, but Strathmore's eyes were beginning to glitter coldly and angrily. Of all things, he hated his personal feelings to be probed, his personal matters touched.

"What!" broke in Erroll; his manner was utterly changed from its usual soft and lazy nonchalance, and his words were spoken by hoarse, abrupt efforts. "What! you are as mad about her, then, as you were a year ago? You never see—you never think——"

Strathmore laughed a little again, more chillily than before:

"My dear Erroll! a year before you were so good as to intrude your counsels on me—pray don't be at the trouble to repeat them. I bore rather ill with your interference then, I may do so still worse now."

"Bear with it as you will! but do you mean to tell me, then, that, arch coquette as Marion Vavasour is, you are mad, blind, infatuated enough to believe she will for ever——"

"'For ever' is a word for fools," interrupted Strathmore, with his chilliest smile; "even forbearance will not last, 'for ever,' if it be tried too far, as *you* take a fancy to try it to-night!"

"For God's sake, do not let our friendship be broken for *her!*" muttered Erroll, with so strange a vehemence and pain that the spaniel, Bonbon, jumped upon him, whining plaintively. "It will stay by us when all the women's love on earth has rotted out of our hands—do not let *her* destroy it!"

"Faugh!" said Strathmore, with contemptuous impatience. "If we had left the ladies' presence at supper, I

should say our good host the Marquis's wine had got in your head, mon cher! The duration or rupture of our *entente cordiale* lies in your own choice; all I beg of you is, cease to meddle with my private matters. I must take the liberty to remind you, that you are neither my keeper nor my father-confessor!"

Strathmore's words were light, sneering, and cold: such, flung at a man in a moment of high excitement, keen suffering, and strong feeling, are like ice-water flung on flames; they came so now to Erroll, and on this spur he said, what else might never have passed his lips.

"You must be a madman or a fool, Strathmore!" he broke in hotly and quickly. "I do not want to be your confessor, to see that you are fettered hand and foot. It is no secret now, you never attempt to keep it so. You are the slave of her idlest caprice, you are utterly chained and infatuated by her—all the world sees it. It is a thing publicly and plainly known enough. Men jest and jeer over it!——"

"Because they envy it—as perhaps *you* do?"

"They ridicule you behind your back," went on Erroll, hurriedly, not noticing (or evading) the sneer, which was all the more cutting for its tranquillity. "I tell you what they —sneaks and cowards—only say out of your hearing. You have no will of your own with her—she rules you as she pleases. Great Heavens! can you make such a byword of your name, such a wreck of your ambition, for the sheer sake of this wanton adultress!"

"Silence!"

The word hissed out on the air like the ring of a bullet. The black, silent wrath of his vengeful race glared in Strathmore's eyes till they gleamed like steel, and he turned away with a smile that had darker meaning in it than the hottest fury, or menace, that could have shaped themselves in oaths or words.

"I should shoot any one else dead for that to morrow morning. I do not need to say our acquaintanceship ceases

from to-night? *Bonbon, ma belle, allons-nous-en! Voilà la pluie qui tombe.*"

He moved away with a low and punctilious bow of contemptuous courtesy; but with a sudden movement Erroll swung round and stood before him in the path; in the yellow moonlight his face looked very pale, and the nerves of his lips twitched under his moustaches.

"Stop! we shall not part like that!"

They stood face to face in the middle of Marion Vavasour's paradise of flowers, while the first storm-drops fell among the leaves above head slowly one by one, and the garish light of the moon, which looked duskily red against the clouds, strayed in streaks across the darkness.

"Wait a moment!" Erroll's voice was thick as he spoke, and shook slightly. "I risked death for you once, I would do it again to-night. We have lived, and shared, and thought together, as though the same mother had borne us. We have not prated about it like boys, but we have held each other closer than men of the same blood do. We never had an evil word between us till *she* brought them. Strathmore! is all *that* to be swept away in a single night?"

The words were more eloquent by feeling than they were by rhetoric; they would have softened most men: Strathmore they did not even touch. He stood with his arms folded and his cigarette in his mouth, while his face wore its darkest, deadliest scorn. When his will was crossed, his wrath was roused, or his pride touched, the man was bronze; words could not scathe, pity could not stir, memory could not soften him. Once his glance grew a little gentler, it was at Erroll's first words; but it soon passed away, and the merciless scoff set on his lips again.

"You are admirably theatrical! but we are not playing 'Hernani' now, and I should prefer that we used the language of gentlemen. It is sad waste of stage-talent, and I should like fewer phrases and more rational ones! Lady Vavasour can in no way be charged with having caused the 'evil words' you speak of; you have only yourself to thank for them by

your madman's conduct, and by your very marked insolence to me. Be so good as to oblige me by letting me pass?"

"Not yet," swore Erroll, between his teeth; a hot flush had come on his face, and his eyes were excited; Strathmore's words cut him to the quick, less for their insult, than their chill and mocking heartlessness. "You insult me for her sake —you turn against me because I tell you frankly what all your friends and enemies say with one voice behind your back—because I seek to warn you against your insane belief, your wretched slavery, with a wanton coquette, a titled courtesan? What if I told you she were faithless to you?"

For an instant the words struck Strathmore like a shot, and he made one fierce swift panther-like movement, as though to spring upon and rend limb from limb the man that dared to whisper this thing to him; then he restrained himself, and laughed a low, cold imperious laugh of contempt and of power; he took the cigarette leisurely from his lips, and his eyes, that glittered like a furious hawk's, fastened on Erroll with deadly significance.

"What!" he said, slowly, and gently winding a loosened leaf round the cigarette. "*What?* Why, you would give me your life for the lie, that is all."

"But if I could prove to you that it were true?"

"Prove it, then! You have dared to hint it, dare to make it good!" hissed Strathmore through his teeth, where he leaned forward as a boar-hound strains to leap upon his foes, while the leash holds him back from the death-grip.

The blood rushed to Erroll's face, staining it crimson; his head sank like a man suddenly and sorely stricken; he stood motionless in the still and sultry night.

"Prove it, if you are not the greatest dastard upon earth!" hissed Strathmore, his voice vibrating with the suppressed passion, which was worse in men of his blood than the darkest wrath of a more open and a quicker spent anger. "Prove it, I say, if it is not the vilest lie that jealousy ever spawned!"

"My God! it is the *truth* I spare you!"

The words wrung out from him, died on his lips too low to be overheard, as he forced them back to silence, by the might of a generous self-sacrifice which wrestled in conflict with a fiery temptation. He stood silent, stood to be branded as a liar! No other man would have uttered that word to Bertie Erroll and lived when the dawn rose.

Strathmore looked at him, in the uncertain shimmer of the moon that streamed fitfully between them through the boughs; and he laughed, tauntingly, scornfully, imperiously, while a cold exultant light glittered in his eyes, and a haughty scorn sat on his lips.

"You dare not? I thought so. Fie, sir, for shame! So this is cowardice as well as falsehood? You play in a new *rôle!*"

The words cut through the air like the swift whirr of the sabre, and Erroll—stood silent still. The veins swelled to cords on his temples; the blood left his face till it looked white and drawn like a corpse; he struggled with a horrible temptation. A word uttered, a word held back: in this lay the whole gist of a great self-sacrifice, and of a great revenge; in this lay the whole powers of his choice. With a word he could strike down the man who stood there in the yellow weirdly light, scorning, and taunting, and thrusting liar and coward in his teeth. With a word he could cast him out of the paradise where he had lain so long, cast him out of every one of its sweet hours, every one of its honeyed draughts; with a word he could turn his exultant idolatry to loathing hate, to bitter shame. With a word! And that word he was gibed and dared to utter!

It was a deadly struggle, but the past, with all its boyish memories, was closer knit about his heart than about the heart of him whose laugh was grating on his ear, and whose insults were falling on his brain like drops of fire. His head drooped, his lips moved faintly, and he muttered like a man in his extremity:

"God give me strength to keep silent!"

The words were very low, and were unheard, as the night-

birds cleft the air with a rushing sound, and the winds rising swept up with a moan through the trees—the moan of the storm afar off.

A moment more, and he lifted his head with a gesture of proud grace; he chose to endure insult, aspersion, wrong, rather than do what he held in his power to do now—lay the burden on the shoulders, and turn the steel back into the breast of the man who had been his brother in all save the ties of blood.

"Since you deem it a falsehood, hold it one—watch your own treasure! For the sake of the past, I let pass your words; *I* can afford to be called a coward. Strathmore! if we must part, let it be in peace."

He held out his hand as he spoke, and his voice grew mellow as music; the moonlight fell full upon his face, with its fair and fearless beauty, while his eyes were soft with the wistful, forgiving, lingering gaze of a woman. The look, the words, the action, should have unlocked a flood of olden memories and thoughts of youth, and should have swept away, as the light of morning sweeps aside an evil dream, all the dark and pitiless passions which a few seconds had been long enough to beget and bring to birth. But in the tangled web of Strathmore's nature ran one hell-woven thread—in anger he was pitiless, in revenge relentless. With his sneer on his lips he signed aside the offered hand, and in the ghastly light his eyes looked into those which met him with gallant fearlessness and wistful tenderness: but his own neither changed nor softened.

"You might know me better—I never forgive!"

And with those brief, calm words he turned and passed across the sward, followed by Lady Vavasour's spaniel. Once, when he had reached the marble piazza of the villa, he turned and glanced at the night, as he called the dog to follow him. Erroll was out of sight. There were only the heavy darkness, which hung like a pall above the earth, and the angry moon, gleaming blood-red where she glared through the mist. The

roar of the winds was rising louder, and from afar off the thunder broke, subdued and sullenly.

The storm was near at hand.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### The Ashes in the Lamp.

THERE was no moment when Lady Vavasour was so resistless as in negligée in her own dressing-room. With half the pearls and diamonds of her regalia glittering on her in the presence-chamber of St. James's or the Tuileries, though perhaps more dazzling, she was less dangerous, than reclining among her cushions like the odalisque of a harem, with the light softly shaded and the air scented with attar of roses, with her shower of hair unloosed, and the folds of some texture, white as snow, or delicate in colouring as the blush on the opal, half enshrouding, half unveiling her, as the sea-foam the goddess. She was so lovely, then, at midnight or morning; and it was a privacy wherein so few saw her, while of even those few, each believed himself the only one!

Strathmore looked at her where she lay, with her feet softly sheathed in pearl-broidered slippers, and a slight smile of amused reverie just parting her lips. It was the morning after *Hernani*, and he thought of the hint that had been thrown out to him the night before, with disdainful ridicule, and bitter scorn of the man who had employed such methods to implant the lie he had not even dared repeat. Long ago at White Ladies he had suspected where the root of Erroll's bitterness upon her lay; in the last few weeks at Auteuil his suspicion had strengthened into certainty, and this morning, as he felt her hand wander over his brow where he lay at her feet, he repented that he had allowed the memory of any friendship to stay him, and that he had not washed out with fitter punishment the coward envy that had sought to revenge itself on him by the suggestion of a hideous suspicion. Truly all better things are swept away betwixt men, when once the face of a woman has come between them!

"What are you thinking of, caro?" she asked him, softly touching his hair.

"I was thinking—how many would make you faithless to me if they could."

"What a wide field for speculation—there are hundreds! Well, if they succeeded, I should not expect you to complain."

"Hush! Do not jest about that."

"Why not?" she laughed. "Love wisely taken *is* a jest, you know. You would have no right to complain, Cecil. One may be queen of all the world, but not sovereign of Oneself; and our hearts are like Ben Jonson's 'blow-balls,' now here, now there, wherever the winds of chance and caprice like to float them. Indeed, I should expect you to take your congé with the most tranquil grace. Come! what *would* you do if I said I loved you no longer?"

The question was asked with that mocking malice which was part and parcel of her nature; this delicate, youthful creature loved to torture! His passionate eyes looked up into hers with the jealous love of Othello.

"Do! God knows! Take your life or my own—or both!"

The answer was not wholly a jest, too deep a meaning lay in the look he fastened on her and the unconscious vibration of his voice; and, for once, she felt a vague terror at the force of the love she had delighted to excite and feed, till it lost all reason in its madness; for once she felt that she had roused what she could not so easily allay, and that the weakness she triumphed and tyrannised over, was a strength which might one day menace her, when no words of hers would be able to soothe it away. For the moment she feared the work of her own will, the next she gloried in her power, and laughed, her white fingers caressingly wandering among the dark chesnut waves of his hair.

"What a horrible answer, Cecil! One would think we were in the *Cinque Cento!* You swift, silent Strathmores have much more of the Italian in you than of the English nature. You ought to be a Colonna or a Malatesta, with the steel in

your sleeve, and the poison in your ring. What! has one love become so necessary to you, that life would be unbearable without it? Oh, Lucifer, Son of Morning, how art thou fallen!"

"But my fall has opened heaven to me, not exiled me from it," smiled Strathmore, as he lay at her feet. "Why do you wonder at my answer? Love has turned to crime in its agony more than once since the world began."

"Perhaps—but not in *our* world——"

"Where passion enters all worlds have the same law! You have made me learn the same madness as an Israelite learnt from Mariamne a thousand years ago, as twice a thousand a Spartan learnt from Cleonice."

"Who both taught it to be slain by it! What an ominous souvenir! You would not slay *me*, Cecil?"

And the loosened tresses swept against his brow, and her eyes looked laughingly yet lovingly into his.

"Almost I could, rather than other eyes should feast on you. Ah, Marion! when men love as I love, they loathe the very daylight to look on what they idolise."

"*Tu es fou*," she interrupted him, but the words were spoken so softly that they were themselves a caress. "It is a madness, Cecil! But why, I wonder, are men who love us as you do, imperiously, avariciously, jealously, and would hate us as pitilessly, always most dear to women? Why? It is very *bête*."

"Why? Because you know no love, worth the name, ever yet bore the shadow of a share in what it loved; because you delight to feel yourselves the mistresses of a man's life, and taste your power to give him misery or rapture, to yield him a god's delight, or cast him out to worse torture than the cursed! To learn how men can love, women must be loved as I love you."

"Ah, my cold, proud Strathmore, what lava flames lay beneath the ice!" she murmured, while the smile still hovered on her lips. "You did not know your own nature till I loved you!"

As she stooped towards him, her caress lingering on his brow, the forward movement dislodged a note which lay among the laces, silks, and Eastern stuffs piled on her luxurious couch, so that it fell, with its superscription upward, upon Strathmore's arm. He took it up to throw it towards a table which stood near, attaching no import to it, but Lady Vavasour with a quick movement interposed her hand, and as he gave it to her he caught sight of the handwriting. Coupled with the memories of the night that was just passed, it struck on Strathmore with a keener suspicion.

"You correspond with Erroll?" he said, quickly, keeping the note in his hand.

"I invite him to dinner, and he answers me," she said, carelessly, with a little half-suppressed yawn; "and I do it pretty often, since he is so adored a friend of yours."

"Is this a dinner acceptation?"

"No, a refusal. I fancy Milly Mostyn said something about his going back to England."

She had moved her hand again as if to receive the note, but had checked herself, and lay with her head resting on her arm, with negligent grace, and her lashes drooping languidly. Nothing could be more easily indifferent than her manner, but as his eyes fastened on her, a faint colour deepened the sea-shell bloom on her cheeks, and Strathmore noted it with the swift Moor-like jealousy that always runs in leash with such a love as his. On his impulse he would have wrenched the envelope open; honour and courtesy compelled him to restrain himself, but he did not give up the note.

"Will you permit me to read this? I have my reasons," he asked her. He believed she might resent, but could not refuse him.

"No!"

The single prohibition was uttered with disdainful nonchalance and haughty sovereignty; the superb and graceful indignation of a proud woman subjected to a doubt that is insult.

"*No?* Why not? You claim your right to my confidence, I claim my title to yours."

She raised herself upon her arm from her cushions, with questioning wonder in her eyes, and a smile of scorn upon her lips—she, Marion Vavasour, to be arraigned in judgment by a lover who was as wax in her hands, and whom she could have bent to any sin, or any folly, at her word! *She* to be doubted, questioned, opposed!

"Confidence!" she re-echoed, with a scornful curl on her lovely lips, and an angry light in her eyes, very new to them, for Marion Vavasour was by nature of a sunny, insouciant temper, rarely troubled by irritation or bitterness. "What confidence can be needed in such a trifle? You have lost your senses, Cecil, I think. Certainly, since you presume to disbelieve my word, I shall not allow you to insult me by verifying it."

"It is not I who have lost my senses, but you your memory, Madame," said Strathmore, the black jealousy in him leaping into sudden life. "Discourteous or not, I must doubt either your word or your recollection. This is a strangely lengthy 'dinner refusal.'"

The letter, which had half fallen from its envelope, was of four pages, closely covered with many lines. For an instant her colour deepened and then died out, leaving her cheek pale, her eyes sank beneath his, and her fluent tongue was silent. Strathmore rose to his feet, grasping the letter in his hand, a hideous suspicion coiling round him, and the jealous love in him working up in silence.

"Since you must be in error as regards its meaning, Lady Vavasour, do you *now* permit me to read this mere 'dinner refusal?'"

"No!"

And as the single word was launched from her lips in haughty denial, with the swift movement peculiar to her she raised herself from her pile of cushions, caught the note in her hand, twisting it by a rapid action from his hold, and held it to a spirit-lamp, that was burning liquid perfume on

the table, which stood, with her coffee, at her elbow. The flame caught, it flared alight, and shrivelling in a second, the note fell, a harmless heap of light grey ashes, into the jasper saucer of the lamp, its words destroyed, its secret safe. Then she laughed softly and amusedly at her own success—her mood changing like a child's.

"Amico mio," she said, gaily, "never oppose a woman—she will always outwit you! While you have but one mode of Menace, we have a thousand resources of Finesse!"

Lady Vavasour was laughing, tranquil, at her ease again, now that the note was floating among the liquid perfume in ashes which could tell no tales. Done in one moment, ere he could arrest her hand or avert the flame, the action literally for that moment confounded Strathmore, and struck him dumb; the next, the abhorred suspicion seemed written in letters of flame before his eyes. His love, though an utter slavery in its bondage, was imperious in its dark and bitter jealousy; the blood rushed over his forehead, and his teeth clenched hard, as he saw the ashes fall into the essence, and heard her low, soft laugh of triumph.

"That letter holds a secret so dear that you destroy it! So be it, then! I will wrench it out of the man who shares it!"

He moved to leave her presence, but, before he could escape her, she raised herself from her couch, and laid her hand on his arm—the hand that could hold him closely as a chain of iron:

"Cecil, you must be mad! Wait and listen to me."

Every word of her voice he was used to obey as though he had no law save her will; but the very weakness of the love she had triumphed over, made its ferocity when crossed with the looming shadow of the slightest rivalry; now he threw her hand off him.

"Listen!—you have palmed one falsehood off on me, already, why wait for another? Your own secrets you must keep as you will, but the man who shares them shall answer to me——"

"You are mad, Cecil!" cried Marion Vavasour again, her

eyes lighting with pretty contemptuous anger, as of a spoiled beauty crossed in her will, while the slender hand closed still on his arm with a movement that, slight as it was, might betray anxiety. "I forbid you to do any such thing! *My* name disputed over, as over some dancer's, or rosière's! I forbid it—I will not have it!"

"Let me go!" said Strathmore, so rife with passion that he scarce knew or heeded what he said. "Let me go! You have lied to me, and I will know what made the need of a lie. You burnt the letter, lest I should even see one word; I have a right to know what those words were which must have been faithlessness to me; I cannot grind it from *you* by force—I will seek it where I can, and, by God, if——"

The words broke asunder unuttered; he could not put into plain speech the hideous thought which he would have disbelieved, in the teeth of all evidence on earth or heaven, save her own witness against her. His strength went down under the torture of the mere doubt that she could be faithless to him, and the oath died away on his lips, which were blanched as death; his love swept aside all beyond itself; to *her* he had no pride, and he threw himself beside her, twining in his hands her loosened hair, and scorching her brow with his breath.

"I *am* mad, if you will! My God! have pity on me. I never stooped to any living thing—I stoop to you! Give a thought to another you shall not—you cannot! For the love of Heaven, tell me what it is you hide?"

"No!"

And she thought with a woman's glad, pitiless idolatry of power how utterly this man loved her!

"Do not trifle with me," muttered Strathmore, incoherently twisting round his hands, in his delirious suffering, the golden meshes of her hair, as though with that frail bond to knit her to him through life and death. "Tell me the truth—the truth!—or I will wrench it from the coward who has robbed me. No man should thieve even a glance of yours, and live——"

The words were muttered in his throat, fierce in their menace, yet imploring in their pain; his very life—more than his life!—hung on this woman's love. She saw he was no longer to be played with; she saw that every syllable he said would be wrought out; she saw that *here*—with his jealous passions loosed—he was no more her slave, but had become her master, and Marion Vavasour shrank from his grasp and from his gaze;—she feared the strength of what she had invoked.

But she was a woman who knew well how to deal with the men she ruled. Her hand gently touched his brow, and she stooped towards him with a pitying, tender smile:

"Ah, Cecil! can you not trust me even in so little? Sceptic! you are unjust and cruel; I but burnt that letter to spare you pain!"

"To *spare* me pain! Quick!—tell me all—all!"

"No," she whispered, bending till her wooing lips kissed his brow; "let it pass. You know I love you—love but you? Let it pass, my dearest!"

"Never! Tell me—at once—or I seek him this moment."

She stooped lower still, while her fragrant breath was warm on his cheek, and her whisper stole on his ear:

"Then—then (let it stir no words between you, Cecil, for *my* sake!)—but—your friend was very treacherous to you, and that letter spoke a love which was as hateful to me as it was craven to you. That is all the truth! Forgive me its concealment; I would so gladly have saved you its pain!"

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### The Swoop of the Vulture.

An hour afterwards, Strathmore quitted the Bosquet de Diane, and took his way across the grounds. He walked at his usual leisurely pace, he had a cigar in his mouth, and his manner was tranquil as usual. But a dog glancing at him would have shrunk whining and frightened away, and a stranger meeting him, and looking at the deadly glitter in

his eyes under their drooped lids, would have thought, "that man is bound on a merciless errand." The hour was just mid-day, the birds had ceased from song, the scythe lay among the unshaven grass, the vintagers afar off had left their work, the very leaves hung stirless. All nature was calm and at rest—all, save the same passions which have drenched the laughing earth in blood, and mocked the sweet, hushed stillness of the summer skies, and made the fair day hideous with their riot, since the suns of Asia shone on the white, upturned face of the First Dead, and the curse was branded on the brow of Cain.

Strathmore crossed the gardens without haste in his steps, his hand closing on a little cane; the blood of his race ran unchanged in his veins, dark with that ruthless wrath which had never yielded to the memory of mercy, the prayers of pity, or the rights of justice, and which had scathed all out of its path, as the scythe sweeps the seeding-grass. To the woman he had quitted he had said but little; but he left her to revenge the coward who would have robbed him, by such chastisement as men do not speak of to women. Less fully told than hinted at, less gathered by deliberate evidence than grasped in all its broad, accursed meaning, the treachery stood out black and bare before him. In his revenge he would have spared no living thing that could have risen up betwixt him and it; had he known of any darker, fuller, fouler, which his birth and breeding could have permitted, or the age and the world allowed, he would have made the man he now hated drain it to the last drop. He had left her, soothing her fears, promising her no violence—left her, with the passions in his blood, that in darker ages far back, had trodden out human life pitilessly and recklessly, as so much waste water spilt, and had scored down with unrelenting bitterness the ruthless motto of a ruthless race, "Slay! and spare not."

He walked across the grounds alone—once he glanced up. The radiant day seemed hot with flame, and the cloudless heavens looked brazen in the light. But he went onward, still calmly, leisurely as before, but with the bloodhound's

thirst growing stronger and stronger within him, and set but on one goal. What *are* our passions, once let loose, but sleuth-hounds freed from leash, which run down all before them, and hunt on even to the death?

A breadth of sward alone separated the *maisonette* of Lady Vavasour from the villa beyond. He opened the gates and passed on, leaving the paradise of roses behind him. Through the glades of trees the terrace which ran before the villa was visible, and a group of men were standing there. Three of them were strangers to him, the fourth was Erroll, who was standing with a brace of setters at his feet, behind him the open window of the dark oak library he had just quitted, before him all the light of the summer noontide.

Strathmore saw him—and his hand clenched down on the cane he held, that dainty jewelled switch, fragile and costly enough for a lady's riding-whip. As the sun flickered through the branches on to his face it was calm and impassive, but there was a cruel smile about his mouth, and his grey eyes were black and lustrous, with a fierce, eager light.

The setters as he approached gave tongue, and Erroll turned. He was talking with them of Court beauties, of Blois races, of the baccarat at Lilli Dorah's, of all the trifles and the chit-chat of an ordinary Paris day; for we smoke and gossip and laugh and dine while our lives are making shipwreck, and all we value is drifting away to the greedy, tideless sea of a fathomless past, that will never give back its dead.

As he looked up his face brightened—he thought Strathmore was come for a tacit reconciliation. Enough had been said twelve hours before to have steeled him to any such feeling; but his nature was not capable of harbouring revenge: he forgave freely—as he would have forgiven now, even such epithets as men never pardon, for the sake of all those thousand memories of childhood, and of manhood, that were still warm about his heart, not even to be washed out, and trampled from remembrance, by the tide of a jealous love, or by the sting of a bitter feud.

He looked up, a smile of pleasure lighting his eyes, which had been heavy and worn before; and Strathmore saw him as he came up the turf terrace—the man who had once flung himself in his defence into the near grip of death, who had been with him in shifting scenes of danger, pleasure, revel, or privation, and who had trusted him and shared his trust, as though the same mother had borne them, since they had been children together playing with the fallen chesnuts, or wading in the shallow estuaries under the woods of White Ladies, far away in England. Strathmore saw him, and his hand closed tighter on the switch, with which he moved out of his path the curling tendrils of the clematis. The revenge of men of his blood had always been swift and silent, but they had always *tasted* it, slowly yet thirstily, drop by drop, with the fierce delight of the vulture, as it sweeps and circles above its prey before it swoops down to wrench and tear.

He went up the terrace-slope leisurely, and lifted his hat with suave courtesy, the soft ceremony in which the Strathmores of White Ladies had ever clothed their deadliest approach, the silky velvet glove which they had ever drawn over the merciless iron hand whose grip was death.

Erroll stood leaning against the side of the window; he could not make the first movement towards a tacit reconciliation, but he was ready to meet, to more than meet, one. He only needed his friend's hand stretched out to him in silence, to give his own, and mutely forgive the worst words which had been uttered twelve hours before.

"*Pardon, messieurs!*" said Strathmore, quietly passing the other men, while they parted to let him approach: as the sun fell on it, his face wore a strange look, out of keeping with the easy suavity of his manner. He moved on to the library window, where Erroll stood, with the sunlight full upon his face. Calmly, as though he tendered them a cigar, Strathmore glanced round him at the three other men, with a bitter evil scorn about his lips.

"Gentlemen! is there any answer save one customary to a lie?"

The men—young fellows—surprised and embarrassed, hesitated; Erroll looked up, the angry blood rushing hotly to his face; but he stretched out his hand with an involuntary gesture.

"Strathmore! you are in gross error! Come within here a moment; I must have one more word with you."

"*Words* are not my answer!"

And as the syllables left his lips, hurled out in blind and deadly fury, he lifted his right arm, the jewelled handle of the cane flashed in the sunlight, the switch swirled through the air like a flail, with a shrill sound, and in the swiftness of a second had struck a broad, livid mark across Erroll's brow, brutal as a death-stroke, ineffaceable as shame.

"*That* for your treachery to me. I will have your life for your love for her."

The words were hissed in Erroll's ear as the blow fell, low but distinct as the hiss of a snake, chill as steel, relentless as death. As he reeled back, for the moment staggered and blinded, Strathmore's eyes fastened on the swollen crimson bar, where the switch had cut its mark, with the steady, pitiless greed for revenge that, fed to the full, yet clamoured still for more. In the blazing glare of the hot noon the vile, ineffaceable insult seemed stamped on the living flesh in letters of flame, which nothing in past, or present, or future, could ever cover or wash out, for which blood alone could ever atone—he laughed a low, chill, mocking laugh. Breaking the switch in two, he threw the fragments down at the feet of the man he had struck, his eyes glittering exultant, the veins in his face black and swollen in the fury of his wrath, a scornful smile set about his lips, as he turned to the others with a slight bow of careless courtesy:

"Gentlemen! you are my witnesses——" but Erroll's hand struck his lips to silence with a force that would have sent a weaklier man hurled backward to the earth. "By God! you must answer this."

The oath rattled in his throat, his face was white, save where the red cut stood out across his brow; his voice was

hoarse and his breath stifled as the words gasped out; the suddenness of the foul indignity seemed to have paralysed in him all save the sheer instinct of its revenge, and to have numbed and stricken even that.

"With pleasure!"

"Where?"

The single word came from Erroll's throat hoarse and suffocated with passion.

"In the Deer-park of the Bois, by the pond, if it suit you."

"Your hour?"

"At sunset to-night? I am engaged until then."

"I shall await you."

"*Soit!*"

With those few rapid words all was said; all had been done and spoken in less than sixty seconds, swift as thought and breathless as passion, staggering and bewildering those who looked on like the sudden flash of lightning in their eyes. Then he turned, bowed low to those standing by, passed along the terrace, and took his way across the lawn back to the Bosquet de Diane. He was well content. Half his vengeance was wrought, the rest could not now escape him. He thought of the brutal and ineffaceable insult he had given with pitiless delight; of all yet to come he thought as thirstily; the jealous hatred and the revengeful greed that were within him could only be sated with one requital—life! Life! which in a few hours' time would be in his hands and at his mercy. Mercy, I say?—the word has nothing to do with him; it was not in his blood nor in his creed. As ruthlessly as he had dealt out insult, he had it in him now to deal out death.

Once he glanced upward at the sky above-head, and as the hot beams fell on his eyes, across his pitiless and exultant thoughts, there strayed by some strange chain of memory, old familiar words, unheard, unread since childhood: "Let not the sun go down upon thy wrath."

The sun was high in the noontide heavens, shining without shadow on the day that was at its full—the day that had

dawned to be weighted with the wail of new lives, and the sighs of dying lips, with the burden of crowding crimes, and the bitterness of human words, with the cry of the slaughtered in far-off battle-fields, and the pent breathing of the toilers in great cities. When the sun should sink and the day fade into night, who should call back warmth to the lips they had seen close for ever; who should render unsaid the words they had heard curse the living; who should have power to bid them return to restore the deeds undone, the sin unwrought, the graves unsealed, and yield back the hours garnered to the past?

The old words, with their grand simplicity of counsel and of warning, crossed his memory; words which mark the short day all too long for men's wrath to endure. God forgive him! Strathmore only thought how, when that sun should rise to light another day, there should be one lost from amongst the numbers of the living, one human life the less upon the peopled earth!

Furies' passions blinded him with their accursed lust, and his soul was set on vengeance—vengeance that would know no pity, and yield no shrive.

From the sultry glare of the terrace he passed by abrupt transition into the aisles of the rose-gardens, into the midst of gay groups gathered about Marion Vavasour; and, with a game of life and death to be played out before the sun went down, he joined in with the jests, the impromptu, the epigram, the graceful flatteries, as lightly and laughingly as any there. There was not a sign by which to tell his past errand, not a glimpse to disclose the purpose on to which his will was set; yet there was one whom the easy wit did not blind, whom the careless nonchalance did not deceive, and at first the bloom had wavered anxiously on her cheek, quickly, however, to be succeeded by an amused, exultant light in her gazelle eyes.

Like Cunigunde, she loved well to see those whom she had ensnared reel up to dizzy heights, and stagger downwards to yawning chasms, courting death, and wasting life, to feast her eyes with proof of her own power.

"Come to me in a few minutes," she said, in a low tone, as she passed into the house an hour or two after. Her idlest whisper was his law, and he obeyed, entering her boudoir, where the light stole subdued, and dreamy oriental odours filled the air.

She stood by an étagère of flowers, idly toying with their blossoms, and turned towards him as he approached, with the imperious grace that so well became her:

"Where had you been, Cecil, when you came into the rose-garden?"

"To the stables. I know how you value Mazeppa, too well to leave her to the stud-grooms."

The answer was careless and natural; there was nothing to indicate that the reply was even an evasion; but Lady Vavasour made a gesture of impatience.

"Mazeppa and I thank you much, but you came by the west gate of the gardens; the stables lie to the south. Never play with me, never evade me, it is utterly useless! You had been to Bertie Erroll?"

"Indeed, no. You are distressing yourself most needlessly, my dearest!"

Strathmore spoke softly and persuasively; he was solicitous to guard from her even a suspicion of what was unfitting for her ear and her sex in the work which was wrought by her own beauty.

"Hush!" she said, petulantly, her eyes glancing into his, with the gaze with which she knew she could have made him lay bare the dearest secret that ever locked in honour. "You are only deceiving me, Cecil. You have broken your word; you have taken revenge when you promised me to forbear it."

"Well!—I do not come of an over-forbearing race."

He spoke with a slight smile—a smile that, momentary as it was, struck a chill to her like the touch of cold steel. She shuddered for an instant as she caught a glimpse of what this man's revenge *might be;* shuddered as though with a prophetic dread of the future—that dread which romancists idly call "presentiment," but which is often only the reflected colour,

thrown before our steps, from our own past acts and follies, as our shadow falls in advance of us as we walk.

"What did you say to him?" she asked, quickly.

And the light was so shaded, that the flush of a certain anxiety which came and went in her cheek escaped him. As great sovereigns have feared their most abject slaves, when the might of their own tyranny has roused proportionate might of passion in those who have long bent the knee to their word, so she now began to fear this man, whose love, now his weakness, might so soon become his strength—a strength to crush its tyrant.

"What did you say to him?" she repeated, impatiently. "I *will* know, Strathmore!"

He saw that she already guessed too truly to be evaded longer, and her will in its lightest caprice lay on him like an iron chain, dragging him where it would.

"I said nothing. I am not fond of words."

"What was it that you *did*, then?"

"Do not ask, my loveliest! These are not themes for a woman's ear."

"But I *will* know!"

"Why? It is not a subject for you. Be content, your name is involved in no way. You may surely trust me to guard against that!"

"But I WILL know!" There was all her wilful, imperious witching tyranny in the words, and in the gesture with which she spoke them. "What have you done?"

"I have treated him as I should treat a hound that bit me."

Even though he spoke to a woman, he could not restrain the pitiless passion that vibrated through his voice, and she understood without translation.

"And he?"

"He has but one course open. A coward would have to meet me, and he is not that."

An eager, exultant gladness lightened in her eyes, a flushed warmth came on her cheek, her graceful loveliness grew in-

stinct, for one fleeting instant, with the fierceness of the panther as it rises for its spring;—for one instant, while it lent to her beauty a glow almost fearful, a life almost terrible, the dark revenge of a Theodora was given to a creature soft and radiant as the morning.

"You are right—you are right," she said, with nervous force. "*I* was wrong who bid you stay your hand. Revenge it! Revenge becomes your race! Could I think you would submit to such rank treachery; sit silent under such perfidious rivalry? Revenge it, Strathmore! You are right."

The fierce words came strangely from those soft lips, that only parted with sweet laughter, or gave a wooing caress. Her hand closed upon the rich blossoms among which it wandered, crushing and breaking them. She stood there, fatal in her dazzling loveliness, fascinating him, confirming to fresh strength every evil instinct in him, inciting to yet darker deed every worst passion of his soul, luring and tempting him to the impending crime which grew holier and dearer to him with every instant that drew him nearer to its act.

If he had loved her ere now, in this hour he adored her! The passion of his own nature found answering echo, spur, and unison in hers. In his mood then, a woman who had stood between him and his wrath would have been hurled out of his path, though he had worshipped her; the woman who spurred him to his revenge became thrice idolised, as her voice spoke the thoughts, and goaded the lusts, of his heart. He crushed her in a close embrace.

"Be content! No man should seek to rob me of your love, and live!"

"But—ah, my God!—I forgot. If your life should pay forfeit!"

The words died on her lips, her face was blanched, her eyes filled with the sudden terror of a horrible remembrance, the piteous fear of a ghastly thought—now she was but a woman, who loved!

"That I must risk. But whether my own life fall or not, my revenge will not escape me."

While he soothed and thanked her with his caresses, the answer, brief as it was, was pregnant with meaning. With the dews of death heavy upon him, and the mists of death blinding his eyes, he would still find strength to keep his grip upon his vengeance, and to take it standing on the brink of a yawning grave, which would, at the least, close over *both.*

"But Cecil—Cecil—your own danger!"

It was the anguished cry of a woman's love, imploring in its terror, yearning in its tenderness, shrinking in horror from the near approach of a fatal hour for him whom she holds dear, or,—it was the most marvellous and matchless acting with which the false breath of a woman's lips ever yet duped man?

"Do not think of it, my worshipped one; think as little as I! But—if it chance so, if I never look upon your face again, kiss my lips when they are cold, kiss my eyes when they are closed, that your love may be with me in my grave; and remember, my love for you was such, that when my life was at its sweetest, when my years were at their richest, I died to revenge one whisper which sought to steal you from me!"

The passionate answer broke from his lips, hoarse and tremulous with the hot tears that rose in his throat, and sprang unbidden to his eyes—the first which had ever gathered there—as he looked on her in her loveliness, and thought that when the morning rose her kiss might have no warmth to waken him, her voice no power to call him back to life, his eyes be for ever blind and sightless to her gaze. Her own tears fell upon his brow as she bent towards him; but her glance looked into his with responsive meaning, her face lightened with his own vulture-thirst for vengeance, a smile of superb triumph wantoned on her lips—triumph to thus sway, and give away at will, to death or life, this man's entire existence!

"Ah! this is to be loved, indeed, as poets have fabled and as women have dreamed! Strathmore, revenge yourself and me—revenge! It is meet and just. And death shall not

scathe you, nor come nigh you, my beloved. You shall return unharmed, untouched, to find your reward *here!*"

She pressed his hand to her heart, where it beat warm and quick beneath its costly lace. As she bent over him, her voice sank to all its wooing softness, but thrilling with a new and fiercer meaning, which fostered every darker passion in him, as tropic heat fosters the poison-plants to seed and blossom, tempting and goading him to the crime that was sweet in his eyes as the gold-haired Gunhilda in the old Norse days wooed Eric the Viking to the sin of Cain. These were the passions that she loved to rouse in men, and see run riot in their deadly course; when a whisper, a caress from her, might have slaked them, her lips only fanned the flame!

And here, an eager thirst for revenge craved its food in her as in him; here, this soft and radiant creature was *cruel* as any panther that ever crouched, any snake that ever reared its brilliant painted crest.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### "And the Sun went down upon his Wrath."

THE sun was setting, descending beyond purple bars of cloud, and leaving a long golden trail behind it in its track—sinking slowly and solemnly towards the west as the day declined, without rest, yet without haste, as though to give to all the sons of earth, warning and time, to leave no evil rooted, no bitterness unhealed, no feud to ripen, and no crime to bring forth seed, when the day should have passed away to be numbered with hours irrevocable; and the night should cast its pall over the dark deeds done, and seal their graves never to be unclosed. The sun was setting, shedding its rich and yellow light over the green earth, on the winding waters, and the blue hills afar off, and down the thousand leafy aisles close by. But to one place that warm radiance did not wander, in one spot the rays did not play, the glory did not enter. That place was the Deer-pond of the old Bois, where the

dank plants brooding on the fœtid waters, which only stirred with noisome things, had washed against the floating hair of lifeless women, and the sombre branches of the crowding trees had been dragged earthward by the lifeless weight of the self-slain, till the air seemed to be poisonous with death, and the grasses, as they moved, to whisper to the winds dread secrets of the Past. There, the light of the summer evening did not come, but only through the leafless boughs of one seared tree, which broke and parted the dark barrier of forest growth, they saw the west, and the sun declining slowly in its haze of golden air, sinking downward past the bars of cloud.

All was quiet, save the dull sound of the parting waters, when some loathsome reptiles stirred among its brakes, or the hot breeze moved its pestilential plants; and in the silence they who had been as brothers, and who now were foes, stood fronting each other: in this silence they had met, in it they would part. And there, on their right hand, through the break in the dank wall of leaves, shone the Sun, looking earthward, luminous and blinding human sight like the gaze of God.

The light from the west fell upon Erroll, touching the fair locks of his silken hair, and shining in his azure eyes as they looked up at the sunny skies, where a bird was soaring and circling in space, happy through its mere sense and joy of life. On Strathmore's face the deep shadows slanted, leaving it as though cast in bronze, chill and tranquil as that of a marble god's, each feature set into the merciless repose of one immovable purpose. Their faces were strangely contrasted, for the serenity of the one was that of a man who fearlessly awaits an inevitable doom, the serenity of the other that of a man who mercilessly deals out an implacable fate; and while in the one those present saw but the calmness of courage and of custom, in the other they vaguely shrank from a new and an awful meaning. For beneath the suave smile of the Duellist, they read the intent of the Murderer.

The night was nigh at hand, soon the day must be gathered

to the past, such harvest garnered with it as men's hands had sown throughout its brief twelve hours, which are so short in span, yet are so long in sin.

"LET NOT THE SUN GO DOWN UPON YOUR WRATH!"

There, across the west, in letters of flame, the warning of the Hebrew scroll was written on the purple skies; but he who should have read them stood immutable yet insatiate, with the gleam of a tiger's lust burning in his eyes, the lust when it scents blood; the lust that only slakes its thirst in life.

They fronted one another, those who had lived as brothers; while at their feet babbled the poisonous waters, and on their right hand shone the evening splendour of the sun. Their eyes met, and in the gaze of the one was a compassionate pardon, but in the gaze of the other a relentless lust.

The duel was *à la parrière;* and the lot of the seconds' toss-up fell to Strathmore; giving him the right to fire first. They turned, and stood back to back; waiting the signal.

"One!"

The word fell down upon the silence, and the hiss of a shrill cicala echoed to it like a devil's laugh.

And the sun sank slowly downward beyond the barrier of purple cloud, passing away from earth.

"Two!"

Again the single word dropped out upon the stillness, marking the flight of the seconds; again the hoot of the cicala echoed it, laughing hideously from its noisome marsh.

And the sun sank slowly, still slowly, nearer and nearer to its shroud of mist, bearing with it all that lingered of the day.

"Three!"

The white death-signal flickered in the breeze, and the last golden rays of the sun were still above the edge of the storm-cloud.

There was yet time.

But the warning was not read: there was the assassin's devilish greed within Strathmore's soul, the assassin's devilish

smile upon his lips; the calmness of his face never changed, the tranquil pulse of his wrist never quickened, the remorseless gleam of his eyes never softened. The doom written in his look never relaxed. He wheeled round—in seeming, carelessly, as you may turn to aim at carrion birds—but his shot sped home.

One moment Erroll stood erect, his fair hair blowing in the wind, his eyes full open to the light; then—he reeled slightly backward, raised his right arm, and fired in the air. The bullet flew far and harmless amidst the forest foliage, his pistol dropped, and without sign or sound he fell down upon the sodden turf, his head striking against the earth with a dull echo, his hands drawing up the rank herbage by the roots, as they closed convulsively in one brief spasm.

He was shot through the lungs.

The sun sank out of sight, leaving a dusky, sultry gloom to brood over the noxious brakes and sullen stagnant waters, leaving the world to Night, as fitting watch and shroud of Crime; and those who stood there were stricken with a ghastly horror, paralysed by a vague and sudden awe, for they knew that they were in the presence of death, and that the hand which had dealt it was the hand of his chosen friend. But he, who had slain him, more coldly, more pitilessly than the merciful amongst us would slay a dog, stood unmoved in the shadow, with his ruthless calm, his deadly serenity, which had no remorse as it had had no mercy, while about his lips there was a cold and evil smile, and in his eyes gleamed the lurid flame of a tiger's triumph—the triumph when it has tasted blood, and slaked its thirst in life.

"*Fuyez!—il est mort!*"

The words, uttered in his ear by Valdor, were hoarse and almost tremulous; but he heard and assented to them unmoved. An exultant light shone and glittered in his eyes; he had avenged himself and her! Life was the sole price that his revenge had set; his purpose had been as iron, and his soul was as bronze. He went nearer, leisurely, and stooped

and looked at the work of his hand. In the gloom the dark-red blood could yet be clearly seen, slowly welling out and staining the clotted herbage as it flowed, while one stray gleam of light still stole across, as if in love and pity, and played about the long fair hair which trailed among the grass.

Life still lingered, faintly, flickeringly, as though loth to leave for ever that, which one brief moment before, had been instinct with all its richest glory; the eyes opened wide once more, and looked up to the evening skies with a wild, delirious, appealing pain, and the lips which were growing white and drawn, moved in a gasping prayer:

"Oh God! I forgive—I forgive.—He did not know——!"

Then his head fell back, and his eyes gazed upward without sight or sense, and murmuring low a woman's name, "Lucille! Lucille!" while one last breath shivered like a deep-drawn sigh through all his frame—he died.

And his murderer stood by to see the shudder convulse the rigid limbs, and count each lingering pang-calm, pitiless, unmoved, his face so serene in its chill indifference, its brutal and unnatural tranquillity, whilst beneath the drooped lids, his eyes watched with the dark glitter of a triumphant vengeance, the last agony of the man whom he had loved, that the two who were with him in this hour shrank involuntarily from his side, awed more by the Living than by the Dead. Almost unconsciously they watched him, fascinated by a dumb horror, as he stooped and severed a long flake of hair that was soiled by the dank earth and wet with the dew; unarrested they let him turn away with the golden lock in his hand and the fatal calm on his face, and move to the spot where his horse was waiting. The beat of the hoofs rang muffled on the turf, growing fainter and fainter as the gallop receded. Strathmore rode to her whose bidding had steeled his arm; and whose soft embrace would be his reward; rode swift and hard, with his hand closing fast on the promised pledge of his vengeance, while behind him, in the shadows of the falling night, lay the man whom he had once loved,

whom he had now slain, with the light of early stars breaking pale and cold, to shine upon the oozing blood as it trailed slowly in its death-stream through the grasses, staining red the arid turf.

And the sun had gone down upon his wrath.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### The Message from the Dead.

THE golden curl of the dead man's hair lay in her lap, in pledge and proof that her bidding had been done, that his revenge was taken; and she stooped over her lover, this Messalina with her cheek of childlike bloom, this Circe with her glance of gazelle-softness, and wreathed her white arms about him, and leaned on his her fragrant lips. And he was happy!—ay, as the drunkard is in the reeling madness of his revel, as the opium-eater is in the delirious insanities of his excitation; he was happy with this guilt at his door, with this life on his soul, while the tresses of her hair swept soft against his cheek, and the languor of her eyes looked back into his own.

Remorse was not upon him,—she, even as she was his idol, became also his conscience and his God. His honour had bent like a green withe in her hands, and crime had no sting since it was just and sweet in her sight.

The past hour left no trail of its horror, the death summoned at his will followed him with no reproach; as he had been without mercy, so he was now without remorse: the ghastly breath of the grave did not chill him in the dreamy warmth of her kisses, and in his heart the plague-spot of crime was not felt while it beat upon hers. As a man after deep draughts of strong wine has all memory dizzily drowned, but every sense subtilely heated and roused, so the fierce passions of which he had drunk so deeply in one brief twelve hours had dulled all conscience, and fanned his blood to flame. For her sake, at her bidding, he had steeped his soul

in the guilt of murder; and so much the more deeply as it doomed him, so much the sweeter grew his love. And the silken gold of the dead man's hair lay there, wet and soiled with the night dews; and he, the Living, gave it no glance of pity, no shudder of remorse, but looked up only to the eyes of the enchantress, and only drew her rich lips closer to his own.

What though a hell had yawned before him for this deed?—his heaven lay here in a woman's soft embrace. What were God or man to him?—*she* smiled upon his sin.

"Strathmore!"

Low whispered, the name struck on his ear as he passed the open window of a corridor leading back to his own room, in the grey of the early dawn. The casement looked upon the gardens, and in the faint light he saw the figure of a man standing there below.

"Strathmore!"

At the second whisper he turned towards the embrasure, and leaned out:

"Who are you?"

"I—hush!" said the speaker, in whom he now recognised Erroll's second. "Wake no one, or they will wonder why I come like a thief in the twilight. As I saw you pass the window, I thought it better to call you than to rouse the house. I came to tell you that to-night's affair may be the subject of inquiry, and that it would be wise for you to get out of France."

"Pshaw! All I do I defend."

He spoke carelessly and contemptuously where he leaned against the embrasure, looking down on the speaker, who, although his adversary's second, had been an acquaintance also of his own.

"As you choose, I only tell you. Sir Arthur has rallied enough to be furious in his grief. For myself, I shall go across the frontier. I have no fancy to wait for the fracas."

"That will be as you please, but it cannot concern me."

The other looked up at him in the light of the new-risen sun, with something of that feeling, which had made him shrink from the man who had stood with a pitiless smile on his lips, to watch the death throes slacken and grow still. He was a soldier, and thought little of a life taken or spared, but even he shuddered at Strathmore's calm indifference, whilst as yet but the short space of one summer's night stretched betwixt so dark a tragedy and its author.

"No," he said, bluntly. "I believe you take no concern save in what touches *yourself!* But Erroll bade me, if he fell, give you this; it is all he left to my charge—save another for a woman in England."

He lifted his hand, standing on the stone coping, and held up a letter. Strathmore stretched and took it, and the other turned away, without more words, and strode back across the lawn in the gloaming.

The sun had risen high enough for the writing to be clear, and as his eyes fell on the superscription, where he stood alone in the deserted corridor while all around him slept, for the first time his own revenge recoiled back on him; he remembered how the life which he had taken had once been perilled for his own; he remembered how this man had loved him! The suddenness of this unlooked-for message from the dead, awoke memories which staggered his merciless and immutable calm. He crushed the letter in his hold unread, and, leaving the house, went out into the dawn instead of going to his chamber; in that moment he wished to shun even the gaze of hirelings—in that moment, ere he read what the hand now lifeless had written, he felt he must have about him the fresh clear air of morning. For,

> Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,
> The fatal shadows which walk by us still;

and already the doom, wrought by his own sin, was following in his trail.

He walked onward in the solemn stillness of that early day, fresh from the lascivious sweetness of a guilty love, and the furious delight in a brutal vengeance,—walked onward

through the warm white mists of the morning, through silent solitudes of woodland, crushing the packet in his grasp unread, until the rapid rush of the river at his feet arresting his course made him note whither he went. Then he paused, and wrenched open the letter of the man who had fallen by his hand.

And what he read was this:

"YOUR OWN ACT has made more words between us impossible; to a blow there can be but one answer. But I write this in the hazard that in a few hours I may have ceased to live; when I am dead you may hear without dishonour to me that you have wronged me from first to last. Were it alone for the sake of our past friendship, I would not let you go through life holding me the liar and betrayer you now do; it were to debase and pollute all mankind, in my person, and in your sight. What you believe I see plainly, how you were duped to believe it I can conjecture well enough; it is sufficient that by your belief you do me the foulest wrong that ever a lie worked. It is she who betrayed you, not I. I loved her—true! with that vile passion which levels us to brutes: but, before God, Strathmore, I write my oath to you that to that love I never yielded; it was she who tempted, I who resisted. In this must lie the root of the revenge upon myself which she now takes in goading and duping your jealousy, till you believe you see in me a rival who would have treacherously supplanted you. Last night, in warning you of Marion Vavasour's inconstancy, I spoke no slander as you thought; when you taunted me for proof, I could have given it you on the word of one who, as you well know, never lied. Only a few moments before I had been alone with her, when the Duc left, in the supper-room; alone, with no shield between my hateful passion, that sprang up unawares, ripe as it was rank, and her own loveliness, that lured me with glances, with smiles, with hinted words, with every devilish divine temptation. . . . My God! you know the snare—you

succumbed to it. Pity me, forgive me, if, for an instant, I almost forgot all bonds of honour to you; if, for an instant, I fell so low as to remember nothing save that her eyes wooed my love and confessed her own—save, that what I loathed while I coveted it, might be mine at my will. Pity me, forgive me, you who know her accursed sorceress beguilings, her subtle tempting that lies in the languor of a glance, in the passing fragrance of her hair! My weakness endured *but* an instant; then I broke from her while I had strength; I left her while the first whispers of love stole from her lips. At the moment I encountered you, I strove to warn you of the worthlessness of the woman on whose love you staked your life and—fool that I was! when you gibed and taunted me for proof, I shrank from striking you the deadly blow; I chose rather to let you think of me as you would, than force you to own the right by which I spoke, since I must have bought my vindication at such cost to you. Early on the following morning her page brought me a note from Lady Vavasour. I send it to you; it will serve to show you how subtlely, how poetically, she shrouds her wanton infidelities, this double-traitress to her lovers and her lord! I wrote her back words that she will never pardon me. Suffice it, that they were such as stripped her amours of their delicate gloss, to show them to her in their own naked light; such as refused her love for your sake, and rebuked her treachery in your name and my own. Out of her presence, and in the calmness of morning, I had strength to do thus much in the right path: God knows I have wandered from it often enough! This is the brief entire truth. My lips never spoke a lie; my hand would scarce write one, when, for aught I know, I may be within an hour of my death. I write it because I could not endure that, throughout your life, you should hold my memory tainted with such thrice-damned treachery as you have attributed to me; and it will spare, rather than inflict on you, added pain, since sooner or later you must learn that this woman's passion has fled, though her pride of dominion over you still lingers, and you will suffer less to know it thus, than

to track it first in the rivalry, and triumph, of some living foe.

"Now let me make you one request in as few words as I can; for though, after what has passed, I should compel you to meet me were you my brother by blood, I still choose rather to ask this boon of you than of any other. The young girl whom you once saw with me in the elm-walk at White Ladies—perhaps you have forgot the circumstance—was not my mistress, as you naturally thought, but my wife. Three years ago, we met by a strange accident, while I was staying at your house, during your absence. She was the daughter of an exiled Hungarian noble, who had taken refuge near the abbey, in obscurity and poverty. She was in the early grief of her father's recent loss, a mere child in years, singularly lovely, and almost destitute. I loved, and I soon taught her to love. To have offered her dishonour, in her trustful and defenceless innocence, would have *been* dishonour. I married her, but secretly, and have kept it secret even from you, partly for entanglements, that you know hampered me, partly because of my creditors, chiefly because, as you are aware, the knowledge of such a marriage would have ensured my certain disinheritance by Sir Arthur. She has lived at White Ladies, still under her father's name of de Vocqsal, and your almost constant absence on the Continent prevented your hearing whatever rumours might be afloat regarding our connexion. She is very dear to me; yet I have but ill recompensed such love as she has borne me. My death will leave Lucille and her child penniless and unprotected; what I would now ask of you is, as far as may lie in your power, to shield her from the bitterness she is so little fitted to brave. This, then, is the trust I leave you, Strathmore; you will let her find in you a sure and faithful friend; you will make to her atonement for the wrong you have done to me; and if her child, now in its infancy, ever live to womanhood, I would wish that in years to come you should speak to her sometimes of her father, but never let her become aware that it is by your hand I fell. Should it be decreed that I die

thus, I will not say, 'Know no remorse,' for that were to wish you devil, not man; but I do say to you, believe this, that neither now nor in the most abhorred hours that your mad passion for the wanton adulteress who has parted us, ever caused me, have I felt bitterness to you. 'I would that it had been an open enemy who had done me this dishonour, and not thou, my brother, my guide, my own familiar friend;' but—since thus it has chanced—take my last words as you would take the oath of a dying man. I forgive you fully all that has already passed, all that may yet be to come. If I die, remember—it will be in peace with you.

"BERTIE ERROLL."

This was the message of the dead.

Standing in the morning light, whose reddening sun-rays, streaming on the page, lit up each word till it seemed written in blood, Strathmore read—read on to the last line.

Then a shrill, hoarse cry, shuddering rang through all the forest silence, greeting the early day as it uprose—the cry of a great agony—and throwing his arms above his head, he fell, like a drunken man, down upon the sodden earth.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

"Whoso has sown the Whirlwind shall be Reaper of the Storm."

MARION VAVASOUR stood on the balcony of her dressing-room looking down on the rose-gardens below, and leaned her white arms upon the bronze scroll-work, and let her Eastern cymar of snowy silk float at will upon the summer wind, and with a sunny laughter sweetly glancing in her eyes gazed at the mists afar off, or downward to where her love-birds were shaking the dew from their wings. Yonder, beneath the roof that was within her sight, where the early sun-rays played about the lips that were sealed to silence, and the eyes which could never more open to their light, lay the dead, slain at her whisper, to sate her revenge;—yonder,

under the forest-shadows, whose outline she traced from her rose-hung balcony, a living man wrestled with his agony, his soul tainted with a murderer's guilt, because her kiss had moved him to its work, her word aroused him to its hell-born passions. But the knowledge did not cast one shade upon her brow, did not scare away for one brief hour the smile that wantoned on her lips; nay, the knowledge was dear to her, since it was proof and tribute to her power. For in this dazzling delicate creature was the cruelty of the beast of the desert.

The full light of the day, now fully risen for some hours, bathed her in its warmth, whilst clusters of her favourite flowers clung above and below her in their perfumy profusion, till she seemed framed in roses; her floating dress showed all the voluptuous outline of her form; her rich hair lay lightly on her shoulders, glancing in the sun;——and thus, in her proud loveliness, she was seen by the man she had betrayed.

It had been better for her then that death had stricken her in that hour. Woe as her beauty had wrought for others, it had never worked deadlier destruction than that which it now brought herself.

Suddenly, between her and the sunlight, a shadow fell.

She turned, with the gay challenge of her triumphant smile, the silvery folds of her robes sweeping the leaves of the roses till they fell in a fragrant shower; then, for the first time in her shadowless life, the smile faded from off those laughing lips, and the pallor of a ghastly terror blanched the rich bloom from her face. She saw the man whom she had fooled with the foul simulation of an undying love, and whom her breath, with its traitorous caresses, had wooed to the bottomless depths of crime. And she saw that he knew her aright at last—saw that there are moments in human life which transform men to fiends, leaving them no likeness of themselves; moments in which the bond slave, goaded to insanity, turns and rends his tyrant.

With a spring like a bloodhound's, Strathmore overleapt the barrier which parted them, and caught her in his grasp, bruising the white skin which he had once deemed too fair for the summer winds to breathe on as they blew. And a deadly fear came on her, for she knew that now her voice would have no power to quell the tempest—the voice which had lured him to crime! She knew that now her loveliness could have no sway to bring him to her feet—the loveliness which was but one fell lie!

As the bloodhound seizes on its prey, his hand crushed her there where she stood; his face was haggard, his eyes were bloodshot, and alight with lurid flame; his hair wet and clotted with the damp sweat of anguish; his dress disordered, and stained with the soil of the earth, and the dews of the morning. Few could have recognised him in the wreck one crime had wrought—one hour worked. In his agony he was mad—I speak it literally—mad; with its hideous riot surging in his brain, and reeling through his blood. And in the sunlight he saw the mocking accursed loveliness, which, even as a fiend in angel guise, had drawn him on into an abyss of infamy, and stained his soul with the curse of fratricide.

He crushed her in his arms, bruising her white bosom and her delicate limbs; and his voice, which had lost almost all human sound, broke out with a loud hissing whisper:

"Traitress—murderess! I will have life for life! It is the old Jew law—God's ordinance!"

Through the stillness of the summer morning his laugh rang with horrible mirth, his soul, drunk with one sin, was athirst for more—athirst to trample out this divine and devilish thing which he had worshipped, down into the darkness of the tomb; to avenge his own betrayal, and the betrayal of the dead, on the woman who had trepanned both, with her wanton's love, her serpent's cruelty. His hot breath scorched her face; his eyes, bright with the light of insanity, glared into her own; his hands twisted in the shower of her shining hair, that golden web which had meshed him in its toils; he held her powerless to break away from the worst that he might work, while

the fair hues of her face blanched white, and her voice rose in a shriek of abject terror.

"Oh Heaven! I shall die—I shall die! *You* would not kill me, Strathmore?"

Again, in its mirth, his laugh broke out; he was delirious in his agony.

"Why not? Why not, if devils *can* die? You have done murderer's work, you shall have a murderer's doom!"

Held in his grip, she could not free herself; clenched there as in a vice of iron, she could not escape from whatsoever he might mete out to her, and in his maddened cheated love, his felon guilt, his tortures of remorse, he knew not what he did; he was brutal and conscienceless as any beast of prey ravening for blood. He only saw, in the burning glare of the mocking sunlight, the beauty which had betrayed him; he only felt the forest-brute's fierce craving thirst for life. And she knew that she was in his power;—she knew that her slave was now her master. Sickening with terror, trembling, quivering, stifled, she wrestled in his grasp, while her voice moaned out a piteous cry:

"Oh, Strathmore! My God!—have mercy, mercy!"

Closer and closer he clenched her in his anguish, her amber hair tangled in his arms, her form pressed in his hold until she moaned with pain, while his laugh rang out again, like Damien's in the torture of the fires:

"I will give you such mercy as you gave:—no other!"

And she knew that death was nigh her now—death from the hands of the man she had fooled, and goaded, and betrayed; in his iron strength her delicate frame was frail as flax which the winds can break in twain, and as helpless to his will. One pressure of his fingers on her throat, and its breath would be stilled for ever; one blow from his hand upon her fair veined temples, and the death she had meted out would be her portion.

With all the preternatural strength which is begotten from a ghastly terror, she wrestled and panted in his hold, as the bird in the hand of the snarer; as easily might she have

sought to escape from a vice of steel that had locked her in its jaws, as seek to wrench herself free from the deadly grip of the man whose outraged love made him a fiend, whose vain remorse made him a madman.

A sickness of mortal fear came over her; a mist blinded her eyes, shutting out the light of day; a loud noise surged in her ear, and beat about her brain. He only saw in the glaring sun-rays the face which he had worshipped—the face which had lured him to his sin; he only knew but one brute impulse to crush and trample out this loveliness, where never more could it reproach him—where never more could others gaze upon, and rejoice in, it. She was dying—dying by his hand!—without power to summon all those who lay within her call; without strength to break from him to where safety, succour, defence were all close, only parted from her by the velvet hangings of her door! There, without, lay the sunny peopled earth; here, nigh at hand, was the household which obeyed her lightest word: yet, powerless, voiceless, imprisoned in his grip, she must die, without a sign, without a cry, like the fawn which is choked by the hound's death-grapple!

And her eyes gazed up to him with a wild appealing pain; —that look smote his strength like a sudden blow. He had seen it when the sun had set, in the sightless eyes of the dead.

His frame shivered, his limbs grew powerless, his sinews paralysed, his nerves stricken strengthless; he threw her from him with a sudden cry, hurling her fragile form from his arms, as the winds hurl a broken flower from out their path.

"Death is too much mercy for you! You shall *live* to suffer——"

And, leaving her where she lay in her bruised and quivering loveliness, Strathmore reeled out into the scorching sunlight, that seemed to glare upon his sight and scathe his brow like fire—reeled, staggering like a drunken man, his eyes blind, his reason giddy, with the horrible riot of threatening delirium. For on his soul was the curse of Cain.

Marion Vavasour told none of that hour of jeopardy. When he hurled her from him she fell insensible, and her attendants, finding her thus, deemed it a swoon or syncope, and she let the error pass, undisputed. Too much was intertwined with that horrible conflict for her lips to be those which unfolded its story. And on the morrow, when she lay on her delicate couch shrouded in laces, and silks, and cashmeres, her eyes but the lovelier for the dark circle beneath them, her face but the fairer for its fragile whiteness and the languor of indisposition, Monseigneur le Duc d'Etoiles and Monsignore Villâflor, admitted to her cabinet de toilette, thought they had never beheld her more divine in her most dazzling moments, than in this illness, which she allowed that the tragedy in which her name was involved, had brought on her through its shock and its terror.

"Cecil Strathmore has killed his friend, you know? It is fearful—it is terrible! It has shattered all my nerves," she said, with a delicate shiver of terror, to the prince and the bishop. "That horrible story!—do not talk of it any more, I beseech you—I entreat you, sire. Poor Cecil! My lord always said he would commit some crime or other some day. They quarrelled about me, you say—perhaps! But it was *bien bête* if they did. And poor Bertie Erroll was so handsome! It is such a pity that the Strathmores' passions were always dangerous!"

And Marion Vavasour sighed, and shuddered again with that delicate *tressaillement*, and stirred her chocolate, and stroked the snowy curls of her lion-dog, and languidly tossed some perfume over her jewelled fingers, and asked what they thought of Scribe's new comedy and George Sand's fresh novel; while Monseigneur and Monsignore each alike congratulated himself that her long unbroken liaison was evidently snapped asunder with this Bois scandal, of which all Paris was talking, and that its rupture had left a fair field open to all new aspirants.

Remorse was not in her; she knew it not; and she was

well content that Paris should have nothing else to discourse of, before midnight in the Salons, and after midnight in the Cercles, but this tragedy in the Deer Park, whose fatal end was but sign and seal of her power. Two countries babbled of that Helen-like beauty which drove men to madness—

> as when through ripen'd corn,
> By driving winds, the crackling flames are borne.

What mattered it at what price her superb triumphs were won?

It was but once or twice in solitude that, remembering, with the icy dread of its awful danger shivering afresh through all her veins, the peril of the death which had so nigh encompassed her, she heard again hissing in her ear, with its ghastly laugh, that menace of the future: "Death is too much mercy for you! You shall *live* to suffer!" It was only then that, vaguely and with a nameless dread, Marion Vavasour, in her glad and glorious omnipotence, feared, with prescient terror, that law inexorable which has written, "Whoso sows the whirlwind, shall be reaper of the storm!"

## CHAPTER XXVII.

Dies Iræ.

THE full sweet light of the summer day fell into the chamber of the dead, where they had lain him down and left him, in the deep stillness that no footfall stirred, no voice disturbed, and no love watched, save that of a little spaniel which had crept into his breast and flew at those who sought to move her from her vigil, and crouched there trembling and moaning piteously.

The sun of another day had risen, waking the earth to its toil and the children to their play; lifting the drooped bells of the closed flowers, and rousing the butterfly to flutter in the light; giving back to the birds their song, to the waters their sparkle, to the blue seas their laughing gleam; bringing to all the world its resurrection from the silence and the

gloom of night. But here where the sun fell, touching his cheek to warmth, his hair to gold, it had no spell to waken: life was left to the insect stirring in the grasses, to the leaf flickering in the wind, to the spider weaving in the sunshine, —but life was robbed from him!

Through the long day the light found its way into the darkened room, and wandered lovingly about the limbs, with their superb and stately stature, which lay powerless and stricken; and about the face, with its rich, woman-like beauty, where the fair, luxuriant hair was clotted and soiled with the black trail of blood; and where the grey hue of that Corruption which knows no pity in its theft, no mercy in its march, already was stealing on its ghastly way.

The day was nigh its close when the hired watcher, dully sleeping at his post, started in affright as a voice fell on his ear:

"Let me pass!"

"Pass? Not *there!*"

"Yes—there."

At the reply the man looked up to scan the stranger who sought to enter the chamber of the dead; and as he saw his face, although it was wholly unfamiliar to him, shuddered at the look it wore, and at the light that glittered in the eyes.

"Why—why?" he faltered. "What claim have you? Who are you?"

"I am his murderer! Stand by!"

And at the hideous calmness of the answer the man involuntarily sickened and shuddered and fell back; and an iron grasp thrust him aside like a cowering dog, and closed the door upon him and barred him out.

Strathmore was alone with the dead.

And he stood by him, even as in the virgin years of the young world the First Murderer stood beside the brother whom he had slaughtered in his fair and gracious manhood, because the seething madness and the brutal hate of jealousy and vengeance had made a ghastly crime seem sweet and

holy in his sight. The sin of Cain was on his soul—and even as Cain heard in the awful silence the voice of God calling on him for the life that he had hurled from earth, so he heard it now, as in his agony he shrieked aloud to the dead to waken, and free him from his curse!—to arise and live again, so that he should not bear this doom through life and through eternity! And his own voice, as it echoed back upon the stillness, left silence as the mocking answer of his prayer, that silence which must for ever stretch betwixt the dead and him.

He shuddered in the sultry warmth of day, like one who shivers in dank, icy waters; and stood looking down upon the white, serene face, and the hair that was blackened with blood, looking, with the dulled, paralysed stupor of remorse.

This man had loved him, had suffered for him, had borne with sacrifice and wrong for his sake, had cleaved to him closer than a brother,—and he had slaughtered him as we slaughter a brute!

Yesterday living, in all the fulness, the strength, the beauty, the rich rejoicing glory of his manhood, and to-day dead—dead!—carrion that lay sightless to the sunshine, senseless to all sound, powerless to lift his hand against the feeblest insect that should begin the fell work of the tomb, useless save to be thrust away by hasty hands out of the remembrance of men into the dark and brutal silence of the grave.

Standing there beside him, a terror, such as falls upon men in their own death-hour, when every forgotten sin stands out to damn them, fell upon his murderer; rending asunder the iron of a pitiless nature; striking to dust, as the lightning shivers steel, the unyielding strength which had refused to know remorse, and had gazed with a chill smile upon the agonies of death: smiting down upon his knees, as with the wrath of God, the mortal whose passions had usurped God's judgment and forestalled God's summons, who had dared to mete out life and death as though he were not Man but Deity.

Now for the first hour he realised what he had done:—and struck by it as by a blow, he staggered and fell, his head bowed, his arms stretched out, the dews of a mortal anguish thick upon his brow, his brain on fire with the horrible surging of the blood, that, like a pent-up flood, seemed bursting to break from bondage.

Suddenly in that dread silence where he knelt beside the bier, there arose, joyous and melodious, the evening song of the birds without, where they fluttered amidst the ilex leaves; and the tender sound struck on his ear as a knife strikes upon bare quivering nerves. In those frail things, born for a summer's span, which could be crushed by a young child's feeble grasp, the great mystery of Life was left; and here—*here*—his hand had shattered it for ever! A lifetime of remorse could not restore what he had destroyed, and trampled out, in the brute fury of one crime.

That sound broke his stupor, and saved him from madness; his chest rose and fell as though heaving against bands of steel; the blood beat and surged about his brain; the iron of his nature broken asunder, yielded and gave way, and one deep gasping sob quivered in the air as he sank forward, calling in his blind agony on the name of the dead.

There, beside the man whom he had loved and murdered, they found him when, far towards the night, they broke open the barred door—found him lying senseless.

For two months the wise men who gathered about his bed because he had gold and rank, and sought to drive away the retribution which followed a fell crime, with the poor miserable herbs and poisons that their pharmacopœia taught them, held his life in danger, and called his peril by a lengthy name.

More briefly, it was still but the mad beating of the imprisoned blood, which, like the waves of a sea, flooded all the chambers of the mind, already filled with distorted thoughts and abhorred sounds, the offspring, not of the fantasia of delirium, but worse—of the memories of guilt. Worse; for the

madman, or the fever-stricken, made sane, leaving his bed, leaves far behind him all which turned it into hell; but when the lurking fire in Strathmore's blood had, flame-like, of itself burned down into exhaustion (or, as the wise men better loved to phrase it, when "*they* had cured him"), with him arose every dread shape that had made night horrible and day sickly; and with him they passed out into the world, and mingled with the things of daily life, and followed him—denying him solitude, forbidding him rest. In those awful hours when but one of two issues had seemed inevitable for him—insanity or death—*these* had been ever before him; the Sorceress, with the wanton glamour of her divine loveliness, whose kiss seemed ever scorching on his lips, whose laugh seemed ever mocking on his ear; and the Dead whom he had slaughtered at her bidding, whose dying sigh quivered for ever on the air, and whose face, with the eyes wide open to the light, with their last look of wild appealing pain, for ever was before him.

When he arose and went forth again amongst men, with what seemed to the world, which had thrilled with the horror of his story, an unaltered bearing, an unnatural negligence and calm, these were with him still—spectres of the passion which had betrayed him, of the crime with which his soul was stained. Before the tribunal of God, in the horrors of night and solitude, when none were by to stand between him and the sin which made his conscience its own hell, between him and the anguish which rioted still for this woman's lost loveliness, his chastisement grew more ghastly with every day which dawned, with every hour that passed. It was like the chastisement of Orestes, followed by those dread shapes which tracked him through his doom, and lay beside him even on the threshold of the altar of God, watching him while he slept, so that his sleep was peaceless; while he waked, so that his day was joyless; while he prayed, so that his prayer was fruitless—those Eumenides which are but type and figure of the Passions.

There are natures which in their anguish seek the fellow-

ship of their kind, as a wounded deer will seek his herd; there are others which shun it, as the stricken eagle soars aloft to die alone, howsoever the blood be dropping from his broken wings. Strathmore's nature, proud, tenacious, unyielding as iron, was the last. Pitiless himself, he abhorred pity, and if he yielded little mercy to misery, he asked none for his own. Therefore the world, when he rose from his bed and entered it once more, marvelled at his heartlessness, and deemed him unchanged, untouched. So the world, great liar though it be, is oftentimes deceived!

Unchanged!—if the iron that has passed through the fire be unchanged after the furnace which has molten it in its scorch till it has bent like a river reed, then was he so: not else. All that was evil in him had leaped up like a lion from his lair, and now could never more be drugged to sleep; all of softness which his guilty love had lent his nature had been swept aside in the whirlwind, and its pitiless strength had centred in but one purpose, one desire, one craving: that of vengeance. For his character was one of those in which cruelty is twin-born with suffering, and which, having tasted of crime as the tiger blood, seeks more, and blots out sin by sin. His curse had been born of his vengeance; yet to crush out his agony he craved vengeance yet again. For this man, who had held himself his own god to mould his destiny at will, who had deemed he ruled his desires under iron curb, and who had looked on in cold disdain while others suffered or rejoiced, indifferent to joy as he was steeled to pain, endured tortures such as weaker, gentler natures never know—let them thank Heaven for their exemption! However guilty and born of the senses his love had been, he had worshipped to devotion the woman who had betrayed him; the very air she breathed had been sacred to him; he had loved her with passionate truth; he had been jealous of the very winds that played amongst her hair; he would have staked his life upon her fidelity, even as he did stake his honour and his peace. What marvel that *now* "the hate wherewith he hated her was yet greater than the love wherewith he had loved her?"

Her hand had hurled him into an abyss of guilt; her kiss had breathed upon his lips a curse that must for ever lie there; her tempting had allured and betrayed him into crime, which however the law and the world freed him from all stain, marked him out for ever in his own sight and in the sight of truth—a murderer.

And go where he would his curse pursued him. In the watches of night it wakened him, and he cried out in its agony with the cold sweat dank upon his brow. In the chill dawn it uprose with him, till the light of day looked hideous, and made him turn from it as from the gaze of an accusing angel. Passing the open doors of church or cathedral it pursued him, for the hot sun seemed streaming down upon the written Law which guards the sanctity of life, and forbids its golden cord to be cut asunder by the hand of man. Amidst the peopled world it haunted him, till the purple wine in his glass looked red with blood, and through the riotous laughter of brilliant revel he heard ever in his ear the piteous shiver of one dying sigh. In the gay glare of gas-light, or in the grey shadows of the twilight, in the rush of crowds or in the stillness of his chamber, he saw the face of the dead; he saw the shudder of the laboured breath, the anguish of the death-spasm, the life-blood winding slowly, slowly, in its dark and slimy trail amidst the grasses, and soaking the fair and trailing hair. Like Cain's had been his crime; like Cain's was now his chastisement. And the brand burned not the less, but the more, upon his soul because it was not written on his brow for men to read.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### Requiem Æternam.

It was a damp, yellow autumn night, with the melancholy sighing of winds through the dense Druidic woods, and white vapours rising from the meres and estuaries to sweep chillily across the sward. A profound silence reigned over White

Ladies—a silence in which the "calling of the sea" could be heard from afar off, where the Western Ocean washed its time-worn reefs, and each fall of the yet green leaves trembled audibly through the stillness. And in this silence, complete as that of mountain solitudes, save for the moaning murmur of the restless seas and the weary lulling of the winds as they swept through the pathless forests, a man on foot, and alone, took his way through the woods on an errand that it is rarely given to mortals to fulfil: he went to atone to the Living for a wrong to the Dead. Fool!

We can destroy, but we cannot restore; and the soul may labour futilely through the length of weary years, to upbuild what one brief hour of its passions has sufficed to shatter into dust. Sin ever comes obedient to man's bidding; Expiation, fugitive and fleeting, mocking him, eludes his grasp.

He walked through the gloom of the descending night, with the pale skies above him, and in his hand the dead man's letter. It seemed to him that that which he must say to the one whom he had widowed in her youth would be better said beneath the shroud of night than in the garish day. He went on alone, while at intervals a water-bird started at his step, and the hoot of an owl pierced the silence; went on till he reached the dwelling to which they had directed him, where it stood shut away by forest trees from the lonely road. No living thing was near; the faint bark of a dog baying in the distance the only sound which broke upon the night, while the moon shone fitfully on the dark rustic porch and the lozenge-shaped panes of the casements. The door was slightly open, and since no one answered to his summons, he thrust it farther back and entered; the house seemed empty. There was no light save that of the moon's rays as they strayed in, and of a dim lamp burning above the staircase: the rooms on either side the entrance were deserted, though they bore the trace of recent occupance, and in one, as the moonbeams fell upon it, he saw the outline of an easel, and the white pages of a book open upon a music-stand. The house appeared forsaken, and he went slowly

onward up the stairs, guided by the little oil-lamp that swung there, and bending his head to avoid the beams of the low ceiling. In a chamber to his left, as he mounted the staircase, he saw the glimmer of light, and followed it; he thought he had mistaken the dwelling, and here might find some who would direct him aright, for he knew but little of the by-roads and homesteads about.

He paused on the threshold of the bed-chamber, and struck lightly on the panels of the door; it was opened by a woman, who looked up at him alarmed and curious at the first moment, then dropped him a lowly reverence as she recognised the lord of the manor.

Strathmore uncovered his head and slightly advanced.

"I am Lord Cecil Strathmore. Can I see your mistress?"

She hesitated, and looked uncertain.

"I suppose so, my lord—if so be as you wish——"

"I desire to see her,—now."

The woman noticed that his voice was hoarse, and seemed to tremble slightly, and, in obedience rather to that sign than to his desire, or his rank, fell back to let him pass into the room.

"Will you walk hither, then, if you please, my lord?"

"Here?"

He followed her, wondering at the place chosen, into the dimly lit bedchamber, that to him looked as deserted as the rest of the dwelling. The woman preceded him, herself strangely silent and subdued, and drawing aside the muslin curtains of a bed which stood, in foreign mode, in an alcove, motioned him there, without a word, to her side.

At the gesture he paused involuntarily.

"Good God! is she ill?"

The servant looked at him surprised, and her voice sank to a whisper:

"Ill? I thought your lordship knew she died at dawn to-day?"

"*Died!*"

The word rattled in his throat, he staggered back against

the wall, and leaned there, his face covered, his breath thick and laboured: another life lay heavy on his soul!

"A few weeks ago, my lord," went on the woman, while her voice faltered and grew thick with tears, "a letter came from Paris—leastways, it was that postmark—with a strange writing on the envelope, and inside of it another letter from Major Erroll. Mademoiselle Lucille read the note from my master first, and as she read her face grew scared and awful, with a piteous look in her eyes, like a lamb's they're leading to slaughter. She seized the letter it had come in, and her eyes had scarce fell on it before she gave a cry like a death-cry, my lord, and sunk down, all cold and senseless and crouched together."

The woman's voice stopped with a low gasping sob.

"We did all we could, my lord—indeed we did; but the minute the doctor see her, he said as there was no hope; that a sudden shock had shattered her brain, and that the cruellest thing to wish for her was life. Oh, my lord! and so young as she was! She never knew any one of us again, not even the child, but lay there, weeks through, with no sense or sight in her beautiful eyes. She sank slowly of sheer exhaustion, fading off like a flower. And, at length, at sunrise this morning she died. I suppose your lordship will know what has chanced to my master? His letter that she held clenched in her hand, the doctor took and locked up with other papers, but that in the strange handwriting was left, and I made bold to read it. It came from a gentleman, who wrote that Major Erroll had been shot in some duel at Paris, and had bade him as wrote it enclose that letter to Mademoiselle Lucille if he fell. I know nothing else, my lord; I only know that the news killed my mistress."

She ceased; and each of her homely words struck like steel to the heart of her hearer, staining his soul with the guilt of two lives blotted out by his hand from the Living.

DEAD!

Had he known her and loved her well, the word could scarce have echoed more hideously in his ears than now, when

it met him on the threshold mocking the atonement that he came to offer, and striking paralysed and powerless the soul which, in its presumption, had thought to strike the balance with its sin, and cover crime by costless expiation. DEAD! He leaned against the wall, with his head bowed in silence; the direst agony that racks men in their hours of bereavement was mercy to the remorse that Strathmore knew.

Then he raised his head slowly and moved towards the couch, whilst the woman turned away so that she did not look upon his face; she, who only had heard of his close friendship with the dead man, thought he was moved by grief at his friend's loss, and his rank made his sorrow sacred and unapproachable in her eyes. He drew near the bed, impelled by some resistless impulse to look on the work that he had wrought, urged by that strange self-chastisement which forces us to drink to the uttermost dregs from the cup of retribution. The pale lamp-light fell on the white and delicate couch, fit bier and pall for the early youth thus early smitten to the tomb, and on the bed she lay—dead in the opening summer of her life—dead like a lily rudely broken in its bloom. The love faithful in life was faithful unto death; she had gone to rejoin her husband!

The lifeless form lay there in its ethereal and solemn loveliness, her hands lightly folded on her breast, her eyes closed as though in slumber, bearing no sign of the destroying hand, save in the hue that blanched the lips, on which, even now, a sigh seemed set, a voiceless prayer suspended. And in strange contrast with her mother's mournful and motionless repose, her head pillowed on the heart that had no throb for her, her brow resting on the arm that gave her no embrace, her breath leaving its fresh warmth on the lips that answered her by no caress, was a young child sleeping. Life in its earliest bud, side by side with Life stricken in its fullest bloom; the light gold locks mingling with the dark unbound waves of her mother's hair, the flushed cheek, with its rose-leaf hue, lying against the one now colourless and

cold, the soft and dreamless sleep of childhood beside the chill and hopeless slumber of the tomb.

"The child would not leave her, my lord," whispered the woman. "She sobbed herself to sleep there trying to waken her mother, and I had not the heart to stir her. Poor orphan! she is but an infant; scarcely two years old, and a love child! What will become of her!"

"Her future shall be my care."

His voice sounded dull and hoarse in his own ear as he answered the brief words; standing there, the vanity and the mockery of the atonement he had come to offer seemed to rise, and jibe and gibber in his face before the holy hush of death; and the hand of God seemed stretched to sever him from those whom he had slain, and bid him stand aloof, alone on earth, with no companion save his crime.

He was too late!

TOO LATE!

The words seemed wailing through the air—the eternal requiem of every sin; and as he stood there, with his head bowed in the faint lamplight of the chamber of death, the young child, waking from her sleep, stirred as from some joyous dream, and pushed her fair hair from her eyes, and laughed up in innocence and gladness in his face. With an involuntary gesture he spurned her from him as though some accursed thing had crossed his vision:—her lips wore her father's smile.

Stricken by that look as by the sword of an avenging angel, he turned and went out into the silent night; and in his ear the ceaseless moaning of the distant seas, and the weary cry of the winds, wandering and without rest, followed in his path with one eternal wail—"Too late! Too late!"

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## CHAPTER XXIX.

"Good and Evil as two Twins cleaving together."

"YOU drink the bitterness of Remorse? Taste the sweetness of Revenge."

The words stole softly to his ear in the stillness as he paced down the ruined cloisters of the Abbey, breaking in on the far-off lulling of the seas and the hoot of the night-birds near. They pierced so strangely to the secret of his thoughts, broke in so suddenly on the solitude, in which no living thing was near him, that he started and looked up with, for one instant, what in a weaker man might have been akin to superstition. The fitful moonlight, slanting greyly in through the low pointed arches, fell across the figure of a woman leaning against the moss-grown pillar of the cloister-side; and in the dress, worn something as Arabs wear their garments, with the vivid colours which marked her tribe, and in the profound melancholy of the Sclavonian features, he recognised the Bohemian Redempta, who thus crossed his path for the third time like some fixed recurrent fate.

His steps were involuntarily arrested, and he paused, looking at her in the moonlight, whilst her gaze steadily met his, without boldness yet without fear, with something compassionate in its mournful fixity; and as she moved forward where a brighter streak of the moon-rays fell, he saw that the olive-bronze of her cheek had paled, and that her deep-set eyes were lit with a luminous gleam.

"Well!" she said, slowly, "does the kiss burn like poison now? Was sin born of the love, and a crime of the sin, and a bitter curse of the crime? Were the words of Redempta aright?"

He flung her out of his path with unconscious violence; the passions that were at work within him made this mocking travesty of them seem scarce so much insult as jibe.

"Out of my way, woman—devil—whichever you are!"

"More devil than woman, for, like you, I hate!"

The answer came slowly and bitterly from her lips with menacing meaning; the ferocity of his grasp and his words seemed to have swept unnoticed over her, and to have stirred her no more than the sweep of the forest wind past her cheek. Her intonation caught his ear, and he turned and looked more closely at her features, on which were written the dark passions of the Sclavonic character, masked by that melancholy composure natural to the Eastern blood which mingled in her veins. He saw that this woman's words were not the offspring of charlatanry if they might be those of a maniac's wanderings, and he paused, instinctively drawn by the fate which seemed to have interwoven her knowledge and her actions with his own.

Of that moment's pause she seized advantage, and leaned towards him, changing her slow and imperfect English for her own swift, mellow Czechen.

"Listen? You are an English noble, rich and full of power—I a wandering Czech, whom your laws call a tramp and your scorn calls a vagrant, and yet—yet—listen! I, the daughter of Phara, the gipsy, can give you what your wealth cannot buy nor your power command—I can give you your vengeance!"

By the faint yellow light she saw in his eyes rise the steel-like glitter of his dangerous wrath as he thrust her back.

"You are mad, or an impostor! Let me pass, woman! I am in no mood for fooling!"

A smile bitter as his own crossed her face, and she did not move from his path.

"Am I? Look in my face and see! Listen first, my lord, ere you judge! If the words of Redempta were error that she spoke to you long ago in Bohemia, then say she speaks falsely now;—if you did not find, as she foretold to you a brief while since in France, that your love, changed to hatred, will know no rest for its throes till it is slaked in revenge, then believe that she lies to you now. But if you found these things true, then judge her by them: as true is her hatred

for her whom you hate, as sure is her power to point you your vengeance. Say! were they truth or error? Say!"

She waited for his answer, and he was silent, where she stood fronting him in the dim moonlight of the ruined cloister; a bitter wrath was in his eyes, a haughty menace on his lips, but the melodious appealing voice of the Bohemian carried its own conviction, and in a measure disarmed his anger; her words struck too closely home to the curse he bore within him to be heard idly or with scorn, and the soul of this man, in whom much that was great commingled with dark and evil crimes, was too instinctively true to itself and to others to sully itself by a lie even to a beggar. She saw the advantage gained, and pursued it, her voice growing swifter, and sunk to a whisper, whilst the untutored poetry of her natural speech lent dignity, almost solemnity, to the Bohemian tongue in which she spoke.

"They were truth!—and you have known their bitterness. Listen, then! I have followed you here to your own country to be heard, for what you vainly seek I can point out, what I vainly crave you can work. Listen! The worm burrows, where the tiger cannot reach; the tiger tears and rends to death, where the worm would be trampled and crushed under foot; let them both work together! Will you hold your revenge in your own grasp, to let its blow fall, slowly, surely, sharply, at what hour you will?—will you shatter the jewels from her breast, the smile from her lips, the laughter from her eyes, the world from her feet?—will you hold her fate in your grip, meting it out at your will, crushing all that wanton loveliness which has betrayed you, as you might crush this velvet-painted moth in your hand? If you will, then, my lord, listen to the words of Redempta, who, though ahungered and athirst, a wanderer on the earth, without home or people, poor, and stricken, and desolate, will ask no reward of you save one—one!—*to see her suffer!*"

Her voice sank lower and lower, stealing out in the hushed night with a terrible and ghastly meaning; her hand clenched unconsciously upon his arm, her eyes gleamed with a lurid

thirsty light, and the immutable and melancholy calm that veiled her features, as it veils the faces of the Easterns beneath the throes of strong emotion, only lent but a more deadly strength to the last words than the wildest curse of passion could have carried with them. To doubt her was no longer possible; and he answered her nothing where they stood in the sickly autumn moonlight, the air around them filled with the faint and mournful soughing of the sea, and the lull of the winds among the cloisters of the dead Dominicans.

"*To see her suffer!*"

It was the lust of his own soul—this merciless and brutal longing to draw within his grasp the vile and lovely thing who had been his madness and his curse, and watch his vengeance work, and fester, and eat its way into her very soul, whilst he stood calmly by, as men in ancient days stood to watch the lovely limbs of women stretched and broken on the rack. For Strathmore, who had been born pitiless, had now become cruel.

The Bohemian was silent also; she seemed to have lost all memory of his presence or her errand; and where she leaned against the broken archway, her eyes were vaguely looking onward into the darkening night, and as her hands moved unconsciously over her chain of Egyptian berries, her lips muttered still:

"*Thou* knowest how I have toiled to keep my oath. Grant me but this—but this! To see her suffer ere I die—suffer as she made *thee*. Vengeance is righteous!"

A smile more evil than the worst curse that ever lodged on human lips, came upon Strathmore's face where the watery light of the moon fell on it. Having tasted guilt, he had ceased to abhor guilt; racked by remorse, he still longed for added crime, and the fires that scathed his soul neither chastened nor purged, but only burned what was iron into steel.

"Righteous?" he echoed, while his voice was laboured with the passions roused by this woman's tempting, but sup-

pressed by her presence. "No!—it is hellish! But what matter?—it is all that is left now! Answer me, impostor or devil, whichever you be—why do *you* hate?"

A weary smile, haggard as grief, crossed her lips for one moment, and a strange softness trembled over all her face.

"Why, why!" she cried, while the melancholy Czechen words rose plaintively upon the silence. "Why do women ever hate, sorrow, travail, rejoice, lament? Because they love! I loved—I—the vagrant, the gipsy, the fortune-teller, whom delicate women shrink from as from pollution, loved, what she—the aristocrat, the courted darling, the beauty of courts—robbed from me. I loved—oh God! it is not of the *past*. I love still! my beloved, my beloved!"

Her head drooped upon her breast with a low gasping sob, and her form trembled as though she shivered at the wind; then she threw back her head and stood erect with her stag-like gesture, the light glittering flame-like in her eyes, the dark blood burning flame-like on her brow.

"We met in Galicia. He was an Austrian soldier, a noble like yourself, and he found beauty in me, and I loved him, as the chill, pampered, luxurious women of his world never love. I was his toy, but he—he was my god! What others called my shame, was my glory; what others held my sin, was my crown; and I said in my soul, 'I have lived enough, since I have lived to be thus dear to him.' I quitted my tribe to become his mistress; and when Lennartson left the province, and went to Vienna, I followed him—and he loved me still, though where he once gave me days, he gave me hours. And when he went to Southern France, I forgot my people and my country, and followed him still thither—and still he loved me, though where he once gave me hours, he gave me moments. It is ever so with men's love! And there he saw HER. By night, as I crouched under the myrtle shrubs of her villa to see his shadow, where it fell, I saw him in her gardens; by day, hidden under the pines, watching for his horse's gallop, I saw them riding together. She beguiled him as she beguiled you; he loved her, and he was lost to me for ever!

For a while, I know scarcely how long, time was a blank to me. I remember nothing; people who tended me said afterwards that I went mad—it may have been so. The first thing I remember is, when I crawled out and found my way to his house, there was a crowd about—a crowd whispering and awe-stricken; and when I pushed my way through them, I saw him——"

A shiver ran through her frame, and her voice dropped; she waited one instant, then summoned back the proud and mournful calmness with which she spoke:

"I saw him, dead, shot by his own hand .... and those about him were saying how she had laughed and taunted him the night before, and how, maddened by her, he had left her presence and ended the life that she had made worthless. She had slain him!—and when they told her she felt no remorse for her work, but went to a ball in her diamonds and her loveliness with a laugh on her lips. And by his corpse, when it lay there, torn, pale, its beauty shattered, and its glory stricken, I took my oath to God and him to know no rest until I had revenged him!"

She paused again; and in the silence between them there sounded the melancholy lulling of the ocean like the endless ebb and flow of human passions, ever renewing, never at rest. Then her chanting and melodious tones took up their burden once more:

"And I have kept my vow. I joined my own people again; but, unseen, undreamt of by her, I have followed in her track, groping in the dark for some dropped clue, some broken thread to guide me to the redemption of my oath. She never saw me save once, when she bade her hireling strike me out of her path like a dog; yet I never let her escape me, but followed ever in her shadow, as her doom should follow a murderess. Oftentimes my errand seemed hopeless, and I said in my heart, 'Fool! can the field-lark cope with the falcon? can the emmet destroy the gazelle?—how then canst thou reach her?' Yet ever again I took patience and courage, since ever in my ear his voice seemed

crying, 'Revenge! revenge!' and when my soul fainted because of the weariness of its travail, I thought of him as I had beheld him, driven to his death by her, with his beautiful face shattered and ghastly, and bathed in its blood! Then I gathered my strength afresh, and afresh pursued her, blindly, but yet in security, for I believed that the hour would come when the God of Vengeance at length would deliver her into my hand. And lo! the hour at last is here. Yet now that I have the knowledge my power is too weak to turn it against her. I, poor and lowly, and whose voice would never be heard, cannot use what I have found. But you, English lord, can do with it what you will. I, the Vagrant, and you, the Noble, both hate; let the great take the key to his vengeance from the obscure. The worm has burrowed, let the tiger rend!"

Her voice ceased, and there was silence again between them, whilst the winds swept with hollow echo through the arched cloisters where they stood, these strange companions thus strangely drawn together, with the great chasm of social difference yawning between them, only bridged by the community of hatred, which, like the community of love, binds together those who are farthest asunder. He had heard her throughout without interruption, and as the moonlight fell about him she saw the varied passions that swept across his face, and the tiger glare darkening his eyes. As dried wood ready for the burning leaps up to the touch of flame, so the lust of revenge which was within him leapt up to the woman's words,

"*To see her suffer!*"

He, too, was athirst for it. All that was evil and merciless latent in his nature—and there was very much—had fastened on one desire: to wreak the fulness of some hideous revenge where he had blindly doted. And he stood now silent, while many thoughts coursed through his brain, larvæ of evil which the hotbed of remorse was swiftly nourishing to deed.

A profound and rapid reader of human character and

motive, this woman's soul was bare before him as a book, and in it he read—truth. Her history brought back to him that which had once been told him at Vernonceaux of Marc Lennartson's death and of its cause, and he saw that the heart of the Bohemian, untamed and untutored, knowing no god but its love, and no heaven but its hate, would make no erring flight to the quarry of its vengeance. He saw that this woman held, or believed she held, the key to the redemption of her oath; and he saw that, weak with her sex's tenderness, yet thereby strong as her sex ever is, ignorant, and malleable as wax in his guidance, yet with the tenacity of an Indian in tracking the trail she followed, she would be his tool to work as he would.

For one moment he paused; the pride of rank and of habitual reserve, rather, perchance, than any nobler principle, shrinking from association with the Gitana, rejecting the employment of one thus far beneath him, loathing his instrument because he must make it even with himself if he once stooped to use it. That moment passed; then he motioned her from him:

"I will hear you; follow me."

And she followed him in silence down the cloister as he went onwards to the entrance of the Abbey, which stood out, a grey, sombre, stately pile, in the moonlight that was shining white upon its delicate fretwork and its pointed windows, and leaving deep in shadow its masses of Norman stone and battled wall shrouded in their vast elm-forests.

An hour afterwards the dark figure of the Bohemian moved swiftly and silently across the park of White Ladies, taking the road which led to the little hamlet beyond the gates, and at the window of the library where his audience had been given to this strange, unfitting guest, Strathmore stood leaning out to catch the coolness of the autumn night —fire seemed on his brain, fire in his blood, for the hatred of men of his race had ever outweighed and outstripped the sweetness and the madness of their love. And as a sleuth-

hound scents the trail of what he would hunt downward to its death, so he now saw shadowed out before him the sure track of a deadly vengeance.

Here, beneath the roof of the Dominican Abbey, which once had sheltered both, both seemed beside him: the woman who had betrayed him, the man whom he had slain. The sweat of a great horror gathered thick upon his brow—flee where he would these must ever pursue him, wander where he would for ever on his lips must burn the delicious lie of her guilty kiss, for ever in his path must rise the spectre of that death-agony which he had gazed on with a smile. For Conscience is God; and hide us where we will, it tracks us out, and we must look whither it bids, we must listen to that which it utters, we must behold that which it brings, in the reeling revel as in the silent dawn, in the dull stupor of sleep as in the riotous din of orgies;—from its pursuit there is no escape, from its tribunal there is no appeal.

And where he stood, while through the silence there seemed to echo the mocking music of Marion Vavasour's sweet, accursed laugh; and down the hush of night there seemed to tremble the dying sigh of him whom he had murdered at her bidding, good and evil strove together in his heart; the remorse that should have purified like fire, and the hatred which, like fire, would destroy.

Atonement!—his soul hungered for it. It had been shattered from his hand to-night; yet, later on, it might be wrested back. If he gathered, by his will and by his wealth, about the young child whom he had orphaned, all that earth can know of gladness, shelter, riches, tenderness; if, for her father's sake, and in her father's trust, he made her future cloudless as the life of the flower which but opens to the light to rejoice through the sunny length of a fair summer day, and made her lips only speak his name in gratitude and blessing, the sin might be atoned? He had loved the man whom he had brutally slain: through the young life given by the dead, should expiation to the dead be wrought.

Expiation to the dead;—but to the living Vengeance.

The lust for it was in his blood as strong as at that hour when his hand had been upon her throat, her life within his grasp:—and the power of vengeance lay now within his grip. "*To see her suffer*"—suffer, and plead for mercy, and be denied, even as she had denied it, and find her loveliness of no avail to shield her from the doom of an unerring and a pitiless fate! For this his soul was athirst; to its purpose his life was set; he saw it looming through the darkness of the future; the pursuit in which his speed would never slacken, in whose success his will would never relent.

In this hour, when he stood alone in the autumn night, with no companion save the distant lulling of the weary seas; of his remorse was begotten his atonement, of his hatred his revenge.

Twin-born, must not one strangle the other in the birth? Or, twin-nurtured into strength and life, could both prosper side by side?

## CHAPTER XXX.

### The frail Argosy which was freighted with Atonement.

FOR a year Strathmore was not seen in Europe.

Rumour, which must always lie rather than keep silence, babbled now and again remembrance of him; he had been seen in Thebes; he had been met on the Amazon, or the Ganges; he had been heard of as dwelling at Damascus, and studying the buried learning of the East; he had been slain in a midnight fray with dragomans close by the Gates of the Kings in Egypt; these were among the things that Rumour babbled of him, and that Rumour lied, for none were true. Those who knew him best deemed that he shunned the world, and had sought solitude; and these also erred. For Strathmore was of a nature which masked anguish with an iron strength and an impassive calm, and to which the artificial atmosphere, the feverish crowds, the profound ambitions of the great world, were the necessities of existence; of the

air of the mountain and the valley he had ever wearied; his breath was the breath of cities. Whatever of returning peace the eternal calm of mountains and the freshness of trackless forests may lend to the man whom the world has wronged, they have none for the man self-doomed by a self-chosen guilt. *Now* solitude was abhorrent to him—to be alone with Nature, man must be at peace with Himself.

Solitude! while over the still, starlit, pathless ocean in the hush of night there seemed to steal the quiver of that dying sigh. Solitude! while the crimson glare of the desert sunlight, streaming from the brazen skies, seemed reddened with the blood that he had shed. Solitude! while in the fairest fall of the tropic night, there seemed to look into his those dying eyes with their look of blind, beseeching pain. *His* solitude was a hell.

Yet for a year he was absent from Europe, and though many babbled of him, none truly saw him, or knew whither he had gone. He was absent for a year. For he held, what had been ever the creed of those of his blood, that vengeance accomplished, is crime acquitted, and remorse dulled.

And patiently and ruthlessly as the sleuth-hound follows in the trail of its prey, he followed the track of his revenge. For his own agony had not taught him mercy, and in pursuit this man was untiring and inexorable.

In the betrayal of his love he had suffered enough to have chastened his sin to its full due; the most rigid moralist might have compassionated him beneath the tortures of his guilt-stained passion. It had not been *love* with Strathmore, it had been worship—blind and insensate, if you will; but one into which his whole being had been absorbed, which had cast down unheeding every sacrifice at her feet, which would have died for her, content if his last breath had been spent upon her lips, and which had laid waste his life as no merely sensual passion could have ever done, when he had learned that his love had betrayed him, her fealty forsaken him, that her kiss, her sigh, her smile, her loveliness were divine lies, as free to all the world as to himself! The hate

wherewith he hated her was as mighty, therefore, as the love wherewith he loved her. Born with that certain taint of cruelty which often belongs to a character in which desire of power is dominant, and which an imperious, negligent egotism renders indifferent to all not touching on itself, the latent trait hitherto negative or dormant, rose under the pressure of maddened passion and grief, into an accursed thirst for retaliation. Ere this he would not have inflicted pain save when compelled to do so to clear his path, or to advance an aim; now, the germ grown into a tree, the seed sprung to a disease, the passive quality that had lain in his nature, grew active, inflexibility ripened into cruelty, and he set himself with pitiless purpose to work such ruin as he should watch and taste and prolong to slow protracted pain, and deal out as though his hand and his will had but to wield the iron flail of destiny.

Blindly as Othello had he worshipped what he loved; ruthlessly as Othello he now longed to crush her out with his own hand where none could gaze on the loveliness which had betrayed him; for there is no cruelty with which passion has not been allied; there is no vengeance so remorseless as that which has its birth in love that has turned to hate. And although his nature had been bowed and bent under the weight of its agony, as steel in the forging and the flame of the furnace, it had but grown like the steel in the ordeal, the keener to strike, the surer to slay. Because a ceaseless remorse ate like fire into his soul, he clung but the closer to his vengeance; because an anguish of regret smote his strength till it sickened and reeled in the torture of his lonely hours, he reared that strength but the higher, to gather afresh the reins of fate into his grasp, and build up with his own hand the structures of expiation and of chastisement.

Strathmore, great in much, weak in much, and guilty in far more, was very human; for human nature, with many touches of deity in it, has yet far more of devil, and is a tree of which

sed quantum vertice ad auras
Ætherias, tantum radice in Tartara tendit.

And of the few boughs which stretch to heaven, how many fibres strike to hell!

Where the Atlantic waves wash on the western shore, and the headlands are clad with ivy and trailing honeysuckle; where the white surf foams up on the ribbed pearly sands, and in the shadows of the hollowed rocks, ever sounds from dawn to sunset the delicate music of birds' voices mingling with the murmur of the seas; there was sheltered the young life which Strathmore's crime had orphaned in its opening. It was a fitting place for childhood to grow up in, free as the winds which swept over the ocean, joyous as the white-winged sea-birds which cleft their path through the sunlight;—this place on the western seaboard, with the melody of its waves echoing through the day and night, with its warm breezes blowing over golden gorse and purple heather, with its snowy breakers dashing on the rocks, and with its broad blue waters tossing seaweed in the light of a summer's noon.

There, where the boughs of the trees dropped almost to the edge of the sheltered sunny bay in St. George's Channel, and through the opened windows on a summer dawn came the voices of the fishermen, and the sound of the sea, and the piping of the waking birds, dreamily mingled in one pleasant music, lived the one who filled her dead parent's place to Erroll's young child—Lady Castlemere. Although he had given to her but negligent regard, a cold ceremonial of attachment, Strathmore's mother had loved him, not in his childhood or his youth, for she had then been a political leader absorbed in her great party, but proudly and warmly now that she followed his career from her solitude by the western shores, whither she had gone when age and delicacy of health had made the great world distasteful, and had softened that haughty chillness which came with her Norman blood. A stately and noble woman still, with that which had

been unyielding in her nature rendered touchingly gentle under the hand of Time, which mellows whilst it destroys, she left the proud station of Marchioness of Castlemere to her elder son's wife, and merged her own ambitions into those of Strathmore, whom she saw seldom, but of whom the world told her much. She had bitterly mourned when she heard of the slavery into which a woman's beauty had fettered him, and had shuddered aghast at that deadly tragedy which the world passed over with a light forgiving name. But in his guilt she loved him more truly, perhaps, than she had ever done; and in his guilt his thoughts turned to her.

It was his mother to whom he had delegated, and who had accepted that trust which the death of the wife had rendered it alone possible to fulfil to the child; and in proportion to the remorse which gnawed to his heart's core with every remembrance of the man whom he had murdered, was his almost morbid craving to fulfil to its uttermost breadth and depth that which he looked on as a request to be obeyed sacredly and unceasingly, as the sole atonement that lay in his power to render to the dead.

If you have once known what it is to recall, in a too late repentance, cruel words spoken, harsh thoughts uttered, to one whom you loved well and who has gone from you for ever beyond hearing of your prayer; and to lavish your care—in your poor miserable futile longing for some atonement, or cleaving to some relic of, the dead—on horse, or dog, or flower that he or she had treasured, then you know in some faint shadow of its bitterness that which he now felt; that on which he now acted.

The heart of his mother yearned to him in his crime and his remorse. For his sake, and at his wish, she accepted the guardianship of Erroll's young child: he coupled it with the condition—first, that the child as she grew up should be taught to look upon him as her friend and guardian, and, again, that she should *never be told her father's name.* So, alone, could none unfold to her the history of her father's

death; so, alone, could she grow up ignorant that the hand which fostered and sheltered her was stained with her father's blood.

It was easy to accomplish this. Erroll's marriage had been known to none; the clergyman of the obscure village where the ceremony had been performed was dead; his wife had still borne her maiden name; the servants, the doctor and the vicar at White Ladies had looked on the offspring of their union as a "love-child," and there were no others who even knew of her birth. Accordingly, when the young Lucille was secretly removed and placed with Lady Castlemere, under her mother's Hungarian name, as an orphan whom she had adopted, and to whom her son had been appointed guardian, into a matter of so little moment none inquired, and his mother's protection of her excluded any coarser supposition as to Strathmore's relationship to her, which, under other circumstances, might have been mooted, to her disadvantage in later years. On her he settled, independently of himself, a considerable sum, more than sufficient for all needs of her nurture and education, and, in the case of his death, provided that she should inherit largely of his wealth. He desired that if she grew to womanhood she should hold his name in love and gratitude, ignorant of the heritage of wrong she owed to him; he longed that there should be one innocent life on earth unaware of the guilt which lay upon his soul. And here, too, the will of the dead strengthened and sanctioned his own: Erroll had written, "Never let her know that it was by your hand I fell." A wish of his was now more sacred to the one who had slain him, than all the laws of God and Man which he had broken!

The arrangements with his mother had been all made before he quitted England, and the child had been a year in the dower-house of Silver-rest, happy as a joyous childhood ever is from the sunrise of its careless, cloudless days to the sunset of its peaceful, dreamless nights; happy with the seaweeds for her treasures, and the yellow gorse for her wealth, and the hushing of the seas for her slumber-song, yet—it

might have been whimsically fancied—with the regret of her mother's loss vaguely told in the wistful gaze of her fair eyes, and the shadow of her father's dark and early doom left in the touching and unconscious sadness, which stole like a fate over her young face in sleep or in repose.

She had been there a year, when, in the close of the summer, Strathmore's yacht, *Sea Foam*, bringing him, as most believed, from the trackless forests and buried cities of Mexico, came to anchor in the little western bay, after her long run across the Atlantic, before she went down Channel. He landed, and went on alone to Silver-rest in the morning light. Far as the eye could reach stretched the deep still waters of the bay; the white sails of his yacht and of the few fishing skiffs in the offing stood out distinct and glancing in the sun; over the bluffs and in all the clefts of rock the growing grass blew and flickered in the breeze; and as he crossed the sands the air was fragrant with the scent of wild flowers that grew down to the water's edge.

But to note these things a man must be in unison with the world; to love them he must be in unison with himself. Strathmore scarce saw them as he went onward; all that he beheld was the Future and the Past, the vengeance which should stand in the stead to him of all that he had forfeited, and the crime which gnawed unceasingly at his heart, as the vulture at the living entrails of the doomed. Outwardly, he was unchanged: the cold, urbane manner, the chill, keen brilliance natural to him were unaltered; he was a courtier and a man of the world; for twenty years to come he would not change perceptibly; but in character he had altered much; or rather—to speak more truly—his nature had leapt up from its repose like a lion from its sleep. An agony of repentance had shaken his soul to the dust, rousing it for ever from the calm egotism in which he had bade it lie; a guilty passion had swept over his life like a whirlwind, smiting from his hands for ever the curb with which he had boasted, godlike, to rein his passions at his will. The temple which he had built to himself had been riven to the ground by the

thunderbolts of the storm: a holier from its ruins might yet have arisen, but that with his own hands he chose to fashion the twin structures of Retribution and Expiation. Briefly, Strathmore had grown at once more sensitive and more dangerous, and though the whole creed of his pride had been scattered, like leaves before the wind, before the test of a great temptation, though the strength which had haughtily held all human error aloof and in disdain, had succumbed to the first attack of passion, and had wrought a foul crime as calmly as a righteous act, Strathmore never altered in this: life was still to be moulded by *his* will, and by *his* decree he held still that he should rule fate even as Deity! Alas!

> Evil or good may be better, or worse,
> In the human heart, but the mixture of each
> Is a marvel and a curse!

This is the widest truth in human life, but it is one little remembered among men.

He went this morning where, in his yearning love for the man whose blood was on his hands, he had centred his sole chance and choice of expiation on the frail life of a young child. As he walked onward over the wet smooth sand he came into a sheltered semicircle in the rocks, part of the grounds of Silver-rest, where the trailing plants were thick and odorous, forming a hanging screen of flowers, through which the sun-rays played upon the pools, and on the boulders that glowed deep red where the water had splashed them wet; and here he stopped, for lying on the wild ivy full length, with two setters beside him, he saw a boy of some ten years old, Lionel Caryll, the son of one of his sisters by an ill-fated mésalliance, who, early left an orphan, had always been brought up by Lady Castlemere.

The boy started, rose, and stood shyly silent; he had seen but little of Strathmore, and of that little he was afraid. He was a handsome child of the Saxon type, with a fair, tanned skin, and a mane of fair, tangled hair. Strathmore put out his hand carelessly to him; he disliked and never noticed children.

"How are you, Nello?"

The boy, shy still, did not answer, and Strathmore passed onward, putting aside a quantity of creepers which, hanging from the shelf of rock above, obstructed his progress. But the boy sprang forward with an eager gesture:

"Stop! please—pray! you will wake her!"

"Wake what?"

"Wake *her!*—and she was so tired."

Strathmore instinctively looked down, deeming that the boy's care referred to some pet setter or retriever.

Amongst the long grass under the ledge of rock, with the sunlight streaming fitfully through the leaves upon her, with her arms above her head, and her limbs lying in the pliant, unconscious grace of childhood and of sleep, there at his feet lay the child he had last seen at the death-bed of her mother. Her clasped hands held a long trail of ivy, her fair hair was wreathed in with a childish crown of wood violets, and her face was turned towards him with the dark lashes resting on its warm, flushed cheeks, and in its loveliness, still almost that of infancy, the shadow of that unconscious sadness which seemed like the shadow of her father's fate; a presage, or a heritage, of woe.

Strathmore paused, and a shudder ran through his frame; again this young child, in her innocent sleep, seemed to him as his worst accuser, seemed to him at once her father's phantom and avenger; and again this time, as she slept, the smile that smote him to the heart parted her lips and passed over her face, the smile that he had seen so often on the lips of the Dead.

Lionel Caryll looked at him, awed and terrified, he barely knew why:

"Are you ill?" the boy asked timidly.

Strathmore signed him away:

"Yes—no. Go on and tell my mother I am here, Nello. I will follow."

The boy hesitated, and looked at the sleeping child who had been his companion in play.

"Will you take care of Lucille?"

Accustomed to deference, and intolerant of opposition, Strathmore signed him away:

"Go, and do as I bade you."

The boy wavered, looking wistfully at his companion, and doubtfully at Strathmore; then, instinctively compelled to obedience, he went like a greyhound over the sands, followed by his setters. Strathmore was left alone with the remorse which an infant's smile had sufficed to waken into all its anguish—such is the coward doom of Crime.

He stood in solitude, with the sound of the seas about him, and at his feet the sleeping child, with the violets tangled in her fair, floating hair; and as he looked on her young loveliness, which, so different yet so similar, bore so strange a likeness of her father's face, memories thronged upon him, starting from the haze of long forgotten years, and gathering around him, even as the pursuant Shapes gathered about the Slayer in Hellas, till the air, which was clear to the sinless, grew, to the accursed, darkened and crowded with their thronging, shadowy forms. He remembered Erroll, a young child, even as this, with the same fair, trailing hair, and the same smile like sunshine on his lips; he heard his fresh, glad laugh ring on the summer air; he heard his childish voice echo upon his ear; he felt the touch of his young hand; he lived again in those years that had long drifted by, forgotten in the whirl of years more evil, when in his own soul there was no sin, when the man whom he had murdered played beside him in the sunlight, when his life was guiltless as that on which he now looked, where it lay sleeping at his feet!

And a bitter cry broke from him where he stood on the solitary shore:

"My friend! My brother!"

Back upon his ear the echo of the rocks around wailed in return his own yearning, futile anguish, like a prayer fruitless and rejected of Heaven.

In the sunny stillness of the noon Strathmore bowed down his head upon his hands, and his frame shook with the throes

of the remorse which could not force back the sealed portals of the grave, which could not call to earth the existence one fleeting instant had been sufficient to destroy. He could not have told how long he had sat there in the solitude, where every stirring pulse of life, from the noiseless rush of the sea-birds' wings to the faint shouts of the fishermen across the bay, seemed like the voice of God calling upon him to answer for the life he had hurled into the grave; moments might have passed, or hours, when he was roused by the silken touch of hair against his hand, and a voice which whispered softly in his ear:

"You are not happy!—tell Lucille!"

He started and looked up; the young child, awakened from her sleep, had come to him, and vaguely grieving for the grief she could not comprehend, as spaniels do at sight of human pain, was blindly striving, as a spaniel might, to comfort him. Losing fear of a stranger in her child's compassion, she had drawn close to him, so that her bright hair swept over his hands, and in her large soft eyes stood tears half of terror half of pity for the suffering which she saw and vaguely felt, with answering pain, as the spaniel the sorrow of which he nothing knows. And her young voice, tremulous but tenderly caressing, murmured in his ear, "Lucille is sorry for you—do tell Lucille?"

With a gesture as though a serpent had stung him, Strathmord started, flung her off, and quivered like a man who has been struck a death-blow.

"Child, child! hate me, curse me, reproach me, but—oh, God!—do not pity me! Keep off; my hands are red with his blood, *yours* must not touch them!"

The wild words died inarticulate in his throat, and his teeth clenched as the anguish she had strung to torture rent and tore his frame—the worst chastisement from the hands of man would have been mercy to the reproach of those innocent words which *pitied him;* to the unconscious accusation of those uplifted eyes gazing with a child's tender yet wondering compassion on the face of her father's murderer!

She stood apart awed and silent, the tears standing in her eyes, that were at all times wistful with a haunting, beseeching sadness; the fierce gesture which had flung her off she understood, the words she did not, they were unintelligible —indeed, unheard—but she waited, pale to her lips, and trembling like a young fawn after a cruel blow, yet drawn by a strange instinct of compassion towards this agony, which she seemed to know was brutal, not to her, but from its own blind pain. She waited, then grown more daring, and taught by those who instilled to her an infinite love for all who suffered, she drew near him again—nearer and nearer, till her hair swept once more on his hand, and a pathetic entreaty trembled in her voice:

"Speak to me—do speak to me? Lucille meant no harm."

Again at her touch and her voice he shrank and shuddered as under physical torture; this child came with caressing gentleness and plaintive pity to the one whose guilt had orphaned her, and to whose hands she owed the deepest wrong that life can owe to life! Then he lifted his head and looked at her; when his resolve was set his strength was iron to bridle himself or to coerce others, and it was his will that she should grow up holding him in love and gratitude, and ignorant ever of the crime which otherwise must stretch, a hideous and impassable gulf, between her and the assassin of her father. He passed his hand lightly over her fair silken hair, and answered gently:

"Lucille is very kind. I thank her. Tell me, you who are so pitiful to pain, are *you* happy?"

"Always."

Her eyes looked their mute surprise that any one could ask her such a question, and a smile played about her lips as she drew a long glad breath, recalling her own exhaustless treasury of joy—the joys born of sea, and bird, and flower, of a crown of forest violets, and a chase of summer butterflies! The joys which are pure, and cost no pang of shame, no purchase-gold of guilt, in their glad reaping!

Strathmore found in the simple answer the first seed of his atonement; it was much to him to learn from the child's fresh, truthful lips that she was "happy"—happy by his means, and in his fulfilment of the trust bequeathed him by the dead. His hand rested on her hair, and his eyes upon her face, as she leaned against him caressingly and without fear, as though he were known and dear to her, rather than, as he was, a stranger. Skilled in reading human features, he read the nature easily which was dawning here, the susceptibility to joy and pain suggested by the lips with their mournful lines in repose, and their sunny, laughing smile which sparkled and then died; the too early depth and poetry of thought which were written on the low, broad brow; the latent tenderness which lay in the sadness of the upward look, and in the liquid melancholy depths of the eyes, soft and dreamy as the night. These might have told him that to secure happiness to the Childhood was easy, with its fleeting pleasures centred in a bird's carol, in a dog's love; but to secure it to the Womanhood was a more perilous venture, which might chance on shipwreck.

At that moment a little toy-spaniel that was with him caught her eyes, and with a child's swift change of thought she uttered a laugh of delight, and threw herself upon the sands beside it, kissing its long ears, and bathing it fondly in her bright long hair. With a stifled cry Strathmore seized the animal from her arms: the dog was the one which had nestled in Erroll's breast, and refused to leave the side of the dead man; he could not see the child in her unconsciousness caress the brute whose fidelity had outlived his own, whose watch had been kept over her father's corpse!

She looked up at him, deeming that she had committed some great fault in touching a stranger's dog without his leave; and with caressing grace and penitence she leaned against him, lifting her dark, beseeching eyes:

"Lucille is sorry—Lucille was wrong! But he is so pretty, and he would love me—all things do!"

Callous to much, merciless to more, Strathmore, who had

deemed that nothing in life could ever wound or move him, felt the burning tears gather in his eyes at the simple words and action of this child, so unconscious of his own deep guilt, and of her own great wrong! His voice shook as he stooped to her:

"The dog is yours—none have so great a right; Lucille, if all things love you, will you give some love to me?"

She looked surprised yet wistful, and her eyes dwelt on him earnestly.

"Yes, Lucille, will love you. But not *for* the dog. Tell me your name, that I may say it in my prayers?"

For many moments he made her no answer; and in the silence his loud laboured breathings hoarsely rose and fell. Then his hand passed slowly and gently over her hair, and his voice shook still.

"Ah, in your prayers! God knows I need them from all things innocent. Remember me and love me—I was your father's friend."

The last words were low with a great agony, and seemed to rend and stifle him in their utterance. His hand lingered for a moment in farewell upon her hair; then he turned and left her, bidding the spaniel, which clung to and fawned upon the child, stay with her. Young Caryll was coming swift as the winds towards them. Strathmore passed him without word or sign and went onward, leaving behind him, standing together on the sunny silvery sands, the boy Nello and the young child Lucille, between them the little dog which had crouched in its love upon the dead man's breast, when human friendship had betrayed, and human watchers had forsaken him.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

### The Whisper in the Tuileries.

MARION LADY VAVASOUR stood in her dressing-chamber, before her Dresden-framed mirror, come from a fête of one

of the leaders of that brilliant set of which she was still the Fashion, the Cynosure, and the Queen. The lustrous light in those superb eyes was not dimmed; the mocking smile on those lovely lips laughed triumph that was unshadowed; the fair brow and the delicate bloom wore the brightness of their youth unmarred. For the world was as ever at her feet, and remorse had no part and no share with her; it could not whisper in her golden dreams, nor dog the royal negligent step with which she swept through life. Remorse! She knew it not. How could its ghastly cry be heard above the ceaseless chant of homage about her path?—how could its dread terrors force their way into the proud and dazzling presence to which kings bent and princes knelt?

She knew revenge, she knew cruelty, so do the velvet panther and the painted snake; but she knew not remorse, neither do they; and that dark tragedy of which she had been the cause, touched her no more than these are touched by the death they deal—save that she knew, when the world babbled of it, it babbled of her power; save that she loved to learn how deeply a woman's smile may strike, how widely a woman's loveliness may blast. True!—till she had wearied of the fidelity even of a guilty passion, all that she had vowed to Strathmore had, perchance, not been a lie; true!—there had come hours when she had thought that had they met earlier, met when their love might have been pure, and the breath of the world had not sullied their hearts, she might have given him such constancy as poets fable and as she mocked: the fleetest rivers have their deeper waters, the most heartless amidst us have their better hours. But her lust was Tyranny, her glory Power, and the evil which she worked smote not upon her—for her, as for Greek Helen, brethren warred with brethren, and men cast their lives into the slaughter! And this triumph was her crown. She stood now before her mirror, and let her gaze dwell proudly on the peerless form whose divine grace no living woman rivalled; then she swept onward to her carriage to go to that world which was her court. She was the most beautiful woman

of her time. Who shall give me title so omnipotent, sceptre so mighty?

Where she went was to the Tuileries. Here the English Peeress, the beauty of Paris, the leader of Fashion, had ever found her proudest triumphs; here to-night, as countless nights before, Princes coveted her smiles, Queens were outdazzled by her, and Sovereignties paled beside the sway of the woman whose beauty owned no rival; here, Marion Lady Vavasour was in the height of her brilliance, and her fame. And here, and thus she was watched by the man whom her love had made a slave, whom her lie had made a murderer.

She glittered through the titled crowds that were gathered in the palace of the Bourbons, with the sapphires glancing among her amber hair, and her smile of superb triumph upon her lovely lips, her choice and delicate wit falling like a shower of silver, her resistless coquetries charming to blindness all drawn within her circle in the salons of a King. And he watched her—this divine loveliness that had betrayed him with a kiss; this soft and patrician thing that had forsaken him with the vileness of the wanton; those angel lips with their childlike bloom, which had whispered and wooed him to the bottomless abyss of crime. So much the more madly worshipped once—ay, *still!*—so much the more mercilessly was she now doomed, so much the more deeply damned!

The palace was thronged that night. The ball was on the occasion of a royal marriage, and all that was greatest in Europe was assembled at the Tuileries; but as her sapphires outshone all the jewels of royal peeresses and imperial orders, so she outshone all the loveliness gathered there, while she floated through its courtly crowds, now listening to the flatteries of Princes of the Blood, now to the murmur of velvet-lipped Cardinals, now bending to her feet austerest Statesmen, now seeing bowed before her some proud crowned head. And Memory was far away from her in her superb omnipotence, her cloudless present—far as was Remorse!

She passed down the Salle des Maréchaux on the arm of

the Duc d'Etoile, her perfumed lace floating about her, the sapphires starlike above her brow, the light falling on her dazzling face; and every glance involuntarily turned on her and on her Royal lover, for such he had notably become. But as she went, unrivalled in her omnipotence, unequalled in her beauty, sweeping through the courtly crowds with wit on her lips and conquest in her glance, the eye of D'Etoile, resting on her, saw her face grow pale and a strange tremor seize her.

What was it? Was there poison in that perfumed air—miasma in those royal salons—plague-taint, or subtle death-odour, burning from the lights which gleamed above upon her loveliness, or exhaling from the jewels which glistened in her bosom? No, none of these; we are not in the days of Medici and Sforza, and (grown virtuous from dread of science and of law) we do not slay the body, we only slay by slow and sure degrees the soul, the honour, or the peace of what we hate, because this is a homicide absolved of men.

What was it, then, that, suddenly as she swept through the presence-chamber of the Tuileries, made her lips grow white, her eyes gleam for one fleeting moment with the terror of a hunted antelope, her hand tremble on her Royal lover's arm? It was this only—the whisper of two words, which seemed to float to her from a distance, yet which reached no ear save hers:

"*Marion St. Maur.*"

She glanced on all immediately about her—courtiers, ministers, ambassadors, princesses, peeresses, maids of honour—but she saw that as none of these had heard, so none of these had spoken that whisper of her maiden name. But as she lifted her eyes, they fell upon the face of the man she had forsaken and betrayed; the man who, in the last hour she had beheld him, had hurled her from him because death was too swift and merciful a vengeance.

Strathmore stood at some slight distance, leaning against a console where the light fell full upon his face, which wore

its look of cold and pitiless calm; and his eyes were upon her, watching her with a steel-like glitter, a dark tiger-passion, insatiate and without mercy, that the drooped lids did not veil.

And she who in her light insouciance, her omnipotence of beauty, feared Heaven and its wrath as little as the most daring of blasphemers, the most stoic of philosophers, turned pale even to her laughing lips, and felt the air turn sickly faint, the lights whirl round her, the crowd grow dizzily indistinct, and saw nothing but that gaze, with its mute, and merciless menace, suddenly met there as a ghost arisen from the tomb, silently quoting to her the Past, silently threatening the Future.

The weakness endured but an instant, too swift for even the Prince on whose arm she hung to note it, and he passed on—passed Strathmore. He did not move; he gave her no sign of recognition; but his eyes rested on her, and—he smiled. She knew the deadly meaning of that faint chill smile; she had seen it on his lips before he went from her to meet the man whom he had doomed, and she shuddered and grew sick and cold, and shivered with vague and intangible terror, as at the chastisement of their mutual sin. In that single moment, which for the first time smote on her soft and brilliant life with a ghastly and nameless fear, his vengeance had begun.

The flatteries had lost their honey, the homage had lost its glory, the charm of the world was marred, the power of her sway was broken that night to Marion Vavasour; and while she reigned in all her radiance in a King's Palace, the hand of a nameless terror lay heavy upon her, and she saw, ever pursuing her with its iron calm, that ruthless and unspoken doom.

Henceforth there would be poison in her wine, and canker in her roses, a ghost beside her couch, an asp within her bosom. His vengeance had begun.

The Paris Season had commenced, with the marriage-

ball at the Tuileries, something earlier than usual, and Lady Vavasour sat in her loge at the Opera, moving her fan with all a Spaniard's grace, lazily listening to Mario and Malibran, or to the whispered worship of her *cohue* of courtiers, while the delicate sandal-wood perfume floated from her rich lace, and some of the brilliant deep-hued tropic flowers of the East lay crown-like upon her lustrous hair.

In the light, in the warmth, with a Prince's homage murmured in her ear, with diamonds of untold price glistening in her bosom, with a proud title of her own, in the sight of a proud Order, surely she, if any, was secured from the evil stroke of bitter fortune; looking on her, it seemed that even Death itself must pass by this beautiful, pampered, imperious thing, as too fair to smite, too full of sovereignty to slay! Yet where she sat, with the sweetness of music lulling her ear, and the gaze of lovers' eyes worshipping her beauty and entreating for its smile, lapped in her own dazzling, voluptuous, victorious Present, like the epicurean she was, the same fear which had suddenly smitten her in the presence-chamber of the Tuileries smote her suddenly here, the same chill ran through her, the same emotion for one brief instant blanched her lips, gave terror to her eyes, made the wit falter on her tongue—for she heard the same whispered words spoken on the air close by her:

"*Marion St. Maur!*"

Yet they were but the words of the name she had borne before marriage.

"Qu'avez vous, madame? Vous trouvez l'air du loge tant soit peu étouffant?" D'Etoile asked, with tender solicitude.

"C'est l'odeur des fleurs qu'on a mises à mon bouquet, prenez-le!" said Lady Vavasour, holding to him the jewelled bouquetière, which Etoile took with such a subtle, graceful flattery in his thanks as only a Parisian can turn; but it fell for once dull and lost on the ear to which it was murmured, as Marion Vavasour pressed her fan against the lips on which she knew their bloom had paled, and thought in

her soul, "Who can know it here? Not *he*,—surely not he!"

For the terror on the life of this courted and sovereign beauty who had been used to coquet at her will with Destiny, and rule Fate by a sign of her fan, a *moue* of her lip, was her dread of the man whose love she had fed to madness and goaded to crime, and who had spared her from death only that he might see her live to suffer.

As her eyes wandered, half unconsciously, half restlessly, over the house, in the full glare of the light on the opposite side, she saw him again, saw him as in the Tuileries, with his eyes fixed upon her under their drooped lids, and upon his face that slight, chill smile which struck like the cold touch of steel. A few moments previous he had been in the loge which adjoined hers; now he stood fronting her, looking on her as he had trained himself to look, tranquilly, passionlessly, as in the Question Chambers of the Inquisition the Dominican, with gentle voice and soul of steel, looked on the tortured whom he doomed, and bade the rack be turned.

And Marion Vavasour could have cried out in her dread, and risen and left the Opera House, as though fleeing from some haunting spectre; for she knew then that it had been Strathmore's voice which had whispered her maiden name. But she was too skilled an actress thus to betray herself; though of much cowardice with much cruelty (for her nature was one essentially feminine), she had ever at command finest finesse and calmest self-control: like many of her sex, pusillanimous to the core, she was an actress to the life. She sat there, now that his gaze was on her, with the bloom on her cheek, the smile on her lips, the lustrous languor on her eyes, while her royal lover leaned to her with suavest homage, and the wit, the scandal, the persiflage circled around her. She listened, she laughed, she moved her fan with softest coquetry; she reigned with all her negligence, her brilliance, her grace, her imperious charm. But in the rich harmonies of the music, the courtly flatteries of mur-

mured words, the jeux d'esprit, the wooing homage which filled for her the hours of the *Prophète*, she only heard the single whisper of that name which had told her that the secret of her early life was in the hands of Strathmore. In the glare of light she only saw the face of the man she had betrayed, watching her with that merciless menace of the veiled eyes which quoted to her the unburied past, which foretold to her the shrouded future. Hear what she would, that name sung for ever in her ear; look where she would, that glance for ever followed and met hers; there in the glare of the Opera House, with the light falling on the pale bronze of his face and the dark gleam of his passionless eyes, he stood before her—he whose love had been insanity, whose religion would be revenge.

And when after those brief hours, which had been to her one long-protracted torture—torture which was endured with a smile on the lips, lustre in the eyes, sovereignty seemingly shadowless as of yore, Marion Vavasour was alone in her carriage, she sank back, trembling, quivering, unnerved, dreading evil with the shrinking terror of a delicate woman, shuddering from the fury of the storm whose whirlwind she, the sorceress, had raised from the passions of the man she had tempted and betrayed.

It was thus he ordained that she should suffer first, as the Dominican, with astute calculation, commanded that the torture should be administered gently and by slow degrees, so that each succeeding pang was tasted to the full. To wrench the limbs from out their sockets *at once* were too much mercy. Was it no torture to himself to go into her presence as into the presence of strangers; to look with unmoved calm upon her face; to hear echo on the air the silvery music of her voice; to stand by and watch the gaze of those who had succeeded him fasten on her loveliness, and her eyes look up to theirs? Truly it was such that when it had been endured, and he was alone in the solitude of midnight or of dawn, when the strain was released, and the unnatural calm broken down, Strathmore's suffering was, as his

love had been, a madness. In the great agony of that last fooled, cheated, guilt-steeped passion, which even in the riot of its hate begrudged the breath which whispered to another, and envied the dog that nestled in her bosom, his misery was fearful in its strength, fearful in its despair, for he loved while he loathed her still.

But Strathmore was no coward to *endure;* what he appointed himself, that he would have wrought out, though his own life had been the penalty at the close. His lust of vengeance was brutal, but none the less was it immutable as death, unswerving as destiny. He had the fierce passions and the profound dissimulation of an Eastern; therefore he trained himself to meet her thus, and she alone read the language written in the veiled depths of his eyes. The world deemed that the liaison of a year before had been dropped by him among the things of the past; and the world deemed also that, considering the tragic story which had been interwoven with its rupture, he was something callous to have forgot so soon; but then, the world remarked, he was a cold and heartless man, and for the issue of a duel he of course could not reproach himself. Poor world! great spy though it be, how surely, how universally it is chicaned!

Strathmore remained in Paris through the whole of that winter; and through that season, rarely and slightly at the first, more often and more markedly towards the spring, it was remarked, chiefly by women, that Lady Vavasour was losing the brilliance of her beauty, and was looking pale, almost worn. It was the first time that such a rumour had ever been whispered against her dazzling loveliness, on the day now eight years past, when she had first appeared as the Marchioness of Vavasour and Vaux. What wrought it, was that which has power to shatter the strongest nerve, to break the boldest spirit, to undermine the most careless insouciance—it was a *hidden fear*, the asp among her couch of scented roses, the dagger suspended above her head by one frail thread of hair, which the world could not behold, but which never quitted her. He had shown her that he knew

her secret, and he let that knowledge—the more bitter because indefinite—slowly and surely eat its poisoned way.

They knew each other's hearts, they whom sin had united, and sin had severed; and as she read her doom so he read her suffering, without speech, without disguise. That single name breathed in her ear told her that she was in his power; that single glance from his eyes told her with what mercy that power would be used; though when, or how, or where the blow would fall, she knew no more than we know when the stroke of death will descend upon us. And it was this endless uncertainty, this unceasing apprehension, which wore and tortured her till her careless, epicurean creeds were rent by it like filmy gauze, and the woman who had become so used to sovereignty that she had learned to believe she could command every hazard of life at her pleasure, grew the perpetual prey of a ceaseless fear and a momentary anxiety, which gnawed at her heart the more cruelly because concealed from all.

Wherever she went, there Strathmore followed her, till his presence grew as fearful to her as the spectres which follow the distempered minds of those in delirium tremens. In the salons of the Tuileries, in the reception-rooms of ambassadors, in the entertainments of princes and nobles, at the Opera, on the Boulevards, in the clear noonday as she drove through the streets, in the midnight glare of light at some patrician bal masqué, she saw him; always before her, in the distance and as a stranger whose glance swept over her unmoved, but with the meaning on his face under the cold and courtly calm, which she had seen there when he went out to deal death to the man he loved, and with the threat in his fathomless eyes, which spoke to none but her. He was ever before her like some avenging fate from which to escape was hopeless, and which tranquilly and immovably awaited a chosen hour to strike. He was ever before her, with that unspoken doom in his glance, and that unknown power silently told in the slight, calm, cruel smile which she knew so well. And the fear which had possessed her of him, from the hour

when her slave had risen to crush his tyrant, and the passion she had loved to excite to delirium had turned upon her in its madness, grew gradually under this ceaseless watch into a terror unbearable. It made her nerves unstrung, her manner uncertain, her glance like that of the hunted antelope, when it listens for the eager step which gains nearer and nearer through the awful hush of the night in the jungles.

They noted that her bloom paled, that her dazzling insouciance was capricious and depressed, and they noticed rightly; the beautiful hue upon her cheek, which so long had distanced art, now needed, for the first time, to be replaced by art. To regain that repose which had deserted her she had refuge in narcotics, which, however subtle, left their depression on the morrow; and to cover that depression had recourse to stimulants which, however skilfully prepared, left their mark on one, the happy and childlike sunniness of whose nature had been the chief spring of her ceaseless fascination.

The hidden canker in the rose ate at its core, and dimmed its bloom. Marion Vavasour ere this had been a perfect actress, and had never known one pang of pain; but that was when the peace and lives of others hung in the balance. Now it was her own that were in jeopardy; and so strong upon a mind naturally impressionable grew her dread of the vague doom which threatened her, and of the cold, pitiless face which, go whither she would, seemed for ever to pursue her, that she could have shrieked aloud and shrank away when, day after day, night after night, she met the gaze of Strathmore, and could have fled out from his presence trembling, as those who flee from the ghastly phantom of their own imaginings.

That she never thus betrayed herself, was due to her proud and haughty spirit, where dissimulation alone might perchance have broken down, this enabled her so to meet, and brave unflinchingly, what became an hourly torture, that the world should never have title to whisper that Marion Vavasour was agitated by the presence of the lover whom she

had deserted. To this, also, it was due that she never permitted her dread of Strathmore's power to drive her from the circles where she reigned. Once she felt tempted to flee from him to Nice, Florence, Pau, the Nile, anywhere where her caprice or her physicians might furnish an excuse; but she disdained and repelled the temptation; she felt that, go where she might, there would his vengeance pursue her; she refused to give to it its first triumph by surrender. Besides, she knew not *what* he knew; and Marion Vavasour was in her own epicurean fashion a fatalist. The blow did not fall yet, the blow might never fall; circumstances might arrest it, death itself might close his lips with her secret still unuttered. So she reasoned, so she reigned, throughout the Paris winter.

But in herself she never lost the sickening sense of that dagger which hung vibrating above her head to descend at any instant; in her white bosom, unseen by the world, the asp coiled ever under the freshness of the flowers, under the brilliance of the diamonds, and ate and ate with its poisoned fangs. *He* saw how she suffered—this woman to whom her sovereignty was her secret, to whom her pride was so dear;—he saw, and drove the iron farther down into her heart by every glance with which his eyes met hers, compelling her, while the eyes of the world were on her, to smile, to coquet, to scatter her golden wit and her lustrous glances unmoved and undimmed, while she grew faint and heart-sick with the terror of that power, vague yet wide and sure as destiny, in which he held her. Thus he tortured her till the dread of meeting his gaze grew with her into a morbid agony;—thus he tortured her until, imperious beauty and accomplished actress though she was, her cheek paled, her eyes grew anxious, her health became uncertain;—thus he tortured her, for he willed that she should taste the full bitterness of vengeance by being forced to watch its slow approach, as the prisoner chained to the stake was condemned to watch the gradual onward creeping of the pitiless flame.

And he waited, for the blow of his revenge to fall in the

sight of all assembled Paris, upon the same day in the spring-tide, as that on which, three years before, they had met at sunset on the Bohemian waters.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

### The poisoned Wounds from the silvered Steel.

EARLY in the ensuing Spring the carriage with the coronet of Vavasour and Vaux upon its panels, its chasseurs, its lacqueys, its postilions, its outriders, left the court-yard of her hotel to drive amidst all the other élite of the equipages of Paris, through the Barrière de l'Etoile, and round the Bois, and past the site of the ancient ruins of the Abbaye de Longchamps, whose religious rite has passed into a ceremonial of fashion.

The day was softly bright, the city was in its spring-tide gaiety, the dense crowds were sweeping down towards the barrières of the west, Paris was *en fête:* and Lady Vavasour's cortége, dashing through the streets with its accustomed royal fracas, bore onwards to join the great stream of carriages which brought the sovereigns of the Faubourg St. Germain and the Quartier Bréda, the Royal Highnesses and the Empresses Anonyma, alike to the throng of Longchamps and the inauguration of La Mode this sunlit day upon the Boulevards. And she leaned back upon her cushions in her languid loveliness, with the imperial ermine, a Czar's gift, which formed her carriage-rug, turned aside, for the hour was warm, and her priceless perfumed point d'Angoulême gathered about her with that carelessness which was her own inimitable grace. The carriage joined the row, eight broad, on the Place de la Bastille, and closed in with it; all eyes turned on her, for she gave the law of the year and led the fashion, and men surrounded her as her Guards surround a Queen, Princes and Ministers spurring their horses to approach her, and stooping from their saddles to seek a word as eagerly as they would have sought a Crown.

She swept along the Boulevards and down the drives of

the Bois, where the man whom her lie had murdered had been slain when the sun had set; and the past was not remembered nor repented, for remorse had no share in her shadowless life; remorse had no place in her world.

She was alone in her carriage; none were permitted that day to share that throne (of which her barouche-step was the *haut pas*) of the Sovereign of Fashion; her little lion-dog alone occupied the cushions beside her, with his jewelled collar on his snowy fleece, and in the double line of horsemen, on either side the throng of carriages, on every lip there was but one theme—the beauty of the English Marchioness who gave the mode to Paris.

Lady Vavasour drove onward past the site of the old Abbaye, whilst Etoile leant from his saddle, breathing a Prince's flatteries in her ear, until she reached the full stream of equipages, where the occupant of almost every carriage (that was patrician, not lorette) was numbered on her visiting-list; and each one of those delicate *aristocrates* was either her friend for boudoir confidences, or her acquaintance for State dinners. And now in the rich morning sunlight, as she encountered their equipages and received their salutations, she saw that which sent an ice-chill through the warm current of her glad life.

What was it, slight, nameless, intangible yet to be *felt*, that she read in the glance of one or two of the highest women of the French and English aristocracies? Imperceptible to another, *she* caught it—for Marion Vavasour had a secret to guard, and whoever owns a secret always suspects that the world has unearthed it. That which she read, or fancied, in their look was not censure, not inquiry, not insolence, not wonder; it was more vague than any of these, yet to her it spoke them all. She caught it once, twice, thrice on different faces, and her delicate bloom paled: it was that chillness which is marked and felt rather by that which it suggests than by what it does, slight, but intentional as it was unmistakable. Etoile looked surprised; but he was too true a gentleman to affect to perceive what in real truth bewildered

him. For one brief second her soft antelope eyes lightened with ill-suppressed anxiety and with unrepressed anger; there is no glass which reflects so delicately, yet so bitterly and so surely, every shade of disdain as the faces of trained women of the world. The steel with which their scorn thrusts is silvered, but the wound it deals is barbed, and deep, and poisoned. Lady Vavasour caught that disdain, and knew or guessed its meaning, and her cheek paled under the sea-shell bloom of her delicate rouge; the thrust of the silvered steel struck to her soul, for she knew that it struck to the core of her secret.

The carriages rolled onward, and as yet the coldness lay but in look, the blow was dealt but from manner, her bows were returned as of yore, though with a certain distance, a marked chillness; and Etoile found no constraint in her wit, no light the less in her luminous eyes; she seemed to note nothing of the look which spoke so much! But the asp in her bosom had fangs not one whit the less bitter because the smile did not leave her lips, nor the nonchalant grace of her attitude change: women cover their wounds, but under the veil they throb—they throb! The carriages rolled on, and her postilions threading their way through the throng passed the stately equipage of her chosen and intimate friend Lady Clarence Camelot—that cold, proud beauty, in whose veins ran the "blue blood" of Norman monarchs, and whose social creeds were lofty if not stringent. But yesternight they had sat at the Opera together, rival rulers yet close allies; but yesterday so complete had been their sisterhood, that they were in private to each other "Marion" and "Ida." Now, the azure eyes of the descendant of Plantagenet looked with calm, cold regard at her, as though regarding a stranger, and, recognising her presence no more than she would have recognised that of a beggar, the Lady Clarence Camelot passed on round Longchamps.

On Marion Vavasour's lips, which were blanched to whiteness, the smile was arrested as on the lips of those suddenly smitten with death; and while the smile rested there, into

her eyes came a wild, haunting anxiety as they glanced over the crowd to see whether this had escaped all others. And as they glanced they saw—cold, pitiless, with the brutal menace in the eyes and the slight smile about the mouth, unmoved as though cast in bronze—the face of Strathmore.

He was watching the progress of his work—watching how slowly and surely, drop by drop, his poison fell.

The throng bore his horse backward; her carriage rolled onward with the glittering mass making the tour of the Bois de Boulogne; and once, twice, thrice, again and again, the Queen of Fashion was made to eat of the ashes of the deadly humiliation; and the silvered steel thrust its barbed point farther and farther down into her heart, probing deep to the core of her secret.

She passed the Countess of Belmaine; she passed the Duchesse de Lurine; she passed the Marchioness of Boville; she passed the Vicomtesse de Ruelle; she passed her oldest friend, Lady Beaudesert.

And all these dealt her the same blow, one by one, with the same chill, delicate, unerring weapon; all these gave her no recognition even of her presence.

The procession of Longchamps, which had ever been one long triumphal passage for the proud and dazzling English leader, was one long pilgrimage of shame, worse than that which, in the centuries gone by, the barefoot penitents had made by that same route, when the blind, the sick, and the lame had thronged to the Abbaye altars, to the grave of Isabelle Capet.

On many tongues in that dense throng, among such as could observe it, was but one theme—the insults of her Order to the Marchioness of Vavasour and Vaux.

But she leaned back, not letting the smile even grow constrained on her lip, not allowing even a glance of anxiety in her eyes, a flush of anger on her cheek; but negligent, graceful, tranquil as of old, not seeming to have noticed the thrusts which pierced her to the soul. At last, as her carriage was turned back to Paris, it passed side by side with the equipage

of the most notorious adventuress of the demi-monde, Viola Vé, celebrated for ruining a peer of France every trimestre, and whose extravagances startled even "equivocal society;" as her barouche-wheel locked slightly in that of Lady Vavasour, the Lorette smiled and bowed, and said a few careless words to the English Peeress, as though they were of the same world and the same order!—and laughed as her carriage rolled on, as one who gives an insult she knows *cannot be resented.*

The open outrage and insolence were translatable to every looker-on in that dense crowd; the key to it was a mystery which convulsed Longchamps with bewildered amazement, and convulsed Paris similarly in a few hours after. And at this coarse indignity Marion Vavasour turned white to the very lips, and trembled exceedingly; for she was proud, very proud! and she had had her foot on the neck of this haughty and patrician world so long, so long! It was so bitter to have the diadem torn from her brow, the sceptre shattered from her hand!

Once again, as rallying her courage she glanced around in defiance of the insults, she saw in the yellow sunlight the face of Strathmore, watching her with the smile on his lips and the menace in his eyes, watching her as the serpent watches the bird which cannot escape from its fangs. Marion Vavasour knew that it was he who had her secret, and was on her track; his hand which by the silvered steel of these women's indignities, dealt her this poisoned and mortal wound.

With all nonchalance, all hauteur, all easy grace, unchanged, but with her lips blanched and drawn over her pearly teeth, the most beautiful woman of her time returned with that slow and glittering procession from Longchamps to Paris, veiling the quivering nerves and the throbbing pride with calm courage, with admirable artifice—for she was a more perfect actress than any the stage has seen. Yet she ran the gauntlet of a deadly trial; for in those hours which that long pageant occupied, in the dense throngs which fashion

gathered, all the eyes of Paris Proper were on her, and the crowd was divided but into two classes, those who passed the outrage on her and those who witnessed it!

As at last she swept up the steps of her own hotel, she did not observe a vagrant woman loitering hard by on the pavement; but the Bohemian had watched there through livelong hours, watched to see her face as she returned from Longchamps, and a smile came on Redempta's lips as her vigil was repaid, and she muttered in Czechen:

"It is begun. I have not lived in vain, beloved! She suffers! she suffers!"

It was true—she suffered! Marion Vavasour had laughed her sweet soft laugh at the mortal agony she dealt to others, but in her own bitterness she, the discrowned, who had known no pain and no remorse, suffered—suffered even as Marie Antoinette when the crown was wrenched from her golden head, and the Dethroned was led out for the gibes of the people.

There was some confusion and agitation in her household as she crossed the great parquet of the hall, but not noting it she swept onward up the staircase, turning to the groom of the chambers:

"Where is my lord?"

The man hesitated slightly, and looked grave; she repeated her question imperiously:

"Where is his lordship? Answer me!"

"Pardon me, my lady, but during your ladyship's absence his lordship was attacked with a—slight indisposition."

An intense alarm and anxiety came into her face—strange visitants there, for the world had never known that she had loved her lord!

"Indisposition of what kind?"

"Something—I believe—of a syncope, my lady."

He was too polite and too elegant a philomath to use so brief a term as "fit," but her fears grasped his meaning, and she bade him send the physicians to her in her boudoir. They came, honeyed and deferential, and from much cream and

verbiage the simple truth gradually oozed that, in plain terms, the Marquis of Vavasour had been struck by apoplexy after a pâté of nightingales, followed by too many bouchées and rosolios, at his luncheon, and now lay, sensible indeed, but in a state most precarious, of which the issue was doubtful.

Then she dismissed them with a queenly bow of her graceful head, and signified an imperative necessity that she should see her lord alone on family matters of the highest moment. The physicians, curious, like all of their trade, vainly strove to represent that their presence was indispensable for every second; all Europe bowed to her will, and she permitted none to gainsay it; it was obeyed now. His score of attendants retired from his chamber, and her husband was alone when she entered it.

With her rich and graceful beauty she came and stood by the bedside of the sick man, on whose face death had written its mark out plainly; and, for he was quite conscious and had every sense left him, he opened his eyes and looked at her curiously, for it were hard to describe the change which had come over her features, and she wore no mask with him.

She leant over him as she sat beside the couch, after a few hurried words of condolence, speaking low and swiftly:

"Vavasour! All Paris knows it!"

Into the supine face of the old Marquis came a gleam of malicious amusement crossed with surprise.

"The deuce they do!" he said, with a laboured articulation. "Who told 'em?"

"God knows! What matter *who!*" And she, whom grief in all its agony, passion in all its fury, had never moved, save to that gay, triumphant amusement with which a child crushes its costliest toy, spoke with breathless agitation, her lips quivering, her fair hands trembling, her eyes filled with tears of bitterness! "They know it! Even Ida Camelot cut me dead an hour ago; a score of them passed me as they would pass a dog! And even that woman Vé, Caderousse's mistress,

dared to insult me—ME! They know it! Nothing less could make them act so, nothing else could give her title with impunity to——"

The sick man chuckled low and with difficulty, as though this were the best joke which could have come to cheer him on his death-bed:

"Gad! I wish I had been there! Deuced pity to have lost it! Eh! bien, ma belle! you can't complain; you've cheated them a long time!"

And where he lay back among his pillows he chuckled still, faintly, for his breath was with difficulty drawn, but with a malicious amusement that was in ghastly contrast with the marks which death had set upon his face.

A passionate anger and misery gathered in hers:

"And that is all the pity that you——"

"Pity!" broke in the Marquis, with a laugh which struggled with a spasm of the breath. "Gad!—the deuce!—what pity do you want? You've had your own way, ma belle, and women love it. I was a great fool to take your terms, for they were confounded high; however, I don't mind it, you've amused me. It was a drawing-room vaudeville, with the fun always kept up; but pity—'fore George! women's ingratitude——"

And the Marquis choked with his disgust at the ill return which was given him, and with his amusement at what roused him even from all the apathy of a moribund.

"But, Vavasour, now—*now*—why not now? If you would, still it might be done—privately, secretly; secresy could be bought, and the world would never know——"

She spoke low, tremulously, incoherently, and in strange agitation for the flattered, courted, proud, omnipotent beauty! Her hands played nervously with the lace and silk of the counterpane, where she leant half kneeling against the bed; her attitude was almost supplication, and her haughty loveliness was abased and dejected; for she had worn her diadem long and proudly, and it was bitter to the Queen of Fashion

to have her sceptre wrenched and her purples torn aside for all to see the secret of the discrowned.

"Why not *now*, Vavasour?" she whispered eagerly, while her lips were hot and parched. "It would be so little to you; it would spare me so much. Now—now, before it is too late! I can purchase inviolate secresy——"

The dying man interrupted her with his stifled laugh rattling in his throat, while his sunk eyes leered maliciously, and his hand feebly played with the diamond circlet of her marriage finger—the badge, she had whispered to Strathmore on the rose-terrace of Vernonceaux, as the badge of Servitude and Silence.

"I dare say! and *ma belle veuve* would then win, perhaps, M. D'Etoile, who knows? As it is, she will have to be only his mistress! No! I am not in the mood! You think one *en moribond* ought to lend himself as a lay figure? Ah! there you are wrong, ma belle; you must ask the favour of some one of your old lovers, that man with the Vandyke face, who killed his friend for your beaux yeux; or one of the new ones, perhaps, may pay the price more graciously."

Again the horrid, unfitting laugh, chuckling and rattling in his throat, sounded through the stillness of the death-chamber; Lord Vavasour had eaten his last pâté of nightingales, but he had still palate and power to enjoy what he and most men with him find of still sweeter flavour—the pleasure of Malice. And leaning there against the costly draperies of the bed, in her lace, her jewels, her delicate floating dress which that day had given out the fashion of the year to Paris, in her lovely womanhood, in her haughty grace, Marion Lady Vavasour—who wore no mask with him—sank forwards, thinking nothing of her husband before her, but with her white hands clenched, her teeth set tight, her fair face blanched, her rich hair pushed back in its masses from her temples, eating in all their bitterness of the ashes of Humiliation, tasting in all their cruelty the death-throes of Abdication.

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## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### The Errand of the Lost.

THE household was hushed, all moved with noiseless footsteps through the wide marble staircase and the stately corridors and the brilliant-lighted chambers of the Hôtel Vavasour: the presence of death was nigh, and breathed its solemnity even through the gilded halls and the pompous hirelings of that magnificent palace, where wit was usually as rife as in the salons of Rambouillet, and cost was as unheeded in luxury or dissipation as in the days of Vitellius. It was known that his lordship could not recover, and that, Vitellius-like, his goblet was reversed and his last Falernian was drunk, and the Prætorian Guards of Pallida Mors were leading him out, stripped of his purples, and made nothing better or greater than an old, bloated, gluttonous man, to hurl him over the fathomless abyss, where none would mourn him, and down the dark, cold river whence none return.

The household was still and awed through this early part of the spring night, and his wife sat in her own chamber, when her dinner had been served and dismissed, musing and alone. From custom she had dressed for the evening, as habitual, and the delicate shower of costly lace fell about her, and the diamonds and amethysts sparkled in her hair as she sat there, her head leaning on her arm, her lips white and pressed together, her fair proud brow knit in vain thought—thought how to baffle, how to escape from the vengeance which netted her in and held her tight beneath its stifling meshes.

Only five-and-twenty years had passed over her head, and she must lay down the sceptre, and put the crown from off her brows, and pass from the haut pas and the throne, to mingle with the jeered and common crowd. Already! already! She must leave her kingdom in her youth. She had known that sooner or later this must come, that sooner or later this shame and bitterness must fall; but in the royalty of her

omnipotence, the gladness of her power, she had forgotten her doom. She had believed that it would come, perhaps at some far distant time, when her beauty was spent, and when in age it would matter but little; nay, she had at last believed that so happily had fortune favoured her, that her life would flow on for ever in the sunlight, and that she would live and die in the honour and odour of the patrician world she ruled, her secret never guessed, and buried with her in the grave which would bear the name and titles of Marion Marchioness of Vavasour and Vaux.

And now—now—in the brilliance of her youth, in the splendour of her triumphs, the stroke had fallen; and she must go out, to be the jibe, the mockery, the scorn, of her rivals and her foes.

The dews stood on her brow, her hands clenched in her anguish, she shivered and started from her solitary reverie—it was so horrible!—to stoop her pride into the dust; to be banned for ever from the haughty, shadowless, patrician life she loved; to be the scorn and the derision of the women she had outshone and outrivalled, and made follow the mere fashion of her drapery, the mere mode that her changing caprice gave as law.

She started and rose to her feet, and there was a piteous misery in the eyes ere this so proud, so lustrous, so full of careless laughter: she had known no mercy for others, but she knew suffering for herself. As she rose, her lace caught in and overturned a gold filigree basket filled with the notes which had come during the past twenty-four hours; one rested, as the shower fell, upon her dress, and mechanically she raised it and broke the envelope; they were only a few lines in French, bearing the date of the previous day:

"MADAME,—Lord Cecil Strathmore has some secret of your past, with which he intends to take his vengeance on you to-morrow, in the sight of Paris. I know no more than this, which I gathered from what I accidentally and unavoidably overheard between him and Madame de Ruelle this morning.

I acquaint you, that if you deem fit you may seek to avert what seems to threaten indignity, or worse, to you, and I am willing to answer to him for having done so. In this I render you good for evil, but, as you know but too well, I have loved you more faithfully than most.

"*Veuillez agréer, Madame, l'assurance de ma considération distinguée.*

"FALCONBERG."

That note she should have received the night before; and it had lain there in the jewelled basket unnoticed, while the Queen of Fashion had gone out to meet her doom. She, sceptical of all else, believed in that hour in Destiny and Retribution; the writer was an Austrian, a mere boy in years, whose young life the beautiful panther had torn and destroyed for a night's amusement, a coquette's triumph, at one of the gorgeous masked balls of the Viennese Court: and while she read her lips quivered and her hand shook as it clenched upon the paper.

It told her no more than her fears had known before—that the cold and pitiless face she had seen that day had told her without words.

"Poor Falconberg, poor child!" she murmured unconsciously, for in triumph we cast aside human tenderness, but in despair we value it. "His mercy—*his!* As soon seek pity from marble, warmth from ice! As soon ask the vulture not to tear, the lion not to rend——!"

And she sat there with the pallor of terror blanching her lovely lips, which trembled as with cold: she knew that more hopeless than to seek mercy from the beasts of prey was it to seek compassion from the hand which her love and her lie had dyed with blood.

And yet—and yet—her eyes fell on her own loveliness. It had bent him as the wind the reeds; it had melted him as the flames the steel. Might its ancient power not be wholly fled? could he who had been her abject slave gaze on it wholly unmoved? Up from the dread of a great despair grew

the sickly shadow of a vain hope, side by side with the mad impulse of an unconsidered resolve. She was so used to her sovereign sway, her proud omnipotence—resistance to *her* prayer seemed a thing impossible. And hastily, and on the instinct of a misery which made death from his hand look better to be coveted than the living chastisement to which he doomed her, she arose—nerved to a hopeless and desperate purpose.

Late that night Marion Vavasour entered a little brougham by one of the side-doors of her own residence, and was driven rapidly through the few streets which parted her from the Hôtel de Londres. The carriage was hired, the driver a stranger, and she herself was enveloped in long, black, sweeping folds, which concealed her person, while a thick black veil thrown over her head wholly obscured her features. Etoile himself might have passed her at his elbow and never penetrated her disguise; those who would have died for one smile from her eyes would not have recognised her in that veiled and sombre form.

The driver stopped at the hotel, and came to the door for instructions.

"Inquire if Lord Cecil Strathmore be visible?"

The man obeyed, and ten minutes after returned.

"Milord is within, madame, but they doubt if he will be seen so late."

"Very well, let me out."

She descended from her carriage, and entered the hotel. A few moments' conversation with one of the attendants, two louis d'or slipped into his hand, and she followed him up the staircase, along the corridors, and towards the door of one of the great suites.

"Your card, madame."

She handed him one, on which was printed a name, but not her own, and the servant entered the apartment leaving her without, but with the door not wholly closed, so that

where she stood she could hear his voice, and that of the one who replied to him.

"A lady entreats milord to see her for a few moments?"

"The 'Countess Lena!' I do not know the name; and what an hour! However, show her in——"

The man returned, threw the door wide opon, ushered her ceremoniously into the salon, and retired, closing the door behind him. He presumed this veiled midnight guest, whose voice thrilled him like sweet music, came from the Bréda Quartier, and envied the Englishman who received her.

The door closed, and Marion Vavasour was alone with Strathmore. He rose as she entered, standing under the full light of the chandelier which glittered immediately above his head.

"Madame, may I ask to what fortunate chance I am indebted for this honour?"

As the calm, chill, courtly tones, addressing her as a stranger, fell on her ear, she shivered—could that suave, gentle, immutable voice ever soften to pardon, to mercy? She was silent, pausing in the centre of the chamber; and he moved a fauteuil towards her.

"Be seated, madame. I await your pleasure."

She did not take the chair; she did not answer; and Strathmore, marvelling if his veiled visitant were dumb, awaited her pleasure—leaning his arm on the marble console while the light was shed on the peculiar Vandyke type of his features, with the dark gleam of his fathomless eyes under their drooped lids, and the cold straight line of the calm brows. She looked at him and shuddered, for she knew the fierce passions which lay beneath his high-bred and courtly suavity; she knew the steel gauntlet which was covered with that delicate, velvet, broidered glove of a courtier's manner. All the courage which had brought her hither on a mad impulse failed; the last time that she had been within his reach his hand had been upon her throat seeking her life! She sickened and shuddered with the memory of that ghastly hour, that awful torture, when death had been so nigh;—

noting how she trembled, this stranger, this veiled woman, Strathmore approached her gently.

"Have no disquietude, madame. If I can assist you, command me."

"Strathmore, you can spare me!"

The words rang out almost with a shriek; and as the words smote on his ear, he staggered back, and a spasm passed over his face as at some wound suddenly dealt by a keen knife.

His passion was not dead because it had changed to hate; nay, hate rioted in him *because*, though love abhorred her, love still craved her. For this woman had been to him sovereign, conscience, world, heaven, all that life can hold—all that eternity can offer!

A moment,—and he conquered himself; he held in an iron rein every emotion which could betray him; his face grew chill and passionless, as though it were cut in stone; he looked on her, as he had looked in the Tuileries,—as he had looked in the sunlight of the past day,—and was silent.

He had trained himself to see her thus without a sign, that he might watch her suffer; and she might sooner have wrung tears from a cast of bronze, a moan from a statue of marble, than mercy or weakness from him.

"You can spare me, Strathmore!"

The words rang out hoarse in their bitter supplication; cold and tranquil his answered her.

"I can."

"And you will—you will?"

For all reply he smiled; and that slight smile, as it passed over his face where the gaslight fell white upon it, was more pitiless than any speech which could have condemned her.

A faint cry broke from her lips as she saw it; she cast from her the trammels of her heavy sweeping cloak, and flung back the black lace which shrouded her like a Spanish mantilla. Her loveliness was once more before him, unveiled in all its brilliance, the light streaming down upon her face with its glittering hair and its lovely youth, the sapphires

flashing in her snowy bosom, the perfumed lace, half falling off, half trailing round, the divine grace of her voluptuous form. And she stood silent, her head drooped, her eyes soft with lustrous tears, her bosom heaving with its voiceless sobs, the light falling full upon her. This beauty had been omnipotent to tempt him once to cast aside all laws of God and Man—this beauty might tempt him yet again. This had stricken his strength till it was a reed within her hands—this again might give her back her power. And she stood there, while her eyes looked up to his, and her heart heaved where the jewels gleamed; and the lace sank farther down—down—from off her beautiful shoulders, with the diamonds glittering where they nestled in her breast. But his will was iron; his veins were ice—for her; and his eyes did not change, his smile did not alter, as his words fell cold and clear on the silence.

"It is too late for *that!*"

A burning flush crimsoned her face, and she shrank under the blow. She was a woman, and one who glossed her amours with delicate refinement, and one who was used to rule omnipotent, and yield with a sovereign's grace—not to sue and be repulsed. Tears, genuine and bitter, started to her eyes, and her voice thrilled with passionate emotion.

"Strathmore! Strathmore! I am in your power—spare me! I am a woman—be pitiful to me! You loved me so well once—have some pardon for me now!"

He did not change his attitude; he leaned there against the console, with his eyes, under their drooped lids, fixed on her; and his words answered her, falling low and chill on the silence, like the dropping of ice-water:

"I marvel you dare say that to me! Go!—you were always a matchless actress; it is a pity to waste your time, your tempting, and your loveliness!"

She shivered as she heard him: from fiery passion, from menace, from reproaches, she would have hoped to win, to touch, to tempt, to torture him into some mercy. With those cold, measured, inflexible tones, all hope died out. She felt

as those who, gliding down into a bottomless abyss upon the Alps, feel the ice-wall they strive to grasp, slide, smooth, and frozen, and shelving from their touch, as they sink downwards to darkness and to death.

With a low cry she threw herself at his feet in all her soft abandonment of supplication; her proud head humbled to the dust before him; her white hands wrung and clenched; her loveliness, thrown there before him like a criminal's who kneels before her judge.

And he looked down on her unmoved, save that his vengeance was dear to him, and sweet: she suffered—at last!

"Strathmore! Oh, God! see, I kneel to you; *I*, who never bent to any mortal thing! I may merit this from you; I do not dare to deny it. You may have much to avenge on me—much!—though I loved you; ay, I loved you as I have loved no other! Women crave conquest, power, cruelty; but we *love*, despite that—love, though we love ourselves first! If I sinned *to* you, I sinned *for* you!——"

"True! It is the trade of the courtesan!"

Where she lay at his feet, prostrate in her loveliness and her abasement, she shuddered under the calm, chill, brutal sneer—she! the woman who had ruled over princes, and to whom kings had knelt! Yet—she would not renounce all hope, she would not give way from all effort: she lifted her head, so that the white light fell on its lustrous hair, and shone in her lovely eyes, with their appealing prayer; and that face, in its blanched pain, its prostrate beauty, its stricken pride, was more resistless than in its most radiant hour of witching sovereignty.

"Shame me! humble me! strike me as you will! I wronged you, and I am in your power, and a woman, and defenceless! Yet hear me: be great enough to forego vengeance—be noble enough to heap coals of fire on my head by Pardon. If I erred, were *you* sinless? If I were guilty, were *you* stainless from crime? See!—you have made me drink the bitterness of humiliation to the dregs! Cannot that content you? Spare me more, for the love of God! Hear me, Strathmore, and

have mercy! To-day you have let the world whisper it, but to-morrow's whisper may soon efface to-day's. Lord Vavasour is dying, dying fast; let me bear his name in peace? If you do not reveal the truth to his heirs, none will dare attack, and sift, and search—none will raise the question. I may live in peace; live without shame, and sneer, and jibe from the women I have rivalled, from the society I have ruled. Only spare me this—this! Do not hunt me down to poverty and degradation, do not expose me to the world!——"

She stopped, and a sob choked her voice, for here, if acting still, the actress felt her part and pleaded her prayer in all its acrid bitterness, its keen, imploring pain, for she felt and pleaded for herself. She suffered,—she suffered,—and the burning tears gathered and fell, and under its delicate shroud of lace her form shivered with the physical cold of a great dread, of a convulsive suspense.

She pleaded as the Condemned plead for life. Her future lay in this man's keeping—and he had spared her from death only to bid her live "to suffer."

She had made him in God's sight and in his own a murderer. Could she hope for mercy from him? Could she strike vengeance from his hand?

A death-like stillness reigned between them as her voice ceased, and she lay there at his feet in her abject supplication, her abased loveliness, her stricken pride. He stood changeless, motionless, his face unaltered in its tranquillity, his eyes unfaltering in their relentless gaze:

"If you were drowning before my eyes, and my hand stretched out could save you—you should perish in its need! If you were bound to the stake, and one word of mine could save you—I would not speak it! If you were dying of hunger and thirst, and a cup of cold water from my pity could save you—I would refuse it in your death hour! I have answered. Such mercy as you gave, I give to you; no other."

As his words fell slowly out upon the silence, chill, tranquil, and inexorable as Fate, a shudder ran through her frame,

and a cry broke from her lips wild and piteous, like that of a woman who receives her death-warrant.

She trembled, shivered, shrank before the iron pitilessness, the icy hate, of this man's nature, on which her own might fling, and wear, and spend itself for ever, yet make no more impress than the fretting waves which break upon a granite sea-wall, and leave no sign of all their feverish travail. And she lay crouched at his feet in all her fallen loveliness, stricken and paralysed as by a cruel mortal blow.

His eyes dwelt on her long and meaningly, while not a muscle of his face changed from its rigid calm, its bitter exultation; he watched her shudder, and writhe, and crouch there at his feet with a faint smile playing on his lips—as he would have watched her strained on the rack or bound to her funeral pyre; and his voice hissed slowly through his teeth as he stooped and whispered in her ear:

"Listen! I have what you can never rob me of—I have my VENGEANCE. You have lived to suffer! And you will fall lower and lower into sin and infamy, and misery and want; fall as those fall who trade in beauty, and die as they die when beauty leaves them: die in the streets—die craving a crust. Go!—your fate waits for you."

The brutal doom hissed in her ear, maddened her as a shot a panther, till all its desert nature wakes to life under its pain. She started, and uprose and stood before him, her face blanched to the lips, her eyes alight with a tigress-glare, fearful in her loveliness, ghastly in her brilliance, dangerous in her weakness and her despair.

"Abase me, expose me, destroy me, work your worst; *I* plead no more! But, by the God whom we have both outraged, the hour shall come when the mercy you mete out to me I will mete back to you, when you shall seek in vain of earth or heaven, Strathmore, for the pity you now deny!"

She stood before him in all her beauty, while the light streamed down upon her, her face turned towards him with the glittering hair thrown back, her lustrous eyes dilated, her form instinct with despairing passion, her voice rising

and quivering in the air till it rang with a menace of the future, with evil dark and merciless as his own; she stood there, terrible as Até, prophetic as Cassandra. And thus they looked on one another, this man and woman, so lately bound in the close ties of passionate love and mutual sin, now sundered farther than they betwixt whom oceans roll. Thus they looked on one another; and in her eyes was the lurid gleam of a vengeance which soon or late would pioneer its path and sate its lust; and on his lips sat the calm, chill smile of a vengeance which would never cease from pursuing, and never stay its hand for pity or for prayer, which held its quarry in its grip, and tasted its power slowly, drop by drop, with thirst which grew the greater with its every draught.

Thus they looked on one another; there was a moment's silence again, as though she still mutely awaited whether yet he would not yield to mercy, yet abstain from vengeance, and bid her go, loathed, abhorred, condemned, but—spared. There was a moment's silence, in which the very air seemed pleading for her pardon, and supplicating for the God-like vengeance of forgiveness. Then she cast one look upon his face: it was white, calm, chill, inflexible as the features of the dead, and unmoved as they to prayer, or woe, or menace; and without word or sign she turned and left his presence.

They had parted.

And, as the door closed, he fell heavily forward, with a crash, across the marble, weeping a woman's very passion of tears;—loathing life, longing for death, abhorring himself while his heart was breaking. He had loved her so utterly; —he loved her still!

To her he had been as granite, but in his heart he was so weak. His vengeance had so much guilt, but his life had so much misery.

"Oh God, I grow a fiend!" he moaned in his great wretchedness, his added crime. "Oh God, why did they not kill me in my birth?"

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## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### The Core of the Secret.

AT twelve that night, while Lord Vavasour lay dying, and Paris danced and supped, and gamed and laughed, and whirled through the merry hours, a party of some dozen or so were gathered after the opera for a petit souper in the salons of Madame de la Ferriole, the wife of one of those princes whom the Bourse makes in a day. The hôtel was superb; the ameublement would have been deemed marvellous in a palace; figuratively, for its cost, the supper could boast of liquid gold for its wines, and melted gold for its dishes; and the Sèvres on which it was served was rimmed with pink pearls: yet Madame de la Ferriole (genuinely, Madame le Maire) was still on the outskirts of fashionable society, and was at this moment still passing through that transmigratory period which transfers the owners of Capital among the leaders of Ton; and blazons the Or with the Gules. She moved highly, but not with the highest, and therefore her guests around the supper-table discussed the insult of Longchamps without the key to it, which as yet only lay in the hands of the ultra exclusives of one certain set; and, therefore, they hailed with pleasure and empressement the late advent of the single member of that set whom they had yet secured, and who had deigned to come and sup with Madame de la Ferriole, partly because, *en vraie Parisienne*, she respected the wealth, partly because, *en bel esprit*, she wished to satirise the appointments of the roturière. That single member was Blanche de Ruelle.

With all the "languor of good tone," but with all the curiosity of scandal-mongers, the party around the millionnaire's supper-table sought the confidence of the haughty and unapproachable aristocrat, who, lying back and slowly breaking her ice, seemed disposed to talk of little but the new opera, and of that only to her own escort, the Vicomte de Chanrellan. Blanche de Ruelle had been the first to whom Strathmore had entrusted the secret of Marion Vavasour's downfall, and bidden deal the poisoned wound with the silver steel; she had been the chief to enable him to mete out revenge and chastisement thus slowly, subtilely, witheringly. And although he in unfolding, she in receiving the story had placed but one motive in sight and surface—to wit, the proud

wrath of an insulted Order, and an outraged and patrician Matronage; the chastisement had been the more willingly, the more completely done because she had once loved—hopelessly—where the woman whose abasement she was summoned to carry out had been madly worshipped. The same passions move the world as in older and more transparent days; they are but the more closely veiled.

And now, about the supper-table of La Ferriole, little else but one topic was circulated, if abandoned for the moment, to be resumed the next; and the bored, languid, slander-seeking flâneurs, masculine and feminine, lounging away an hour after the opera over the priceless wines of the Princess of the Bourse, sought its explanation from the first of those who had dealt the deadly thrust that day in the green allées of the Bois. For the insult to the English Peeress was the theme of Paris; and the high station of those who had passed it raised curiosity to frantic wonder and to breathless impatience. Blanche de Ruelle let them babble on about it in her presence, while she spoke of Auber's music with Chanrellan; then she raised her haughty eyes in answer to the questions which turned directly towards her, playing gently with her Spanish fan.

"Pardon, madame! Lady Vavasour? Oh, I pray you drop that subject; society has been grossly outraged, foully insulted. Have you not heard? Indeed! Why, the marriage was fictitious—she was never his wife. The world has been deceived, and we—we have received the Marquis's mistress."

## CHAPTER XXXV.

### The Abdication of the Purples.

At twelve of the night the Marquis of Vavasour and Vaux died, and his chaplain, standing by, said unctuously over the bloated body, "Blessed are the chosen who die in the Lord;" for he whose breath had just left his body had had many and rich benefices in his hand, and "died in the Lord," according to all the clergy of the Church of England, which sees no sins in patrons.

"Le Roi est mort, vive le Roi!" and the good chaplain, having said the Last Communion over the past Marquis, went to send the first telegram to the future one. But, rapid as

was his own, one had preceded it to the distant heir, who, from a nameless Attaché, would become a Personage. Where the two passions race, Revenge will outstrip Avarice of the two, though both are hell-hounds fleet of foot.

This latter message ran thus:

"From the Lord Cecil Strathmore, Hôtel de Londres, Paris, to William Vere-Lucingham, Esq., British Embassy, Constantinople.

"I hear the Marquis, your cousin, died to-night, suddenly and intestate. See me here as soon as you arrive, or you will lose the best part of the personalty."

Now, in the absence of all will of any kind, since the Marquis had ever had obstinate horror of a testament, and shunned the word of death as utterly as the Romans on their tombstones, the entail devolved on Vere-Lucingham, sole, though distant, heir presumptive, and all the rich personalty would go to his widowed Marchioness. Therefore, when this telegram came to him with his morning coffee, acquainting him of the new fortunes which Pallida Mors, best friend of the Living, had wrought for him, the young Attaché was bewildered at its latter clause; but knowing well the character of the sender, for he had been under him at Turin, never thought of slighting or neglecting the strange summons, but only felt a grateful and wondering eagerness as to its purport.

At twelve of the night the Marquis of Vavasour and Vaux died—of too much pâté de rossignol and rosolios at luncheon—not a great death, perhaps, but in the main scarce so harmful an one (to others) as Mithridates' or Hamilcar's, or Julius Cæsar's, or divers whom we call heroes, because they perished by a weapon with which they had slain thousands ere their decease, and slew by their legacies thousands after it. To be gluttonous of nightingales is bad; but it may be worse for the universe to be gluttonous of nations; a gourmet only kills himself; a hero fills a larger bill of mortality. The one, however, has only the restaurants, the other the world, to chant his *De Profundis*; and, granted, it *is* murder on a larger scale to kill ten thousand men to make a victory, than to kill ten dozen birds to make a pâté!

The Marquis of Vavasour and Vaux died, and left the

world a legacy of many inimitable *cuisine* receipts, and one great wonder. His young cousin, Vere-Lucingham, succeeded to the Marquisate with all its honours, and refusing to acknowledge her claim to one iota of the rich property which the law would have allotted to the wife of the deceased, to one gem of the Vavasour jewels which had so long sparkled on her brow, the new peer proclaimed to Europe that she whom it had so long received and honoured had no right or title to its respect and homage, but had only been the dead man's mistress. And when the charge was brought, the condemned could put forward no defence, could allege no denial: there had been no marriage; and the Law is not to be seduced by a feminine sophism, dazzled by an actress, or enslaved by a woman's loveliness, but wrings out one uncourtly, and coarse thing—truth.

She, whom the world so long had known and worshipped as Marion Lady Vavasour, had kept her secret well. Who says that her sex has not the power to guard a secret closely? Pshaw! they keep one for a life-time, if—their own! She had kept it, secure that it would never be told by her lord, and that when he died, with him would die the sole possessor of it. And now the secret was given to the winds, and hurled out to the light of the day, and flung to the world where she reigned, as the deer is flung to the hounds at the curée! For the hell-dogs of Vengeance had been on her track, and they never lose scent of the trail.

Years before, cruising among the West Indian Isles, and lying in a harbour (rarely visited) to have his yacht fresh coppered, the Marquis had seen her, lovely as the morning. Her parents, English planters, were dead, and she was fretting at, and wearied of colonial obscurity and insular imprisonment, like a brilliant tropic bird in a cooped-up cage. She looked at her marvellous loveliness, and knew that while it could give her sway wider and mightier than the Cæsars', it must bloom to its full beauty, and fade and die unseen, like the radiant blossoms of some matchless flower in the tangled forests and dense swamps of her own island. The Marquis saw her, loved her, and offered her—the world. She knew, by intuition in her lovely youth, how great a price such beauty as hers should fetch, and refused to sell it for less than his coronet. He declined the payment: she declined any other. A pause ensued, in which both steeled themselves

from surrender, and each awaited the other's capitulation. At last the man grew impatient, the woman doubtful: he was lured by her loveliness, she was lured by the vista of emancipation and conquest which stretched out before her; they each bent to a compromise. She dispensed with the legalities of marriage, but stipulated for the semblance; she did not require to be made his wife, but she required that the world should hold her so: he, well amused to *joliment jouer son monde*, and, musing that (unbound) he could end the comedy whensoever he should have fatigued of it, consented.

She came to Europe with him as the Marchioness of Vavasour and Vaux: it suited his monkeyish malice to play the trick on his order and on society, and he readily lent himself to all which might best sustain the delusion. She was received as his wife—and the rest was soon accomplished by her own unequalled beauty and unrivalled tact. She soon ruled the fashion, and set her foot on the neck of the world. And as time went on the old Marquis grew so well accustomed to her reign, and was so well amused to see society fall before her and men go mad for her loveliness, that he abandoned all thought of dissolving their compact; partially perhaps because he did not care to tell the world himself that he had palmed off a lie upon it, partially because his own weak and supine character had shown its facile points to her, and was ruled by her stronger will with facility, and without his being even aware of the governance. Thus what she appeared to the world she grew absolutely to regard herself.

Worshipped, courted, obeyed as the Marchioness of Vavasour and Vaux, she forgot that she had no legal claim to the title and place she filled. One or two obscure persons in that remote, uncivilised West Indian island were all who knew her secret; how should these reach her great world, or her great world reach them? Moreover, they were in her pay, and bribed to silence; so it was little marvel that Marion Vavasour—such I must still call her—deemed her position secure and her single secret safe from revelation; little marvel that, proud, made to love power and to use it royally, haughtily fastidious as though a born patrician, with some blood of an illegitimate Stuart actually wandering in her veins, and accustomed to the homage of exclusive circles, she had learned to look upon her rank as unassailable, and felt the degradation of her deadly fate bitterly, bitterly—as any

queen, who with her crown torn from her brows, and her purples rent from about her, ever was bidden to descend from her throne and come out to the jibes and the hiss of the multitude where yesterday the highest sought her smile, where to-day the lowest could revile and scoff and stone! Strathmore's vengeance would have been more merciful if he had slain her in the glare of that summer morning—a moment's pain, and all had then been over. He had chosen a more lingering and cruel retribution: he had bade her live to suffer.

Her secret was known in Paris, and nothing of the bitterness of her humiliation was spared to the Discrowned. She had outshone the one sex, she had maddened the other; who was there amidst the order she had insulted, the women she had rivalled, the men she had fooled, to break the violence of her fall, to heed how brutally the diadem might be wrenched from the fair, proud head, raised in its lovely sovereignty so long above them?

Her secret was known in Paris: in the cercles, in the salons, in the Tuileries itself, in Galignani's, on the Boulevards; in all the cafés, in all the boudoirs, over fine ladies' chocolate in their bedrooms, over gourmets' five hundred francs' breakfast in the Maison Dorée, it was the theme of the hour, to the exclusion of all else; it flew across the Channel as swiftly as special correspondents' copy could reach Printing-house-square, and filled all the journals, Anglo and Gallic, with its startling sensation-news, its incredible scandal. All Europe knew this beautiful Helen with the antelope eyes, for whom princes and chiefs had been ready to war, almost as in the old days of Hellas. All Europe was summoned as witness and auditor of her shame and her abdication. From the Palace to the Press all Europe arraigned her—and for what mercy could she look in her abasement, when those who found her guilty were the nobility she had insulted, the society she had trepanned, the rivals she had humiliated, the lovers she had fooled? These made judges more pitiless than Alva's Council of Blood.

True, for sake of her loveliness many asylums offered to her, in terms which now she could not resent as insult, and of them she accepted Etoile's. But the protection of a Prince was almost as bitter to her as the obscurity of a convent—she who had reigned in the palaces of Europe to be classed with Viola Vé, she who had shone amidst women of blood royal

and visited at St. Cloud and at Windsor to sink amidst lionnes of the Rue Bréda and Enghien toy-villas! It was a bitter change—from the purples of the Patrician to the stained robes of the Hetira.

She suffered—ay! she suffered cruelly, this woman, who had mocked at all human grief with her silvery laugh, and dealt out anguish and death as gaily as a child deals both to the painted butterflies that he slays for his sport. She suffered cruelly; for to the proud and flattered woman there was no chastisement so fearful as humiliation. And it was a scourge of scorpions wherewith he lashed her—he, whose hand, though unseen, dealt every blow under which she shrank.

With the keen cunning and the patience in pursuit, of her vagrant race, the Bohemian had learned the secret of the aristocrat from a quadroon woman whom she had found, by what chain of hazard and investigation combined, matters not. In her hands it was powerless for evil—a gipsy could not be heard against a peeress; but she placed it in those which her shrewd intuition knew would use it most widely, most mercilessly. When Strathmore had taken his yacht, as it was believed, to the Western world, he had gone to pursue every link of the clue given him by the Czechen, in that remote unnoticed colony whence the first thread of his vengeance had to be found. It had needed long and patient search; those he sought were obscure and unknown; but he was patient in the trail as an Indian, and when his gold had bought over their silence and purchased their fidelity to the secret they had in keeping, his vengeance was his. He had returned to deal it—his hand invisible, but his will directing its every step, its every sting.

With his revelation he had bought opprobrium and chastisement for her from the highest; with his gold he bought insult and degradation for her from the lowest. As it had been his intimation which had caused the patrician women to cut her dead in the passage of Longchamps, so it had been his will which had caused the lorette to greet her familiarly in the allée of the Bois—so it was his wealth which purchased every subtle indignity, every suave outrage which, by a cool word or an insolent smile from those in whom womanhood is disgraced, classed her with them, and struck deeper than a dagger's thrust into the heart which, with all its sin, with all

its licence, remained haughty, fastidious, refined, aristocratic to its core. A laugh, a note, a bow, the pointing of the monstrari digito, the shame of coarse epigram, or sneering quatrain, or obscene caricatura, the insult of courtesans' friendship, or courtesans' invitation—these were the weapons with which the unseen hand that dealt her doom, stabbed her momentarily, mercilessly, with a retribution as subtle as it was relentless. He had bade her live to suffer! It environed her, it pursued her, it poisoned the very air she breathed; she grew exhausted under it, this unending vengeance, which never slacked its speed, which never slaked its thirst, which, in its subtlety and its power, seemed all but supernatural. My brethren, are not men's passions ever so when they break the bonds of nature, and trample wide the mercy which God yields, but they deny?

He had bade her live to suffer; and she did suffer, this woman, whom no remorse had ever touched, no pity stirred, no tenderness stricken, but who had pride, which suffered deadly agony in its fall. There is a torture of the spirit which is more devilish and more terrible to endure than the shorter and coarser torture of the body; and she—she who had reigned so long!—knew this to its uttermost. She knew it when the men-servants of a household which had used to be obedient to her slightest gesture, could revenge themselves for many an imperious word or haughty command, by the slight and the sneer which the hirelings of the fresh lord had no scruple to deter them from offering to the mistress of the dead. She knew it when the women whom she had scored from her visiting list as beneath her rank, or refused to enter on her invitation-roll as roturières or rococo, could pay her back in whatever coin they would. She knew it when she stood alone, a queen discrowned, in the chambers where she had so long reigned absolute with a crowding court about her, and looked down the long vista of the magnificent salons, where yesterday every art-trifle had been hers, every will had bent to hers, every guest, every servant, ay! even every picture on the walls, or jewel in the tazze, or flower in the conservatories, had been *hers*, and whence now, she passed out with less honour than the lowest hireling who moved about their chambers, with less right, or title, or share in them than the dogs which slept upon their cushions.

The shame of a great sin had never smitten her; she knew it not; but under the shame of a great abasement she writhed, she shrank, she shuddered, as the women of old, who were given over, naked and bleeding, and hooted, to the pillory and the scourge. Is she alone? Surely not, for with mankind it is not the crime which is dreaded, but the scaffold.*

The Duc d'Etoile's carriage awaited her on that day when she passed for ever from the residence and the state of the Marchioness of Vavasour and Vaux. She entered it, sweeping through the great crowd, which assembled to gaze upon her as a notoriety, with all her accustomed haughty grace, now with a shade of defiance in it, and with her teeth slightly set together, for henceforth the world and she were at issue, and would contemn and confront each other. But this was only *for* the world; alone, the fallen empress bowed under the bitterness of her degradation, and writhed as upon a wheel where she was chained for public gaze and public mockery, as the carriage rolled onward to the Duc's villa; Etoile was not with her—some court ceremony detained him at the Tuileries, and he had written that he could not be at Auteuil "jusqu'au souper," in a note, in whose rich compliment already she learned the difference of a Prince's wording to a Peeress of England, and to one of Viola Vé's Sisterhood. She needed the solitude; she was thankful for it. Away from the eyes of the crowd, or from the presence of her lovers, Marion Vavasour's high-strung spirit gave way, like a bow overbent. She who had looked on all pain as her sport, as the young cat claims the agonies of the dying bird for her play, she knew it now for herself.

She was alone; on her arrival the chambers seemed stifling, the very evidences of a prince's wealth prepared for her looked loathsome; they were the insignia of her fall. She needed to suffer in solitude—once—once—for henceforth she would be amongst those whose wealth lies in their smiles, whose livelihood hangs on the brilliance of their beauty, and who must ever laugh—laugh and love, with the rouge on their paling cheeks, and the iron sharp in their souls! She went out into the sheen of the spring sunshine, sweeping

* "Le crime fait la honte et non pas l'échafaud," says Corneille. But the world reverses the poet's dictum; and in the world's eyes and our own, we may sin as we please, provided we avoid the scandal of being gibbeted for it!

swiftly and unheedingly through the grounds of the Duc's villa. The birds sang about her path; she scared them from her; their song was jarring mockery in her ear. A gardener's child asked her for alms; she spurned him from her with a cruel word; she had lived to envy that beggar's brat playing among the roses. A bright-winged butterfly fluttered in the grass at her feet; she trampled it to a brutal death, for daring to be joyous there—that senseless insect! —in the sunny light.

She swept onward swiftly, and unheeding where she went, while in the distance across the stretch of wood, and in the sunny mists of coming evening, uprose the roofs and spires of Paris—Paris, where she had reigned idol of its Court and leader of its Noblesse; Paris, where she had wielded more than a sovereign's sway; Paris, where she had sunk in all the bitterness of her fall. She swept onward, fast and blindly, through the glades and gardens, her lips white, her teeth set, her frame quivering with the shame of that day's degradation, till a branch of one of the early roses struck her across the brow, and recalled her to herself with its sharp physical pain. The flowers swung in the sunlight—the flowers which, with that more poetic element mingling in her nature, she had ever loved and interwoven with her beauty. Now, they recalled a thousand ghastly memories; with a rapid gesture she broke them asunder, and tore and scattered their fragrant leaves upon the earth: she was, even as those roses, a lying loveliness with a canker at the core! And, with a passionate moan of pain, Marion Vavasour sank down upon the stone steps of the terrace to which she had unconsciously taken her way, and, sinking her graceful, haughty head upon her hands, gave free vent—in solitude—to the bitterness of a fallen pride, to the misery of a world-wide degradation.

Yet even this luxury of loneliness she was denied:

"You suffer *now!*"

The words, hissed in her ear in strange ill-spoken French, made her start and rise with her old proud imperiousness, yet with something of fear; for the ruthless vengeance which pursued her had, now that its worst was wrought, left its terror upon her, and in her nature, as in the panther's, something of cowardice ran side by side with cruelty. Bending above her, over the grey ivy-hung coping, she saw the dark figure of a vagrant woman; it was the Bohemian, Redempta,

who had stood there watching her, with a dark hot flush warming the pale olive of her features, and lending them new life and light—a flush of thirsty joy. For to the wild, half-savage nature which had known no duty but its love, no law but its instincts, revenge looked great and holy: a just peace-offering to the beloved dead.

To Marion Vavasour she was unknown—her face, though twice beheld, unremembered—and, in vague alarm, she glanced around, and saw that she had wandered so far to the outskirts of the grounds that she was only surrounded by woodland, with none within call; her hand instinctively sought for gold, and tendered it in alms to this gipsy, whose gaze filled her with a nameless terror, thus suddenly met in her hour of solitude, in her day of dishonour. A smile, mournful in its utter disdain, crossed the lips of the Bohemian, and she motioned it aside with that calm dignity with which nature had dowered her:

"Should I touch *your* gold if I were starving? I came for a richer guerdon than all the wealth of empires—I came to see you suffer!"

"Suffer—suffer!——"

She repeated the word vaguely, mechanically; in that moment of abandonment her nerves were unstrung, her strength beaten down, and the defiance she had assumed for the world had but left her the more exhausted and heart-sick with the faintness of despair. She could not resent the Bohemian's words, but only dimly marvelled at them.

The gipsy looked at her, a smile lighting her eyes, and breaking up from the immutable melancholy of her face, while her brown hand clenched on the white, soft arm of Marion Vavasour:

"Ay! I have toiled, and laboured, and endured for that, only for that—to see you suffer! You were the murderess of Marc Lennartson, the slayer of what I loved. Ah! false fornicatress, did you never hear his blood cry out for vengeance? —did you think to smile, and sin, and drag men down to hell with all your loveliness, and never have your crime come back to you? You slew him—and you laughed at his death. You slew him—but I have avenged him! I have been on your trail day and night, and year after year; I burrowed to your secret at last, and I gave it to Strathmore to destroy you. You suffer!—your lips are white, your eyes are dim,

your face is haggard—you suffer! You have eaten of such bitterness as you gave; you have fallen from your proud estate; you will die in lowest infamy. God has given me vengeance—God has given me vengeance!——"

The words broke swift and fierce from the Bohemian's lips, with all the ferocious passion of her savage race, her eyes glittering, her voice triumphant, her hand clenching harder on the delicate arm she bruised in her grip, as she watched the woman she had hated and pursued shrink back and shiver, and turn sick under her stripes, as the scourged under those of the lash. Then the glow faded from her dark cheek, the vengeful lust and joy from her gleaming eyes; she loosened her hold and threw up her arms with a wild, piteous gesture to Heaven:

"Oh, God! thou givest me Vengeance, but thou canst not give me back the Dead! She suffers!—she suffers!—but he——"

The shrill, agonised cry died in a broken moan, her arms fell, her head drooped; she stood livid, mute, motionless as a statue. For in this lawless, vagrant woman, born of savage blood and bred by savage laws, brute instincts were outweighed by one great love; and that love turned even the long yearned-for hour of her vengeance to dead ashes, to withered fruit—for vengeance could not give her back her dead!

Her eyes dwelt on the face of Marion Vavasour with a fixed and lifeless gaze of unutterable melancholy, of fathomless pain, and her voice came slowly and hoarsely from her lips:

"I have smitten you, but I cannot make you render back the life that you destroyed! I revenge, but I cannot recall! He is dead, and my youth lies with him in the grave; though I wring you with every torture, I cannot undo your work. Yet—when you live in shame, and die in infamy, you will remember the woman who loved, yet was forsaken by him, avenged him on you, who betrayed and drove him to his death. If you had spared him, you had been spared!"

Then she turned, and moved slowly away with her head bowed, passing out of sight through the leafy aisles of the trees; and Marion Vavasour stood alone, with the chill of a great and nameless terror upon her. Her hands clenched on the stone coping as if for support, her eyes swam, she

shivered in the mellow sunlight, she recoiled under the chastisement of the great sins which had found her out and come home to her—fruit of the seed sown. She shuddered there, where she stood in the warm evening air, and crouched down like a thing of guilt, while the dank dew stood on her fair, proud brow. And, as though led by the hand of an avenging angel, her eyes, dim in her bitter, throbbing misery, unconsciously followed the circling sweep of a white-winged swallow skimming the surface of the earth; and as they pursued the bird's flight, fell on the place where it rested, a block of marble, lying amidst green luxuriance of spring-tide flowers and the leaves of drooping trees, which bore the name of the dead below:

BERTIE ERROLL,
AGED 33,
Killed by the Hand of his Friend.

The grounds of the villa touched the cemetery of Auteuil; beyond, well-nigh at her feet, lay the grave of the man whom her lie had given to death, with the brief record carved there by the remorse of his assassin. And she, who believed in no God, believed at last in retribution, and stood there paralysed and stricken with a deadly fear, looking down on the tomb where the swallow rested and the sunlight played.

Yet, still—still, the soul of this woman knew neither remorse nor repentance, for these, if they take their spring from crime, yet are holy, and purify while they scathe. But only as the panther in its mortal pain grows fresh hungered for the death-grapple in its blind instinct of revenge, so she in hers grew athirst for added evil—evil which should smite him who had been the companion in her sin, yet who had pursued her as though he were guiltless—evil which should blast the life that had destroyed her own, and strike to the dust the iron will that had stricken her—evil in which she should hiss back into the ear of Strathmore the words with which he had doomed her: "Such mercy as you gave I give to you—no more!"

END OF VOL. I.

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# STRATHMORE

A ROMANCE.

BY

OUIDA,

AUTHOR OF "IDALIA," "TRICOTRIN," ETC.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1871.

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# STRATHMORE.

## CHAPTER I.

### Requiescat in Pace.

OVER that grave the twilight shadows stole, the evening dews gathered in the spring violets which clustered round the marble, the birds went to roost in the boughs which swayed above, and the first faint light of the young moon fell across the letters of the inscription, carved deep into the stone as though to stand there, in their recorded crime, through all change of season and all wear of time, eternal as the sin of which they told. She—his murderess—had gone some hours past; and by the grave, unconscious that she had been there before him, and there sworn a vow of vengeance ruthless as his own, stood the companion and the avenger of her guilt. Always thus in solitude and in the stillness of the night Strathmore came hither; often, very often, for his nature was too brave and too proud to spare itself one tittle of its chastisement, and the love which he had borne the man whom he had slaughtered, seemed to well up in deeper tenderness as everything else in him grew harder, colder, and more merciless. A command he could not resist seemed to impel him to come there as men go to the scene of their past crimes, and to stand beside the record of his guilt, beside the tomb where the life his hand had slain in all its glory and its youth, lay rotting to decay in the womb of the black, dank earth.

There, with his head bowed on the cold marble, and his hands clenched on the wet grass that already covered the ground, he often lay through many hours of long, lonely nights; in what remorse God alone saw. He would have

poured out his own life like water, to bring back the life that he had slain.

He stood there now, gazing down upon the white shining stone and the dark leaves which swayed against it; he felt as though some atonement had been wrought to Erroll by the vengeance which the day just passed had crowned. Had his arm ever paused in the blow he had struck to the assassin of one, and the betrayer of both, it would have been nerved and steeled afresh by the memory of the dead. Beneath the polished ice, the courtly worldliness of Strathmore's character, lay the fierce, untamable nature of the Barbarian, or the untutored Southern, their passions, their love, their vengeance; to him there was not alone revenge in that which he had wrought on the traitress who had stained his hands in blood; there was a wild justice done, there was a duty expiated to the dead in the retribution which had pursued the murderess.

As he stood there in the shadowy light, while the moon streamed upon the sepulchre lying at his feet, the solitude, which reigned unbroken about Erroll's grave, for the first time was shared, and on his ear fell the low, mellow, chanting voice of Redempta the gipsy.

"English lord, I have given you your vengeance! Is it sweet in your teeth, or has it turned to ashes as you ate?"

He started as her form suddenly rose from the depths of the woodland gloom and stood before him by the grave; but the chill smile which had so much of cruelty came on his lips as he glanced at her.

"Redempta, the only thing in life whose sweetness never palls, and cannot die, is vengeance."

Her deep, lustrous eyes, which were now heavy and weary, gleamed for the moment with the evil which glittered in his own, as at the touch of fresh flame dying embers leap to life.

"Ay, ay, she has suffered! I have seen misery gather in her eyes, and shame bowing her head to the dust, I have watched her shiver under the scorn of laughter, and I have

heard her moan with pain like a hopeless, fallen thing. She has suffered! *That* cannot escape me!—*that* cannot be undone! I have avenged him, and now——"

Her voice dropped, and she was silent, while over the lurid light of her eyes a humid softness gathered, and her lips trembled with a voiceless movement—her thoughts were with the dead. For the heart of the woman was in pain, and sickened with the futility of a revenge which could not yield her back what she had loved; it knew not the exultant and pitiless lust of the man, which rioted in vengeance, and fed on its knowledge, and its memory, insatiate and unpalled. For there was this wide difference between the passions of their lives: hers sprang from love which still lived and was deathless, his from love which had become hatred, and in that hatred lost all other sense.

Strathmore glanced at her in the gloaming; he owed this woman much, since he owed her the first secret of his power over the life which he had pursued and hunted down; and the sole price which the Bohemian had asked or taken had been that which she had first named: "to see her suffer."

He stretched out his hand with some louis d'or:

"Redempta, you are ill-clad and in want; take these now, and in the future let me serve you?"

She signed aside the proffered gift with a proud gesture of denial, and on her face came a strange smile, derisive yet melancholy:

"My lord! I told you long ago that Redempta the Vagrant took no price for that which she brought you—no wage for her vengeance. Since his hand lay in mine, no man's gold has soiled it; and with the future I have no share; my work is done. The future is for you: it lies before you; go where it beckons!"

As the Czechen words were uttered in the monotonous, chanting recitative in which she spoke, to the memory of each recurred the spring night far away in Bohemia, when the ruddy gleam of the gipsy-fires had shone through the aisles of the pine woods, and when from the slumbering pas-

sions written on his brow she had made sure prophecy of all which, when they should awaken, would scorch and devastate his life. Her hand closed on his arm in a grasp which he could not have shaken from him without violence, while her eyes dwelt on him where he stood in the gloom, and studied his face with the same fixed, dreamy gaze with which she had looked on him then: a look which had much of compassion.

"*I* have no future, but one waits for you; you must reap as you have sown; you must gather the harvest, and eat of the fruit of your past. It is the inexorable law! The past has been wrought by your own hand; but the future will escape you. You will seek to build anew, and lo! the curse of the dead sin will rest on your work, and the structure will crumble, falling to ashes as it reaches its fairest. The sin of the guilty has been avenged, but the sin to the innocent will never be washed away. You will be great and powerful, and success will go with you, and fame; but the bloodstain will be on your hand for ever, and when you have made atonement, behold it will be seized in your grasp, and through you will the guiltless be menaced!"

The words in her Czechen tongue fell slowly and melodiously in the silence in her mournful and monotonous recitation, while her eyes dwelt on his face with their vague, fathomless gaze. Her hand dropped from his arm and left him free.

"In the future you will remember the words of Redempta. We shall meet no more. Farewell!"

She turned from him, and, with the swift, noiseless movement peculiar to her tribe, was lost in the veiling shadows of the night. He stood motionless where she had left him, in the dull, grey light as the moon passed behind the clouds of the east. Again at her words ran a ghastly chill, as at the touch of steel in a vital wound; less from their prophecy than from their truth; the future stretched before him, darkened for all time, by the shadow of remembered guilt. His hand might pioneer his road to power, and reap him honour in the sight of men, but there for ever on it must rest the stain of

innocent blood. His life might pass onwards in the fulness of years and the ripeness of triumph, but there for ever at its core must lie the curse of an inexpiable act.

Never to lose it, ever to bear it through all the years to come, that burden of life taken, never to be restored; of sin wrought, never to be undone! Veiled in the mist of hidden years, who knew what guiltless life that guilt might strike? who knew what retribution might be coiled and waiting to take its vengeance for the unforgotten crime? who knew where the after-harvest of his passions might be reaped and garnered?

The future! the future! He had said in his soul, "vengeance to the living, but to the dead, atonement." Standing there beside the grave of him whom he had slain, while the words of the prophecy echoed in his ear, the phantoms of the years to come seemed to rise and swarm about him, and rend, and tear, and shatter from his hands the work of Expiation.

That night the Seine wound slowly and darkly through the open country and under the pale, clear stars, and among the rich glades of woodland, towards the city, there to grow black and sullen beneath the arches of dim-lit bridges, and to wash the low walls of the dreary Morgue, and to see the yellow candle faintly burning above the iron cradle of the Enfans Trouvés, and the thousand lights gleaming bright along the palace façade of the Tuileries.

And where the river was still clear, and cool, and fresh, ere it had reached the evil heat and brooding shadows of the city, where green leaves still swayed in its water, and in its depths the starlight gleamed, where its darkness was still repose, and its silence holy, a human form hovered on its brink, bending wearily towards the tranquil gliding waters, where the water-lily floated, and the hush of night seemed visibly to rest.

It was so cool, so serene, so peaceful: to lie there lulled to dreamy death by the cadence of its ebb and flow, and know no more the passionate pain, the breathless tumult, the

vain despair, and the unending bitterness of life, were this not wisdom, oh you who suffer?

It looked so to her; for her soul was weary of its travail, and her heart was fain to be at rest. She looked far across the dark and silent country, where no living thing stirred, and upward to the stars, whose white light fell upon her deep and melancholy eyes; her hands were pressed upon her bosom and her lips moved in faint, broken words:

"I have avenged thee. What have I more to do with life?"

Her head drooped upon her breast, and she leaned nearer and nearer towards the waters, where the quiet stars were shining, and the pale lilies slowly floating in their shroud of leaves, where were oblivion, and peace, and death; and in the silence she listened to the tranquil murmuring of the tide. And as she thus leaned nearer and nearer yet towards that cool and restful place, in her weary eyes shone the gleam of unshed tears, and in her face a new light came as on the face of one who, having been long imprisoned in the loneliness of exile, beholds escape at last, and liberty and rest.

From her parted lips a whisper stole, broken and yearning, on the hush of night:

"My love! my love! I come!"

And in the silence there was the dull moan of severed waters, and the troubled lilies trembled on the river's breast: then, with a sighing sound, the wind swept over them, and all was still.

The waters flowed upon their changeless course.

Through the summer night the river wound its way under the radiance of the stars, and bore her with it more gently than life, more tenderly than human hands. The waters rippled on with liquid murmur, and the dead body of the Bohemian floated down the stream in its serene and solemn rest, finding repose at last after the heat and travail, the passion and the pain, of many years. To her untaught, unfettered soul, love had been God, and vengeance, Duty; and death was ransom justly won, after a mission justly wrought; death

in her wild, instinctive, barbaric creed was sure reunion with him for whom she had suffered and been sacrificed, and to whom her life had been unceasingly consecrated even to the last, if erring in its revenge, yet heroic in its martyrdom.

The waters bore her onwards slowly, softly, as merciful hands bear the bier of the dead; now in the cool shadow of the leaves, now in the clear sheen of midnight planets, while on her upturned brow and her closed eyes the moonlight shone with fair and peaceful gleam, and in her dark, floating hair the stainless lilies wound, and through the hush of night the winds gently breathed over the surface of the waters, which murmured low about her as though in pitying whisper:

"Rest in peace, O human soul! And judge her not for sin which had its root in love, you great and countless criminals upon earth, whose lust is avarice, and whose god is self."

## CHAPTER II.

### After long Years.

A SULTRY night brooded over London, close and stifling in the dusty, crowded streets, fair and pure above-head, where the stars shone over the leaden roofs and the fretted pinnacles of the great Abbey, over the thronging carriages rolling through the midnight, and the black river, with its spectral mists rising against the sky. It was a hot, oppressive night, with heavy storm-clouds drifting to the westward, and every now and then a far-off roll of thunder faintly echoing; and outside the walls of St. Stephen's men thronged, talking eagerly, and avaricious of news, and waiting to learn the fate of the existent Cabinet; for in the political horizon, as in the summer skies, a storm threatened darkly, and the kingdom had thrilled with the first ominous echoes. And they surged and swayed and filled all the crooked streets round about, and were newly fed by fresh arrivals, and talked thirstily in busy groups, some anxious-eyed and with pale eager faces; for the Ministry was unpopular, and on the issue

of the night there rested not alone the question of resignation, but the question of war or peace, in whose balance the God of Gold hung trembling.

Within the walls the heat was heavier, the crowd more dense, for many peers had come down to their seats beneath the clock, and the galleries were crammed; the import of the night was widely known, and the attack upon the Ministry from the most distinguished leader of the Opposition carried with it all the aspirations of his great party, and was keenly dreaded by his adversaries then in office.

For he was essentially a great Statesman. His genius was emphatically the genius of Power. In classic ages he would have been either a tyrant as Pisistratus, or an intriguer as Themistocles; a ruler as Cæsar, or a conspirator as Catiline; what he grasped, how he grasped, mattered nothing to him, so that he had his hand on iron reins, so that he had his foot on bended necks. The subtle ruses, the unscrupulous finesse, the imperious command, the absolute dominance of power, these were what he loved; and what he wielded, for his mind was one of those which are formed to *rule*, and before which the mass of minds involuntarily stoops suppliant. In his age and in his country, his ambition was perforce chained within bounds, and he could not be that which he would have been in a nation or a century where such governance might have been grasped—an irresponsible and despotic ruler, recognising no limits to his sway, and reigning by the sheer strength of a will of steel, and of an intellect which would have raised his people into greatness and dominance abroad, and would have permitted no rebellious hint against his *fiat lux*. This, circumstance and nationality forbade to him; but the character and the genius which could have made him this, made him in the highest sense a great and successful politician. A profound master of statecraft, an astute reader of men, a skilled orator as well by the closeness of his logic as by mere rhetorical grace, comprehending to the uttermost the truth of the trite byword *ars est celare artem;* never for one instant irritated into abandonment of the suave courtly dignity which did

much to fascinate men to his will, and with that proud disdain of wealth, of empty place, of childish honours, which gave to his career a lofty and unsullied renown—he who in his youth had desired Age and Power, now, approaching to the one, and having attained to the other, found ambition richly ripened to fruition, and exercised over the minds of men a sway wide and acknowledged, a fascination resistless and dominant.

As he rose at midnight in the hot, close stillness, all eyes turned on him, and the cheers which thundered his welcome echoed loud and long, then died away, leaving a silence in which the fall of a pin would have been heard, had one dropped from the lattice-work, behind which were seated the fairest and proudest women of the two great political parties. The dead hush reigned through the Lower Chamber, so that no syllable of the opening words should be lost, as upon the air fell the first clear, chill, melodious tones of his voice, which in invective was ever tranquil, in command ever calm, in denunciation ever courtly, but whose wrath scathed keen as steel, whose mockery pitilessly withered all it touched, and whose dreaded sneer spared neither friend nor foe.

He stood in the full light, one hand in his breast, the other slightly outstretched; on his face a certain melancholy repose, a tranquil and haughty power; in his eyes the swift light, which swept the House like an eagle's glance; on his lips the slight smile that his opponents dreaded; while the lucid, classic, resistless flow of his oratory rolled on, calm, polished, subdued, as suited an audience he had long studied, never losing its dignity, while it rose to denunciation, holding in passion, while it lashed with scorn, fascinating the ear by the melodious music of voice, while it scathed with delicate irony, or rose to stately and measured rebuke.

He spoke long and with a masterly eloquence; his speech was an analysis and attack of a measure of the existing Government, obnoxious at home and pregnant with offence abroad. Loud and repeated cheers thundered through the Chamber as his keen logic mercilessly dissected the weak

and wavering policies of the Ministry, and his brilliant argument cleft down their barriers of defence, and rent asunder their sophistries of rhetoric, as the sword of Saladin cut its way alike through iron casque and veil of gauze.

When he resumed his seat the victory of his party was virtually won, and one of the most marked triumphs which had attended a continuously successful career had been achieved: a tottering government, already jeopardised by its own imprudence, and unpopular with press and people, had been shaken by an attack to which it could oppose but feeble reply and futile defence, and it was widely whispered that the Ministry must resign on the morrow.

Since the great speeches of Sheridan and Canning, few had created so keen an excitement, few weighted so markedly the balance of parties, few thrilled the House so profoundly with the breathlessness of a gladiatorial contest, the heat of a close struggle, the grandeur of a great conquest. As he left the Lobby afterwards his name was on every tongue, and while the proud tranquillity of his features and of his manners was unruffled, and he passed from the scene of a supreme conflict with the easy negligence of his habitual air, unmoved to excitement or to exultation, in his eyes gleamed an imperious rejoicing light under their drooping lids, and they glittered dark with a grand triumph; for this man's god was Power, the essence of his life, the goal of his ambition, the idol of his creed.

As he passed out from the Commons to his night brougham, the multitudes gathered outside (amongst whom had been spread swiftly as wild-fire the news that the Ministry had been defeated on their unpopular measure, and the country been saved from the risk of a needless war by the issue of that great Field-night) recognised in the gaslights the grace of carriage and the haughty features of the well-known member, and pressing forwards by one impulse to view him more closely, broke by one impulse also, into a long, loud shout of salutation, which rang through the sultry air of the late night, quelling in its own thunder the distant roll of the rising storm.

It was Titan homage, rendered with the spontaneity of academic applause, and the hoarse roar with which the masses hurl out their gratitude and welcome, grim, wild, half barbaric, yet grand in its deafening echo and intoxicating in its enthusiasm, like every proclamation of the people, which in the Leader of the Hour recognises the virtual Sovereign of the Land.

He whom they thus saluted passed through them, bowing slightly on either side in acknowledgment, with dignity and courtesy; he held the imperious patrician code of his Norman race, he was an Optimate to the core, and the plaudits of the Populares were almost as indifferent to him, almost as disdained by him, as their censure; he had much of the despot, he had nothing of the demagogue. But in those cheers echoed the homage which multitudes yield to a single dominant intellect; in that welcome rang the acclamations which greet and confirm command; in that human thunder, which outpealed the thunder of the skies, his sway was ratified by the nation; and as his glance swept over the people, and he passed down the narrow path, left him, lined by eager crowds, the Statesman's pulse quickened and beat higher and the lustre of his eyes gleamed darker with their scornful triumph; Strathmore tasted to its full sweetness the one lust of his soul—POWER.

O strange unequal portioner called Life! unjust are its awards and inscrutable its decrees.

The murdered man, who when the summer sun had sunk to rest, had been hurled into his grave, guiltless of all crime save of a too loyal friendship, lay rotting in a foreign land, forgotten from the day when the seal had been set on his sepulchre, by a world which has no time to count its lost.

And his destroyer lived, high in honour amidst men.

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## CHAPTER III.

### The Pilgrimage of Expiation.

A SOFT, serene, richly-tinted picture, fairer than a thought of Lancret's, more golden and tranquil than a dream of Claude's, since one hour of sunlight on one stretch of moss, one fruit-laden bough, one changeful brook, outshines and baffles the best that we, vain painters of nature, can ever catch of her glorious loveliness on canvas or palette. Who knows this better than the Masters of the Art?

The setting sun shone on the oriel casements of an antique ivy-covered Elizabethan mansion, and streaming through the unclosed door of an old stone wall, ripened to gold the fruit of an orchard, whose branches nodded through the opening. Far away to the west, wide, calm, limitless, stretched the great ocean, the gleam of the light falling on the white sail of some fisher boat in the offing. Beyond the tangled leaves of trees, shone the glisten of wet sands and the red boulders of the rocks. In the silence there was no sound but of the birds' last nest-songs, and of the murmuring seas; and under the shelter of dense boughs, shutting out the sun, was a shadowy solitude, where nothing came save the fragrance of countless flowers, and nothing was seen save the silent sunlit bay, when the arching branches parted to show the sheen of sand and sea. It was a home fit for Undine, here in the shadow of the leaves, the earth covered with the delicate bells of heath, the foliage filled with the soft movement and music of young birds, the blue waters gleaming through the spaces of the boughs, the silence but the more serene for the lulling cadence of the seas; and she to whom it was consecrated might well have been sketched as Undine, where she sat, with her head slightly drooped and her lips slightly parted. For she was in the earliest years of opening youth, and of a loveliness ethereal, poetic, such as Dante may have prefigured amidst the angel shadows of the Paradiso, or Guido Reni have beheld flit through the heaven of his

visionary thoughts, too pure, too fair, for the artist to transfer to grosser colouring.

Both poet and painter would have loved that face, but neither could have made it imperishable on written vellum or on tinted canvas; it could no more have been imprisoned to such transcript than the blush on the heath-bells, than the smile on the seas, than the fugitive play of the sunlight. It had a beauty beyond words, beyond Art.

The brow was low and broad, the skin delicate as a white rose-leaf, with the faint flush on the cheeks beautifully fitful; the eyes large, dark, shadowed by their lashes till their violet depths looked black. But what lay beyond poet to phrase, or artist to produce, were not these, but were the spirituality of the whole face vaguely suggestive of too early death, utterly above all grosser passion, all meaner thought of earth, and the touching and nameless contrast of the sunny joyous smile upon the lips with the fathomless sadness of the eyes, of the grace and radiance of childhood with the ethereal melancholy of the features in repose. It was a loveliness like that of the delicate tropic flower which blooms but to perish in all its early beauty; too fragile for the storms and darkness of night, too soilless to wither on earth. She sat there, with the shadow of the thick leaves above her, and around her the melody of the ocean, the music of the birds, and the dreamy hum of bees deep down in the chalice of flowers.

And one unseen, as he stood and watched her, was never weary of gazing on that delicate picture, though it had been familiar to him from his childhood. He was a youth of two-and-twenty, tall, lithe, of a thorough Saxon beauty, with his bright fearless face, his bold blue eyes, his tawny hair, yet he did not suit that scene; he was out of harmony with it, and he broke its spell, even as he broke that of her thoughts, as he put aside the boughs and bent towards her very gently:

"Lucille! where are your dreams?"

She started a little, and looked up at him with a glad smile.

"Nello! I banished you; is this the way you obey? Look! how you frighten the birds and trample the heath."

Lionel Caryll looked sad and repentant as the singers flew from him with a rapid whirr of their wings, and he glanced down on the trodden bells.

"Oh, Lucille, I am sorry! But surely you love me something better than you do those birds and those flowers? *They* feel no pain!"

"I think they do," she said, musingly. "Look how birds' eyes grow wild and piteous when you go near their nests, and how they droop and pine if they lose the one they love; and look how the flowers fade when they are taken from the sun, and wither slowly when they are torn away to die under the pressure of your hand. Ah! I cannot bear to see a flower crushed or broken, Nello. We cannot tell what it may suffer."

Her eyes grew humid and earnest in their dark depths, for the ruling power of her nature, as its fatal danger, was a deep and infinite tenderness, a too keen and too early susceptibility. Young Caryll did not understand her, he did not even follow the thread of her thoughts; in the long years they had spent together, the poetic and profound mind of the child had always been above and beyond the boy's comprehension; they were so now, but now, as then, he felt for all she did and said a tender and reverent love, as for something at once too holy and too fragile for his rougher hands.

"Who could hurt what you plead for, Lucille?" he said fondly. "But if you give so much compassion to your flowers and birds, give a little to me."

She laughed joyously:

"Pity *you*, Nello! What pity do you want? You are as happy as I am! Why, Nello, you are sunshine itself!"

The young man's bright face laughed sunnily in answer: it was the truth, his nature and his life were both shadowless.

"Yes, but pity me for seeing that the song-birds and the heaths are both dearer to you than I! True they suit you

better, Lucille; they are poetic and delicate, and I am neither; but they cannot love you so well!"

In the half-laughing words, in the half-boyish appeal, there was, almost unknown to himself, an inflection of jealous pain, of touching humility, which struck on his listener's ear with some vague sense that she unwittingly had wounded him, though how she knew not. With caressing grace she stooped towards him, where he lay at her feet, and pushed back the tangled hair from his forehead.

"My own dear Nello, I know that! Could you think I rank those things before you? For shame! I thought you knew better how I loved you!"

For the playmate and companion of her childhood was very dear to her, and it was an impulse with her to soothe all pain, from the flutter of a frightened bird to the sorrow of a human heart; and Lionel Caryll gazed upward with an eager pleasure in his eyes, while his lips were mute: it was the reverent and breathless gaze of the young devotee at the beauty of a Madonna or a Vivia Perpetua, the beauty which is too sacred in his sight to waken passion, or be profaned by aught save a holy worship.

He rose with a smothered sigh as he recollected the object of his errand, for he would gladly have stayed here till the moon rose, with murmur of the sea in his ear and the hand of Lucille softly playing with his hair., in the familiar affection which from her infancy she had shown to, and received from, one whom she called her brother.

"Lucille, Lord Cecil is here—I came to tell you."

"Here!"

"Yes, he has come down for part of the Easter recess; only a day or two, for he is going to Osborne. He bade me fetch you to him."

Ere the words were spoken she had sprung to her feet, dropping the Vita Nuova she was reading, and the feathery seaweeds which had lain on her lap, to the ground, and had left him, lightly and swiftly as the flight of a wild bird.

Lionel Caryll stood in the shadow of the leaves, looking

after her. From his earliest years, when the young child, orphaned and desolate and unconscious in her glad infancy of her own fate, had first come to Silver-rest, he had been careful of her every step, jealous of her every smile; he had followed her like a spaniel and tended her like a woman, and risked his life and limb many a time to bring her down some sea-bird's egg, some flower from the cliffs, some treasure from the waves.

Lucille loved him very fondly, for this child's whole life and nature were tenderness; but the boy had always felt what he felt now, that two stood before him in her heart—the dead, whose name she cherished with a reverence which was almost a religion, and the one whom she and the world knew as her guardian.

In the deep embrasure of one of the windows sat a man, with a staghound at his feet, and his face in shadow, as Rembrandt or Velasquez painted the faces of the statesmen and conspirators who sought their canvas, to whose portraits, indeed, he bore a strange and striking resemblance, for Strathmore with the flight of years had altered little. The darker traits were more traceable, the better less so; for in the human face, as in the picture, with time the shadows deepen and the lights grow fainter. The eyes were more searching, the brow more powerful, the features colder and more inscrutable still. Otherwise there was but little change save this, that whereas before, the character of his face had been suggestive of evil passions, dormant and not yet called into play, it now bore the shadow of them from the past, the trace of fires which had burned to ashes, scorching as they died.

Strathmore, who was God and Law unto himself, had moulded his life with an iron hand, although on that hand was the stain of crime. Submerged for a while under the surge of passion, the ambition which had been drowned under a woman's love had returned to him; a diplomatic career he had abandoned for public life at home, and he had reared

himself from the fires of past crimes to follow one road—Power. Eminence in statecraft, his astute, subtle, and masterly intellect was formed to attain and wield. Under his chill and withering eloquence parties writhed; before his courtly and poignant wit opponents cowered; beneath the dominance of his will, wavering adherents bowed; and before the silent and profound mind of the successful politician men felt abashed, discomfited, yet governed despite themselves.

Strathmore was great in many things—in his genius, in his endurance, in his power, in his arrogance; and he had that veiled yet astute will which bends that of all others to its bidding, and governs the minds of men by a resistless, though not seldom an evil, fascination to its sway. To trample out the memories of the past by dissipation was impossible to the man whose intellect was masterly, and who had rioted in the drunkenness of guilt; the revel of orgies was distasteful, the pursuit of licentiousness was contemptible to him. Forgetfulness he sought otherwise, under the iron tramp of mailed ambitions; or rather, to speak more truly, forgetfulness he did not court, as weaker men would do; but as he had kept the mad love which had betrayed him before him, to be avenged brutally and ruthlessly, so he kept the crime which had stained his soul, to be atoned for as though destiny lay in his hands, so he kept the blood-stain on the statue of his Life, to be wrought out by his own hand in after work. For Strathmore, though the pride of his nature had been smitten to the dust, and though he had reeled and fallen under passion, had refused to gather warning from the past, but held it still his to mete out fate to himself and others, as though he were not man but deity.

The sunlight played without, among the leaves while the ocean broke upon the sunny sands, and he sat there in the shadow: on his face was the look of a weary and hopeless melancholy, which never wholly passed away, for the soul of this man, if merciless to others, was not less so to himself; in spirit he scourged himself for the lives which rested on his, as loathingly as ever Carmelite or Benedictine scourged

the body for its sins, and whilst before men's sight his life was cold, unruffled, brilliant, and his "path strewn with the purples" of fame and of power, there were dark hours in his solitude, of remorse, of anguish, of unutterable horror, when the great and fallen nature wrestled with itself, and struggled in its agony nearer to God's light. For *repentance* is a word by a thousand-fold too faint to utter that with which Strathmore looked back upon the past—looked back upon the homicide guiltier than Cain's.

Suddenly, where he sat in the embrasure, a shadow fell athwart the sunshine without, and raising his eyes he saw the young life which was freighted with his venture of atonement. She stood there in the full golden light, which fell on her fair and shining hair; on her eyes, dark as the violet skies of night, and full of their mournful earnestness; on her lips, which wore the sunny and tender smile of the long-dead, radiant with welcoming joy while words were mute; words could not have spoken half so well!

"Lucille!"

He rose, and she sprang towards him, lifting her fair young face to his gaze, while he stooped and kissed her brow with his accustomed caress, which she received as a child her father's. Her hands closed on his softly and caressingly, her lips were tremulous, her eyes, loving in their earnestness, looked up to his winningly, beseechingly:

"Ah! you are come at last; you have been so long away!"

"'So long!' You have watched for me, then?"

"My heart watches for you always!"

He smiled; her answer gave him pleasure. Long years before he had set his will to fasten the love and gratitude of this young life upon himself, and every assurance of them was dear to him, for they were the assurance of his fulfilment of Erroll's trust, of his atonement through the living to the dead.

"And you are happy, Lucille?" he asked her.

She laughed the soft, low laugh of her still lingering

childhood, in which pain had been a thing unknown, to which sorrow had been a mystery ever veiled.

"You ask me that so often? 'Happy?' All my life is happiness. I cannot even fancy grief. I try sometimes, and I cannot."

"Thank God!"

The words were spoken low and heartfelt, and he shaded his eyes with his hand as he gazed down on her, while over the coldness of his face stole a warmth and a softness which never came there save when he looked on her. Her singular and poetic loveliness, as she stood before him in the mellow sunlight, with her dark eyes uplifted in their beseeching beauty, struck on him; he saw for the first time that she was passing out of childhood.

"You are changed, Lucille," he said, as she threw herself at his feet, where he sat, in that graceful and trustful abandon which was as natural to her now as when she had first come caressingly to his side on the sea-shore; for this opening life had been left free, pure, untrammelled by art or bondage, as any of the white-winged birds which spent their summer days above the waves.

She looked up incredulous and amused:

"Changed? How can I be in six months?"

"Six months is six years at your age: the passage from childhood to womanhood is very brief; crossed sometimes in a night, sometimes in an hour!"

"Is it? But *I* have not crossed it."

"No, and I do not wish that you should."

She lifted her eyes to his, full of that appealing earnestness which gave them so strange a sadness, so touching a beauty.

"No more do I. When time rolls on, the shadows deepen across the dial in the orchard, and the sands of the shore; so they say they do in life. Is it true, Lord Cecil?"

"Fatally true, my child."

She shuddered slightly:

"Ah! and that is why I wish mine could rest for ever

where it is. I am so happy, and I dread the shadow! In shade the flowers die, you know, killed by the darkness and thirsting for the sun; so should I."

"Hush, hush, Lucille!" he said, passionately, as he drew her towards him, where she sat at his feet. "'Dread?' 'Darkness?' What have they to do with you? Neither shall ever touch you. Your future is my care; think of it as what it will be, *shall* be, as fair and cloudless as your past and present. No shadow shall ever fall on you!"

"Not under your shelter!"

And as she spoke gratefully and caressingly, the smile was on her face which still smote him as with steel, and she bent towards him with that tender and trustful grace natural to her from her earliest infancy: she loved the hand which fostered her—the hand stained with her father's blood.

The human life which the last words of the man he loved had bequeathed to him in trust, was dear to Strathmore as the dead had once been; and when remorse had struck prostrate the granite of his nature, in the chasm left, this single softness had been sown and taken root; even as on the chill and isolated mountains ice-covered and inaccessible, deep down in some cleft and hidden rent, lives some delicate blue alpine flower. Begotten of remorse, born of a thirst for atonement, and fostered by a passionate, almost a morbid, craving to fulfil to the uttermost Erroll's latest bidding, his tenderness for Lucille had become the one holy and unselfish thing in a heart to which the gentler and purer feelings of human nature and of human ties were by nature alien.

Strathmore's haughty and sin-stained soul hung on this young and fragile girlhood for its single chance and power of atonement. It was not *she* for whom he cared; it was the dead. Had the last words of the man he had wronged and hurled from earth, condemned him to endless self-chastisement, or self-sacrifice, he would have obeyed them equally, nor spared himself one iota of their enjoined torture. Pitiless to others, I say he was not less pitiless to himself; his life, stained with great crimes, was riven with a great remorse;

his nature was like those lofty and darkened ones which first filled the cells of Clairvaux and the ranks of Loyola; natures passion-stained and crime-steeped, but which, even as they had spared none in their guilt, spared not themselves in their expiation.

The trust bequeathed him, and bound upon him, by the weight of the two lives which his act had struck from earth, he fulfilled sacredly. His hand had orphaned her, but his hand sheltered her, and was prodigal in the wealth, and care, and luxury with which it surrounded her; it seemed to Strathmore as though thus, and thus alone, could he atone to him who had given her life. In his mother's home she had grown from infancy to early youth, fondly nurtured, and trained to know that it was from him as her guardian that she received all which made her young years so joyous. Those to whom her education was entrusted he forbade to use any laws with her save those of gentleness, and directed to surround her with all tenderness, to shield her from every touch of pain or harshness, and to indulge her in all things. He was scrupulously obeyed, and the result might have been to many natures dangerous; with Lucille, the inherent character was too loving and too sweet to be thus harmed, to do aught but expand to all its richest luxuriance, its purest delicacy, in the constant sunlight in which it grew, though, as the hot-house flower is rendered unfit for the cold winds without by the warmth which surrounds it, so might this nature be for the harsh conflicts of life. But, then, these she was never to know—from these she would be sheltered, as the exotic is, through the whole of its brief and radiant life.

In pursuance of Erroll's desire, he trained himself to speak to this child often and calmly of her father, as of one lost and dear to him as to herself, until Lucille held, inseparably interwoven and beloved in her memory, the dead, and the living to whom the dead had bequeathed her, and who filled his place. It had been hard to say which were the dearer to her, the ideal of her father which she cherished, or the love for Strathmore which grew with her growth. No instinct had

made her shrink in infancy from the hand which was stained with her father's blood; no prescience now warned her that he who fostered her was her father's foe. All her joy, all her gifts, came from him; for her, his eyes were ever softened, his voice was ever gentle; the distant visits he paid her were sealed with gold in her life, radiating every day they graced with a glory ever missed in his absence. And thus Erroll's young child grew up in her graceful loveliness, her happy innocence, with no shadow allowed to fall on her from the dark tragedy which had orphaned her almost from her birth, but with a deep and reverent love for him, between whom and herself, had she known the truth hid from her, there would have yawned a hideous and impassable gulf, there would have stretched a fell abyss of crime which would have made her shrink from every touch of his hand, shudder from every caress of his lips.

## CHAPTER IV.

### The Cabinet Minister.

A KNOT of lords and gentlemen, diplomatists and ministers, were grouped together in the ante-room at St. James's, after attending a Levee—the last of the season—chatting while awaiting a chance of getting to their carriages through the crowd, where torn shoulder-knots, trampled epaulettes, the débris of gold lace, fragments of bullion, broken plumes, or shreds of order ribbons, bore witness to the severity of the conflict, which is a portion of the ceremonial attendant on the Germanised Court of England.

"But V—— gained so much by the Schönbrunn Treaty; he is far too exigeant," said the French Ambassador, alluding to the subject under discussion, which was the aggression of a petty Duke, who might chance to embroil Western Europe; European tempests not seldom being brewed in a Liliputian teacup.

"But others gained, too, by the treaty," suggested an

English Minister, "and grapes shared are poisoned to most gatherers. With a whole bunch to ourselves, we grudge the broken stalk that we leave behind."

"*Hein! c'est vrai!*" laughed a Prussian Statesman, applying himself to his tabatière. "Still if he were decently wise he would be content."

"Is it wise to be content?" smiled the English Minister; and his smile was cold and ironic. "What duller atmosphere possible than Contentment? A satisfied man has nothing to desire, gain, or contest; he is a mould-grown carp in stagnant waters——"

"Which are the quietest," added the Prussian, who had too much slow Teuton blood in him not to relish "stagnant waters." "I suppose V—— thinks with you, or he would never thrust forth such claims; he knows the Federation will never acknowledge them."

"But they will foment disturbance; they will draw the eyes of Europe on him for half a dozen months, and many would rather be decorated like Midas, than move unnoticed and unknown in

secretum iter et fallentis semita vitæ,"

said the English Statesman, with a contemptuous laugh, cold, slight, and clear.

"Et puis," said the Ambassador, with a slight shrug; "the opportunity was tempting. Man was created a dishonest animal, and policy and civilisation have raised the instinct to a science."

"And what he seeks now is for 'Patriotism.' Let none of us forget that. 'Pro Patria' is so admirable a plunder-cry; I don't know a better, unless it be 'Pro Deo,'" smiled the Englishman, whose own *cri de guerre* was, with but little disguise, "Pro Ego."

Standing at a little distance, wedged in by the titled and decorated mob, a man looked at him as he spoke; the words were inaudible where the other stood, but the smile he saw and knew of old, he had seen it on his lips when the sun sank

down beyond the purple shroud of mist, seen it as the duellist stooped to watch the dark blood slowly trailing through the grasses, with the passionate and cruel lust which branded him assassin. Raoul de Valdor had long forgot that hour, from the indifference of custom to a life so taken, and by long years passed in a fashionable whirl. At the time it had chilled and revolted him from the man who, with deliberate purpose, had slain his friend with the unerring aim and greed with which a tiger darts upon his prey, insatiate to destroy and indifferent to destruction. But their intercourse had remained the same, and the remembrance had drifted into the mist of long past things. It rarely recurred to him, yet it did so now, standing in the thronged ante-chamber of the palace, when glancing at the successful Statesman, with the ribbon crossed on his breast, and the cold courtly smile on his lips, there arose before him, sudden and distinct, the memory of that summer night, with the hooting of the shrill cicala, and the sullen surge of the noisome waters as the reptiles stirred amongst their reeds, and the last rays of the evening sun gleaming above the storm-cloud as the dying man reeled and fell.

He looked at Strathmore as he stood among his peers; and, strange, dissimilar, unbidden, the scene rose up before the memory of the inconsequent and thoughtless Frenchman, as he stood among the court crowd of St. James's. Yet he had been present at many such scenes, and the value of life taken had never weighed on him, nor its memory ever remained with him, before. In his creed of honour duels were blameless; in his country's custom they were habitual. What long ago had revolted the dashing and daring spirit (which with many faults and many follies had something of the old code of the gallant gentlemen who had fought and died for the White Lilies) had been the pitiless *purpose* which he had read ere the shot had been fired, and which had borne in his sight the fixed and treacherous intent of the murderer. It was this which he remembered now.

The throng parted, the knot of ministers separated,

Strathmore came forward to go to his carriage, and Valdor moved also; they met, as they had done a hundred times, since that night by the Deer-pond of the old Bois.

"Ah! you Valdor? Charmed to see you. I had no idea you were in England, much less at the Levee. Insufferably warm, isn't it? Such a press!" said Strathmore, giving his hand to the man who, sixteen years before, had whispered in his ear, "*Fuyez! il est mort*," unheeded, as he stooped to sever the gold flake of the hair which trailed among the dark dew-laden grasses.

"Such wretched rooms!" laughed Valdor, as he glanced contemptuously through the reception-chambers, unaltered since Queen Anne. "I only arrived yesterday. I have come to town on family matters—a disputed inheritance affair. But permit me, mon ami, to offer my congratulations on your recent honours; never was a finer political victory won. Your coup d'état was supreme!"

Strathmore smiled.

"You give me and my party too much distinction; we only effected, dully and slowly, by speeches and leaders, what you over the water would have done in a week by a few cannon-balls and closed barrières. But the British mind refuses the quick argument of a fusillade—as if it were not as wise to be convinced by a bullet as by a newspaper! Will you do me the pleasure to drive home with me?"

They pioneered their way through the arristocratic mob, and reaching the air at last, after the heated atmosphere of the densely-packed palace, passed to Strathmore's carriage, while the crowds without, waiting to see the courtiers leave the Levee, crushed themselves close to the wheels, and rushed under the horses' heads, and pushed and jostled, and trampled each other, in eager curious haste to see the favourite Minister—he who, could he have had his way, would have ruled them with a rod of iron, and swept his path clear from all who dared dispute his power, by the curt Cæsarean argument of armed hosts!

"Have you any engagements for to-night, Valdor?" he asked, as the carriage moved.

"None. I was going to dine at the Guards' club, and look in at the Opera."

"Give me the pleasure of your society, then. I have a State dinner this evening; the cruellest penalty of Place! Though truly it is selfish, perhaps, to ask you to throw over that most graceful of all sylphs, La Catarina, for ministerial proprieties."

"The egotism, at least, does me much honour. I shall be most happy. Your season is pretty well over, Strathmore; you eat your farewell whitebait soon?"

"To-morrow. I shall leave town in a week or two; the session will virtually close then."

"Where are you going, après? White Ladies?"

"Not yet. I shall be there the last days in August, when I hope you will join us. Völms and plenty of people will be down; and by all they send me word, the broods are very abundant and the young deer in fine condition. No; I go from town into Devon to see my mother, stay there three or four days, and then start for Baden, give a week coming back to Fontainebleau with His Majesty, your execration, and to White Ladies by the First."

"You go into Devon next week?"

"Or the week after. Why?"

"Because I am bound there. Perhaps you remember I have English blood in me by the distaff side? and there is a property down there which ought, I think, to be mine by rights, at least it needs looking into; *pas grand' chose*, but valuable to a poor wretch a million or two of francs in debt. I must make investigations at your Will Office ('Doctors' Commons,' n'est ce pas? 'Doctors',' because it has the testaments of those the doctors have killed; and 'Commons,' because it is common to nobody who hasn't the money to pay the fees. You English have a grim humour!). We can go down to the south together, Strathmore?"

"Certainly." (Valdor did not note that the answer was

slightly constrained, and halted a moment.) "Where is this property you name?"

"Bon Dieu! I don't know! The place is—peste! it is in my papers but it is out of my head!—wait a moment—is—is—Torlynne, surely, or some such title."

"Indeed! That is close to my mother's jointure house of Silver-rest. I remember it is a disputed title, an old moated priory with fine timber, but wholly neglected."

Valdor twisted his scented moustaches with a yawn of ennui:

"Vous me faites frémir! What on earth should I do with a 'moated priory?' It sounds like a ghost-story! However, I shall go down and prove my title if I can; for I suppose it will sell for something?"

"Undoubtedly. Since you will require to be on the spot, I am sure I need not say that Lady Castlemere will be most happy to see you at Silver-rest, if you like to stay with us."

Valdor thanked the kindly Fates which thus, by a fortunate chance, preserved him from the horrors of Devonian hotels, and accepted Strathmore's invitation, proffered from a cause he little guessed. Strathmore had heard of his intended visit to the south with annoyance, almost for the instant, with apprehension; it was this which made him hesitate, and but coldly consent to the suggestion that they should travel together. He knew that Valdor had heard those last words breathed with a broken sigh, "Lucille! Lucille!" and he dreaded to see the child of Erroll in the presence of one who had been with him in that hour. But as instantly he remembered that do what he would, Valdor, compelled to visit Torlynne, would certainly pay a visit of compliment to Lady Castlemere, and, living on the same solitary shore with Silver-rest, could not fail to meet Lucille. Therefore, with that policy which he used in trivial as in great matters, he disarmed all danger by meeting it *d'avance;* any act unusual on his part might have wakened Valdor's curiosity or wonder concerning the lovely child whom he would find there as his

ward; to invite him at once beneath the same roof with her was to avoid, entirely, exciting that piqued interest which, though no link remained to guide him by any possibility towards the truth, might yet have induced him to inquire much that would have been difficult to satisfy.

The foresight was wise, the reasoning just, the inference and expectation both rightly founded; yet—woe for us, mes frères!—the surest barriers raised by men's prevision are but as houses builded on the sands, which one blast of shifting winds, one sweep of veering waves, may hurl down into dust.

"What spell have you about you, mon cher?" said Valdor, two hours later, in the drawing-rooms of Strathmore's residence, as he threw himself into a dormeuse. Time had passed lightly over Valdor, and left him much the same—a gay, débonnaire, brilliant, French noble, whose fortunes were not equal to his fashion, in whom a transparent impetuosity mingled in odd anomaly with the languor of the world, in whom the fire of the South outlived the indifferentism of habit, and who, with many follies and some errors, had honour in his heart and truth in his tongue. He looked younger than he was, with his delicate brune tint, his soft, black eyes, his careless and chivalrous grace; and the man in whose society he now was looked on him disdainfully as "bon enfant," because his hot passions were short-lived, and the nonchalance of his nature made him candid as a child.

Strathmore raised his eyebrows:

"'Spell!' What a romantic word! How do you mean it?"

Valdor laughed, throwing back the dark waves of his hair; he was a little vain of his personal beauty.

"I mean to account for your perpetual success. You command success as if you had all the genii of fable to back you. Men censure you, oppose you, hate you, inveigh against you, and you have a strong party of foes, but they never contrive to defeat you."

"Well, I am not very tolerant of defeat."

"Pardieu! who is? But most of us have to swallow it sometimes. What I want to know is how you succeed in perpetually compelling your enemies to drink it, and avoiding one drop of the amari aliquid yourself!"

Strathmore smiled; the frank expression of curiosity and opinion amused him; he had himself the trained reticence of the school of Machiavelli, and years had of necessity polished his skill in the knowledge "how to hold truth and how to withhold it," once laid down by him as the first law of wisdom and of success.

"You ask for a précis of my policy! You know I invariably contended that what men choose to accomplish they may compass sooner or later, if they use just discernment, and do not permit themselves to be run away with by Utopian fancies or paradoxical motives. Let every one make up his mind to be baffled in what he undertakes nineteen times, but to succeed on the twentieth; I would warrant him success before he has reached half the score."

"That tells me nothing!" said Valdor, petulantly, though, in truth, it was this very inflexible and long-enduring patience, which nothing could dissuade or daunt, that was the key of Strathmore's rise to power. "Well! you must keep your secret, mon ami, and I dare say it has too much science and subtlety in it to lie in a nutshell. But as for your theory, which makes one think of the Bruce Spider-tale—peste!—it won't answer always. Look at *us;* we persevere for ever, and never succeed!"

Strathmore smiled slightly; he knew Valdor referred to the efforts of his own French party, and the loyal Utopia of a Quixotic and chivalric clique, found little sympathy with a statesman the distinguishing and most popular characteristic of whose politics was their entire freedom from all idealogy or vagueness.

"Mon cher! I spoke of a man who pursued a certain definite goal and power for himself, not of those leagued together for the chase of a shadowy chimera. To seek a pal-

pable aim and a palpable ascendency is one thing; to embrace a visionary crusade and an ideal flock of theories is another. *I* mean blasting a rock with rational materials and science; *you* mean climbing the clouds with ropes of sand!"

"Then," said Valdor, impatiently, with a dash of envy and a dash of intolerance—"then it would appear that the wise man consecrates his labours and his ambitions to the advancement of himself; it is only the fool who wastes both on mankind!"

"Certainly," smiled Strathmore. "Who ever doubted it?"

At that moment the doors of the vestibule were thrown open, and the first of the guests bidden to his State dinner was announced: further tête-à-tête was ended.

Strathmore was not popular among his colleagues; his personal coldness and his consummate indifference to how he wounded, repelled men, the generosity of feeling and the cordiality which in earlier years had been very strong to the few whom he liked, were gone. Although his liberality was as extensive, it seemed rather to proceed from disdain of wealth than any kindlier feeling, and though at times great and even noble deeds were traced to him done in privacy, they appeared rather to come from some rigid law set to himself than from any warmer feeling toward humanity. But his ascendency was indisputable, his intellect priceless to his party, and the brilliancy of his career without a rival; and men rallied about him, and confessed his influence as the most prominent politician of his day, and the assured leader of the future.

Valdor looked at him as he sat that night at the head of the table entertaining many of the most distinguished men of his country and time, fellow-Ministers and foreign Ambassadors, while the light from the chandeliers above, flashing off the gold and silver plate, the many-hued exotics, the snowy Parian statuettes, and the bright-bloomed fruits, fell upon his face with its peculiar Vandyke type, in which were blent the haughty melancholy of Charles Stuart with the statesmanlike power of Strafford, the serenity of a fathom-

less repose with the darkness of passions untameable if aroused.

Valdor looked at him as Strathmore drank his Red Hermitage and exchanged light witticisms with the French Representative, and again, unbidden und unwelcome before the thoughtless mercurial mind of the dashing and languid *lion*, rose the memory of that night in the Bois de Boulogne, and of the tiger-lust with which the death spasm had been watched to slacken and grow still.

"*He* has forgotten!" thought Valdor, with marvel, admiration, revulsion, loathing, all commingled. "He slew without pity; he lives without remorse."

So rashly do men judge who draw inferences from the surface; so erringly do they condemn who see not the solitude wherein the soul is laid bare!

## CHAPTER V.

### Among the Lilies of the Valley.

THE afternoon sun was warm on land and sea, and a light amber haze was lying on the soft outline of the hills, the stretches of golden gorse, and the glisten of the moistened sands, as a steam-yacht which had come down channel from the Solent, and rounded the coast, anchored in the little bay of Silver-rest, where nothing was ever seen save the fishing-smacks and tiny craft of the scattered population, whose few rough-hewn shingle cottages nestled under one of the bluffs.

"There is your Torlynne, Valdor," said Strathmore, pointing to some gable-ends which arose some mile or two off in the distance above masses of woodland, as they walked up from the shore. They were expected at Silver-rest, but the day of their arrival had been left uncertain, as he had not known when he might get finally free. Strathmore allowed himself little leisure in office; he never appeared either hurried or occupied, but he burnt the candle of his life at both

ends, as most of us do in this age, and must do, if we would be of any note in it.

"Ah, pardieu! I wish it were an hotel in the Rue de Grammont instead!" laughed Valdor, as he glanced across. "Not but that, I dare say I shall never get it, unless I languish through your Chancery till I am eighty. I shall hear the verdict is given in my favour, just when I am receiving the Viaticum!"

"I hope better things; it is a vast pity it should moulder unowned. Meanwhile, the litigation befriends me with a most agreeable companion during my exile at Lady Castlemere's. I fear you will be terribly bored, Valdor; my mother lives in strict retirement."

"Another instance of those who once ruled the world abjuring it in advancing life. What years it is since I had the honour of seeing her. I was a little fellow—a court-page, proud of my blue and silver! Does she live alone, then?"

"Oh, no; merely away from the world. She has a grandson with her, a lad at college; and also a ward of hers and of mine, little more than a child as yet, Lucille de Vocqsal."

"De Vocqsal? An Austrian name, isn't it?"

"No, Hungarian; it may be Austrian, too, however—*is*, indeed, I think, now you name it. You must expect to find Silver-rest dull—it has nothing to boast of but its sea-board."

"And its country," added Valdor, as they passed through the lodge gates.

Strathmore glanced carelessly over the magnificent expanse of woodland and moorland, hill and ocean, which stretched around.

"Yes; but that has not much compensative attraction for either you or me, I fancy."

They went on in silence, smoking, through the grounds, which were purposely left in much of the wildness and luxuriance of their natural formation, with here and there great boulders of red rock bedded in the moss, and covered with heaths and creepers, and Strathmore looked up in surprise as a sudden exclamation from Valdor fell on his ear.

"Bon Dieu! Look there. How lovely!"

Strathmore glanced to where Valdor pointed, marvelling that the landscape should rouse him to so much admiration, for the fashionable French Noble was not likely to be astonished into any enthusiastic adoration of the pastoral beauty of nature, or the sun-given smile on the seas.

What he saw was this.

A rock of dark sandstone overhung the turf below, forming a natural chamber, whose walls were the dense screen of tangled creepers and foliage pendent from its ledges, or the great ferns which reared to meet them, and whose carpet was the moss covered with lilies of the valley, which grew profusely where the tempered sun rays fell through cool leaves and twisted boughs, flickering and parted. And under its shelter from the heat, half buried in the flowers, lying in the graceful abandon of a child's repose, resting her head upon her hand in the attitude of Guido's "Leggiatura," her eyes veiled as they rested on her book, one sunbeam streaming through the fan-like ferns above, touching her hair to gold and shining on the open page she read, was Lucille.

The steps of both were involuntarily arrested as they came upon her in her solitude; there was something of sanctity in that early loveliness,

> Soft, as the memory of buried love;
> Pure, as the prayer which childhood wafts above—

that silenced both him to whom it was familiar, and him to whom it was unknown. Then Strathmore turned to move onward through the grounds: he felt repugnance to break in on her repose, or to meet her in the presence of the one who had heard the dying lips faintly whisper the name she bore, in their last farewell to her lost mother.

But Valdor put his hand upon his shoulder.

"Wait for Heaven's sake! Who is she?"

"A lovely child, but no more than that as yet. My ward, Lucille de Vocqsal."

"Mort de Dieu! She is the most beautiful poem, picture

—Heaven knows what—that ever I beheld. Make her lift those eyes; what must the face be when they are raised?"

"You will see her later on," answered Strathmore, coldly. "I shall not disturb her now; she is very young, and would not understand our having pryed on her in her haunt. And pray do not use that flowery language to her; youth flattered into vanity is ruined, and you would talk in an unknown tongue there."

He moved away, and Valdor, something surprised and something annoyed, prepared to follow him with a lingering backward gaze. But it was too late; a squirrel swinging downward from the boughs above made Lucille raise her eyes. She saw Strathmore, and, with a low cry, wild in its gladness, sprang from her couch among the lilies, and flew to meet him. Midway, she saw, too, that he was not alone; and paused, hesitating, with the colour, delicate as the rose flush on a sea shell, deepening in her cheek. She knew by instinct that Strathmore was haughtily reticent before all auditors, and although too highly bred and nurtured to know embarrassment, she had something of the beautiful wild shyness of the young fawn with those who were strange to her.

A shudder ran through Strathmore's veins as he perceived her standing before them there in the sultry mellow haze; while the eyes of his companion rested on her—the eyes which had watched with him the shadows steal over the face, and the convulsion shiver through the limbs of her father, in the summer-night of years long gone.

Then he moved forward and greeted her with all his accustomed gentleness, less tenderly than when they were alone —but to that she had long been used when any other was present at their meeting—and led her towards Valdor.

"Lucille, allow me to introduce to you one of my oldest and most valued friends."

"Pardieu!" thought the Frenchman; as after a graceful acknowledgment of his salutation, none the less graceful, but the more, from that delicate proud shyness which was like the coy gaze of the deer, Lucille turned to Strathmore with

low, breathless words of joyous welcome, and the radiance of that smile at which the sadness fled from off her face, as though banished by a spell. "Pardieu! when was anything more exquisite ever born; it is not mortal; it is the face of an angel. I have seen something like it, too, somewhere; now she smiles it looks familiar. Perhaps it is some head of Guido, some fantasy of Carlo Dolci, that she makes me remember. She seems to love her guardian; is she the only thing on earth he does not ice? The last man living, I should have supposed, that would have taken such an office; however, it may be done from generosity here. Strathmore would ruin his friend without mercy if he stood in his way, or awoke his passions; but he would give royally to his deadliest enemy who asked him in need. A bad man sometimes; a dangerous man always; but a mean man, or a false man, never!"

Which fugitive thoughts flitting through the volatile and reckless mind of Valdor, which seldom stayed to sift or criticize, were just enough in their deduction, drawing one of those haphazard truths by instinct, for which patient and shrewd observation often toil half a lifetime in vain.

"What were you reading there among the lilies of the valley, Lucille?" asked Strathmore, as they passed onward through the grounds, while her head was ever turning with a graceful, upward movement to look on him, and her eyes were ever seeking his with their loving, reverent regard, as though she could scarcely believe in the actual joy of his presence. They were but few and rapid visits which he paid her, but they were remembered passionately from time to time. The fairest summer lost its beauty if he never came with its golden promise; the dreariest winter was glad and bright with all the warmth of spring in her sight if it brought her but a few hours of his presence. From the moment when as a little child on the sea-shore she had asked him his name that she might say it in her prayers, Lucille had clung to the memory of Strathmore with a strange and deepened fondness far beyond her years.

"I had taken Æschylus and Euripides."

"You can read them in the original then, mademoiselle?" asked Valdor, in surprise.

"Lucille learns very rapidly, I believe," answered Strathmore for her. "She has been taught chiefly what she fancied to study, and one of those fairy fancies was Greek. I believe merely because she had heard how the sea she loves was loved in Hellas—was it not, Lucille?"

She smiled, and looked over to the sunny waters.

"Well! I can fancy how the Ten Thousand clashed their bucklers for wild joy, and shouted 'Thalassa! Thalassa!' to the beautiful dancing waves. I love the ocean! It is a music that is never silent, a poem that is never exhausted. When I die I should like my grave to be beside the sea."

"Death for you, mademoiselle!" broke in Valdor, while his eloquent southern eyes dwelt on her with admiration. "The gods have lavished on you every fairest gift, but they will be too merciful to those who look on you, to show their love towards so bright a life, in the way the Greek poets deemed the gentlest."

Lucille raised her eyes to his with something of surprise; she was unused to the suave subtleties of flattery, while a shadow stole over her face, such as an artist would let steal over the young face of Proserpine or of Procris whilst yet they lived their virginal life amongst the flowers, the shadow of that unknown future which lay awaiting them coiled in the folded leaves of yet unopened years.

"I wonder they chose early death as the gentlest fate," she said, softly; "to die in youth, to leave all the warmth of life for the loneliness of the grave, to grow blind to the light of the sun, and deaf to the voices we love, and to lie alone there, dead, while the birds are waking, and the wind is blowing over the flowers, and the day has dawned for all but us! Oh, who could choose it?"

The words, spoken with the unconsciousness of childhood, yet with the utterance of a poet, were very touching, and silenced both who heard her; one they smote with the memory of that dawn when the birds had sung under the leaves, and

the rejoicing earth had waked to gladness, and alone amidst that waking life had lain in rigid stillness the brother he had slain.

"She knows nothing of that past story, or she would not speak thus of death to him," thought Valdor, moved and impressed by this beautiful child, whom he had seen among the lilies: she was a study so new to him.

"Æschylus and Euripides have saddened you, Lucille," said Strathmore, as he moved a wild rose-bough from her path. "Those tragedies of curse and crime are far too gloomy for you."

"Oh no, I love them!" she answered him, with the ardent eloquence natural to her, and cultured, not fettered, by education; "they are grand, they are like a sea-storm by night! And they are so human through their grandeur too; the Eumenides may be fable, metaphor, spirit-allegory, what it will, but while *one* man sins, Orestes will be mortal, and will live? That guilt wrought in a moment's vengeance; that burden bound upon the murder for ever; those ghastly shapes which follow him, though to all other sight he is alone; they surely are true for all time while crime is still on earth!"

"And there is a crime yet more accursed than Orestes'—Orestes' victim was *guilty!*"

Her thoughts had been uttered from an imagination freshly steeped in the solemn verse of the tragic poet; his answer broke, beyond all check of will or power, from the sleepless remorse of conscience, stung into one momentary bitter Meâ Culpa.

Past the ear of the young girl it drifted harmless, revealing nothing, and like an utterance of an unknown tongue: his companion knew whence the words sprang, and thought,

"I did him wrong: *that* was remorse."

Strathmore caught his look, and his proud and disdainful nature shrank in wrath from its generous compassion. After long years of constant intimacy, through whose whole tenour this man had never seen deeper than the rest of the world saw, nor probed his silken social vest to the iron cross worn

beneath, Strathmore knew that he had betrayed his secret to him. Sensitive, and intolerant of intrusion, he resented pity yet more than insult.

The clear, silvered moonlight fell on Lucille's face that evening where she sat beside the open window in the twilight, which at her entreaty had not yet been banished from the chamber, though in the inner drawing-room beyond the chandeliers were lit, and Valdor and Strathmore's private secretary were playing closely contested écarté.

The stillness was unbroken. Lady Castlemere sat silent, a stately and noble woman, who bore her seventy years with dignity, though attenuated by bodily infirmity; in whose glance was still the fire, and in whose features the arrogance of earlier years, though both were tempered now by a touching and chastened gentleness. Her grandson, Lionel Caryll, was silent also; though bold and careless enough ordinarily, he feared his uncle; to him as to all youths Strathmore had always been cold and negligent; in the presence of the profound man of the world, the able and subtle statesman, the chill and brilliant courtier, he felt abashed, shy, ill at ease, and the polished ice of tone and manner froze the boy's frank young heart. The stillness was unbroken, save by the sound of the waves from without, or the noise of a grasshopper under the leaves, whilst the moon shone on the silvered sea, calm and phosphor-lighted; and Strathmore where he sat looked at Lucille, as, with her head bowed slightly, and her dark wistful eyes gazing out on the night, the starry radiance fell about her.

With much that was dissimilar, she had all the brightness and delicacy of her father's beauty, though upon it was a vague, intangible shadow of sadness, as though the tragedy of his fate had left an unconscious melancholy on the life which took its existence from him. Strathmore saw and noted this; he had done so often, and it always smote him with keen dread; for every touch of sorrow which could have fallen on her he would have held as a breach in his fulfilment of her father's trust. His eyes rested on her, and his thoughts filled

with the thronging shapes and memories of the past. Forbidden intrusion in the press of the world, trodden down in the path of power, dashed aside by the mailed hand of a successful and unscrupulous ambition, they coiled about him *here*, and would not be appeased. While she smiled up into his face; while he spoke to her calmly of her father; while he bent his will to rivet her affection and her gratitude, a vain remorse was on him. As in monkish times, those whose lives were fair in the sight of men, and who wielded the sword as the sceptre of sway over the world, came to the dark sepulchre and the blood-steeped scourge for their chastisement, so he came for his into the fair and innocent presence of this young life.

He sat long silent, looking on her where she gazed out to the moonlit sea, his thoughts in the travail of the past; and he slightly started as his mother, who was near him, spoke:

"Lucille will soon cease to be a child!"

"Not yet—not yet!" he answered hastily, and almost with pain. "In Heaven's name, let her guard her childhood over all the years she can!"

"Surely, but it will flee of itself beyond our arrest. One touch will soon scare it for ever."

"Accursed be the touch that does!"

Lionel Caryll heard, and looked at him, and the young man shuddered as he caught the look on Strathmore's face; he did not know that the sole feeling which prompted Strathmore's words was a passionate wish that the childhood—so easy to gladden, so easy to shield—could be prolonged for ever; a passionate fear, which crossed him for the moment, lest, when she should be no longer child but woman, others beyond his control should make shipwreck of the life in whose innocence, peace, and protection his atonement lay.

Their words did not reach her ear, but the sound of them roused her from her reverie, and she came and knelt before him with her hands crossed on his.

"Lord Cecil, I have something to beg of you."

He looked down into her large soft eyes.

"Of me, Lucille? You know you never ask in vain."

She laughed with a child's gay joy.

"Ah, how good you are! I want you to let me come and see White Ladies?"

"White Ladies! Why there?"

"Because it is your home. It is not far away, and I should so love to see it. It must be such a grand and stately place, with its cloisters and its forests? I have read of it in the archives, and chronicles, and legends. I know them all by heart! And they frighten me, some of them—that one, its terrible burden:

> Swift silent Strathmore's eyes
> Are fathomless and darkly wise,
> No wife nor leman sees them smile,
> Save at bright steel or statecraft wile,
> And when they lighten foes are 'ware,
> The shrive is short the shroud is there!

It is not true of the name either now. Your eyes are not cruel, and your hand never harmed any!"

The innocent, half-laughing words struck him like a dagger's thrust;—the legend on *her* lips which had been on Marion Vavasour's, prophetic of the guilt into which his passion and a woman's lie would hurl him! The sickly memory of the Domino Blanc passed over him; more horrible in all its remembered brilliance and beguiling, than any scenes of misery and torture. He heard the very ring of the masker's laugh, so mockingly sweet, so luringly fatal! He lived in that hour again fresh as though it had been but yesterday! He shuddered, and in the moonlight the pale bronze of his cheek grew whiter; but Strathmore, a courtier and a statesman, had not now to learn the lesson of self-control, of calm impassibility. He smiled:

"Why take pleasure in those dark legends of a benighted age, Lucille?—they have nothing in common with you, you fair child! What I have brought you befit you much better. Come, let us see how you like them!"

He stretched out his hand, and took from the table, where

he had lain them earlier in the evening, some cases of pink pearls as costly in their value as they were delicate in setting and in hue; he was prodigal of all that could either amuse or adorn her, but, from her age, these were the first jewels he had brought her, and, stooping, he clasped their bands of gold upon her arms, throat, and hair. The white moonlight fell about her where she knelt before him, on the graceful abandon of her attitude, on her face, upraised as a child lifts it in prayer, and he watched the flush on her cheeks, the breathless pleasure on her lips. Every time he saw her glance lighten, and her lips laugh, *through him*, he felt that so far the trust of Erroll was fulfilled, that so far his atonement was wrought out, that so far his expiation might claim to wash out the sin.

"Ah! how beautiful they are, and how kind of you to bring them!" she whispered him, rapidly and caressingly. "You have always some new thought for me. Look how they gleam and glisten in the moonlight! What jewels are they? They have the blush of a wild-rose——"

"And of your cheek," said Strathmore, with a smile.

She laughed: reared in innocence and seclusion, she was wholly unaware of her own loveliness, and flattery had never polluted her ear nor profaned her heart. She had the fairest charm of youth—unconsciousness. Then her eyes, uplifted to his, grew earnest; she leaned slightly forward towards him, and her voice changed from its breathless pleasure to a tender and almost saddened earnestness:

"Ah! how good and generous you are to always give me pleasure; and yet, do you know—do you know—I sometimes wish you did not give me half so much, that I might show you better how Lucille loves you! I sometimes wish that you were not rich and great, but poor, so that you might know how little it is *these* I care for; a lily of the valley, a heron's feather, a forest squirrel from White Ladies, would be as dear to me if from *your* hand. It is so little to love those who give us joy; the proof of love is to endure in pain!"

"God forbid that you should prove yours so!"

Her words moved him; any evidence of her affection was welcome for the sake of the dead, yet every evidence of it struck him with a pang of remorse. This child, who caressed his hand as the one from which she received all joy and blessing, would have shuddered in horror from its touch had she known the life it had blasted from earth!

"Do not wish that, Lucille," he added, gently. "I need no proof of what I know. Remember, I read your heart like an open book, and can see all that is written there."

She smiled, a sweet and trustful smile.

"Yes! I forgot; only sometimes I wish that I could *prove* it to you. While you make me so happy, what value is there in gratitude? The very dogs love the hand that feeds them! But, Lord Cecil, you have not told me—may I come to White Ladies?"

"Some day, perhaps."

But as Strathmore put her tenderly aside, and rose to approach his mother, he thought, with a shudder, of the dark shadow which lay athwart that threshold, making it impure for her fair and innocent youth to cross. White Ladies!—where a fatal love had trampled aside all laws of hospitality and honour; where the beginning of that ghastly tragedy had opened, only to close when the sun went down upon his wrath, and the dying sigh trembled through the silence; where her father's memory filled every chamber, haunted every familiar place, and peopled the vacant air, with the thronging phantoms of a vain remorse!

As he had entered the room from that beyond, having finished his game, Valdor had overheard her request, and had noted the manner in which it was received.

"She has never seen White Ladies, and he will not have her there! It is strange!" thought the Parisian, struck by the circumstance, as he might never have been but that the fair face which he had beheld first among the lilies, had wakened a new and deepening interest in him. Lucille was so unlike all he had ever seen.

"Your ward is very lovely, Strathmore," he said that

night, as they walked up and down the lawn under the limes smoking. "She reminds me of some one, I cannot for the life of me think whom. Can you help me?"

"Not at all. It is rather an uncommon style of beauty," answered Strathmore, indifferently, while swift to his own memory swept the recollection of that sunset hour when Valdor had watched the death-spasm convulse the face whose features she took, and the death film gather over the eyes from which her own had their smile.

"True. But I have seen some one like her," persisted Valdor. "Did I ever know her parents?"

"Very possibly. But both died so many years ago that it is not likely, I fancy, that you would recall them."

The answer was negligently given, as in a matter of small moment, yet in no way as though he avoided the inquiry; for though his earlier regard for truth had not worn away, the profound and acute mind of the politician had dealt too long in finesses not to deem them legitimate under private or public necessity.

"De Vocqsal," repeated Valdor, musingly. "She was of Hungarian birth, I think you said? May one ask, without intruding, anything more?"

"Of course, my dear Valdor!" said Strathmore, surprisedly, with his slight, cold smile. "You speak as though Lucille were some enchanted princess! But there is little to learn. Her name you know; she lost her parents in her infancy; I and my mother are her guardians. What remains? She is still a child!"

"But a lovely one, pardieu!" laughed Valdor, thinking to himself that he had been a fool building up a mare's-nest. "Do you know that I have actually been bête enough to suspect you of a nearer tie to her. I fancied she might be your daughter."

Strathmore smiled:

"Mon cher! your imagination has run riot! That my mother's home is hers might have assured you of the legitimacy of her birth."

The Comte laughed gaily:

"Of course!—and *I* should be the last to wonder at a generosity in you. But—one question more! Why will you not let her go to White Ladies? I could hardly help echoing her prayer myself."

"She may go, certainly, but she is almost too young to be brought out at present; and White Ladies, whenever I am down, is as completely 'the world' as the London season; seen there, she might as well be presented at once. However, she must very soon be both; but the question of when, is more for my mother's adjustment than mine. I do not think it is for a young girl's happiness to begin womanhood, coquetry, heart-burnings, and late hours too soon; but most likely women differ from me."

He spoke negligently, with easy indifference, as men speak of a trifle which, turn whatever way it may, will have no import to them, and Valdor dismissed his supposed secret as a chimera. But as they parted that night, Strathmore's eyes followed him with their dangerous and merciless light lit in them; the mere interrogations had aroused his wrath, and aroused with it insecurity and suspicion. "He meant no more than he said. He is as transparent as glass!" he thought, with the disdain which a reserved and self-contained mind entertains for a frank and unreserved one. "It is impossible he can fancy the truth; the likeness in her is not strong enough to suggest it; even if it did it could never go *beyond* fancy. There would be nothing to support it, nothing to corroborate it. Yet—if I thought there were a fear, I would find some means to stop his babble."

The thought did not travel further, and did not take definite shape or meaning; it was only the vague shadowing of an impalpable dread, but it was coloured by that inexorable pitilessness which swept from his path all that obstructed it, the pitilessness which made at once the force of his career and the evil of his character. His yearning to work out expiation through the living to the dead was holy in its remorse; such may well claim to wash away and to atone for the dead

liest sin that can rest upon the soul of any man. But—this is the greatest evil which lies *in* evil,—the ashes of past guilt are too often the larvæ of fresh guilt, and ONE crime begets a brood, which, brought to birth, will strangle the life in which they were conceived.

That night, after her attendant had left her, Lucille, who felt wakeful, she knew not why, threw open one of the casements of her bed-chamber and leaned out, resting her cheek on her hand, and her eyes on the moonlit seas, lying wide and bright in the stillness of the summer night, with here and there, against the starry skies, the dark sail of a coasting vessel gliding slowly and silently. A child in years, she had the heart of a poet; and that vast limitless ocean in serenity and storm, in the tempest of black midnights, and the calm of holy dawns, had been a living poem to her from her infancy;—indeed the beautiful myths, and the idyllic dreams she drew from it, had much to do with deepening the susceptibility of a nature already too poetic and too ethereal for its own peace and its own welfare.

She leaned out, under the leaves and clematis-flowers, clustering about her window, while her hair, flung backward, fell unbound over her shoulders, and her deep wistful eyes travelled over the starlit Atlantic, whose ceaseless melody swelled upward from the beating surge, through the quiet of the night. As she rested there, two shadows passed before her sight; one crossing the sward under the limes below, another passing before the lighted casements of a chamber in a wing, built out, so that divided by a lawn, it stood opposite to her. The first was Lionel Caryll, smoking, and walking backwards and forwards there, with all a youth's romance, to watch the light which shone from her window, through the clematis-clusters, while he mused vaguely, timidly, of what he loved this fair child too reverently, to dare draw out from the golden haze of an immature dream which could not call itself a hope. The second was Strathmore, who, in this brief break upon his life of feverish power and unceasing conflict, could

not wholly abandon the habits of his accustomed sphere, nor cease wholly to work the wheels within wheels of a keen ambition and a ruthless statecraft, but who, pacing to and fro his chamber, dictated to his secretary the verbal subtleties of a foreign correspondence. The two shadows crossed her sight; the moon-rays fell on young Caryll's face, lending it much of delicacy and sadness, as his steps sounded slowly one by one upon the stillness; and the strong waxlight within showed Strathmore's profile distinct, as though cut on an intaglio, as he passed swiftly up and down before the open windows, the countenance full of haughty intellect and lofty power, like the face of the man, whose iron brain framed, and whose iron hand would have carved out the blood-system of "Thorough"—master of all men, save of himself!

On the two the innocent eyes of the young girl fell, as she looked into the night, and away across the starlit ocean; and on the one they scarcely glanced, but on the other they lingered long. It was not on the youth as he paced under the windows, keeping fond yet holy watch on the light of her casement, and dreaming over thoughts hardly less guileless than her own, that Lucille looked, but on the worn and unrevealing face of the statesman, cold in its power, dark in its written record of spent passions, as he consumed the sleepless hours of the gentle night in the exercise of a restless and dominant ambition. She lingered there long, and wistfully, hidden in the shroud of fragrant clematis, and her eyes never wandered from that resting place; then she gently closed the window, and over her face was a deep and loving tenderness, a hush of sweet unutterable joy that smiled on her lips and filled her eyes with unshed tears.

"How great he is—and how good!" she whispered softly to herself. And then she knelt down beside her bed, with her hands crossed on her heart, and her young face upraised, and, even as she had done from infancy, prayed to God for Strathmore.

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## CHAPTER VI.

### One of the Legion of the Lost.

In a bed-chamber au deuxième, in a house in the Rue Beaujon, Champs Elysées, sat a woman, while in the street below rattled the wheels of passing carriages, and through the windows little was seen save leaden roofs, and dripping water-pipes, and dreary skies, for the day was wet and cheerless. The chamber was luxurious to a certain extent, if something too glittering and meretricious; the hangings were of *rose tendre;* ormolu, buhl, rosewood, marqueterie, porcelaine de Sèvres, were not wanting; and cachemires, sables, flowers, *objets d'art*, were scattered over it, the offerings of those young *lions* who were anxious to have their names associated with one who had been the most notorious and dazzling star of the demi-monde years ago, and who, even yet, by a resistless spell of fascination, was as costly to them as the Baccarat, and the Lansquenet, and the Rouge et Noir, which drew thousands of francs from their pockets in the midnight privacy of her salon. Out of the bed-chamber opened the drawing-room and the supper-room, both furnished in the same style; with warm nuances of colour, which struck the eye pleasantly; with carefully-shaded light, which cast its own twilight here upon everything; with an ensemble which looked glowing and illusive when the apartments were lit, and scented with dreamy odours of pastilles, and redolent of the bouquets of rich wines and the smoke of chillum from eastern hookahs. On the dressing-table of the bed-chamber lay many jewels, chiefly inimitable counterfeits, for the originals of most had been parted with for two-thirds their value as soon as received, and the paste was all which glittered there in company with the cases of rouge, cosmetiques, pearl-powders—all the dreary pitiful paraphernalia of the life which masks the youth it has lost, and dares not, or cannot, wear the dignity of coming age, but only hideously masks the tread of time, and wreathes a

death's-head in an unreal smile! And by the table sat a woman. It was but noon, and she was alone; the pigments and powders of the toilette-table had not yet been used, and they were sorely needed. Needed—to lend their bloom to the hot, parched lips, their lie to the haggard and faded brow, their blush to the hollowed cheek, their lustre to the heavy eyes. Needed—for in this face there was such still splendid remnant of bygone loveliness as will linger in the discoloured petals of a flower which has been trodden and trampled in the mud—such trace of a brilliant and matchless beauty too great for any age to utterly sear out, as only served to make the wreck more bitter—such straying rays still lingering of the gracious glory with which Nature had once dowered her peerless work, as only made the souls of young and virginal women, who passed her in the crowd, vaguely shudder at all which had been thus lost, thus sullied, thus debased. And this was Marion Vavasour!

Where had fled the dazzling radiance which had seemed of old to fill her face and form with light? Where had fled the haughty grace with which she had swept through the presence chambers of Courts, bending monarchs to her will? —the superb triumph which had wantoned on her lips, and sat throned upon her brow?—the lovely youth which had beamed from her antelope eyes, and smiled in her sparkling wit?—the resistless sorcery with which she had bought the souls of men at her will, when the night-luminance streamed on the diamonds flashing in her glittering hair, or the gladness of the morning fell about her where she stood, wreathed in the fragrant clusters of her summer roses? *Where?* Where all things fall!—into the grave of Time, which, ever full, yet ever yawns for more—into the abyss which waits for the Womanhood that is sullied, and sin-steeped, and gives its glorious dawn and noon to sowing broadcast seeds of evil whose deadly harvest ever ripens, and is reaped by its sower in the dark vale of waning years.

*Facilis descensus Averni.* Down—down—even as one slips down a shelving and glassy slope the Discrowned had

fallen, slowly yet surely, for there are no resting-places on that road; once launched, there is no refuge, save in the chasm below. The fate to which an inexorable vengeance had doomed her had been hers, and would be hers until the uttermost letter of its pitiless Mosaic law had been fulfilled. Dethroned, disgraced, exposed, mocked, reviled, stripped of her power, and stricken into poverty and shame, there was but one fate for this wanton, merciless, beautiful, evil woman —the sorceress in angel guise, the destroyer veiled in lovely youth, the *bella demonia con angelico riso.*

Not for her the purging bitterness of shame, the purifying fires of remorse, the acrid yet holy tears of the Magdalen, whose heart whilst crime-riven is contrite. Not for her: she knew humiliation, but she knew nothing of repentance; she only knew revenge. She suffered: but not with the suffering which on the ashes of guilt raises the sanctuary of expiation. Perhaps, had mercy been yielded to her prayer in the hour of her extremity, had she been humbled to the earth with the god-like forgiveness which would have *spared her*, and bade her "go, and sin no more," the faint rays of purer light which here and there strayed across her soul might have dawned clearer and stronger, and have saved her. Perhaps! Few are so deeply lost that an infinite mercy cannot do something to restore them. It had been denied her, and Marion Vavasour from that hour gave herself up to dazzling evil, and steeped herself recklessly in that gilded degradation which ere then she had shrunk from, and drank to the lips of guilty pleasure, and used her beauty with fearful and pitiless power to accurse her own soul and all others that she drew into the Circean tempting.

And therefore was she thus now, fifteen long years after. For the riches of sin flee swiftly, scattered in a mad extravagance; and as her beauty stole away before the step of time, so stole her power with it; so she sank downward in that decline whence there is no ascent; so she drifted swiftly and surely over the passage of years from brilliance and sovereignty and evil sway, towards that dark and lonely end

which he who drove her forth to her fate ordained to her in words which needed no prophet's prescience to give them their prediction. And therefore she was thus now.

She sat alone, whilst over the stove the chocolate simmered, and without the ceaseless pouring of the rain dripped wearily. Where were her thoughts? Away in that glad omnipotent time when she had reigned wheresoever she moved, commanded wheresoever her brilliant glance fell; when the riches of empires and the mines of both hemispheres had been rifled to adorn that marvellous loveliness which kings adored; when she had listened to the nightingales among the fragrant aisles of her rose-gardens with that soft poetry which made her deadliest spell, her most seductive veil; when she had seen princes bending to her feet, and royal women outshone by the glory of her face, while Europe babbled of her fame? Surely: they wandered far back over the past as she sat there, with no companion in her solitude, save the drip, drip, drip of the unceasing rain from the black leaden roofs without: wandered far, while in the columns of the *Patrie*, which she was wearily glancing through, her eyes rested on one name:

"STRATHMORE."

And that name was associated with dignity, with honour, with a wide renown, with the great policies of Europe, with all which encircles the career of a dominant and successful statesman. What weakness was there in this patrician power, what crevice in this blade-proof mail, what flaw in this haughty and inaccessible life, through which the bolt of a woman's retaliation could speed its way to the quick?

None!—none!

It had baffled her hopelessly through all these years, which to her had been a gradual descent from empire into impoverishment, which to him had been a gradual ascent from ambition up to power. Yet she had held it in close sight persistently. For there is nothing at once so hopeless and so persistent as a vague, shapeless, impotent, yet un-

dying, desire for Revenge. All these years she had had watch kept on him, and through them all she had failed to discover one aperture through which the adder of retaliation could worm its way and leave its venom. Yet she had never given up hope; she had never surrendered her search; for I have said that in the nature of this woman there was much of the panther, its cowardice, its velvet softness, its cruelty, its wanton love of destruction; and, like the panther, she lay in wait.

Her eyes rested now on the word "Strathmore;" honour, dignity, power, sway, these were what she beheld ever paid to him, gathered by him, become alike the mistress and the ministers of the man who had once been the abject slave of her caress and her word. Their parts had changed; he had hurled his tyrant down into the dust, and stood afar off—afar as though their lives had never touched—where her passionate hatred, her burning bitterness, could no more assail him than the fever of fretting breakers the icy summits of mountains above them. And a hopeless sickness, a faint despair came over her, as her eyes gazed upon his name. Should she *never* reach him, should she *never* gather up from the wreck of the past, sufficient of the force, the power, the will of Marion Vavasour to smite that steel-clad life, that soul of bronze, even as he had smitten hers, to make him reel and stagger beneath her blow, even though to compass his destruction she herself might perish?

With a passionate gesture, she crushed the journal in her hand, and threw it from her; her lips set, her eyes gleamed, her hands, so fair and delicate still, clenched with convulsive force, and in her teeth she muttered thirstily, dreamily:

"It must come, it *shall!* 'Tout vient à point à qui sait attendre!'"

And then she arose and went before her toilette-mirror, and leaning her head upon her hands, sighed, whilst a hot, arid mist gathered in her eyes: far more cruel to her than

death or shame, or privation, was the loss of her glad and glorious loveliness.

"Oh! woman, woman, you miserable insect-thing!" she said, bitterly, while her old mocking smile came about her lips, but now derisive and now joyless. "Only born to pander to men's pleasure—only created to intoxicate their senses and to damn their souls—what are you worth—what are you worth? A butterfly of less value than a dead leaf, when one short summer has stolen your beauty! You reign by the brightness of the eyes, the bloom of the cheek, the whiteness of the bosom, and when those are gone you may lie in a kennel and die. What are your victories? Only such as drink, or dice, or the Turf win as completely! What are your slaves? Only those who are the slaves not of you, but of their own passions: Impotent, wretched, ephemeral thing! —only loved for the vice you gratify, only of worth while there is youth on your lips!"

The mocking, scorning words broke out with the pride and the eloquence of long-past years; to her heart she felt their truth.

"And yet—and yet," she muttered, "it *is* power—while it lasts. To see them, as I have seen, thirst for a glance and hang on a smile, and love a sneer, a rebuff, a cruelty rather than no word! To make them, as I have made, kneel and pray, and grovel in the dust to kiss one's feet; and bend their proud necks to the yoke, and break their stern souls down to a spaniel's humility; and deal out anguish and despair, heaven and hell, at will. Ah? it is Power! None wider, none surer on earth, while it lasts!"

The words were passionate now and triumphant; for the instant she lived again in the rich and royal Past, and tasted all its glories. Then her head sank, and the salt tears filled her eyes, and her hot pale lips quivered, and a piteous wailing cry broke from her:

"Oh, my lost beauty—my lost beauty!"

And then after a while she took up the rouge, and the powders, and the paint, and sought wearily and futilely to

counterfeit all which had fled for ever; and when she arose after that ghastly task, through all, despite all, there was something beautiful still; the haughty grace, the antelope eyes, the sovereign glance, the perfect form, these naught could wholly destroy save death; but it was only such fugitive, sullied, faintly-lingering beauty as made the history it told more bitter and heart-sickening; as would linger about the golden cup which had been bruised, and polluted, and burned in the fire, as would remain to the glorious statue which had been defaced and overthrown in ruins in the dust, as would be given by the painter of the Purgatorio to the faces of the fallen and accursed as they bear their doom.

## CHAPTER VII.

### The Shadow of the Future.

THE summer morning broke warm and clear over the western coast, and Strathmore, as he rose and dressed, bade his servant set the windows open. The ocean sparkled in the light, the birds sang among the leaves, the golden gorse blossomed far and wide over the bluffs and moors; but in his youth he had had little sight or heed for these things: he had none now; the fairness of the opening day he barely noticed. But beneath his windows rose another song than that of the thrushes, as sweet as they and as joyous; the song of a young heart and a young voice rising up to heaven with the early day, with the fragrance of the flowers, with the freshness of the dew, with the odour of the grasses, with all things fair and pure. It was the invocation of the Spirits to the Hours, from Shelley's "Prometheus:"

> The pine-boughs are singing
> Old songs with new gladness,
> The billows and fountains
> Fresh music are playing,
> Like the notes of a spirit from land and from sea.

And the words, with the improvised music, uprose on the air as a lark rises into the clouds.

He heard it, and approached the window; in the sunlight

Lucille was bending down among the flowers like Milton's Proserpine,

> Herself the fairest flower;

filling her hands with their fragrant wealth, with golden laburnums, snow-white lilies, roses dew-laden, buds nestled in their dark wet leaves, and drooping coils of scarlet creepers. He stood and watched her where she moved in all the gladness of her youth and the brightness of the morning, among the boughs and blossoms, while the burden of her song echoed upon the air, and the sunny warmth of light fell on the fairness of her face. He watched her, and over the world-worn coldness of his face a strange softness trembled, and into his calm pitiless eyes came a yearning pain—he thought of the dead. He had loved him, he had been loved by him so well! and across the dreary stretch of years no cry of a vain agony could reach, to pierce the tomb where he had been hurled in all his glad and gracious manhood. The life lay rotted to ashes in the grave: what avail the passionate throes of a remorse, impotent, tardy, powerless with God or man? Remorse could not bring back the dead! Yet remorse ate into his soul as the brand burned into the brow of Cain; with him by night and day, beside him in the glitter of courts, lying in wait for him in his solitude, consuming his peace under the purples of power, it burned ever in him; this remorse, hidden under an armour of steel, veiled from men's sight beneath a powerful, successful, impenetrable career. And into his eyes now, there came a weary, passionate, yearning grief, as he gazed down upon the young life which had sprung from that of the lost, where she stood among the flowers with the joyous echo of her song floating softly down the air; and his lips moved in an unconscious, broken prayer, as though that prayer could reach the grave.

"My friend, my brother! I will guard her without shade or soil, her life shall be before my own. Oh God! may not *that* suffice?"

"Lucille will soon be a child no longer."

His mother spoke again the same words as she had spoken the night before, where she stood in the embrasure of one of the oriel windows, a woman aged, but of noble presence still, in carriage and in feature not unlike to Marie Antoinette, with her silvered hair turned back from a haughty brow, and the sweeping folds of her black robes draping a form bowed but full of dignity; for Lady Castlemere had been the proudest woman of her day until the steel of her will had been bent and softened in the fires of calamity and the crucible of age. Strathmore stood opposite to her, leaning against the casement; it was near sunset, and they were alone. He looked up from what he was reading:

"Unhappily, yes."

"And she has great loveliness, Cecil?"

"Very great; she has had from childhood."

"Then we must not always imprison it here! In a year or so at latest she should see some other world than that of a solitary sea-shore, some other society than that of her birds, and dogs, and flowers. Your wish, of course, decides all concerning her, but neither your duty nor mine would be fulfilled if we denied her for ever any other sphere than this."

Strathmore was silent some moments; he felt an invincible reluctance to realise the truth that Lucille was growing out of childhood; a yet greater to give the signal for the flight of all that made her as glad and as innocent as a child, by her introduction into a world where she would learn her own loveliness, be sullied by flattery, see hollowness, artifice, frivolity, all of which she never dreamt now, and be taught either joy from other hands than his own, or the pain from which he would have no power to shield her.

"Some time—yes," he answered, slowly; "though she will learn nothing by wider freedom save what is best unlearnt. She must be introduced, and presented, and all the rest, of course; but there is no haste for that. She is so young yet; and whilst she is happy here, she is better here."

His mother was silent too for a while. I have said that

Strathmore had at no time given her more than a chill regard and a courteous respect; he was not a man to be bound by or to feel any of these ties, but she loved him—loved him better since she had shuddered at his crime and aided his atonement. She was silent; then she moved towards him, and laid her hand lightly on his shoulder, a hand like his own—long, fair, delicate to the touch, yet never to be shaken from its grasp, the hand which seems instinctively formed to hold Power.

"Strathmore, forgive me if what I say pains you; you know how deeply I should grieve to do so; but as Lucille grows older, a question occurs to me which I never remembered during her infancy. All those who see her, believe her parentage foreign, and never dream of looking beyond the fact that she is an orphan, and a ward of yours and of mine. But—if men meet her who learn to love her, they may look closer, and to whosoever becomes her husband in the future you must tell the history of her true name and fate."

Strathmore almost started, and a look of distaste and repugnance passed over his face: the young life which had been to him like a child-angel of atonement looked to him too sacred for the sensual thoughts of love to approach, or the touch of a lover's kiss to profane.

"Love? Marriage? They are desecration to associate with that young innocent child," he said, impatiently. "Let her love, as she does, the waves and the birds and the flowers; they are the only things pure enough for her. *Our* brute passions have nothing in common with her."

"Still—unless she were consigned to conventual seclusion—it will be impossible to prevent the love of men from fastening on her by-and-by?"

"True: but it will be time enough to speak of that whenever her own heart is touched."

There was the look in his eyes which ever came there when his will was crossed; but Lady Castlemere's will was as resolute as his own. She pursued the subject:

"But in the event I name, to one to whom Lucille may be

betrothed in the future, her parentage must be made known. Has this never struck you?"

"I see what you mean; but it shall never be so."

The reply was calm, but it was inflexible. In his heart he swore that none should ever learn that fatal secret, none ever glean the power to unfold to her that he whom she caressed and revered, and honoured and prayed for as the guardian and giver of her every joy, had been the destroyer of her father.

"But how can it be avoided?"

In his cold fathomless eyes she saw the evil look glitter darker and darker, which would have been restrained to none save herself, and he answered her chillily:

"With that I will deal whenever the time comes. Suffice it, I shall never permit any to learn a secret which is buried for ever, as much by *his* will as by mine."

She mused a moment over his words:

"Then," she said, slowly, "then—Lucille must wed with some one who must love her too well to ask her descent; there are few who love thus, Strathmore."

He looked at her in impatience, in surprise, in curiosity:

"Why talk of love at all? To think of marriage for her looks to me as premature, as it seems pollution! In the seclusion in which you live here you select all her acquaintance, and she meets none who can whisper to her of what she does not herself dream."

"Perhaps not; but there is one here who may do so."

"*Here?*"

"Yes; my grandson loves her: he scarce knows it himself, they have been so long together, from her infancy; but I know it; and some hour or other, unpremeditated and involuntarily, he may discover his own secret and utter it to her."

"A boy's puling fancy! a lad's moonstruck sickness! Why have him here if he must taint the air she breathes with the miserable maundering of sentiment?"

He spoke with intolerant, contemptuous impatience, his slight, bitter smile upon his lips, chill and disdainful; it in-

censed him more than he showed, that this youth should have dared to dream of love in association with Lucille, should have dared to desecrate with his amorous follies the opening life which seemed too pure for any coarser touch of earth.

"My home is Lionel's," answered Lady Castlemere, briefly and coldly, for her grandson was as dear to her as Lucille—in truth, more so. "What he feels for her would not merit the harsh and scornful words you give to it; his love is like much first love, timid, shrinking, delicate, most reverential. He would breathe no word in her ear he would not speak in my presence, and he holds her in most perfect tenderness. It is an affection which has grown with his growth; he is not conscious yet of its force; but a word, a moment, may reveal his own heart to him, and then—I cannot answer for his silence."

"Secure it then. Send him on the Continent, or to Egypt, till the Oxford Term. I forbid a boy's maudlin sentimentality to desecrate her ear."

"Nello's love is purer than most older men's!" said his mother, with a sigh. "And I do not see the necessity to banish it wholly until we know that she would not respond to it——"

"Respond to it!"

Strathmore echoed the words half in derision, half in incredulity, wholly with anger; around Lucille the only holy feeling which his nature had ever known had gathered so much that was hallowed, pure, and of profound sadness, that, for any passion to approach her seemed like profanation, and for any other hand to attempt to wrest her from his guardianship looked sacrilegious theft.

"Why should she not? Though a boy to you, he is not so to her. She feels for him a loving affection, born with infancy, which may well deepen into what would be the safest and happiest love which she can know. His character is known to me as no other's can be; it is one to which her peace might be securely trusted; and with him the impediment which would surely arise with any other man could not

occur; he would never dream of inquiring more deeply into her history. There are many reasons that induce me to think Nello's love—if she can feel any for him—would be the calmest haven we could secure for her. I leave the matter in your hands, you are her guardian; but I know that her happiness and peace are too paramount with you for you not to weigh them well. Pardon me if I suggest, Cecil, that it would be well neither to fetter her until she is old enough to know her own heart, and has had larger experience, nor, on the other hand, to banish wholly either him from her, or hope from him, lest thus you should shipwreck what else would be a tranquil and shadowless love? These matters seem beneath you, but they are not so, since you have made that young child's peace your care."

"Nothing is beneath me which can bestow on her a moment's joy, or spare her a moment's pang."

The brief words were the truth; to screen or to gladden the life which he felt to hold in wardship from the Dead, he would have given his own; for in this man's heart as there were "depths which sank to lowest hell," so there were also "heights which reached to highest heaven." He spoke no more, but stood silent, revolving many thoughts—thoughts which had but one centre and one goal: Lucille's future peace.

As he went to his own chamber, half an hour afterwards, he met her on the wide staircase; she was dressed for the evening, and about her hair was wreathed a chain of delicate shells of a rare kind and opal hue: they formed a graceful ornament, and he noticed them as he paused.

"Oh, they are Nello's shells!" she answered, laughing. "Are they not pretty? He brought them from the cliffs to-day, and risked his life to get them. He said so sadly that he could not give me costly pearls like yours, that I told Babette to string them on a Trichinopoly chain, and fasten back my hair with them. I knew he would be pleased."

The words struck him as they would not have done but for others he had lately heard. He looked down into her fair

eyes, now glad and laughing, yet in whose depths a sadness ever lay, deep, yet undefinable:

"You love this boy, Lucille?"

"Oh, dearly!"

She spoke warmly, earnestly, for the companion of her childhood was, indeed, very dear to her; and of "love," in men's and women's sense, Lucille knew nothing, scarce its name, save as it was written to her—vague, mysterious, solemn, glorious—in the pages of Dante and his brother poets. Strathmore passed his hand over her brow with a gentle caress, and went onward in deep thought. It was strange how this single holy feeling, which had grown out of his trust from Erroll, penetrated and intertwined a life which seemed, in all other respects, chill as ice, impenetrable as steel, and filled to the brim with insatiate ambition, worldly wisdom, and power which was not seldom as unscrupulously sought as it was imperiously wielded. It was singular how in the cold yet restless, successful yet insatiate, callous yet embittered, career of the Statesman, this solitary, pure, and chastened tenderness had been sown and rooted. Lucille was the sole living thing he loved, Lucille the sole living thing he would not have trampled down in his path unheeding; and a sickly sense of *loss* came over him as he thought that, however he had thus far fulfilled her father's trust, her future must pass into the care of others whom it would be beyond his power to control; that, with whatever gratitude, reverence, and love she now regarded him, the time must come when her guardian must surrender her to her husband, and the joy of her life be given from other hands, and other lips, than his.

"Caryll, I need a few words with you. Will you come hither?"

Strathmore stood outside one of the dining-room windows smoking on the lawn without, while his secretary and his nephew lingered over the olives. Valdor was away on some legality connected with Torlynne. The young man rose and

went to him instantly, where he stood in the moonlight; Strathmore held him at a distance, and Caryll feared, almost disliked him—all youths of his age did. The graceful negligence, the haughty courtesies, more cold in their suavity than their omission could ever have been, the subtle bitter sneer, the profound knowledge, felt rather than ever shown —all these awed and repulsed them, apart from the lofty and glittering fame which surrounded the successful and inscrutable Minister.

"Walk away from the windows, if you please," said Strathmore, as he moved across the grass. At the bottom of the lawn he turned and glanced at his nephew. "So, Caryll, I hear you love my young ward—is it true?"

At the suddenness of the personal and merciless question, spoken, moreover, in that soft, harmonious voice of which every inflection could cut as coldly as an ice wind, Nello was speechless; he coloured to the temples, and his eyes dropped shyly as a girl's; his love was sacred to him, and he dreaded his inquisitor. In the light of the moon Strathmore's eyes studied him searchingly, und the politician, accustomed to read men's thoughts at a glance, read the youth's heart to its depths. He smiled, unconsciously, contemptuously: his nature was unsympathetic, and for the timidity and poetry of young love he had no compassion—he had never known them himself—and here, as well as a foolery, they looked a profanity.

"Chi arrossisce e se tacea, parla assai,"

he said, with the derisive coldness which was as terrible as a knife-thrust to the ardent, sensitive, unveiled heart of the boy, who shrank under the glance and the tone, as a prisoner under the cold steel of the inquisitor. "And may I ask on what grounds you have upbuilt your romance, or what right you have to presume to build it at all?"

The hot blush died off young Caryll's face, leaving it very pale: he had scarce known his love himself, until these abrupt and merciless questions threw their light upon it.

"Right?" he said, hesitatingly and hurriedly. "I have no right, sir—scarcely hope."

"'Scarcely!' Then you cherish some?"

His eyes, with a chill disdain slumbering in their depths, fastened in relentless watch upon his nephew's face, till the painful flush and pallor kept changing there like a woman's. It was a terrible ordeal to Lionel Caryll to have his heart probed and bared by this negligent, callous, pitiless, polished man of the world!

"Who does not, sir, who loves?" he murmured, almost indistinctly.

"Then you think that Lucille gives you hope?"

The questions were put coldly, carelessly, but with an authority which seemed to the youth to wrench answers from him whether he would or not.

"Yes—no—I cannot tell—I dare not say," he muttered, hurriedly. "She is very gentle to me, but that she is to all things; she loves me, I know, but it may be only as a brother. Still—still—with time, I fancy—and she wore my shells in her hair to-night——"

His cold smile played a moment about Strathmore's lips. To this man, whose soul had been drunk long ago with the madness of passion, and was now steeped in the intoxication of power, the shyness and the romance of a first love seemed puling puerile sentiment.

"You consider you *have* hope," he said, chillily. "Whether founded or unfounded, time will show. And now, how much of this 'love' have you presumed to whisper to my ward without my permission?"

"Not a syllable!" said the young man, eagerly. The interrogation roused his pride, and made him shake off the awe which he felt for the man who stood there, smoking in the moonlight, with his searching glance fixed on him, and his point-blank questions dealing, without sympathy or compassion, with what was to him the very core and goal of his life. "Not a syllable, I swear, Sir! I have never let her dream of any other feeling than that with which we played

together in her infancy. I would not—I dare not—she is too sacred in my eyes. To speak of love to her would seem profanation; to think of it, does almost!——"

He spoke hurriedly but earnestly, and with all the delicacy and tenderness which characterised a love that his own temperament, and Lucille's early years, had both tended to make rather reverential than impetuous, rather poetic than passionate, such as the young knights of Arthur's Code felt for some holy and lofty love, their guiding-star from afar off, but beyond the reach of grosser desire.

His answer found favour with Strathmore, and softened the haughty and scornful intolerance with which he had hitherto regarded the young man's attachment; he perceived at a glance that here there would be no maudlin romance, no sickly sentiment to brush the bloom off the fair opening leaves of Lucille's young heart. He was silent, and paced up and down for a few moments, musing on his nephew's reply; then he paused, and looked on the young frank face in the moonlight, while Caryll's eyes met his, fearlessly now, though a boyish flush was hot on his temples.

"You are perfectly right," he said, briefly. "I am glad you have so much perception and so much reticence. To have taken advantage of your position and opportunities to usurp her ear, without having received my permission, I should have considered very unwarrantable, and should have resented proportionately. As it is, you consider that you have some grounds for hope, and I am aware myself that Lucille holds you in sincere affection; whether it may ever ripen to more, neither you nor I can tell, and I distinctly forbid any attempt to force it prematurely to do so."

Young Caryll bent his head silently; he felt powerless against this serene, inflexible will, and he knew that Strathmore, as her guardian, had a right to speak as he would.

"You understand? Now listen further. For two years I forbid any attempt to speak of love to her, or to secure her own. I do not interdict to you such means as may warrantably foster her affection for you; to do so would be unjust,

but you must neither rouse nor fetter her heart in any way. At the end of that time she will be old enough to make her own choice, and she will have seen a wider world than this; you can then say to her what you will. If it prove that the hope you now cherish is legitimate, and if she find that you are dearer than any one has, or could, become to her—if, in a word, her happiness depend on you—I will sanction your suit. Give me your word to keep the silence I exact?"

Nello hesitated a moment. Two years! It looked an eternity! But an influence was upon him he could not resist. He had feared Strathmore before, now he felt his power; he saw, moreover, that the words were gentle and were just, and he bowed his head and gave the pledge.

Strathmore paused a brief time, looking at him keenly, and taking gauge of his character—a gauge which satisfied him that Lady Castlemere had been right in her estimate of her grandson.

"Very well," he continued. "Meanwhile, I will assist your career, so that should you ultimately be united to Lucille, your position may be honourable for her. You leave Oriel in the spring? My mother's wealth is so tied that she can give you little or nothing, and you must make your own way in life. But I will return you for a seat in the House, and I will allow you such an income as will give you your independence, and leave you unshackled. It will rest with yourself then to become worthy of Lucille, and such as I should trust with the care of her future."

Young Caryll looked at him, bewildered, incredulous, distrusting his own senses. He had heard of Strathmore's ascetic indifference to wealth, and the generosity with which he gave it to others, but for himself he had had scarcely passing notice from him, and he listened dreamily, marvelling whether his dread had been error, and if beneath the chill and satiric suavity of manner there lay compassion and warmth. Words broke from him, full of the gratitude he felt, eager, breathless, fervid, eloquent from their simple truth and depth, and tremulous both with surprise and emotion.

To the sanguine and dauntless heart of youth what luminous glory streamed over all his future with Strathmore's words! For youth knows and fears nothing of two barriers in Life's path, which men call Death and Failure.

Strathmore arrested him in the midst of his warm protest of deathless gratitude, for the nature of the man was too true to assume a virtue it had not.

"No thanks," he said, coldly. "I in no way merit them from you. It is not any feeling towards yourself for which you need be grateful, it is simply for her sake, not yours. You deem it possible that Lucille may love you; I desire that her love should be shadowless. I should have said the same to any other man of your youth, and of your hopes; what she may prize, I desire to make worthy of her."

The words fell on the young man's warm, eager heart, just lain bare in all its agitated gratitude, like an ice-touch; and it closed, shrinking and troubled. Yet a certain tone in Strathmore's voice, even and tranquil though it was, struck on him; he fancied that in it, with all its chillness, all its calmness, there was something as of *repressed pain.* He was silent, hesitating, and embarrassed; but his nature was candid, and he spoke on his impulse.

"Lord Cecil, may I ask you one question?"

Strathmore turned as he was moving away.

"Certainly."

"Then—then—in my love for Lucille I have your full sanction, your cordial wishes?"

"On the conditions I have named—yes. I have told you so. Why ask?"

"Because—because," murmured Caryll, indistinctly and impulsively—"because I have sometimes fancied, sir—forgive me if I offend you—that your solicitude for her, your kindness towards her were so great, that you might have other views for her womanhood——"

"Other views! I do not comprehend you."

The languid coldness of tone froze the boy's heart, as if it were gripped by an iron hand; but the impulse which im-

pelled him was stronger than even embarrassment, timidity, or awe, and his words broke out involuntarily:

"I thought, my lord, that—that—perhaps you brought her up to wed her yourself when she should be of age? She is so lovely; and guardians have married their wards——"

He paused, terror-struck at the effect of his words. Strathmore started, as though a shot had hit him; and in the summer moonlight his face grew death-white, as with the spasm of some ungovernable horror.

"*I* wed her—*I!* Good God! you do not know what you say——"

For the first time in his life Lionel Caryll saw the veil rent asunder, the steel armour pierced—for the first time he saw the equable tranquillity of Strathmore's habitual manner broken down, and shattered into passionate feeling. And he marvelled, wonder-stricken and aghast at what his simple words had caused;—caused only for an instant; the next, Strathmore regained self-control.

"Your fears are very idle," he said, calmly. "I have no taste for marriage; and the great disparity between Lucille's years and my own is sufficient to show you the groundlessness of your supposition. Fulfil your share of my conditions honourably, I shall fulfil mine towards you. And now go back to Curtis and the olives; we have said enough on this matter."

Caryll obeyed him, going slowly across the lawn, dissatisfied and troubled, despite the hope which was warm at his heart, and the future which beckoned before him; he saw that there was some mystery here which he had never before suspected, and which seemed to him hopeless to wrest from the granite soul of a man in whose hands he felt like an impotent child. The horror which had rung through Strathmore's words—"*I* wed her—*I!*"—thrilled through his memory, too real for the doubt which had tortured to longer pursue him; yet the fear could not wholly be banished. By the side of the accomplished and courtly Statesman he felt his own inferiority and insignificance, and he felt, too, with a lover's

instinct, that Strathmore, despite of, ay! even increased through the years which he had named, had all which most fatally fascinates women to love, where they meet no pity and no response. The words he had heard, the look he had seen, had declared his dread not alone improbable, but impossible; yet that dread he could not wholly abandon, it clung to him heavily, wearily, as he re-entered the lighted rooms. And yet it was not for one moment that he doubted that his uncle had spoken the truth.

For some moments Strathmore walked to and fro in the still night. His nephew's question had struck on his ear with horror, almost in loathing. His hand stained with her father's blood, touch her own with a husband's caress! Her fair innocence learn to rest in its holy sleep on the heart which imprisoned so dark a secret! He seek her, wed her—*he!* the assassin of both the lives from which had sprung her own! He recoiled from the thought thus suddenly and unwittingly bidden before him, recoiled, sickened and horror-stricken. It looked to him abhorred as crime, accursed as incest! He thrust it from him in its mere harmless suggestion as men thrust the first dawn of some hateful guilt.

Not that it had temptation for him; it had none. Lionel Caryll's doubt was groundless. Strathmore's feeling for Lucille, while it was the only tender, was also the only pure, feeling he had ever known; her father's could not have been more completely unsullied than his, and the profound melancholy which mingled with it served but to make it more hallowed. The repressed pain which his nephew had detected beneath the cold tranquillity of his tones was not due to the spring to which Nello traced it, but simply to that sense of reluctance that any other should have the moulding or marring of her fate, that sense of loss at the knowledge that hereafter others would usurp alike her affections and her guardianship, which had come upon him after the words of his mother.

He had spoken to young Caryll in the manner he had done, from his belief in the possibility that Lucille might

centre her peace in the youth's love, and his intention that nothing which his own foresight could provide for or against should ever bar the way to her happiness. But it had cost him some effort, for his sense of atonement to Erroll lay in his knowledge that he made her life bright and pure as sunlight, and to surrender it to other keeping was to imperil, perchance to shipwreck, what alone could give him power to say when he lay upon his death-bed, "I have atoned!"

It had been this pain which had been carefully repressed throughout his interview with his young nephew, it was this dread which weighed on him where he paced the lawn in the moonlight alone. Strathmore was a man of action and of power, a ruler amongst men, who crushed mercilessly all which opposed him, and bent all who came beneath his influence with an unerring and resistless hand; who deified Will, and believed that every man as he is devil, so he may be also God unto himself. And yet for the first time, as he paced in his solitary walk through the fresh summer night, with the sounding of the sea in the silence, a vague foreboding passed over him that he might be powerless to control the mystical ebb and flow of fate, that to the craving agony of a vain remorse, expiation might be denied and shattered at the last!

Lucille was alone when Strathmore entered the drawing-room, half lying on a low couch with that restful grace with which a young fawn throws itself down to repose when tired by its play. He paused a moment, looking at her as the silvery light of the candelabra fell on her where she lay, her head resting on her arm, her lashes shadowing her cheeks, which were slightly flushed—this dawning fragile life, with its bloom delicate as the bloom of a rose-leaf, and its strength slight as the frailness of the harebell which one rude touch withers, how easily it might be wrecked, how easily crushed! It was a frail argosy in which to place and peril the expiation of a crime, heavy, blood-stained, bitter as the fratricide which slew Smerdis in the dark days of olden Egypt.

He approached, and bent over her.

"My darling, are you not well?"

Her eyes unclosed, and the touching sadness ever on her face in repose, beamed away in the sunlight of her father's smile.

"Oh yes. I am never ill, you know. I feel a little tired sometimes, that is all. Do come and sit by me, will you, and not go away?"

"Surely. But you should not feel this tire, Lucille, at your age; lassitude is weakness."

She laughed brightly.

"Not with me. When have I had a day's ill health? Who could have, by the side of the free, strong, beautiful sea? I am only tired, and I was lying thinking, Lord Cecil——"

"And of what?"

Her eyes dwelt on him lovingly, reverently in their dark and mournful beauty, and her voice was hushed in its earnestness.

"I was thinking of how great you are, and how good; and how you who sway men with your word, and empires with your will, yet have so much care, and thought, and love for me."

"Good!" He echoed the word with the bitterness of anguish; he had trained himself to bear all these things from her lips, and had sedulously fostered the reverence and gratitude she felt for him, but none the less did they cut him to the soul; and now and then, even his will of steel and his long-worn visor could not conceal the spasm of a struck wound, of a wakened conscience. His voice had a thrill of mingled pain and tenderness in it now as he stooped towards her:

"Never give that word to anything which I do, Lucille, least of all to what I do for you. You know that you are dear to me for—your father's sake."

"I know; but I cannot love you less, but more, because you loved him so well," she said, softly, while her hand nestled into his, and drew it caressingly closer to her. At

the clinging touch and the gentle words, the brand of crime, seared on the soul of the murderer quivered, as the brand of fire quivers in the living flesh of the doomed.

Yet he sat there, calm still, letting his hand lie in hers, and his lips wear the words with which he ever spoke of the dead; for his strength was great to endure.

"True, I loved him well," he said, gently; "and so would you have done; Lucille, you do not forget him; you think of him fondly, sometimes, as though you had known him—as though he were living now?"

"Ah, yes," she murmured, softly. "I think of you both, think of you together; you have told me of him until I know him so well, and when I kneel down I often pray to God to let me see his face, and hear his voice, in my dreams, as well as yours. And He does."

Strathmore sat silent; his hand lying in hers, his heart smitten by those innocent and childlike words as by the stroke of the avenging angel.

"Your dreams are more merciful to you than the life which robbed you of him," he said, calmly and gently, for he suffered without allowing one sign to escape, or one blow to be spared him. "Love your father's name better than mine, Lucille. He is more worthy it than I."

"Lucille could not love anything *better* than you," she said, musingly, while her earnest, wistful eyes fondly studied his face with that regard which he had noticed as too mournful and too deeply contemplative for her years, when, as a little child, she had asked why he suffered, on the sea-shore. "Where was it that he died, Lord Cecil, and how? You have never told me that."

"He died abroad."

"And were you with him?"

"Yes."

"Did he suffer?"

A slight quiver shook his voice:

"I hope to God, no."

"He died happily, then?"

"He died at peace with all, even with those who injured him. Not happy, since—since he left your mother scarce older than you are now."

Lucille sighed, a hushed, broken sigh.

"No—and his death was hers. I think *I* should die of a great grief, as my tame curlew did when his sister-bird was killed by the eagle. He could not live; why should he? There was no joy in the air, or the sea, or the sky, when what he loved was taken."

She was silent, her hand clinging caressingly to Strathmore's, as her eyes grew wistful with thoughts too poetic and too deep for her years. He rose involuntarily:

"Hush, Lucille! No grief shall ever touch you! Why think of what cannot, what *shall* not, come nigh you? Are those letters? Is the evening mail come?"

"Oh yes; those are yours. But come and sit by me to read them. Do!"

He obeyed her: inflexible as bronze to any other, a wish of Lucille was sacred to him. As her guardian, he had commanded that her desire should never be disputed nor disappointed, and to himself, when with her, he allowed it to be law. A nature less pure, less loving, less incapable of being warped to egotism or tyranny than hers, might have been ruined by this limitless indulgence; with Lucille it had no effect, save that of rendering her affections more clinging and deeply rooted, and her character more tender and dependent; the very luxuriance of its beauty was fostered by the warmth it basked in, if it were more certain to be blighted at the first sweep of frost or storm. She lay still watching him, while he sat beside her breaking the seals of his correspondence. His face wore no evil traits to her; she only saw its power, its intellect, its profound melancholy; she only saw that the eyes so cold, the lips so mocking to others, for her ever wore gentle smiles and generous words. "Je n'en puis rien faire —ces traits ont toutes les plus grandes qualités et tous les plus grands vices," a French sculptor had once said, casting down his calliope and chisel before a bust of Strathmore. But

Lucille only saw the nobler, and saw none of the darker meaning, and she lay looking at him lovingly, reverently, silently: she was never more truly happy than thus. And as he sat thus, beside her couch, Valdor, who had that moment returned and entered the drawing-room, looked at them unperceived, and wondered afresh, as he had done before, what secret this could be which united Strathmore to this young girl, and which made a man ordinarily negligent in manner, indifferent to all human affections, and solely devoted to ambition and power, be tender towards her as a woman, submit to all her gentle caprices, forestall her lightest wish, and watch with pleasure for her slightest smile. It was a mystery which he could not fathom. Strathmore, glancing upward, read his thoughts. Valdor looked keenly at him, to note if he resented having thus been seen; he might as well have sought to note the marble features of the Parian bust near him move and speak!

Strathmore was never betrayed into an unspoken expression of what he felt; he was calmly and impassively impenetrable. He did not move now, but smiled a courteous welcome to his friend, and spoke of some political news which the day mail had brought.

But he remembered the look with which the frank Henri Cinquiste had gazed at himself and Lucille, and the words he had spoken the night before, of surprise at her having never visited White Ladies; and he acted on both.

"Lucille, White Ladies will be full next month," he said with a slight smile, the next morning, looking up from his letters where they sat at breakfast, the sunlight flickering through the screen of foliage and roses which overhung the Elizabethan windows.

She looked up eagerly, a flush on her cheeks, and her lips parted.

"Would you like to be with us?"

He spoke still with a slight smile, as of a man listlessly amused with the bright caprices and easily-bestowed pleasures of a child.

"Oh, Lord Cecil!——"

She did not say more; Valdor and his own secretary were strangers to her, and indulgence had never made her exacting.

"Very well, then. Plead with my mother, if she have no objection, to do me the honour to come there, and bring you with her."

"What a fool I was to suppose he did not wish her to visit White Ladies! My brain must be going, to dream such nonsense. That lovely child bewitches me!" thought Valdor, as he listened.

Two days afterwards, Strathmore left for the Continent. These brief visits were all he, a Foreign Minister, spared to Silver-rest; he was seldom fatigued—never alone; he was absorbed in the keen contest for power, and lived, with scarce a week's retirement, in the fulness of the world.

Valdor remained; all that he needed to see or do at Torlynne could have been seen and done in a week's time, but he stretched it over almost to the time at which Strathmore would be at White Ladies, and he should go thither with the rest of the autumn guests. The French noble had no pastoral tastes; "*Hors de Paris, hors du monde*," was most essentially his creed; the sounding of the seas and the soft wild beauty of the western coast had no music and no charm for him; a *viveur*, a state-conspirator, a man of fashion, he was customarily wearied and impatient at a day's detention in any other world than his own. Yet he stayed on, in, or near the solitudes of Silver-rest.

He was captivated by the child-beauty, the spiritual, unconscious loveliness, which he had first seen among the lilies of the valley, flowers whose grace and fragility were like her own. He was at once enchained and held in check by it; to Lucille he could not speak of love, or even of compliment, as he would have done to others, they seemed profanation; yet he began to feel for her a far holier and more enduring tenderness than he, a wit and a voluptuary, had before known. She was silent with him; except with those whom she knew

well, she had something of the soft shyness of the half-tamed fawn, and her nature was one of those, poetic, introspective, deeply thoughtful, and meditative far beyond their years, which speak but to few, and only find utterance when moved by the voice that they respond to, as the Æolian chords only echo to the touch of certain winds. But it was this which was newest to him; it gave him much to conquer, and he saw that whoever would win her heart must never startle it rudely from its innocent rest, but wind his way gently and slowly. He felt as both Strathmore, a cold and negligent Statesman, and Caryll, a romantic and unworn youth, had equally done, that "love" was no word to whisper to Lucille, and that, grasped too quickly or too boldly, the sensitive plant would surely close and recoil.

But Valdor had never failed, and his nature was sanguine; therefore he stayed on near Silver-rest, and learned a purer passion than he had ever known, while he listened to the young girl's voice, that was low and sweet as the lulling of the seas; or watched her, himself unseen, where she sat gazing on the changing face of the waters, with the deep shadow of ivy-hung rocks above, and sunlit sands stretching before her; or heard her songs rising in mellow evening air, with some sad, wild German legend or rich cathedral chant for their burden; or won her to speak to him of the things in which her eyes and her heart—those at once of a poet and a child, an artist and a dreamer—found beauty and delight: the silvery flash of a seagull's wing, a bird resting on a heather spray, a crested wave leaping in the light, a trailing coil of forest-leaves.

Strathmore had made provision for the early, guileless, hesitating love of the boy Nello; he had made none—could have made none—against the more subtle, more eloquent, and more tutored tenderness of the man who had been beside him when he had slain her father, while in the west the sun had set, in the dead years long gone.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### "Seized, in the Name of the Emperor."

It was past midnight, in the salon *au deuxième*, in the Rue Beaujon.

The lights were many, and in their dazzle the warm nuances, the rose-tendre hues, the ormolu, the mirrors, the smoking-couches, made an enticing *forberia della scena* in its own florid, demi-monde style. The air was heavy with the odours of wine from the supper-room, whose folding-doors stood open, and with the perfume of that chillum which was a speciality of the Rue Beaujon, and which some who smoked it averred to be delirious as Monte Christo's hatchis. Two or three tables stood about the room, and round each were grouped some half-dozen men, young attachés, soldiers, bankers, Englishmen, or nouveaux riches, few if any of them over thirty, some wanting ten years of it, and all flush of money, or they would have found no entrance there. At one table they were playing Trente-et-Un, at the other Trente-et-Quarante, at a higher maximum than is permitted at Baden, *gros jeu*, where the colours revolved and the gold heaps changed, swift as thought in a dizzy whirl, and swifter than the thought of many could follow them. For the gaming which is forbade publicly will, like every other dangerous instinct, be indulged in secresy; and the play in the Rue Beaujon was greedily sought after suppers that left the pulse heated with fiery wines, and the reason little able to baffle the intricacies of hazard. It had made many a career beggared and ruined, ending in the Faubourg d'Enfer with crossing-sweeper's rags, where it had begun in the Boulevard des Capucines with a thousand-franc breakfast; and it caused not a few lives to cease by a pistol-shot in de Bois de Vincennes, or an overdose of morphine in the grey early dawn.

The play was at its highest, the stakes enormous, the gold on the tables flashed and glittered under the light which was thrown back from the rose hangings and the gilded walls;

the heavy odours of the wines filled the air with an intoxicating aroma, and the wreaths of smoke still curled in spirituous vapour, though the hookahs had been left, while now and then the hazard went on in a dead silence, only broken by the formula of the cards; and oftener was played in a mad whirl, a reckless rotation, in the noise of wild jests and riotous laughter and unbridled licence of words from brains half drunk.

And she who was the evil Circe of this evil Avernus, with a glance would turn attention from the cards, till—too late—the stake was lost; or with a smile would daze and dazzle some novice till his gold poured in showers into the bank; or with some gay mot, which still rang with something of the old moqueur, bewitching wit, would raise a laugh at the right moment, till her confederate—who played croupier for the nonce—raked in by rouleaux the money of the tyro. "Men who tempt, and women who are tempted!" So runs the old hackneyed, maudlin, threadbare dictum, much akin to the time-worn opticism which runs, "the Pagans who persecuted, and the Christians who were martyred;"—as if there were not six of the one and six of the other! Pshaw! leave formularies aside, good world, and open your eyes. Women, from Eve downwards, have been First Tempters, and the tempters among them make up half the ranks of their sex, subtle wooers and destroyers of their hundreds.

In the light, with the bloom of art upon her face and the lustre of art lent to her eyes, with mock diamonds glittering where once the costly sapphires of a peeress had lain, with the enamel covering the deep haggard lines, and a smile haunting the lips with the mocking shadow of its old resistless witchery, there was some loveliness still: though ghastly —without its youth; though wrecked most piteously—to those who had known her in the years of her glory; though fearful in the story which it told—to those who paused to read it. There was loveliness still, though a wretched travesty of that which once had been; though justly and truly looking on it she had cried out in her bitterness, "O, my lost beauty! my

lost beauty!" since none who remembered what Marion Vavasour once had been, and despised the wreck, remembered and despised as utterly as she. For this woman, who was without remorse for her work or conscience for her crimes, had a ceaseless misery for the social degradation which denied her Pride, and for the encroaching years which left her without Power, since these had been her gods, omnipotent and beloved, and were now drifted from her reach for ever, never again to be recovered.

The Mistress of Paris, who had beheld Greece rise in arms at the havoc of her loveliness, flung to the ribald, brutal crowds of the common soldiery, would not more bitterly have felt her degradation than did this woman. For, though sensual, merciless, frail, and fatal as She who, in the verse of Æschylus, comes with Death and Havoc following on her loveliness, she had loved to reign with imperious will, she had loved to veil her infidelities in poetic grace, she had loved to have her foot on the bent neck of a prostrate world; and now—*now*—she sickened at herself; not for her guilt, but for her humiliation; not for the deep stain upon her soul, but for her broken sceptre, her jeered crown, her rent and trampled purples.

Is it not this, and no better than this, which now and again passes for Remorse? yet which is no more Remorse than its twin-brother, trembling Fear, is true Repentance.

Remorse Marion Vavasour never knew, and never could know; but anguish for her own lost omnipotence she did. She knew it now; to-night, while the noisy laughs echoed about her, and the reeking fumes filled the air of her salon. Oh! bitterness of bitterness! she, into whose presence sovereigns had humbly sued to come, could not resent the coarsest word that was uttered in her presence; she, at whose feet princes had vainly knelt, while statesmen paled before the beauty of her smile, must tempt, and court, and seek these unfledged youths, these nameless idlers; their witless profanities fouled the ear which had once listened to the graceful wit and delicate flattery of monarchs, their slighting glance con-

temptuously leered upon the face whose beauty once had been the theme of courts, the hymned of prince and poet, the torch which lit whatever it passed, to love, and feud, and madness. She who had ruled the rulers of the earth, could now be slighted by the lowliest!—deadlier than sackcloth and ashes, than hempen cord and sheet of penitence, were the rouge upon her cheek, the laughter upon her lips, the mock gem upon her breast, to this woman whose fastidious pride, whose victorious sway, whose aristocratic grace, whose capricious imperious will had been as haughty and dear to her as those of any anointed queen.

It was long past midnight; the play was fast and furious; the stakes of frightful enormity; the gamesters now and then drank down fiery draughts of fierce Roussillon, or above-proof cognac, or poisonous absinthe, and went, madder than before, to the wild whirl; the light flashed back from the rose hangings and gilded ornaments on to the faces of the cards and the heaps of gold; and now the game went on in a riotous chorus of jest and laughter, and now in the dead silence of high-strung excitement, while here and there fell a muttered oath, or twitching lips turned pale, as a million of francs was swept away on the turn of a colour or the hazard of a card.

Suddenly on the panels of the door, came a loud summons as at the gates of a barricade, thundering, impatient:—many of the gamblers, their brains besotted and their reason whirling with the delirium of play, scarce heard and did not note it, but he who played as croupier grew pale, and with a rapid sign began to sweep away the piles of Naps, while the Priestess of the Pandemonium, who ere this had slaughtered human lives with her skilled lie, and sent a murderer out to work her vengeance with cruel, unfaltering falsehood, stood in the gaslight with the unreal smile arrested upon her lips, and her cheek quivering slightly under its rouge.

She knew that the Rouge-et-Noir of the Rue Beaujon was discovered beyond concealment at last.

"Au nom de la Loi!"

Sharp and swift upon the summons for admittance, the door was burst open by instruments which wrenched and splintered all the intricate locks and bolts for those little scrupulous of ceremony or tolerant of delay; the gaudy rose portière was thrust aside by rough hands, which dashed down all the barricades erected behind it; the salon and its privacy were invaded, the police filled the chambers.

"*De la part de l'Empereur!*" said a voice, serene, inflexible, as bland as though it gave a welcome salutation, as frigid as though it pronounced a sentence of death. Confusion, riot, tumult, execration arose pêle-mêle; the stakes were seized, the doors were closed so that no egress was possible; the tables were overturned, the croupiers dashed wildly here and there, trying to get to covert like a fox run close by the pack; some of the gamblers, their brains dizzy with the chillum and the wine, stared stupidly and helplessly at the seizure; others, cursing and blaspheming, sprang at the gold and cards, swore they were but playing at Boc with three francs as their maximum, and offered bribes, at any rates, with insane eagerness to have the thing kept dark. And while his subordinates secured the croupiers and the stakes, and other officials quietly took down the names and addresses of all present, the Inspecteur approached the mistress of the salon, and, with the same tranquil and inflexible courtesy, arrested her in the name of the Emperor.

For the moment, losing her self-possession, her presence of mind, her swift invention, and her ready diplomacy, the hideous contrast of her present and her past smote on her through the darkness of evil years and the callousness of a soul unsexed; she writhed from under the official's touch as from beneath that of an adder, and gazed at him with the wild stare of a hunted animal hard pressed, and, wringing her white and delicate hands, laughed a shrill, terrible, mocking laugh:

"The Emperor—the Emperor! 'In the name of the Emperor!' What! are the years come back when I was his guest and he mine? Does he remember how often he sat at

my table, that he summons me now to his Court? To the Tuileries! To the Tuileries! Of course! these diamonds are fit for the Tuileries!"

Rending the false jewels from her bosom and her hair, she cast them on the floor and trod upon them with her foot, those miserable symbols and insignia of her fall, crushing them to powdered glass, and laughing all the while, with bitter delirious mockery of herself.

In that brief instant of passionate misery, of ghastly irony, something of her old resistless grace, of her old imperious pride, returned as she wrested herself back from the official's grasp, and stamped into shining dust the worthless gems, while above the uproar round the gaming-table, above the clash of the gold as the police swept the stakes away, above the oaths of the startled, half-drunk gamesters, rang that laugh, once silvery as music, now jarred and dissonant:

"To the Tuileries! Of course!—To the Tuileries! My diamonds are fit for a Court!"

The Inspecteur, smiling slightly, took no note or heed of this delirious despair, and seemed neither to have seen nor heard it, but, proceeding without pause or hesitance with his errand, arrested her. For what she said had not even a meaning to him; he had heard of her but under her last alias and *nom de guerre;* he knew her but as a prisoner who had transgressed the law, and Marion Vavasour had no power now—not even to make the world, which is swift to forget, remember her past.

And this is the last step into the abyss of oblivion, when none even pause to recall *what we were.*

As a voiture dormise bore her, in close escort, from the doors of the house in the Rue Beaujon, apprehended on the proven charge of having a private gambling-hell every night in her salon, the vehicle was stopped in its progress a little farther down the street by carriages which blocked the way. The blind of the window nearest her was but half drawn, and she, who had now recovered her composure, her finesse, and

her dissimulation, leaned forward as though to show how little moved she was by the charge against her by watching the night with idle amusement. The carriages which entangled the dormise stood before the residence of a French Prince, not enclosed by a court-yard, the doors standing wide open, as the guests dispersed after a State entertainment of more than ordinary magnificence. Descending the broad flight of steps, which was lined on either side by lacqueys, and lighted to the brightness of noon, came the English Minister for whom the equipage waited, the gas shining on the riband which crossed his breast and the orders and stars which glittered there, and falling on his face—a face of pride, of dominance, of successful and imperious power.

Marion Vavasour, looking on him thus, shivered with the thirst of an impotent vengeance, and drooped her head upon her hands with a bitter moan of chained and baffled hatred.

He lived in riches, in dignity, in honour, with his name on the lips of the world, and the cup of his ambition filled to the brim and crowned; while she——!

"Oh, Heaven!" she whispered, passionately, through her clenched teeth, "will the hour *never* come when I can strike him in his power and his arrogance? Will the day *never* dawn when I shall say back in his ear, 'Such mercy as you gave, I give to you!'"

And in the warm summer night in the Paris street they passed each other thus as the carriages rolled on: the Minister who went from a State-gathering, and the Arrested who was taken to Judgment.

## CHAPTER IX.

### "Roses my Secret keep."

WHITE LADIES was filled.

In the great court-yard, troops of saddle-horses, or carriages with their postilions and outriders splashed and tired, came home in the grey twilight while the dressing-bell rang;

in the King's Hall covers were laid for half a hundred guests; in the preserves a thousand head of game were bagged each day, yet no ground beaten twice; in the stately galleries trailed the sweeping dresses of peeresses; and under the roof of the Abbey were gathered not a few of those whose playthings are the policies and destinies of nations. For the master of White Ladies was in Office; and, while the dictum of the world never swerved him from his own course, he was a man who knew, to the utmost of its value, the worth of being prominent in the sight of the world if you seek to lead it.

Rome went to Cincinnatus in his farmstead solitude; but modern Europe would never seek a Sulla once retired to his Cuman villa. Strathmore knew this; none better; and while he smiled at the follies of mankind, turned them to his own profit, and surrounded himself with luxury and circumstance, because he recognised in them the most intelligible symbols of rule and power to the purblind sight of the masses, though he held both in disdain, and in his own tastes was almost ascetic, in his own life almost austere.

The gatherings at White Ladies were noted through the country; and Strathmore was as courtly a host as in his earlier years: his genius was one of those which, essentially facile, are never laborious. The amount of work done by him was vast, but it was done without effort; though he never wholly laid aside the political harness, none saw a gleam of it through the silken surcoat he wore in society; and whilst the chief secret of his power over men lay in the entire absence of sensitive self-consciousness, or Utopian ideology from his career, not a little attraction lay for them in the brilliant ease with which this ambitious and arduous career was covered by the same art with which the Damascus armourers covered their keenest steel with the light elegance of the chasing;—while the chasing blinded the eyes before which it flashed, the cunning smiths knew that the steel cut swifter passage home.

The warm sun fell across the sward through the boughs of

the wych-elms, and down the ruined cloisters into the oriel room where he sat at breakfast. The purple hangings were behind him, with the dead gold of their broidered chiffre; the light fell through the painted panes and the blazoned motto, "Slay! and spare not;" without, the same lengthened shadows fell across the sward, and the same ivy roots clung about the cloisters; even his own features were unaltered, the same save for some trace of added age, some look of haughtier power and of deeper melancholy, as on the day when he whom he had loved and slain had sat at his table, and the name of their temptress and destroyer been first upon his lips. Yet of that day he did not even think once out of the thousand times that found him sitting thus: wear the spiked band of penance long about your loins, and they shall so learn to bear it, that they feel it seldom, save when a sudden blow drives the iron afresh into the flesh. Could the Furies have pursued Orestes through many years, he would have grown used to the haunting troop, and would have learned to sleep, to rest, to labour, and to love in the loathed presence of the Avengers; and only at rare intervals would he have started from his slumber to shudder at the accursed forms, or flee in the dead of night from the sacred temple, because they hunted him from rest, and pursued him for the blood of Clytemnestra.

Strathmore's life was a successful one; not a contented one, because his insatiate and restless ambition always desired wider and more irresponsible dominance than in this country the highest can ever wield, and because all happiness had been stricken from it with the betrayal of the woman he had worshipped, of the lips for whose kiss he had stained his soul with guilt. But one of those lives which, full, grand, eminent, make "happiness" look tame, insipid, and needless: and in such a life it was but the solitary hours when silence and sleep were nigh, or the rare days when the eyes of Lucille met his own, which remorse could claim; for the rest Strathmore was the world's, and the world his.

There was a brilliant party gathered about him at breakfast: English statesmen, German princes, French nobility,

with lovely women, who sometimes discussed the question over their Orange Pekoe before the dressing-bell rang, whether he would ever marry. Negligent of their charms, and wedded to public life, brilliant eyes softly wooed him, never to awake response: the burning passion which had once consumed his life seemed to have seared out every trace of warmer desires. After that mad, guilty, but devoted love, none could assail him; the sternest ascetic who had ever dwelt in that Dominican monastery was not colder to women than he who, beneath its roof, had been the lover of Marion Vavasour.

With a large party he went out that morning deer-stalking for the day in the forests which belted in White Ladies, where red deer were as abundant as in the wilds of Exmoor. The sun had sunk, and the windows of the grey and stately façade were all lit, as they returned and dispersed to their several chambers; while Strathmore went to his own room, fronting the State Apartments, which had been unused from the time when they had harboured the loveliness which had tempted and forsaken him. Of her he now thought, as he left his chamber and returned along the corridor; one of the long line of windows stood open to the night, and from the gardens below was up-wafted the heavy, rich scent of the roses; and the remembered perfume suddenly rising, made the memory which lay within, coiled to stillness, but never dead,

> like a dreaming snake,
> Drowsily lift itself fold by fold,
> And gnaw and gnaw hungrily, half awake.

It had been the love of his manhood, that single burning passion of an ambitious life; and—though changed in one swift hour to deadliest hate, which had pursued her with unquenched and insatiate vengeance, which would have watched her still, with unrelenting gaze, starve as a beggar at his feet, and die of a beggar's dole denied—when memory uprose, and with it burned again upon his own the lips which had betrayed him, and with it he beheld again the loveliness

for which he had rent down and trampled under foot the laws of God and man, the old agony uncoiled from its rest, and pierced him with its poisoned fangs.

He had loved her, till ambition, honour, conscience, life itself, had all been given to her hands; he had loved her with delirious, ungrudging worship, that saw in her kiss his heaven, in her smile his world, in her will his deity; and that dead passion awoke, not less in hate but more, while yet across the stretch of many years it was stricken afresh with the stroke of its betrayal, and sickened afresh over all its wealth wasted, its treasure mocked, its idolatrous love poured out—in vain! in vain!—upon that lovely, hideous, beautiful wanton thing, upon a courtesan, and an assassinatress. And it was thus it awoke now, stirred to memory by the odour of the roses that stole upwards on the mist through the opened window, as he passed down the solitary corridor; and he flung the casement to, with swift hand and passionate gesture, to shut out that haunting, mocking fragrance of the flowers that Marion Vavasour had loved.

He—the cold, inflexible, and successful Statesman—shuddered and shrank from the mere scent of the summer-roses!

A low, ringing laugh, echoing gaily on the air, startled the silence of the corridor: it came from the unused State Chambers. He started as he stood by the casement, and looked up. The long passage leading thither was dully lit, for the gas burned low, and at its foot the opposite door of the State rooms stood open, and—with a light held high above her head, so that while the arched doorway and the chamber behind were deep in gloom, its luminance fell upon her and about her, brightly shed upon her young and radiant face, with the bloom of childhood on the cheeks and the smile of childhood still haunting the fair eyes—he saw Lucille.

Strathmore gazed at her, as men have gazed upon the spirits which, born of their own haunted memories, have seemed to fill the air with the forms of the dead.

What place had she beneath the roof of White Ladies, when across its threshold lay the shadow of a guilt which, known to her, would have turned her steps from it in loathing and in horror? The house of her father's murderer was no home to harbour her dawning life and shelter her innocent sleep!

"In *that* room—in that room!"

The words were muttered unconsciously in his throat, as he stood silent and motionless for the moment; to see her thus, and there, made the air round him teem with the shadows of the past, which whispered that the work, wrought by his own hand when it dealt out death and retribution, must for ever endure, the blood-stain never effaced by expiation, the dead days ever lying in wait to devour and destroy the future.

That moment passed,—the weakness was crushed down and conquered; he welcomed her with kind and courteous words, as Lucille sprang towards him, lifting her lips for his caress of greeting, her face brightened still with her happy and melodious laugh.

"Oh, Lord Cecil! I could not help being amused, you threw that window to, with such a passionate gesture; and I had never seen you anything but calm and still and tranquil! Whom were you angry with in thought?—not me! I shall be afraid of you in future, as they say all the world is——"

"Hush! hush!" her careless words smote him in that moment with keen pain. "Lucille, you would never fear me, shrink from me, dread me? I have made your life too happy——"

She looked at him surprised; he, the haughty and arrogant leader of men, sought this assurance as a boon from the child-ward who owed him all! But her mood was changed to his in an instant, her hand softly closed on his own, and she leaned caressingly towards him, till her hair, with white violets woven in it, brushed his breast, and her deep loving eyes were uplifting to his:

"*I* fear *you!* Oh, never, never! Whom can I love and

honour and trust to, like you, who have filled, and more than filled, the place of all I lost?"

He drew her gently to him, and kissed her brow, recovering the self-command which for one moment had been shaken:

"Think of me always so—always; as one who has striven to supply to you your father's loss, and to fulfil your father's trust! But how came you here, Lucille? I did not know you were at the Abbey. My mother left the day of your arrival uncertain."

"We came an hour ago. Lady Castlemere felt better, and I was so impatient to see you and White Ladies. What a stately place it is! I love its grey, solemn, time-worn grandeur. Take me all over it—now, will you—now?"

The earnestness, too deep and thoughtful for her years, with which she had spoken of her trust and love for her guardian had passed away; now she was only a child, used to the gratification of every bright caprice and momentary fancy as she looked up at him with longing in her eyes and eagerness upon her lips.

He smiled:

"Not now, Lucille; we dine at nine, and it wants only a quarter; to-morrow I will take you wherever you wish. But how do you come here—and alone? The rooms where you were are never used. They have not given you those chambers, surely?"

He spoke with impatient anxiety: he could not have had her rest *there!*

She laughed amusedly:

"I lost my way! When I was dressed, I sent Babette to ask Lady Castlemere some question for me, but she was so long gone that I grew tired, and thought I would go myself. But I could not find the room so well as I fancied; I missed it among all these passages, and found myself wandering in those chambers. Why are they never used?"

Strathmore avoided answer.

"You must not wander alone about White Ladies till you

know its intricacies, my dear. You may very easily lose yourself. I will take you to my mother now—they ought to have placed you close to her—and then we must go down to the drawing-rooms. There are plenty of people very desirous to see you."

Lucille sighed a little:

"Ah! I do not care much for strangers," she answered him, as she ran up the steps, where she had hastily set down her little silver lamp.

The spaniel which he had given her in her infancy, and with which she never parted, though it was now very old, had remained in the chamber, and she went back to fetch him. The dog did not come immediately to her call, and Strathmore, following her, stood once more in the State Apartments, where his step had never entered, and his eyes never rested, through the many years which had passed since he had first returned to White Ladies.

"What beautiful rooms! Why are they never used? Because they are only for the Royal Family, is it? Who slept here last, then?"

She spoke, holding the lamp high above her head, so that its light was shed on her, and flickered fitfully on the azure hangings, the Venetian mirrors, the gold services, the silk, and lace, and velvet, the costly cabinets near, and the dark shadow afar off, where the silvery rays could not reach, but left half the magnificence of the room lost in the darkness of the night.

At her innocent question he shuddered as at the scent of the summer-roses! His eyes glanced for one moment over the luxurious chamber, with its costly adornments and its depths of gloom, in sickening memory—then they fell upon the form of Lucille, where she stood in the halo of the light, one hand holding to her heart the little dog which had once kept its faithful vigil crouched in the bosom of the dead. The hideous past seemed to breathe through the chamber with its pestilential odour, its avenged passions, its eternal

guilt—and he stretched his hand, and drew her with a sudden gesture out from that unholy place.

Yet his voice was tranquil and his smile calm as he closed the door on her, and led her forward:

"Those State rooms are damp, they have been unused so long; it is not wise for you to be in them at night, Lucille. Besides, everyone will think that I have deserted my guests."

And, with the suave and graceful dignity of a courtier, he conducted her along the silent corridor, and down the broad oak staircase, in the full gleam of light, giving her urbane and courtly welcome beneath the roof of White Ladies, where her father's laugh had so often rung in clear and joyous music, and her father's hand closed in love and friendship on the hand which now held hers—the hand which, unfaltering, had dealt him death.

Lucille, introduced into the splendid circle gathered under her guardian's roof, struck and touched all there with that ethereal and rare loveliness, of which its own unconsciousness made not the least and most common charm. She was still but a beautiful child, with all a child's unstudied grace, a child's artless transparence; and the manner in which she had been reared, while it had given her that nameless ease which only belongs to high-breeding, had brushed nothing from the innocence of a youth which had loved the birds as its friends and the flowers as its teachers. Her young beauty charmed those who approached her like music, the upward gaze of her eyes, always earnest even to sadness, had for all the haunting sweetness of some remembered melody, and the joyous gladness of a life, on which no shade of sorrow had ever fallen, contrasted touchingly with the mournfulness which in moments of silence stole over her face, born of a nature musing, sensitive, and essentially poetic. The princes and the peers, the statesmen and the men of pleasure, staying at White Ladies did their best to teach her her power by subtlest flattery and most delicate court; they had seen nothing for years fairer than the way in which she listened

to them in naïve surprise, and turned from them in graceful indifference; while the titled beauties, something jealous of her, yet sought her with courtly kindness, and wondered among themselves that Strathmore, the coldest, most heartless, and most ascetic man of his age, had so much of gentleness and consideration for a young girl to whom he was merely guardian: it could not be from her beauty, they thought, for was he not negligent of *theirs*, and of all!

To Lucille the sumptuous, glittering, brilliant life led at the Abbey seemed to her like a *conte des fées;* all had the spell of freshness for her, her light laugh rang under the arches of the grey cloisters, her youthful steps echoed down the vast area of the banqueting-hall, her eyes gazed at the Strathmore portraits, and—the shadow which lay across the threshold of White Ladies cast no shade upon this sunlit, dawning life, and the winds which sighed through the boughs of the monastic elms, and blew softly among the long grasses over her mother's grave, brought her no burden from the history of the lives to which her own owed birth. She was so happy!—life looked to her so beautiful in its still half-folded glories, like the illumined pictures of an uncut book, like the closed leaves of the passion-flower, which keeps its richest beauty shut in its core till the last. She was so happy! —for, for the first time, she was beneath the roof of Strathmore; she saw him daily, hourly; she was always in his presence, or watching for it; could sit and listen to him while he spoke with his guests or his fellow ministers, never weary of hearing the voice which, chill in its very harmony to the ear of others, to hers was the sweetest and most mellow music that it knew. And her heart, child-like in its purity, but far beyond childhood and beyond youth, in the vivid depth of all it felt, cherished as the life of its life, her love and reverence for him to whose guardianship her father had bequeathed her. From her earliest years she had clung with a strange affection to Strathmore; while yet so young that comprehension of his career was impossible to her, she had delightedly listened to all who would tell her of his great-

ness; she loved to think how much she owed to him, and how deep must have been his friendship for her father that he took this care for her. All that was powerful, generous, and grand in his character drew her to him; all that was darker was veiled from her; she thought it as stainless as it was unrivalled, and the fair, fond dreams of a luxuriant imagination had clung about him as their centre till that affection had become the religion of her life. It seemed as though the love which her father had borne to him had been transmitted to her: natures such as Strathmore's, which are indifferent to love, are not seldom those on which most love is lavished.

"What are you so absorbed in, Lucille?" asked one of the women staying there, a certain lovely leader of the fashion.

Lucille, half lying on a couch in the library, resting her head on her hand, looked up with a smile:

"I was reading 'Indiana.'"

Lady Chessville laughed, and turned to Strathmore, who had just entered the library with the Duke of Beauvoir, his son the Marquis of Bowdon, the Prince de Volms, and Valdor.

"Lord Cecil! here is Lucille absorbed in 'Indiana.' Do you permit that as her guardian?"

Strathmore smiled as he approached:

"Lucille will not be harmed by Georges Sand, Lady Chessville: Rousseau or De Kock would leave no stain *there*; the soil must be fit ere impure plants will take root. Still—you are right. Where did you find that book, my dear? It is not my edition, I think."

Lucille looked at the cover.

"No; there are not your arms on it. I found it in my room; it amused me, and so I brought it down. There is a name on the title-page, though the ink is faded. Look! 'Bertie Erroll.' Who was he?"

She held the book up to him, her hand on the faded writing, her eyes raised to his, and a sharp agony struck him

again like the stab of a mortal blow, for his grief for *this* sin was great and deathless.

But his smile did not change, not a muscle of his face moved, and he took the volume without even a moment's hesitation, carelessly glancing at the title-page:

"Yes, it is one of Erroll's; he was a friend of mine. Keep the book if it amuse you, Lucille."

Lucille saw no difference from his habitual manner, which, when others were with them, was always gentle but cold. Lady Chessville connected nothing with the name, for she had been a child at the time of that tragedy in the Deer Park of the Bois, and the world had long since forgotten that darker story of its successful Minister's earlier manhood. Beauvoir, a good-hearted, kindly man, whispered to Lord Bowdon as they went out:

"He shot that very fellow Erroll through the heart years ago about a notorious woman, and now speaks of him like that! Bosom friends, too, they were! Able man, Strathmore, very able, but cold as ice and cruel as a Borgia. Don't know what remorse is!"

So bystanders judge! Valdor alone noted, to judge differently, the singular indifference, the perfect tranquillity with which Strathmore spoke Erroll's name and looked upon his writing: he had seen them precisely as calm, precisely as negligent an hour before sunset, when he went out with a murderer's resolve, brutal and inflexible, in his heart; he had so seen them when the sun had sunk, and the murderer had stooped to sever the golden lock from the trailing hair of the dead man. By one of those instincts which the mind cannot trace, but which it involuntarily follows, it struck him that Strathmore had spoken thus *for the sake of Lucille;* he would not have thought it needful to have assumed such complete indifference towards Erroll's memory merely for men who knew how Erroll met his death, and would have rather respected him more than less for some show of remembrance also. From that hour she became associated with the memory of Erroll in Valdor's thoughts; he felt convinced that the

cause of Strathmore's care for his ward arose in some way or other from her connexion with the man whom he had slaughtered in cold blood: and Valdor was keen, hot, eager in the scent, for all concerning Lucille had interest for him, this guileless beautiful child, reared in seclusion by the English shores of the Atlantic.

Strathmore saw this interest, saw it in Valdor, as in many others under his roof, throughout those autumnal weeks, and it woke anger in him whenever their glances fell on her, or their words made her eyes grow dark and wistful in half-shrinking, half-disdainful surprise, as they whispered subtle flatteries in her ear. Anger which was twofold: first, because they would rapidly destroy the unworn freshness and the innocence, earnest whilst it was childlike, which were beautiful to him in her; last, and more, because each might be one who would wake her heart from its rest and imperil its peace. He had sworn to make his atonement by securing her happiness at whatever cost; he had looked on hers as the life on which hung his single power of expiation. How could he secure it when once she should have been taught to place it in the hands or embark it in the love of any one of those who sought to dispel her childhood by their honeyed whispers?

Strathmore, who held that Will can work what it chooses, and who, in the arrogance of a great intellect, conceived that he could mould fate like potter's clay, felt passionate impotence as he realised that the work of his atonement might be wrested from him incomplete, and dashed to pieces before his eyes. It was here that his error had lain; his remorse was holy in its intense contrition, its sincere agony; but he did not seek its expiation in that humility and self-doubt which a great guilt may well leave upon the proudest and most self-sustained nature: he had set it before him as he had set the ambitions of his public life, as a purpose to be effected by his own foresight and his own will, guarded by him alone from all chance of miscarriage, all touch of opposing will, all danger of human accident, as his strength of steel and his unscrupulous force bore down all that was antagonistic to him,

and pioneered his road to power. Prostrate and chastened by misery, he had vowed to fulfil the trust bequeathed him an hundred-fold beyond all which that trust enjoined; but to the fulfilment of his oath he had gone in the same spirit with which he had dealt out death and meted vengeance; the spirit which relied on the masterly skill of his own hand to mould what form it would, and still conceived that Life would bend and bow to his haughty fiat: "*I* choose this!"

"You gave me leave to hope; but what chance of hope, sir, is there for me with all *these?*" said young Caryll, bitterly, one day, as he glanced at the knot of titled and famous men gathered about Lucille in the cedar drawing-room.

Strathmore had extended his invitation to the young man, true to his promise, to give him opportunity to advance his love on her affection, for he was scrupulously just, and never broke his word in private or public matters.

Strathmore smiled—that smile under which young Caryll winced as under the cut of a knife:

"I gave you leave to hope, certainly; it is for you to give your hope a basis. I never told you *I* deemed it well founded; but you should know how to make it so. If you have so little of the necessary love-lore, I cannot help you; *ce n'est pas à moi!*"

"But—but how, when she has so many to teach her her power——?" began the youth, hesitatingly.

Strathmore raised his eyebrows:

"'*How!*' If you be such a novice in the art, it were wiser you should abandon it altogether."

He spoke with that slight laugh which was more chill than most men's sneer; but, though his words had stung his nephew as the young alone can be stung by the light contempt of a man of the world, Strathmore's disdain for him was not unmixed with a wish that his suit might prosper. If Lucille's heart were fastened on Caryll's love, and could be content in it and with it, her happiness might be more surely and safely secured than with those more brilliant in station, who now sought her; and over his nephew, who would be his debtor,

and whose career would be moulded and checked by him, he would have still a sway, where, if she wedded any other, he would lose his influence for her and over her life for ever. Yet the same bitterness which had arisen when his mother had first spoken of marriage for her, rose in him now, as he looked across to where she stood in the conservatories, caressing a bright-plumaged bird, and trying to lure another from the topmost boughs of an orange-tree, too absorbed in her wayward favourites to be conscious of the glances bent upon her by the group around.

"Can they not let her alone for a few brief years, at least?" he mused, with an acrid impatience. "That bird's wing which brushes her lips is fitter caress for her than men's embraces. Marriage! Faugh!—it is profanity to speak of—to think of—for her!"

"Strathmore, if you are disengaged just now, give me five minutes," said the Duke of Beauvoir, touching him on the arm at that moment.

His Grace was a heavy, cheery, generous gentleman, to whom *Mark Lane Express* panegyrics on his prize short-horns were dearer than European encomiums on his policies, and who in the Cabinet was very utterly under the lead of his subtle and astute colleague, though the reins were so excellently managed that he was wholly unconscious of his own docile obedience.

"I want to talk to you about a merely personal matter," went on the Duke, as Strathmore led the way into the billiard-room, just then empty; "in fact, about your young ward, Mademoiselle de Vocqsal. Have you any marriage in view for her?"

"None, my dear Duke."

"Well! Bowdon has lost his head about her," went on his Grace, in his usual sans façon, good-humoured style, which flung dignity to the winds as humbug, and yet somehow or other never entirely lost it. "Never saw him so much in love in my life! You've remarked it, of course, eh? He has asked me to-day to speak to you. In point of fact, I should be very

glad to see him married myself, and I have so high an esteem for Lady Castlemere, that I should have been perfectly satisfied if I had known nothing more than that the young lady he sought had been reared under her tutelage, so I told him I would mention the matter to you this morning. I presume the alliance would have your concurrence?"

"A more brilliant one it would be impossible to find for her! You do me the highest honour in soliciting her hand for Lord Bowdon," answered Strathmore, with his suave, chill courtesy, which was never startled into surprise as it was rarely warmed to cordiality. "His proposals, then, have your full sanction? May I ask what has been said on the subject to my ward?"

"Nothing!—nothing definite, at least. She is so exceedingly young—not brought out, indeed—that Bowdon and I both concurred in seeking her hand from you first. Will you mention it to her as you think best?"

"With pleasure. We may postpone, then, any further discussion of your wishes or mine until we are aware how Mademoiselle de Vocqsal receives your most flattering proposal?"

"*How?*"

His Grace looked fairly astonished—a little amazed, moreover; it was so very new a suggestion to him that his son, the future Duke of Beauvoir could possibly be rejected!

Strathmore smiled, that suave, courtly smile which always a little worried his noble colleague:

"My dear Beauvoir, I need not say that alliance with your House surpasses the most splendid aspirations which my ward could have indulged in for herself, or my mother and I as her guardians for her; at the same time, I do not prejudge Lucille's answer, since I should never seek to sway her inclination. But there is little fear, doubtless, of what that answer will be; Lord Bowdon could not woo in vain."

His Grace's pride and consternation were both soothed, and he passed on to speak further of his proposals in his son's

name with that hearty *au point*, straightforwardness, which in the Cabinet made so strong a contrast to the fine finesses and inscrutable reticence of one who, from his earliest years of public life, had recognised the essential art of success to lie in knowing "how to hold truth, and—how to withhold it."

"I must be the first, then, to taint her mind with marriage offers!" thought Strathmore. "Rank more brilliant could not be given her; every woman in England will envy her her lot; he is a handsome, amiable, inoffensive—fool! Such men make the kindest husbands. There will be no fear for her happiness, if—if—she love him. And yet, that soft, delicate, innocent life! Good God! it is defilement!"

The thoughts flitted, scarce shaped, through his mind; the sudden offer of the Duke's alliance had struck him with keen, though vague pain—the same pain, but more intense, which had smitten him when his mother had first spoken of Lucille's future. Young Caryll's love for her had been some distant thing, viewed by him with some contempt, and subject to long probation; he had not realised it in connexion with her; but the Duke's words had set sharply and vividly before him the inevitable certainty that, ere long, the loveliness to which so many testified would be sought and claimed in marriage, and that, once given to another, his right over the life which he alone now protected, and directed, must pass utterly and for ever from him. She might be happy in her husband's home, and in that happiness he would have no share; looking on it, he would no longer see in the beauty of her days the symbol of his own atonement: or—she might be wretched in the union which bound her, or in the grief of a wronged womanhood, and he would be powerless to give her freedom and consolation, and must see the life he had sworn to the dead to keep unstained and unshadowed, consume hopelessly before his sight!

To the man who, high in power and arrogant in strength, had a scornful unbelief in the power of Circumstance to overthrow Resolve, the sense of the impotence of his will here was

bitter as it was strange. For the moment, maddened by it, he felt tempted to exert his title as her guardian to forbid all marriage for her, all love to her; but this, again, he was forced to surrender; to secure her happiness, free choice must be left her, in that which, thwarted, often makes the misery of a life; and Strathmore's nature, merciless to others, was one to the full as inflexible to himself in any ordeal self-chosen, any sacrifice self-imposed. It smote him with pain, with aversion, almost with loathing, to be the first to speak to her of what must lead her across that boundary she had told him wistfully she feared to pass, which oftentimes parts Childhood from Womanhood by a single step. He revolted from his office; but it devolved on him as her guardian; as such he had accepted it, and he went to fulfil it.

As he descended before dinner, he saw her upon the terrace leaning over the parapet in the warm glow of the western light, which slanted across the broad flight of steps, and fell about her where she stood; strange contrast, in the bright and aërial glow of her youth, to the grey monastic walls of the Gothic façade behind her, and the dark massed branches of the cedars above her head.

He approached her, and laid his hand gently on her hair, turned simply back from her brow in its rich silken waves:

"Where are your dreams, Lucille?"

She looked up, and the warm light which ever came there at his presence beamed upon her face:

"I was thinking of all those who have lived and died here; of all the histories those grey stones could speak; of all the secrets which lie shrouded in those woods since they saw the Druidic sacrifices, and heard the chant of the white-robed Dominicans:—the dead days seem to rise from their graves, and tell me all that is buried with them!"

She spoke only in the fanciful imagination which loved to wander in the poetic mysteries of the past, but her words now, as often, struck him with that deadliest Nemesis of crime—the doom which compels the guilty to hear reproach in every innocent speech, and feel a blow on unhealed

wounds, in what, without that remembered sin, had been but gay jest or soft caress.

"You are too imaginative, Lucille," he said, quickly. "Why dream of that dark past, of unholy sacrifice and insensate superstition? The past has nothing to do with *you;* live in your own fair present, my child. Your sunny seashore suits you better than the monastic gloom of White Ladies."

She lifted her bright head eagerly:

"Oh! I love White Ladies best."

"Surely? But Silver-rest is your home?"

"Yes; but this is *yours.*"

He smiled; all expression of her affection was dear to him, not because affection was ever necessary to him, but because hers was like the pardon and purification of his crime. Then the office which he came to execute, recurred to him; they were alone, no living thing near save the deer which were crossing the sward in the distance, and the peacock trailing his gorgeous train over the fallen rose-leaves on the marble pavement. But that solitude might be broken any second; he employed it while it lasted.

"Lucille! you may command another home from to-day, if you will."

Her eyes turned on him with a surprised, bewildered look, while a happy smile played about her lips:

"Another home! What do I want with one, Lord Cecil?"

"Many will offer one."

The surprised wonder in her eyes deepened, she looked at him hesitatingly, yet amused still:

"I do not understand you."

A curse rose in his throat on those who made him destroy the yet lingering childhood, and awaken thoughts which he himself would have bidden sleep for ever.

"I am not speaking in enigmas, Lucille; I tell you merely a necessary truth," he answered her gravely. "As your guardian I have the disposal of your future; of that future those who love you will each seek the charge; it is for you,

not me, to decide to whom it is finally entrusted. His Grace of Beauvoir has to-day sought your hand from me for his son. What answer shall I return to Lord Bowdon?"

Her eyes had been fixed wistfully on him as he spoke, scarcely as if comprehending him; at the clearness of his last words a blush, the first he had seen there, flushed her cheeks, her lashes drooped, her lips parted, but without speech, and he fancied that she shuddered slightly.

His task revolted him, he loathed it yet more in execution than in anticipation; but Strathmore let no trace of repugnance appear, he addressed her calmly and gravely, as befitted one who filled to her, in her eyes and the world's, her father's place:

"I do not need to tell you, Lucille, that such an alliance is almost the highest in the country, and one of the most brilliant it would be possible to command. His father tells me that Bowdon loves you as much even as the fancy of youth can wish to be loved. To exaggerate the rank of the station you would fill would be impossible, and your happiness——"

"Oh hush! hush!—it seems so strange."

The words were spoken rapidly under her breath, and almost with an accent of terror, while the flush was hot on her cheek, and her head was drooped and slightly turned from him; it might be the startled shyness of girlish love, the momentary agitation of a flattered pride; he took it for these, and a pain, keen and heavy, smote him, and made his tone more cold, though as calm and even as heretofore, as he went on:

"Nay, you must hear me, Lucille. I but repeat to you what the Duke has said, and it is no light matter to be dismissed hastily either way. I am no ambassador of a love-tale; but I should err gravely in the place I hold towards you if I did not put fully before you the eminence of the rank for which your hand is sought, and the splendour of the alliance into which you may now enter——"

He paused suddenly, for she turned towards him with a

swift movement and that caressing grace with which as a little child upon the sea-shore she had leaned against him, thinking she had done wrong to touch a stranger's dog.

"Hush! you pain me. Why do you speak to me so? Are you tired of me, Lord Cecil?"

The colour still was warm in her face, but her eyes as they questioned his were pleading and reproachful, and there was a naïve plaintiveness in the words, and in the action, with which she turned to him, which touched him, even while they struck him with a sense of keen relief, of vivid pleasure: it would have cost him more than he had counted to surrender his right to gladden, to guide, and to control this young life; it would have been the surrender of Erroll's trust, and of his own atonement.

He drew her gently towards him with that tenderness which existed only for her, begotten of circumstance, while foreign to his nature.

"Why does it pain you, my love? Have you heard me aright? I but speak to you of a marriage for which my consent has been sought, and which is so exalted and unexceptionable a one, that as your guardian I should be deeply blamable if I did not fully set before you all it offers. I should never urge your inclination, but I must state truly all which may await you if you accept it. Decide nothing hastily; to-morrow you can give me your reply."

A look of aversion shadowed her face, she clung to him with that caressing reliance as natural and unrestrained now as in her childhood, and lifted her eyes in beseeching earnestness:

"Oh no! Why? What need? Tell them at once that I could not—I could not!"

A gladness which had never touched his life since Marion Vavasour destroyed it, swept over him for a moment at her words; he loved her for the sake and in the memory of the dead; and he rejoiced that he was not yet bidden to bestow her on her lover, to give her up from his own keeping:

"It shall be as you will, Lucille. I have no other aim

save your happiness. But are you sure that you know what you refuse; that you may not desire to speak of it further with my mother? You are very young, and a station so brilliant——"

Something proud, pained, wistful, perplexed, which came into her eyes, again arrested him; the delicate and spiritual nature shrank from the coarser ambitions imputed to her, the worldly bribe proffered to her:

"Why do you tell me of *that*, Lord Cecil?"

"Because it is my duty as your guardian, *not* because I think that it would sway you. I do not. Yours is a rare nature, Lucille."

His answer reassured her, and the shadow passed from off her face as the warm sunlight of the west fell on it, the smile upon her lips, so like her father's in its gladness and its sunny tenderness, that it smote Strathmore as on the night when she had wakened from dreaming sleep on the bosom of her dead mother.

"Then—then—whenever any others speak to you as the Duke has done, you will answer them without coming to me? You will say 'Lucille has no love to give strangers, and needs no guardian save the one she has!'"

He smiled, moved to mingled pain and pleasure by her words:

"I cannot promise that, my child, for I fear they would not rest content with such an answer. And—Lucille—the future must dawn for you as for all, and you will find other loves than those you now know."

She put her hand up to his lips to silence him, and her eyes grew dark and humid:

"Never! Never! If the future would differ from the present, I pray God it may not dawn. Are you weary of Lucille, Lord Cecil, that you would exile her to other care?"

"Never ask that! I wish to God my care could shield you always."

His answer sprang from the poisoned springs of a deep and hidden remorse: she heard in it but a sure defence and

promise for the future, as he stood resting his hand upon her shoulder in the evening silence, while the sun sank from sight behind the elm-woods, and the shadows of twilight stole over the terrace, where the winding waters glistened through the gloom, white with their countless river-lilies, as on the night when Marion Vavasour had been there beside him, wooing from his lips the first words of that guilt-steeped love in which all the beauty of his manhood had been cast and wrecked.

Laughing in soft, child-like gaiety—for his words had made her very glad, and banished even from memory the momentary vague pain and fear which had fallen on her, she scarce knew why—Lucille stooped and wound her hands in the luxuriance of the late roses, which still blossomed in profusion over the steps and balustrade of the cedar-terrace, covering the white marble with their trailing leaves and scarlet petals, and filling the air with their odour. Her hands wandered among them with that delight in their beauty which was inborn with her artistic and imaginative nature, and drawing one of the richest clusters from the rest, she held them to him in their fragrance:

"I do not wonder that the Greeks and the poets loved the roses best, and that the Easterns gave them to the nightingales as the burden of their song and the choice of their love! How beautiful they are—the Queen of Flowers!"

The words, the action, the sight and scent of the roses, as she held them upward to him in the twilight, recalled, in sudden vivid agony, the memory of the woman who had stood there with him on that very spot, with the subtle, poetic lies upon her fragrant lips, which gave the flower that she loved value and sweetness in his sight because their kiss had rested on its leaves:—it was among the roses that he had seen her in the morning-light at Vernonceaux; it was among the roses that he had seen her in the summer-noon, when he had spared her from death only that she might live to suffer! And the flower was accursed in his sight.

Those scarlet roses, with their heavy fragrance and their clinging dews, gave him a thrill of horror as he saw them

lifted to him by the innocent hands of Lucille; they were in his eyes the bloodstained symbol of the assassinatress, of the destroyer!

With an irrepressible impulse he seized them from her, and threw them far away, till they fell bruised and scattered on the turf below.

Her look of surprise recalled him to himself.

"Roses have a faint odour to me, my dear; I have not your love of them," he said, hurriedly. "Your lilies of the valley become you best, Lucille; those roses have nothing in common with *you*, the flowers of orgie, of revel, of secresy!"

She looked at him surprised still, for she had never seen his tranquil repose of manner broken until now at White Ladies, and it seemed to her very strange that he, the haughty and inflexible political leader, should be thus moved by the unwelcome fragrance of a few autumn roses!

Her eyes dwelt on him wonderingly, wistfully:

"Have I vexed you, Lord Cecil? You are not angry with me?"

He passed his hand softly over her hair, deeply moved in that moment by the tender and pleading words.

"No! God forbid! Act as your own heart dictates, Lucille, and you will ever act as I would have you. I rejoice that you do not risk your life in other hands than mine. Keep your beautiful youth while you may!"

## CHAPTER X.

### The Night Whisper of the Past.

"So you have sent poor Bowdon away, Lucille. It was very cruel, and a refusal must seem so remarkably odd to him!" laughed Lady Chessville, the night after, as she came into the young girl's dressing-room before the déshabille. The Peeress, young and omnipotent herself, was one of those women who like the beauty and grace of others.

Lucille shook her head a little disdainfully:

"It is a cruelty he will soon forget."

"It is not so easy to 'forget' always, mon enfant, but you have not learnt that; you have nothing to blot out," said the Countess. "Come, tell me, Lucille, how could Bowdon fail to please you? What was it you disliked in him? I am curious; he is accustomed to be thought perfection."

"I did not *dislike* anything; I never thought about him at all."

Lady Chessville laughed a silvery peal of hearty laughter:

"Poor Bowdon! if he could but hear that! I must really tell the Duke of the degradation to which his beloved has come. But you are very ungrateful, my beautiful child. Can none of them move you any more? I shall say your guardian has taught you his own coldness."

The colour flushed into Lucille's face, her eyes darkened and dilated, she raised her head eagerly, while the rich masses of her unbound hair shook over her shoulders to the ground:

"'Cold?' You must never use that word to my guardian. Oh! how little you know him! There is no one on earth so gracious, so gentle, so generous, so full of kindly thought and noble acts. There is the coldness of his world, of his years, of his ambitions, perhaps in his look and in his words, but there is no coldness in his heart. Look what he has been to me, merely because the father whom I lost was the friend of his youth. Would one cold at heart cherish such a memory so sacredly, and fulfil a trust of the dead so unweariedly?"

The firelight shone warmly on her upraised face, through which the soul within seemed itself to beam; her eyes looked upward proudly and lovingly, with the bright hair brushed from her flushed brow, and her lips slightly parted with the eager words; she might have been painted for Vivia Perpetua in her young and holy loveliness, willing to endure all things even unto death in defence and in reverence for her Lord.

Lady Chessville looked at her and sighed: there was that

in Lucille's face which vaguely touched to sadness all those who gazed on her.

"He was your father's friend?" she said, musingly. "I never knew that!"

"Yes; and he loved him so well!" answered Lucille, while her voice grew low and tremulous, recalling the memory of him whom Strathmore had taught her to dream of with more than a filial affection, hallowed towards the dead as it could never have been to the living. "I cannot remember him, but Lord Cecil has spoken of him to me till I think of him as dearly as though he were living now. He died in my infancy, Lord Cecil was with him at his death, and it is because they had lived as brothers that he has such goodness and tenderness for me. Do you think any man, cold at the core of his heart, could retain such a memory of one lost friend? It will show you alone that the beauty of his character to those who know it aright, equals the greatness of his career; eclipse it, it cannot do!"

"You are eloquent for your guardian, Lucille," said Lady Chessville. "What you tell me speaks very differently for Strathmore than what society says usually; we all know his intellect, his power, his statesmanship, are masterly, but we never held him anything but icily heartless with his subtle, delicate sneer, and his world-steeped egotism. I remember, I fancy, however—I don't exactly know what—but I think I once heard that many years ago he was passionately in love with some woman who deserted or betrayed him; did you ever hear anything of it, Lucille?"

"Never!" She started a little, and a certain look of disquiet and pain shadowed the eyes which were gazing happily and dreamingly at the flashing fire-rays.

"Ah! I dare say not," said the Countess with a little yawn of ennui. "It was a romantic, terrible story, I imagine; it was so long before my time that I never heard any particulars, but very likely it may be the reason of his utter indifference to women. I cannot possibly picture Lord Cecil Strathmore loving anything but power, or heeding anything save himself!

But you will rebuke me if I say so, ma belle; and since he is so kind to you, I shall do my best to believe that there *is* a heart under that polished surface of courtly and ministerial ice."

Lucille did not seem scarcely to hear her; her eyes were fixed with their gaze of vague disquiet on the ruddy glisten of the fire-flames.

"Betrayed him—deserted him," she muttered, musingly. "Oh, surely no woman could——"

Lady Chessville looked up quickly and scanned her face, from which the warm colour had faded; and she passed her hand caressingly over Lucille's brow as she rose.

"Good night, my lovely child. Do not sit up and think over that bygone story I was silly enough to name to you; you may be very sure that Strathmore has never suffered, and (I would stake much) has never loved, even in his early years, except, indeed, perhaps, as people—*petri du monde* as he is—do love, which is very worthlessly. I will not have you waste so much of your thoughts and tenderness on your guardian, Lucille—that cold, negligent, ambitious man, whose only passion is power!"

Lucille drew slightly away from her hand, and a faint smile came on her lips.

"You only know Lord Cecil as the world knows him, Lady Chessville; he merits from me a thousand-fold more than all the gratitude and reverence I can give him."

The Countess looked at her again in silence for a moment, then stooped to give her a light kiss, and floated from the chamber. Lucille sat where she had left her, not changing her attitude, but, with her head bent forward and her hands lying lightly on her bosom, gazed into the hot and glowing embers of the burning wood, with a vague and unknown sadness oppressing her, she knew not why.

Strathmore had told her aright that one day suffices to destroy for ever the barrier which parts childhood from womanhood; and Lucille had that day lost much of the golden radiance of childhood, which is happy in its unconsciousness

and content in its present. But what had dispelled it, was not so much the love which had been proffered to her, which, though it had startled her for the moment, had had so little hold on her thoughts, that it had been shaken off from them, leaving nothing of its significance, and having taught nothing of its knowledge; it was rather this shadowy love of a long dead past, of which she had heard to-night, which woke in her own heart an unfamiliar pain, and made her wistfully muse on its meaning and its story.

For the first time in all her innocent and guarded life she felt an intangible disquiet and uneasiness, and, rising, she went, as was her nightly custom, to Lady Castlemere's chamber before going to rest—her own apartments had been altered by Strathmore's order, and now adjoined his mother's in the west wing of the abbey. She was received with the affection which had encircled her only too tenderly from her infancy, and which the peeress in her aged years did truly feel to this bright and loving child, who had been given to her care by so dark a tragedy, orphaned by her son's own hand, and made desolate by his crime. Haughty still to most others, his mother was invariably gentle to Lucille; and her hand fondly stroked now the floating silken masses of loosened hair, as she lay at her feet in the warmth of the fire-glow resting her head against her knee; Lucille loved warmth and light like any tropic bird.

They were in strange contrast, the age and the youth—the grave and venerable patrician, bowed by the weight of many years, while something of the fire of her superb womanhood still gleamed from her proud sunken eyes; and the young girl in all the dawning glory of her unspent life, with the grace of childhood in every pliant limb, and the unworn brightness of childhood in the bloom of her cheek and the golden light of her hair.

"You are silent to-night, Lucille?" she said, gently, at last, when some minutes had passed by. "Where are your thoughts?"

The colour stole into her face, and she did not lift her head from where it rested.

"I was thinking—I was thinking, Madame—of what Lady Chessville said just now."

"And what was that?"

"Madame," was the familiar title Lucille had given her when too young to pronounce her name, and Lady Castlemere had encouraged her to continue it, since it supported the foreign extraction from which all were led to attribute her birth.

"You can tell me, Madame, did—did Lord Cecil, many years ago, ever love any woman who betrayed him?"

The hand which lay on her waving tresses moved with an involuntary start. Had any been hinting to Lucille the outline of that tragedy so long, so scrupulously, so anxiously concealed from her!—had any been unfolding the first pages of that dark history, which, opened to her, would reveal to her that the hand which she loved, and which cherished her, was the hand which had slain her father, as the pitiful among men would not have slain a brute!

But with the blood of the Strathmores in her veins, his mother had the inscrutable serenity under trial of her Norman race; and she looked down into the girl's wistful eyes with calm surprise.

"Why do you ask, Lucille? It is a strange question."

"But tell me, is it true? Did he ever love any one who was faithless to him?"

Her voice was very earnest, even to tremulousness, and in her upraised eyes there was a plaintive anxiety; and her listener saw that entire denial would rather increase than lessen the little Lucille could as yet know of the truth.

"Long ago, my love, Strathmore loved unwisely and unhappily. But it is a matter so entirely of the past, that it is folly to recall it; and you must never allude to it to your guardian. What was it, Lady Chessville could tell you; she was a mere child in his early manhood."

"She told me very little. She said she knew nothing; but

she had heard of the story, and she thought it was the reason why he was now so cold. Why should she call him cold; he is not?"

"Not cold in your sense, my dear, but in hers. He feels deeply—here and there—as he feels for you, and for the memory of your father; but Lady Chessville means that he has long ago left to younger men the follies of love, and is entirely given to political life. In her sense she is right."

Lucille's head drooped again; and as the firelight flickered on her face, it wore its unwonted look of new disquiet, of brooding and unanalysed pain.

"Oh! how could any woman betray him?" she said, half aloud, with an accent in her voice it had never borne before. "How could any one forsake him and make him suffer—throw away such a treasure as his love?"

Lady Castlemere caught the intonation of the words, and stooped to look upon her face; a thought crossed her which filled her with a ghastly and horrible terror. Better, better, she felt, that Lucille should learn the truth of that fatal history, shrouded from her birth—learn it in all its hideous nakedness, its merciless and deliberate crime, and learn to shrink from the hand she loved and honoured, as the hand stained with her father's blood, than that the fear which crossed his mother's thoughts as she looked on her should ever ripen into truth!

"Lucille!" she said, almost hurriedly, "do not let your thoughts wander into buried years of which you can tell nothing, and which can be nothing to you, my child. It is sorrow wasted, to grieve for so long dead a thing as your guardian's past. All men love, some wisely, some erringly, but love he himself has long abandoned and put aside; it had a charm for him in his earlier years, but it can never now be anything to him, not even a regret; therefore waste no regret for him. In the ambitious life of a statesman, such weaknesses are quickly forgotten; associate them with Lord Cecil no more than you would have thought to do with your father, whose place he fills."

Her words were purposely chosen; and Lucille listened silently, her head bent, her eyes gazing at the falling embers, the warm colour in her face wavering. The vague pain still weighed upon her, and each syllable fell chilly on her, like the touch of a cold blast; the last yet more than any.

"Lucille! look at me," said his mother, anxiously.

The terror which had floated through her mind strengthened with that silence, and the shadows which flickered over the face she watched. Lucille raised her head with a half-broken sigh, and her fair eyes looked upwards to her gaze, guiltless, fearless, trustful, even while their natural sadness was deepened: the fear which had seized on her watcher was slaked for the time; if it had grounds, as she prayed it might never have, she saw that Lucille, at the least, as yet knew nothing of her own secret. She bent and kissed her.

"Go to your bed now, my darling; it is late, and you are used to early hours at Silver-rest. And, Lucille, the question you have asked of me you will not ask of others?—it would displease your guardian."

A faint, proud smile, tender and mournful, came on Lucille's lips as she arose:

"Oh! Madame, you are sure his name is too sacred to *me* to talk of it idly with any! I would never have asked of Lord Cecil's past of any one save yourself."

And his mother knew, as the girl's good-night caress lingered on her brow, that Lucille spoke the truth; that unless any remorseless hand tore down the veil which hid the past, and forced upon her sight the secret which it shrouded, her lofty and delicate nature would never imperil its own peace by restless search or curious interrogation. Yet the new and different fear which had arisen in her that night for the first time could not be banished; and, as she sat in solitude, she shuddered at the memory with which a long and varied life supplied her—the memory of how often, baffling men's justice and men's expiation, the harvest of the past, sown by the guilty, is reaped by the guiltless, and the curse of sin lies in wait to prey on the innocent.

In her own chamber, Lucille did not at once obey the words which had bade her seek rest. She dismissed her attendant earlier than usual, and stood alone gazing into the embers of the hearth, while the little spaniel which had loved her father nestled to her bosom, and her eyes grew dark and humid in deep and dreaming thought. This causeless pain was on her still; she could not have told why.

A long-drawn breath, broken as a sigh, unconsciously parted her lips as she turned at last from watching the wood-sparks fall in showers on the crimson ashes, laid the little dog down upon his cushions, and, moving to the nearest window, drew the curtains aside, and looked out at the night. It was almost a habit with her: from infancy she had loved to watch the stars shining over the face of the ocean, which had been to her a living poem, a never-ending joy, a divine mystery, a beloved friend; here the distant sea was hidden by stretches of wood and hill, but its familiar murmurs reached her ear upon the stillness, and the stars were many in the cloudless skies. She stood looking out into the brilliant night, over the vast forests and the monastic ruins of White Ladies—those silent yet eloquent relics of a long-dead past—as the moonlight shone through shivered arch and ivy-covered aisle, on crumbling cloisters and decaying altar-stones, memorials of a religion and a race whose place now knew them no more. Below her windows ran the cedar-terrace, white and broad in the moonlight, with the roses growing over its balustrade, and covering its pavement; and the fantastic coils and branches of their foliage caught her eyes, and brought the memory of Strathmore's action, and of Strathmore's words:

"He called them 'the flowers of orgie, the flowers of secresy;' perhaps he associates them with *her*," she thought. "Oh! how can they say he never suffered?—how can they know? His love must have been so strong, and his suffering as great! Who could she be, that guilty woman, who could give him misery and betrayal——"

And the dangerous thoughts, which wandered dimly and

blindly towards a dark and unknown past, filled her heart with their pain and her eyes with their tears—tears rare and unfamiliar, which gathered there, but did not fall.

Then she turned away from the silvered light lying on the sward, and leaving in deeper shadow the masses of the woodland; it looked chill and mournful to her—and, kneeling down beside her bed, while the glow of the warm wood-fire gleamed on her loosened hair and on her young bowed head, Lucille prayed her nightly prayer to God, for him whom she knew only as her father's friend.

## CHAPTER XI.

### Under the Aisle of the Palms.

OF the many who at White Ladies flattered the beauty and sought to win the smile of Strathmore's ward, the only one to whom Lucille gave heed, was Valdor.

She was indifferent to all; they neither banished her childhood, nor taught her her power; and the graceful flatteries which might have done so, she heard half amused, half surprised, while they fell from her thoughts as the rain falls from rose-leaves, leaving no stain behind. To Valdor alone she showed favour; not because his pursuit of her was made with all the skill and fascination which lengthened experience in woman's favour had lent him, but because she found in him what she thought a sincere friendship towards Strathmore, which she found in no other. The young girl perceived, what she did not reason on, that Strathmore was rather followed and respected as one of the chiefs of a great party, than surrounded by men's warmer sympathies; and that, while he led and influenced them, he lived isolated from, because independent and negligent of, their personal cordiality. This *she* never traced to its due cause, which lay in his own neglect and contempt of the esteem and support which most men seek—his own cold and all-sufficing self-reliance, which withdrew him from the pale of human sym-

pathies. *She* blamed for it a world which she thought did not read aright a character that, in her sight, was little less than god-like. And the single reason which made her listen to and like Valdor was, because he spoke to her as Strathmore's friend.

He did not wholly mistake the cause which gave him this preference; he knew women too well, and read this soilless and transparent heart at a glance; but the very sense, which he felt from the onset, that he who had been the courted of patrician coquettes might perchance fail here, lent his love but fresh charm and new excitement. He saw that the way to Lucille's confidence and regard was to speak of Strathmore to her as she held him; and this way he took with the subtle tact of the world. Strathmore himself watched his intercourse with her with vigilance, almost with apprehension, which at times foreshadowed to him what, in the face of the past, he refused to acknowledge—that circumstances may net in the power and outweigh the might of the finest foresight, the keenest strength; a creed he scornfully left to weaklier and humbler men. It was not without fear that he saw approach her one who had read the murderer's intent within him ere the shot had sped home and the life had fled.

But all knew that history, though the world had long since let it drop into oblivion, buried by that sure palliator of all error—success. Moreover, he relied upon two things; first, that none would ever whisper to her evil of one who stood in her sight and theirs as her legal guardian; and again, which was yet more sure, that the secret of her birth had been so carefully suppressed, its every slightest trace effaced, its every faintest link broken and buried, that nothing could ever suggest it to the wildest dreamer or the subtlest speculator. Careful provision and fortunate accident combined to make it impossible that the will of Erroll, which was to his destroyer more sacred than any law, could ever be disobeyed—the will which had written, "Never let her know that it was by your hand I fell."

"Lady Chessville tells me, mademoiselle, that your father was Strathmore's friend. Perhaps I knew him also," said Valdor, one day, as they rode homeward through the deer-forest with the river making music as it wound under the leaves, and foamed over granite boulders.

Lucille turned to him with glad surprise: "Do you think so?"

"I think most probably. I knew many, indeed most, of Strathmore's friends. I must ask him, for I would give much to recall in the past one who stood so nearly to *you*."

He spoke gently, for Valdor saw that her nature was one to be wooed by tenderness, but revolted by flattery; his eyes were eloquent, his voice meaning, but Lucille's gaze met his with the innocent look of a child, grateful for his interest in her father, but unconscious of his homage to herself.

"He was my guardian's dearest friend," she answered him. "You may believe how much so, when you see how, for my father's sake alone, he gives such care to me."

"Indeed! I can well believe it, for I know that he can feel very deeply, act very generously, though the world looks on him as cold and austere."

"Ah! but what can the world know of him? It sees him in office, it discerns his intellect, it listens to his eloquence, it admires his statecraft, but what can it know of his nature? Such men as he do not court the world, they lead it; they show the chill iron glove to the masses they rule, it is only the few to whom it is given to feel the warm, firm touch of the generous hand, which is mailed for the many."

The sun shone down through the leaves upon her face bright with reverent eloquence, while her eyes darkened, her colour deepened, her voice grew low and tender; she was very lovely in that sudden glow of proud rejoicing, mingled with the poetic veneration which she gave to one whose darker traits were all veiled from her, whose lawless passions she knew of no more than she knew of the evil and the bitterness of human life, from which he had guarded her.

Valdor for the first time forgot his tact and his resolve in the irritation of a jealous impatience.

"We who know him, mademoiselle," he answered, quickly, "are accustomed, on the contrary, to say that Strathmore has an iron hand under a silken glove. I have seen it grip very brutally, though (to be just to him) I have known it give very generously. Why feel so much gratitude to him as your guardian? It is an office most men would but too gladly discharge to such a ward; and—you do not know that he remains, now your early years are passed, so wholly and purely disinterested!"

"Disinterested!" She echoed his last word in wonder, in rebuke, in as much resentment as could be roused in a nature which had all the gentle softness of her father's; and, in truth, she did not even faintly understand him.

"Yes, you have yet to learn your own loveliness, your own power!" said Valdor, with impetuous bitterness; "and Strathmore, though he is an ascetic now, may not be dead to all the passions which once ruled him quite as utterly as ambition does at the present."

The moment his words were spoken he repented them; he knew how rash and ill-advised they were, by the effect they wrought. Her eyes gazed at him like the eyes of a startled bird, darkened and dilating; the colour burned in her face with a deep and painful flush; she breathed fast and unevenly. His words flashed on her as lightning flashes before the sight, bringing a vague, voiceless terror, and throwing its sudden gleam on depths and danger never feared or known before. With an unconscious, irresistible impulse, half born of the innocent shyness of childhood, half of newly-startled consciousness, Lucille shrank from his side, and rode after those who were in front, as swiftly and breathlessly as the fawn flees from the stag-hounds.

"Lucille! what has frightened you?" asked Strathmore, in surprise, as he glanced at her face where the warm light fell on it through the crimson and amber leaves of the autumn foliage.

"Nothing."

And in truth she could not have told what it was which filled her with a sudden breathless terror, nor what it was which mingled with that terror an unknown, nameless sweetness, which seemed to tremble through all her life. Valdor vainly strove to approach her; he was bitterly resentful with his own folly in having let such words escape him in the moment of jealousy, for he did not believe them himself. Mainly swayed by impulse and caprice, of a transparent and impetuous character, little altered at the core by its surface of indolence and indifferentism, he was consumed with angry self-remorse that he had allowed such words to escape him, treacherous to his host, and indelicate to her. He saw that they had startled, alarmed, shocked her with a force he had never foreseen; whether they had revolted her by the supposition of such a passion in one who filled to her her father's place, or whether they had awakened her to that which she had never dreamed before, was a doubt which unceasingly tortured him, crossed now and again by a hope that this half child-like, half woman-like terror might be born of some feeling for himself. The very action with which she had fled from him was not unlike the first dawn of love in such a nature as Lucille's, spiritual as Una's, poetic as Undine's, which seemed—

Too pure even for the purest human ties.

He was impatient till he made his peace with her; impatient till by look or word from her he could put his last faint and new-born hope to test. Brilliant, handsome, and still young, the French noble was pardonably sure of his fascination over women; here, for the first time, he misdoubted his power, perhaps because, for the first time, he genuinely and honourably—*loved.*

He saw a change in her when they met again a few hours later; slight, not to be defined, yet something which was unmistakable. The colour was deeper and more uncertain on her cheek, the lashes drooped over her eyes, which had lost the clearness and cloudlessness of their regard, and on her

face there was a new look, half light, half shadow; the transparent waters of her thoughts had been stirred and troubled, never again to know their perfect peace.

Valdor knew its cause, and his pulses beat quicker as he thought that it might be himself for whom stirred that still half-conscious love. Strathmore saw it also; when he addressed or approached her, her eyes no longer met his own in glad smiles or pleading earnestness; he saw that something had been said or done to her to scare away the unthinking peace of childhood, as a single touch suffices to scare from its rest the brooding bird.

He turned to young Caryll as he passed him in the drawing-rooms in the evening:

"Have you broken your word?"

The youth started and looked bewildered; the angry colour flushed his face:

"No, Sir. I have the same blood in my veins that you have!"

The answer was spirited, and to its truth the young man's candid, unflinching glance bore witness. Strathmore bowed his head with that warm, frank smile now so rare upon his lips:

"True! The question wronged you, and I beg your pardon sincerely for having insulted you with it."

Lionel Caryll had disliked and feared him before, had dreaded his word, and shunned his presence; at the courtly amende rendered, because it was his due, as gracefully to a young dependent kinsman as it would have been to the highest among his peers, the youth saw for the first time all that was generous and best in his nature, and ceased to marvel that Lucille found much to venerate, and much which fascinated her, in a character which until now had seemed to him to possess many grand traits, but not one human sympathy.

"Mlle. Lucille, you shun us," whispered Valdor softly, late that night, as he was at last alone with her in one of the

conservatories, whither, missing her from the circle, he had tracked, and found her; the light from above falling on her, about her broad-leaved palms, brilliant creepers, and eastern citron-trees, while the waters of the fountain by which she stood fell musically in the silence.

She started.

"I did not shun you. I only came to fetch my spaniel."

"The dog is very dear to you, is he not?"

"Yes! He was my father's; the only thing I have of his."

Valdor looked at her in her silence where she leaned against the marble basin: that fugitive likeness which perpetually evaded him wavered before him now, and, like some strong light which brings what is shadowy into palpable shape, the memory of one whom he had often seen in the very place where she now stood, arose before him, invoked by the groundless fancy with which he had associated her. In the remembrance of Erroll, he saw whose it was that her face recalled to him, and the wild dreaming folly of a thought he had contemned grew into a sudden vivid belief, rootless, unproved, untenable, but clear as the day in his sight. Was *this* Strathmore's secret?

"The spaniel is very happy to have such a claim to your affection," he said gently, and almost hesitatingly, for she arrested the words of flattery and love upon his lips. To whisper of passion to this beautiful child seemed impossible.

She did not answer—perhaps she did not hear him; but she bent her head till her lips touched the shining silky curls of the dog. As he saw the caress given to the animal, by the young lips which he longed to teach to tremble and grow warm under a lover's kiss, the new hope that he cherished stirred and strengthened in him. He bent tenderly towards her:

"Lucille, you so gentle to a dog, will be merciful to me! I deeply regret the words which I was so rude as to offend you with to-day; will you forgive them?"

She did not raise her head, but he saw the colour rise, deepen, and burn on her cheek, and her heart beat with quick, uncertain throbs; they gave him more than hope, almost certainty itself, and he stooped lower still, fearful of scaring this shy and dawning love from him by a too swift grasp.

"I would not for an empire breathe one word which should ever wound you, and I spoke in haste and error. You will forgive me, will you not?"

Resentment could not exist in her nature; she turned to him and held out her hand, with pardoning and winning grace:

"Oh, monsieur, yes! I forgive——"

As his lips touched her hand in gratitude more eloquent than speech could offer, the broad drooping leaves of the tropical foliage fringing the path through the conservatories moved; and Strathmore, who had that moment entered from the rooms beyond, stood looking on them. He saw the blush on Lucille's face, as it still lingered there—he saw the kiss which Valdor left upon her hand, and he knew then who had wrought that shadow of disquiet on her face, who had banished childhood and awakened love.

Valdor released her, and turned to Strathmore with the easy carelessness of a man of the world.

"My lord! I tell Mademoiselle Lucille that you and I have had so many friends in common, that I feel sure I must have known her father. Did I do so?"

"I told you once, no doubt you did."

"But not well enough to recall him? Dieu! that comes of leading a crowded life! Wait! I think I knew a De Vocqsal once, one of the Viennese Bureaucracy; was it he?"

"No! not the same race. I remember whom you mean, but he is a governor in Galicia at the present time. There are none of Lucille's family living."

He spoke so naturally that Valdor was for the moment deceived; there could be no mystery here, it must be a chimera of his own imagining—a bubble without substance!

At that moment the groom of the chambers approached him with a special despatch, marked "Immediate." And with an apology he quitted the conservatory, and left them.

Strathmore was alone with her, and the silence between them was for once unbroken, save by the falling of the fountains; and for the first time he saw that she stood embarrassed before him, that her eyes shunned his, and that she bent away from his gaze over the border of the marble basin. It smote him with a fierce and cruel pain. This was the first sign of the alienation which would ensue between them when her heart wandered to her lover—to her husband.

But, whatever he was to all others, with her he allowed no personal feelings to move him from that gentleness which he rendered her, for in his eyes she was sacred, and to secure her peace he would have sacrificed himself at any cost. He bent towards her, and his eyes, cold and unrevealing, the eyes "fathomless and darkly-wise" of the Legend, softened with an unspeakable sadness:

"Lucille! have you a secret from *me?*"

The reproach quivered to her heart, and her face grew pale, even to the lips. She started and trembled as she leant over the water, playing with the lilies on its surface, and the pain of alienation smote him deeper and more cruelly—he was answered.

He had not deemed it possible that this young life so late laid bare to him in its every thought, wish, and instinct, could learn so soon to harbour a concealment from him. But his voice did not lose its gentleness, nor his eyes their fondness, as he bent still downward to her:

"Lucille! will you not trust me with it? No one can already have taught you doubt of how entirely I am sure to sympathise with your every wish, and give you happiness, if human means can make it?"

She lifted her head quickly, and in her eyes were all their old love and reverence.

"Doubt *you?* Oh no! I could as soon doubt the goodness and the mercy of God——"

He passed his hand over her brow caressingly.

"Then tell me what has changed you since this morning? What is this new barrier, my child, which has arisen between us?"

The colour burned afresh in her cheeks, her eyes glanced at him shy, hauntingly, half ashamed, yet filled with a new light, then drooped beneath his own.

He stood silent beside her for a moment, mastering that bitter pain which gnawed within him: a stern word or a harsh thought he would not have given to her to purchase his own life. He waited till he could speak calmly and gently.

"Lucille, tell me—as your guardian I have a title to ask—did you refuse the Marquis of Bowdon's hand, because your own preference turned to some other?"

The flush deepened over her brow and bosom, and she twisted the lily-leaves unconsciously together, as she stooped over the fountain away from his gaze: again her silence answered him.

"Lucille, can you not trust me in so little? Tell me whom it is—that you love?"

He had no answer, save the flush which burned and wavered in her face, the tremble of the drooped eyelids, the quiver in the silent lips, as she bent down over the water—these were eloquent enough. Leaning over the fountain, she too saw her face reflected in the water, saw all that it told, and all the change which had come there, and with a sudden movement, almost of alarm, she turned and would have left him—his hand arrested her.

"Lucille, I will not force your confidence, but I must sue for it. I did not think that a few hours of a new and dearer fancy could have so soon estranged you from me."

His voice was gentle still, but the restrained pain and rebuke in his words vibrated through it; her swift desertion from him stung him painfully. Held by his hand, she stood motionless for a moment, her head drooped, her face flushed with its hot, betraying blush; then she broke from him, and throwing herself down beside the fountain, with her head

bowed, she sobbed bitterly—tears half sweet, half bitter, born from what spring she barely knew, risen from the heart which was half unconscious, half fearful of all which was waking in it. Her tears were terrible to him!—they were the mockery of all the care and prescience with which he had sought to work out his atonement by the guardianship of this single existence from every touch of pain or misery! And mortal griefs seemed to have no part or share with Lucille's life.

These broken, voiceless sobs thrilled like fire through his soul, callous to pain, and dead to mercy with all others; he raised her fondly from where she knelt, and drew her to him till her bright head was bowed upon his breast.

"Lucille, my child, what has been done to you? Have any dared to grieve—to pain—to tamper with you?"

She turned her eyes on him one moment, beseeching and fearful through their tears:

"No, no! I do not know why—what——"

The words were barely above her breath, hurried and tremulous; her face was very pale now, her glance shunned his:—at that instant the leaves were swept aside by some entrance from the rooms beyond, and starting from him, Lucille fled through the screen of Oriental foliage, and left him ere he could arrest her.

Valdor had entered.

Strathmore stood silent by the fountain, under the fan-like leaves of the palms and banyans, his face as white and fathomless as the marble on which his hand leaned, and he did not greet the approach of his friend and guest by word or sign, as the other hurried to him with an open letter in his hand.

"Read that, Strathmore, and you will see, however rude it be, that I am compelled to leave your hospitality to-night."

Strathmore glanced at the paper silently, and returned it: he was intimate with all the hopes, plans, and intrigues of Valdor's party. He neither favoured nor condemned

them, but it was a portion of his policy to be more thoroughly and early acquainted than any other with the movements of all foreign schisms or projects, and Valdor, passionate, transparent, and open as the day, with all the chivalry and indiscretion which have so fatally characterised all extreme Royalists of every age, confided in and to him without reserve.

"I much regret a summons which will deprive me of the pleasure of your society," he said, with cold courtesy. "But since you must leave us immediately, there is a subject on which I desire to speak with you at once."

Valdor looked up, his animated and eloquent eyes losing all their languor:

"You do not desire it more than I. No doubt you mean concerning my love for your young ward?—perhaps you imagine that I may have been without serious thought or intent——"

"I imagine nothing—I never imagine!" said Strathmore, impatiently. "I have the honour to await your explanation."

"Pardieu! it lies in one word—*love!*" answered the French noble, the indolence and indifference of custom breaking away before the warmth of his passion. "Strathmore, I know well enough you will command offers of marriage for her far more brilliant than mine; many will offer her riches, affluence, station, all that I have lost in a thankless cause and for a lethargic prince; but rank better than mine there is not in Europe, and love truer and warmer she will never win than she has roused in me——"

"Had you not better pour out all this eloquence in her own ear? I fear I interrupted your tender scene a few moments ago?" interrupted Strathmore, in his soft and languid voice, the slight sneer falling like ice-water on the impassioned and eager tones of the chivalrous Legitimist.

Valdor pardoned the sneer for the permission it conveyed:

"Can I do so? Finding you alone I feared she might have retired for the night; it is so late. God only knows how bitter it is to me to leave her at all—above all without a farewell—but what can I do? My honour is involved."

Strathmore did not answer, but rang for the groom of the chambers:

"Order horses to be put to, horses to post twenty miles; but inquire first if Mlle. de Vocqsal be in the drawing-rooms."

The servant returned in a few minutes:

"Mlle. de Vocqsal has gone to her own apartments for the night, my lord."

Strathmore signed to him to retire:

"It is impossible you see," he said briefly, as they were left alone; and with these few words he crushed out, as a matter of not the slightest moment, the glad, vivid hope he had inspired, whose disappointment made Valdor's cheek pale as he turned away with a swift movement and paced the conservatory with fast, uneven steps. Suddenly he halted before Strathmore, who had not moved from his position, standing under the palm-trees, with his hand on the marble basin.

"I must trust myself to your mercy and intercession then. Will you be my ambassador with her?"

"Have you grounds for supposing she returns your love?"

Valdor hesitated a moment:

"Grounds? No. I dare not say that I have, though she has seemed at times to prefer me to others, and to-night——"

"What of to-night?" The question was sharp and imperious.

"To-night I could have sworn that her heart had wakened, and wakened for me; her blush, her shyness—tell me, you saw her the moment I had left her—do you believe that I deceive myself or not?"

"I believe that you do not. I believe that Lucille loves you."

The answer was cold, but it was rigid to truth. There was this that was grand in Strathmore's nature—he never *spared himself;* and those words had judged him justly which had drawn him "a dangerous man always, but a false man or a mean man—never."

Valdor's face lightened with a frank, glad, passionate joy:

"Thank God! And when I return you will give her to me?"

"I will never oppose what concerns her happiness."

"And I may ask you to be my intercessor now?" went on Valdor, swiftly, in the quick eagerness of a nature which knew hot joy and scorned a timorous hesitance as cowardice, as he stood before Strathmore in the midnight silence under the aisle of the palms. "I am compelled to leave her in what will seem to her a manner so cold and strange, that it may well look incompatible with any love worthy the name: may I trust to you to make it clear to her why I go, and why I could not wait even for the assurance and the farewell to-morrow could have given? Will you leave no doubt, no cloud, no mystery, on my departure which might wound her or chill her towards me, as one who has not loved her as she has a right to be beloved? Will you feel for me in the absence, to which every law of honour binds me, in the moment of all others when honour is most hard to follow?—will you remember that I am driven from her in the very hour when I have learnt to love as I never learnt before? and while I am far away, defenceless and powerless against all those who will strive to rob me, will you guard for me what you yourself believe that I have won?"

Strathmore listened, the lids drooped over his eyes, his face impassive as the marble against which he leaned, whilst Valdor, forgetting all that he knew, and all that rumour said of the heartlessness and callousness of the man to whom he pleaded, poured out his rapid words, while his voice grew

mellow and his eyes dimmed with the earnestness of what he felt.

"Will you, Strathmore?" he repeated again. "I do not ask it for my own sake alone, but—if she *should* love me—one doubt is a woman's curse, and that soft, delicate, lofty nature will never love but once."

Strathmore stood silent, still, his face in shadow under the drooped palm-leaves, his eyes looking down into the water where the lotus-lilies she had toyed with floated lazily; none could have told what might be passing in him; his thought was deep, but none could have said it was painful. After some moments, he lifted his head, and his voice was clear and serene:

"Before giving you my promise, you must give me yours to one thing—your love for Lucille is genuine?"

"It is, so help me God!"

"Sufficiently so to concede what I should exact in the event of your becoming her husband (I speak to you now, of course, not as your friend, but as one who fills her father's office), namely, that you would relinquish and give me your word never to rejoin political risks and intrigues? I could not consent to place her peace in the hands of one who would unavoidably jeopardy it by hazarding his own safety—for a Patriot is but a Conspirator if he fail. You would do this?"

Valdor hesitated a moment; his political creed was portion of his very blood and life, and the ardent Henry Cinquiste revolted from condemning himself to the inaction from which he could not rouse his party; but the stronger ardour of a new-born passion prevailed at last; he bent his head:

"I would, I swear to you. And now, Strathmore, may I seek *your* word, that you will guard my hope from being destroyed during my absence, and will say to her of my love all I would myself have said to-night!"

"Yes, I will do so."

His voice was tranquil and passionless; it had no inflexion

of reluctance, but equally none of willingness or friendship; it was simply the assent of a man who undertakes a duty, but it also bore with it the unmistakable assurance of an honour which will unfailingly execute its word once pledged. And that assurance Valdor recognised; he stretched out his hand, a grateful light gleaming in his eyes, with unwonted emotion:

"Thank you from my soul! You have relieved me of all fear, for I know, Strathmore, that though those who trust to your mercy may be in danger, those who trust to your honour are safe. In a brief while I shall return to claim Lucille at your hands."

He spoke in the thoughtless candour, the transparent warmth, of his own heart; the shadow which fell across his listener's face from the swaying palm-trees above hid from him the light which, for a second, leapt to Strathmore's eyes, like the sudden flash of steel in the gloom. But Strathmore gave him his hand, and bade him good speed—and without falsity. He would be no traitor; he would keep true faith with this man, since it was this man whom Lucille loved.

As Valdor left the conservatories, he saw a spray of lilies of the valley fallen from Lucille's dress, natural flowers preserved by some peculiar art; he recognised them, and, stooping, took them up; for this new love of the French noble had something of the knightly reverence of old. He put the flowers in his breast, and went out into the night; his heart was heavy with the pain of enforced absence, but it was warm with hope and with the firm belief of love returned, belief he would never have so cherished but for the testimony of Strathmore—a testimony he felt instinctively was sincere because unwilling; and he thought of her tenderly, longingly, trustfully, while he looked back at the grey, stately, melancholy pile of White Ladies.

He whom he had quitted, pledged to fulfil the office trusted to his honour, stood for awhile motionless beside the lotus-fountain, his hand clenched hard on its marble rim.

An evil of which he had never dreamed uncurled about him up from the poisoned ashes of dead years; a contest which he had never foreseen nor feared was before him through which to wrestle;—and he was no coward, no traitor. He could not shrink from that which lay before him, he could not sacrifice the life he had sworn at all cost to preserve joyous, and knowing not pain, only to secure to himself a selfish and barren desire—the brute desire of the man who, banned from a treasure, destroys it, rather than let it drift, blessing and blessed, into the lives of others.

For awhile he stood motionless there, with his hand pressed on the marble where the young girl's brow had lain; then, with swift uneven steps at first, later on with a harder, firmer tread, as though treading down the accursed shapes which rose about him to torture and to tempt, he walked to and fro the pathway bordered and shaded with the palms. This man—whom his associates deemed callous to all pain, as the bronze to which they likened him, and who in his arrogance had held that life was a thing to be moulded at will, defiant of deity or man, of death or circumstance—suffered a fearful doom, such an one as purer souls or gentler natures never know.

Once, as he paced there in the midnight solitude, he looked up at the drooping and curled leaves of the palms above, and a bitter smile came on his lips.

"The emblems that fools choose of Peace, they are fitting in MY house! Peace! peace!—there is none! Oh, God, is there peace in the grave?—or does science, that knows we rot, lie as well as nescience that babbles of our resurrection? Is there peace there—dull, dreamless peace—or in death must we even *remember!*"

And in the heart-sick mockery there was a misery greater than lies in grief.

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## CHAPTER XII.

### Can Oblivion be Bought?

STRATHMORE had an accepted duty to perform, and from what he had once set before himself he never shrank nor paused. With as little mercy as he drove the steel into the souls of others, he drove it into his own when occasion arose; self-love and self-reliance were dominant in him, but self-pity he disdained, as the weakness of the coward. It was for Lucille's sake that he had given the pledge extracted from him the night before; it was for Lucille's sake that he prepared to fulfil it rigidly and to the uttermost letter, not grudgingly, nor with constraint moreover, but with a complete and unfaltering justice to the man who had trusted him.

And on the morrow he was braced to his ordeal. He was victorious, and ready to carry through what he had appointed to himself; what he had once elected to do he was strong to do, whether it were to inflict or to endure.

It was noon, and the windows of his private library stood open to a shady and secluded part of the gardens, with the Western sea beyond the deer forests.

He sat alone, writing the history entrusted to him; delicacy to her, not distrust to himself, prompting him to relate it thus, for Strathmore, "weaker in many things, stronger in a few," having once selected that which he had to do, was of the stuff to thrust his arm into the flame unblenching, and hold it there till it had consumed without a sign of pain.

So he wrote—wrote the truth in every iota of what had passed between him and the man who loved her. A calm letter, leaving no doubt unjust to the absent, withholding no expression which could assure her she was beloved by him, speaking of him as he deserved, as one not faultless without doubt, but as a generous and chivalrous gentleman, finally leaving her free to be happy in his love if she would, with such kind and thoughtful words of personal tenderness for her own peace as became his position towards her—such as

her father, had he lived, might have penned to her on the turning-point of her young life. The writing had the firm and delicate clearness of his habitual hand; the words were gentle to her, and just in the uttermost to the absent; the style was courtly, lucid, terse; there was not a trace that its composition had cost him anything, or that any feeling moved him save solicitude for her welfare and her future. Yet, when it was done, the dew stood upon his forehead as on the brow of a man who has passed through some great peril, and his head sank down till it rested on the writing-table—he felt as though the curse of his past were rising around him with its sensual murderous vapour, and stifling his life like poisonous fumes.

"It is just—it is just," he muttered, "that I should surrender her to the one who was with me when I slew him! Retribution—is there retribution? Only for cravens and fools! Do I grow a coward as well as a traitor?"

He flung the letter from him, and rose and went to the open casement, where the fresh west wind of the morning was blowing among the thick ivy which clung to the mullions. He wanted to shake from him what had newly assailed him. Strathmore was of the world, and one amongst its rulers; his deity was power, the essence of his life dominance, and that which weakened or undermined his strength he would have cut out by the roots and torn from him, no matter at what cost. Anguish might fasten on his solitary hours, remorse might seize the brief watches of the night, but it was unknown by men. As the Iron Cardinal wore the shirt of penance under the velvets and furs of his pontifical robes, and had the coarse pallet laid unseen under his sumptuous bed, so Strathmore kept his sin unforgotten, to torment him as it would, but never let it be seen of the world, or strike his ambition from his public life, and from his future hold. Like Ximenes he scourged himself, but he ruled others.

As he stood there he saw Lucille. She was feeding one of the pet fawns with rose-leaves, only a few yards from him; and in the fall of the lashes over the eyes, the smile upon the

lips, the whole attitude with which her head drooped, and she held the leaves to the little animal, there was something of weariness and dejection. Possibly, he thought, she had heard of Valdor's departure, though as yet, thus early in the day, it had not become generally known among the numerous guests at White Ladies.

Turning, she saw him, and the rose-leaves fell from her hand; she came to him with the gladness and grace of her habitual greeting, fleet as the fawn which followed her, ringing its silver bells; but the flush, which he had seen for the first time by the lotus-fountain, came on her face, her steps lingered more slowly as she drew nearer to him, and she did not lift her face for the caress which she was used to receive as a child receives her father's. The new love had already stolen her from him; the shadow of estrangement had already fallen between them.

"Have you anything you wish to say to me, Lucille?" he asked, gently, as he advanced to meet her with the graceful courtesy habitual to him to all women, but which to her alone was not unreal. He asked the question with some anxiety, some hope; he would fain have kept, at least, her free and fearless confidence, it was difficult to him to believe that she had so soon learned to treasure thoughts too dear for him to share.

She lifted her eyes with something of wonder mingled with their shyness.

"No—nothing."

He dropped her hand, and was silent a moment, while she stood beside him stroking the lifted head of the fawn.

"Do not think that I wish to force your confidence, my dear," he went on, gently still, "but I should be glad of a few minutes alone with you. Will you come into the library now?"

He held open the glass door for her to pass through; but she shrank back, something of the startled fear with which she had fled from him the night just passed came on her face again.

"You wish me?—now?"

The reluctance stung him to the soul.

"Certainly not, if you be unwilling. It is no matter."

Strathmore re-entered the library saying no more; he let no living creature disobey him, but to her he would not use coercion, not even command, and he left her, lest she—who knew not the blow she dealt—should wring from him one stern or bitter word. From such she was as sacred to him as are the dead to the living: he would no more have raised his voice harshly to her than we would raise our hand to strike some hallowed and beloved face that lies within its coffin.

As he took up his letter, and sealed and addressed it, standing with his back to the windows, he did not hear her follow him, he did not see her at his side, till he felt her lips touch his hand, and started at the caress to meet her eyes raised wistful and pleading to his own.

"Lord Cecil, did I displease you? Are you angry with me?"

"I could not know anger to you, Lucille."

"But you looked coldly at me—your words are not like your own. Are you sure I have not vexed you?"

He stooped to her; and the clear, inflexible voice, which never softened for mercy, nor faltered for pain, nor altered in welcome or invective, in courtesy or in mockery, but was ever tranquil and icy alike to friend or foe, quivered slightly as he did so:

"Lucille, once for all believe me; you can only pain me if I see you pained; you will most truly obey me, most truly rejoice me, by showing me that your heart has not an ungratified wish, nor your life a single sorrow. There is a letter lying there I wish you to read: do not hasten to answer it, to-morrow will be ample time for that—to-morrow at this hour."

His lips touched her cheek in his usual farewell, and he quitted the library.

She sank into his chair, and her head drooped, as the sunlight, slanting in through the ivy leaves, fell on her brow, while her lips were slightly parted in dreaming thought; not

wholly the childlike thought, poetic but unshadowed, with which she had gazed over the seas at Silver-rest, more restless, more vague, more troubled at itself.

"How good he is!—so great, so powerful, so famous, yet so untiring for me," she whispered, below her breath. "Pain him? Oh, how could any ever pain him, or disobey his lightest word? That guilty woman, who forsook him in the past, how could she ever betray such a heart as his? Perhaps her memory is bitter to him still; perhaps he has never loved another as he loved her!"

And the burden of those long-buried years, of that veiled past, she did not know, already cast its first faint shadow over Lucille, where she sat with her head bowed, and her eyes unconsciously tracing the path across the skies, of an autumn flight of swallows, winging their way to cross the golden land where her father's grave was laid, and the pine-covered mountains of her mother's Hungarian home, on towards Syrian air and Cashmere citron-groves.

Some moments had passed when she remembered the letter he had bade her read; she took it up without interest till she recognised his writing, then she opened it in eagerness, all that her guardian did or said was sacred to her. She would have disbelieved the witness of the universe if it had bid her see a stain upon the character whose very indifference to others only served to make her feel the more his constant gentleness to herself.

She opened his letter with eagerness; but as she read, the colour left her cheeks, a look of wondering pain came into her eyes, and at its close her face lost all its warmth and light; she pushed back the hair from her brow with a movement of startled disquiet, and her lips trembled. She sat silent, gazing down on the clear writing and dispassionate words; she was very young, and the love proffered to and pressed on her had little other effect upon her than that of wonder and something of repulsion, she had no need of it, no wish for it, and it had almost a terror for her. Phrases in this letter, moreover—those very phrases which most ex-

pressed solicitude for her welfare, and did most justice to Valdor's claims and story—smote her with a deeper pain. She felt for the solitary time in her bright, brief life, wounded, stricken, left alone.

"Is he weary of me, that it would give him pleasure to exile me to another life?"

It was this thought which made the mist gather between her eyes, and the wheeling flight of the swallows in the sun; this thought which brought over her face a look which it had never worn in her sunny life—a look of that pain from which Strathmore, for the sake of the dead, had set his will to guard her, as though he held the making and the marring, the warp and the woof, of that tangled web of Fate which is woven by hazard in the shadow of a dark uncertainty, and is not to be coloured or riven by the art or the strength of man.

"Lucille! what is it that has grieved you?"

She started, and looked up in the sunlight. Before her stood young Caryll, whom she had sent for rose-leaves for the fawn; the boy's face was troubled at the shadow upon hers, and his frank eyes shone with the love he was forbade to speak, and in which she, used to tenderness from her youngest years from all, and specially from him, never dreamt of danger. "All things loved her," as she had once said in her early infancy; and of another love than this affection which had always surrounded her, of the passion which her beauty awakened, or of the misery which it might cause, Lucille was utterly unconscious. Her life and her education had been such as to leave her, far longer than most, the guilelessness and purity of her childhood. It would be long ere the world could teach such a mind, grosser taint or darker knowledge; it would shake off the evil lessons as a bird's wing shakes the night dews.

"What has grieved you, Lucille?" the young man repeated, as he knelt before her.

"Nothing; at least—I do not know," she answered, slowly, while she pushed the hair from her temples with a certain heat and weariness.

"Something has," he persisted. "Perhaps my uncle ——"

Her face was flushed with light in an instant, and her eyes turned on him with rebuke:

"Nello! for shame—hush! When was Lord Cecil ever otherwise than generous and gentle and kind for *me?*"

The youth set his teeth hard; with the keen insight of jealous love, he feared none of his brilliant rivals who circled about her, free to whisper what they would, while his own lips were sealed to silence, as he feared this graceful and loyal devotion to the man whose years were double his, who stood in her father's place, and whose cold, world-worn, inflexible character looked to Lionel Caryll one which no feeling had ever touched, nor weakness ever smitten.

"Oh, Lucille, Lucille!" he said, with bitterness, for it was a cruel ordeal to chain down his words to go no further than his honour had pledged, "have a few weeks changed you so, that you have forgotten all the years from your infancy, and will not even share what grieves you with one whom you used at least to trust and love as a brother?"

She looked down on him surprised and regretful; the change was not that she gave less, but that he longed for more, and she wondered, self-reproachingly, how she had wounded him.

"Dear Nello, you *are* my brother, and I am not altered —not altered in one shadow! I could never change to those I love."

"And I am among them?"

His voice trembled, his heart beat loud; it was difficult not to pray with all his soul and strength for *one* love greater than all the rest, but it was much to keep his hold on the silver cord of her child-memories. Her hand strayed among the waves of his hair, while the eyes that were clear with the single-hearted loyalty of youth gazed up into her own, and the swift sunlit smile that was her heritage from her father lighted her face; it seemed to her so absurd that he could doubt she loved him, her playmate, her favourite, her brother!

"Nello! it is you who are changed! You never asked

those foolish, useless questions at Silver-rest! You know I love you dearly, very dearly. None will ever love you better than Lucille."

She spoke with the consoling, caressing affection of a loving child to one whom she fears, while she wonders how she may have wounded, and the young man's frank, tell-tale face gleamed with the light of hope and youth; the love of his years, if reverential and poetic, has much of the element of worship, and is quickly gladdened by a little, unlike the fierce, imperious, egotistic passion which, if it have not all, has nothing. He thanked her with joyous, tender words, which he found hard to rein in to the limits of his promise, and led her out into the sunlight.

"I see nothing of you, Lucille, here," he pleaded. "Give me this morning alone, as though we were at Silver-rest."

She hesitated a moment, listening; it was to the roll of carriages taking Strathmore and several of the men to a meeting twenty miles away, which, as Lord-Lieutenant of the county, he had promised to head. Then she went with Caryll where he liked, her guardian's letter lying on her heart, and lying—she knew not why—with a dull pain there.

The park was very beautiful in the autumn noon, with surge and beach, cloud and sunshine, golden woods and winding waters, all molten together in the amber light, and they wandered where chance led them. To her, to whom the brown chesnuts in her path, the sweep of a flight of deer, the glance of the ocean through an avenue of forest-trees were poems, all life, all nature were full of beauty; and he had no world but in her face, and knew no music but her voice.

They came at last to the small, grey, mediæval church of White Ladies, ancient as the Abbey, with dim storied windows, and Gothic walls all wreathed and darkened with ivy scarce less old. It stood shut in with foliage, and singularly still and peaceful, with the sheen of the sea gleaming below through its trees, and the lulling of the waves making solemn melancholy requiem over the buried dead.

"Hush! it is so beautiful!" she whispered to him, as if the

sound of his voice jarred on her in breaking the silence, while her face reflected the tender and holy memories of the place, as it reflected all such things but too deeply. "Listen! the sea itself murmurs softly and low, as though it were afraid to wake them. It is not death *here*, in the stillness, in the sunlight, under those shady leaves—it is only sleep!"

He was silent, gazing on her as her eyes filled with a reverent tenderness and a softened light, as they looked far and wistfully, beyond the beauty round her, into those sublime and mournful mysteries of life and death, in which the poetic spiritual mind had wandered away where his could not follow.

"I love the German name, God's Acre," she said, softly, after long silence. "It seems to say that while the world is only busy with the living, and so soon forgets its best when they are gone, He loves, and has garnered, the lost."

"Do not speak of those things, Lucille; death seems too brutal a thing to remember with *you*."

The youth felt, as all felt in her presence, something more tender than awe, more vague than fear, as looking upon a flower whose brilliance is too delicate and fragile to bloom long on earth, a sunshine too shadowless and too pure to be long lent of heaven. She smiled a little dreamily, and her hands wandered among the long waving grasses and coils of ivy, putting them tenderly aside from the nearest grave, whose single grey stone they had overgrown in their luxuriance; and, as she did so, she traced the moss-veiled letters of the inscription, which was but one word only—

**Lucille.**

She gave a low, startled cry:

"Oh, Nello! look—it is my name."

Young Caryll bent over her, startled also more than so slight a coincidence warranted; it gave him an emotion of pain to see the name he loved graven on a tomb, and in the sequestered village churchyard, where none but the peasantry had been buried century after century, save where the lofty

mausoleums of the great race of White Ladies rose, it seemed one strange and foreign to find there.

"Yours! Whose can it be? There is no date," he said, as he swept the grasses farther off the low headstone.

"No! Perhaps she died young, and they laid her here with only the name by which they had loved her;—and it told all to them, though nothing to us. Ah! death is cruel, desolate, sorrowful! The sun is warm, the sea is calm, the birds are singing, and *she* lies there—alone!"

Her voice was hushed, and her eyes were filled with a sad and tender light, as she wound the foliage reverently about the tomb, leaving clear the name that was her own, the name which touched her strangely, found on this unknown and lonely grave, which she knew not as the grave of her mother. Her temperament was vividly susceptible and deeply tinged with the reflective sadness which usually marks imaginative natures, and Lucille, to whom, personally, sorrow was but a name, felt for all things that suffered, for all who were lonely and in pain, with a divine and yearning pity. Life in her hands was a beautiful wonder-flower, just unclosing without a soil on its white virginal leaves, and the richest gold in its calix still hidden like the amber stamen of the half-opened lily. It seemed so cruel to her that there should be any for whom that beautiful flower was bruised and broken, and left colourless and crushed, and without fragrance, to be flung at the last into the darkened solitude of a closed grave!

And she sat silent, her hand still wandering over the foliage that covered the carved letters of her own name, while at her feet the wide blue sea lay shining in the light, and the honest, tender eyes of Lionel Caryll gazed upward to the face which he had loved from childhood. But her thoughts were not with him as she looked far away through the shady leaves of the church elms over the sunny waters: they were with the unknown life which lay buried and lonely beneath the moss, and with the words of the letter, which rested on her heart with a vague and heavy pain.

Strathmore returned late. He came and addressed a few courtly, gentle words to her, according to his custom, but he did not even with a look seek to learn the effect which Valdor's love had had upon her as he approached her.

"This day has been like an Indian summer! How have you spent it, my dear?"

He noted that her cheeks flushed and her eyes drooped at his presence.

"In the park with Nello. The air was so lovely! And ——Oh, Lord Cecil!"—her face was raised now, and her eyes full of wistful inquiry—"there is a grave here, in White Ladies, with my name, 'Lucille,' on the stone—only that! Whose was it? Do you know?"

"Your name? Had it any date?"

"No; nothing but the one word."

He smiled a little; and even his mother, who knew the history of that grave, could not see any look on his face save some slight amusement with the marvel of youth at the ordinary trifles it meets.

"Were you abroad, Lucille, you would see your name on many graves, though it is an uncommon one here. Several French refugees came to White Ladies, I know, in '89; possibly it belonged to one of them. The stone bore no date, you say? Now, your wandering fancy can dream a mournful story of exile and of severance, and weave an idyl from that single word!"

Those around them laughed; she smiled; the explanation she never doubted, yet the remembrance of that lonely grave lying beneath the waving grasses and the ivy coils, with its incessant requiem chanted by the melancholy seas, saddened her still; and Nello Caryll, as he listened, felt vaguely and causelessly, that in some way or other that nameless tomb under the shadow of the old monastic church was one of the links which bound Strathmore to the young girl, Lucille.

The day had been like an Indian summer, but its warmth and serenity had been treacherous. It had become very chilly

as the evening drew near; the "wild white horses" of the sea dashed in, flinging high their snowy foam; dark, ominous clouds drifted before the wind as the sun went down; and the fisher-people farther down the coast looked up and saw the sure heralds of the coming storm, as the grey gulls and curlews flew with a shrill scream over the angry waters.

In the same hour while the tempest was rising to break over the ocean and the beach, the forests and the hills, of White Ladies, a steamer was ploughing its swift way across the Channel, running fast before the gale to reach the French coast ere the night and the storm were down; and Valdor leant against the side of the vessel with the little delicate lilies of the valley close against his heart. He was on a perilous mission; his name had become suspected, all but proscribed, by the existing government, a trifle made known of his present errand, and he might be "detained," or worse: and yet his thoughts were bright and trustful ones, for the chivalrous nature of the Legitimist Noble knew nothing of the craven hesitance of fear, and—he loved and he thought himself loved.

"A rough night coming on, but we shall be in port in half an hour," said a voice beside him.

Valdor started from his reverie with a courteous "*Plaît-il, monsieur;*" and as he raised his head saw a tall, bronzed, soldierly man, whose face seemed to him familiar. The recognition was mutual, though indefinite, on both sides.

"Pardon me, but we surely have met before, though I cannot recall your name," said the Englishman. "I am Colonel Marchmont, Queen's Bays——"

"Whom I think I had the honour of knowing very well in Paris years ago; is it not so?" said Valdor, as he gave his own name, and acknowledged the acquaintance. "Surely the last time I had the pleasure of seeing you we acted together in an affair of honour?"

"Ah! ages ago," said Marchmont. "To be sure, I remember now; a shocking affair, when that incarnate brute,

Strathmore, killed poor Erroll. I beg your pardon for calling him so; no doubt he is a friend of yours still."

"A very valued one."

"Then I offer you many apologies, but the words slipped out," said the soldier, puffing Havannah smoke from under his long grey moustaches. "I have killed off plenty of men myself in the field, but there was something I didn't like in that affair; it was cold and deadly; one saw he 'meant murder' by his eye. They'd lived like brothers, and he shot him like a dog, and felt as little remorse afterwards! I dare say Strathmore's forgot the whole matter, hasn't he?"

"I have never heard him allude to it, nor any one else, for many years."

"No doubt. The world soon forgets, especially what its great men like to have forgotten. He is a wonderfully successful statesman; his politics are not mine, but there is no denying his power."

"He is the most able man of your country; he was always 'plus fin que tous les autres' in diplomacy," answered Valdor, as his hand wandered in the breast of his coat, where the fragrant lilies were hidden; "but you wrong him if you imagine him brutal. Cold he is, and when he is aroused, perhaps dangerous, still he has generous, and, indeed, great qualities. But you were intimate friends with Erroll, perhaps?"

"Poor fellow, yes! We were in the same corps."

"Do you know if he had any relatives?" Valdor's hand was on the lily-sprays, and a vague instinct connected in his thoughts the memory of Lucille with the memory of the dead man.

"None, I think, except old Sir Arthur, and some cousin or other, who had the baronetcy."

"There was no one to mourn him, then?"

"Nobody, except—all who knew him! He left me a letter for Strathmore, and one for a woman in England, if I remember right; that was all."

"A woman! Who was she?"

His hand was on the flowers, and he felt a sudden, keen, breathless impatience, as though it were closing on the thread of the mystery which he had always felt encircled the life he loved, and connected her with him whom the world saw as her guardian.

"Haven't an idea," answered the Englishman. "Some lady-love or other, I suppose."

"Do you remember her name, monsieur?"

"No, it is so many years ago. I fancy it was something foreign; but I recollect he addressed his letter to her at White Ladies. I remember that, because it was Strathmore's place, and poor Bertie was often down there."

"Would you know the name if you heard it?"

"I might."

"Was it De Vocqsal?"

Marchmont thought a moment.

"Eh? I don't know. I think it was. Yes, I am almost sure. Why?"

"Only because I had a fancy of my own about a story of his past, and I was curious to know if I were right. How the wind is rising; but there are the Boulogne lights. Are you going to Paris?"

"Yes, but only en route for a little farther; to India, for the next ten years, perhaps, if those mountain robbers go on worrying us," answered the soldier, too careless and too indifferent to the matter to wonder why Valdor had any interest in the past history of his long dead friend. Soon afterwards he was called to the cabin, where his wife, but lately wedded, had taken refuge, and Valdor was left alone, leaning on the rail of the ship, while his eyes watched the phosphor light flashing on the crested waves, and his hand held the lilies of the valley as though holding the pledge of a fair future in those delicate, withered sprays.

His pulses beat quicker—he had learned Strathmore's secret! That which every forethought had environed, every care veiled, every prudence and expedient concealed beyond reach of sight; that which had been buried for ever in the

graves of the dead, in a sepulchre whose seal no human hand was to break, lest the poisoned miasma should escape to touch with its taint the young and innocent, had come into his power. Dark, uncertain, shadowy as the past still was, he knew enough to know what was the link which fettered Strathmore to the fragile tenure of a dawning life, in so strange an union; what was the knotted cord of expiation worn beneath the chain armour, and the broidered velvet, of public ambition, and of worldly fame, by the man whom the world deemed remorse never smote. He had unearthed Strathmore's secret, and he forgot how pitiless to those who braved him, how unscrupulous where his passions were roused, or his will was opposed, how intolerant alike of those who stood in his path, or trenched on his power, was one whom nature had made inflexible, whom a woman had made cruel, and whom the world had made merciless. He only felt:

"*I* will never tell her; his remorse is sacred, his secret shall be safe with me."

And the French Noble thought with a generous pity, a noble faith, of the man whose atonement he had learnt, as in the shadow of the night he lifted the frail fragrant lilies of the valley to his lips, and kissed them reverently, like some hallowed relic, as he leaned over the dark angry waters while the vessel bore her way to France.

## CHAPTER XIII.

"Morituri te Salutant!"

It was near midnight; the fires were warm and the lights bright in the cedar drawing-room at White Ladies, flashing on the silver and azure panellings, the countless trifles of art and luxury, the clusters of exotics, and the delicate hues of the women's jewels and dresses. Some were playing chess or écarté, some softly flirting, some talking of sport and some of slander, while the clear contralto of Lady Chessville echoed from the music-room beyond, where she and her idolaters

were singing the music of "Figaro," which they would perform on the morrow in the private theatre.

Within, it was brilliant, still, peaceful, with no sound higher than the murmur of voices attuned to one soft, languid key, which never varied in pain or in pleasure, in repartee, flattery, or spleen. Without, the winds were rising shrill and high among the old monastic woods, and the lightning was swirling about the fretted pinnacles of the Abbey, and in the lull of the music the hollow, angry roar of the seas, answering the challenge of the storm, pealed through the silence. It was a rough night on the coast.

"Bad night out," said the Earl of Fernneley, with a suppressed yawn, as a blaze of lightning flashed through the length of the drawing-rooms, outdazzling the wax-lights.

"Plenty of casualties," suggested Sir Philip D'Orvâl.

"All the better for wreckers, they thank Heaven for foul weather!" said a pretty woman, castling her adversary's queen, and nestling herself in her causeuse to await his next move.

"Wreckers! You touch our esprit de corps, Lady Adela. We are all Ministerialists here," said Johnnie Vaux, a whip and a wit.

A languid but general laugh gave him the answer that flattered him most, as a minute gun was fired, faintly heard in the pauses of the thunder, but not stopping the cards, the chess, or the flirtations.

"Many lives lost off your coast in the year, Strathmore?" asked the Prince de Völms.

"Scores, I believe," answered Strathmore, with negligent indifference, as he pursued his écarté with D'Orvâl.

"Pray don't talk about it, then; it is terrible!" cried a Spanish beauty, with a shiver of her fan, drawing her perfumed lace about her.

Strathmore laughed his slight, gentle laugh:

"*Je n'en vois pas la terreur, madame!* Men must die, it doesn't much matter *how*. If casualties, epidemics, and wars didn't take off our surplus population at intervals, we should

soon be overrun. Nothing is more superfluous than those romantic laments for most convenient laws of nature! I mark the king, D'Orvâl."

Another signal of distress broke on the ear, muffled by the moaning winds, as he turned to pursue his game. With the proficiency of old, he brought the same skill and the same rules to cards as to the Cabinet, and won in both.

He had been perfectly sincere in what he had just said. His political economy taught him its truth. He had a profound indifference for mankind; loss of life did not concern him; with a cold, but correct, philosophy, he held that a thousand people killed by an accident, a battle, or an endemic, mattered no more in the aggregate, and was, therefore, as indifferent to men of sense, as the butchery of a thousand sheep in the shambles.

As he looked up to deal the last game he glanced across the room, and saw the gaze of Lucille fixed on him. Her eyes watched him under their long lashes with something of wonder, of reproach, of sorrow, mingled with their earnest and reverent tenderness; to *her* he never spoke such words, to her this side of his character was never shown, and at its pitilessness her heart which loved every living thing down to the lowliest flower, and grieved for the broken wing of a bird, felt a shuddering incredulity and pain: death would have been sweeter, and more mercy to her, than to have found an error or a stain in him. And that gaze, as he met it, was so like that which had dwelt on him in compassionate pardon, in mute reproach, while the sun sank down upon his wrath, that the life his hand had taken smote his conscience with the sudden memory of irrevocable crime.

He played the game out — played, and won with unchanged science and skill, or he had not been Strathmore;— then, crossing the drawing-rooms, he approached her.

"You look sad, Lucille. Are you afraid of the storm?"

She sat a little apart, no one was near at the moment, and she lifted her eyes to his as his hand lay on her shoulder:

"Afraid? Oh no! I was thinking of the people out at sea,

and of their misery. You only said that in jest; you would save them, I know, if you could? It is so terrible to sit in light and gaiety and comfort while the ships are perishing?—it seems like guilt to be careless and rejoicing while others suffer, and death is close at hand? There is something so fearful in life taken!"

His hand dropped from her shoulder—the hand which had "taken life"—and, stricken by those words, he went out away from the light, the murmur, the music; out into the solitude of the dark and stormy night.

No rain was falling, and the night was still, save when the winds, sweeping up through the forests, shrieked and moaned upon the air, and the noise of the waves arose with a hollow roar, like desert beasts seeking their prey. The ringed lightning, whirling down the sky, lit up the black masses of woodland and the ruins of the cloisters where the graves of the dead Dominicans lay; and at intervals, above the tumult of the wind and sea, the signal of distress broke faintly, and then died away.

He stood on the terrace, looking seaward, his head uncovered, his eyes meeting the blaze that was laden with death or blindness, braving the fury of the storm as he had braved the curse of God and Man. Its wild work rioted unnoticed, unfelt, around him; one of those dark hours was upon him of which the world never knew, when the pride of an arrogant and egotistic philosophy was rent asunder, and the throes of an undying remorse possessed the soul which knew itself but the more deeply damned because the loftiness of intellect by which it was companioned left it no plea of the dullard's brute ignorance, or the murderer's coarse apathy, in its crime. He had wrought his guilt wittingly, deliberately, and, though trodden down from memory by an iron heel, and forgotten through long stretches of time in the pursuit of power, in these hours—rare, solitary, horrible as those hours in which the men of earlier ages, passion-riven, deemed themselves fiend-possessed—it rose from the coiled and slumbering past, and twisted round him as the serpents round the Laöcoon.

Rare, but the more terrible for their rarity, these hours came upon him. He lived again through the commission of his crime; he heard the sullen splashing of the pestilential waters; he saw on his right hand the luminous glory of the sun; he watched the last-drawn breath shiver through the dying limbs, while the white and quivering lips gasped their last words of pardon: "I forgive—I forgive!—he did not know——" Pardon even in the throes of death! And the love that he had borne him, the love of youth's rejoicing brotherhood, uprose before him in all its glad communion, and the very earth beneath, the very air about him, seemed to call for vengeance for that guiltless life hurled into a brutal grave!

Arrogant to the living, before the memory of his sin he bowed, prostrate, stricken, accursed in his own sight. For his work was *irrevocable:* and in its despair, its fruitless yearning, its hopeless impotence, remorse looked mockery, expiation blasphemy.

What is done, is done for all eternity.

He stood looking seaward, while the thunder echoed from hill to hill, and the roar of the deep rose hoarse and sullen to its call, and as the wild winds lashed and moaned about him, his eyes looked up, and met the lightning unquailing. The great lost soul of this man, which knew a supreme remorse, but was never smitten with a craven's fear, found the echo of its own agony in the throes of earth and heaven, and from his lips broke a bitter cry, lost in the beating of the storm:

"Oh God! release me from my guilt!"

In the silence, as the tempest lulled and the winds sank to rise again in deadlier wrath, there echoed from the ocean raging below, the piteous signal, and the prayer for human aid, of men in their last extremity, perishing nigh at hand. He heard it, standing there, looking down into the darkness with his face towards the sea; and as from the night around him there arose that faint and weary moan of mortal misery,

his conscience whispered, "Let the hand which took life save it. So may its sin be redeemed!"

Then as men obey an imperative command, he bowed his head and went through the tumult of the storm down towards the sea.

In the dark-arched portal of the door leading from the western wing, gazing at him with the loyalty of her innocent love, while the wind drowned and wafted from her ear the cry to God of her father's destroyer, stood Lucille. Unseen and inspired by that instinct which lends courage to the weak and strength to the frail, she had followed him through passage and corridor to the silent and deserted western wing of the Abbey. The bright and delicate figure was strangely framed in the grey stone of the pointed archway; her eyes looked wistfully out into the weird darkness of the night; her hair gleamed golden in the flame which played about it; fragile, imaginative, impressible, fearful in much, the storm had no terror for her, its grandeur had been the music which had filled her heart with its own solemnity in earliest childhood, and to which she had loved to listen as to the sublime rhythm of a Miltonic poem. Moreover into danger or death she would have followed Strathmore without pause or fear.

When he bowed his head and went down towards the sea through the winds and the gloom, she left the archway of the door, and silently and softly pursued his steps over the mossy ground, strewn with rent boughs, and fallen fir-cones, along the steep and winding path which led to the beach. The gusts loosened her hair and tossed it floating on the air, the thunder of the skies and waters echoed from hill to hill, the lightnings made their mad war about her feet. Still she went on—she whom the storm could destroy as it destroyed the fairy-bells of the forest lily—went on without fear, for she followed him.

A wild night!

A night to drown death shrieks like the cry of a curlew, and play with men's lives as with wisps of straw. A night

with the black seas yawning in fathomless graves, and the hissing of the surge, filling every moment that the thunder lulled. No rain fell; the air was hot and arid; the dense clouds looked to stoop and touch the wave where it rose, a mighty wall of water, mountain high. A darkness impenetrable brooded over land and sea, when the lightning ceased for some brief second, and when it blazed afresh the heavens were filled with its flame that lit up the white stretch of beach, the Titan rocks that glittered, steel-like, in its light, the vast Druidic forests of the Abbey stretching westward, and the boiling, seething, roaring abyss, where the sea devoured its dead in the horror of night, to smile calm and sunny in the morning dawn, when its work would be done, and its prey rot below, with the sand in their eyes and the salt weeds in their hair, and the nameless things of the deep creeping over their limbs—over the childish brow that had been flushed warm with sleep a few hours before, over the long floating tresses that had been played with by a mother's hand, over the lips which had been sought in the bridal softness of a good-night caress. For the sea is fellow-reaper with death, and, like his comrade, will not spare, for youth, or love, or pity, for childhood's cry, or mother's prayer, or gallant strength of manhood.

It was a wild night. The wind rose in sudden blasts swift and fierce as a simoon, sweeping down from the wooded heights of the ancient monastery over the darkness of the sea, and driving against each other the great masses of the clouds like armies hurled together. The deafening roar of waters met the thunder of the skies as they rolled back peal on peal; and in the occasional glare the ship was seen, black and spectral, with sails rent away, and masts broken like willow boughs; flung from side to side as a lame bird is flung in cruel sport, now lifted on the crest of giant waves, now sunk from sight in the chasm of the closing waters, reeling, rocking, driven at the mercy of the winds, alone in the trackless waste. The minute-gun was silenced now, or drowned in the tumult of the storm; but ever and anon from the

tempest-tossed vessel there rose the shrill, piercing wail of perishing souls, the cry in which Strathmore had heard a voice as the voice of God, bidding him who had destroyed life save it.

The beach stretching beneath the wooded cliffs of White Ladies was almost deserted. There was no fishing village near for several miles along the coast, and there were no fisher-folk, no coast-guard men, no boats, save the pleasure-boats kept for the Abbey, pretty toys, shaped like Turkish caïques, that would have been beaten to pieces in the storm like painted butterflies. A few men had gathered on the shore—gamekeepers, lodgekeepers, woodsmen, labourers, cotters—looking helplessly on, full willing to succour those in peril, but incapable of lending any aid; they had a great coil of stout rope with them, but they gazed vacantly and sadly at it; they had no means to use it for any chance of rescue unless the storm lulled, and some dared swim out to sea. They fell back, and uncovered their heads as Strathmore's step was heard on the surf-splashed sand, and the lightning shone upon his face; he did not seem to see them, but stood looking outward to the ocean where the ship was reeling through the trough of the waves. In the uproar of the night, in the fury of the storm, in the violence of the winds that swept the sea apart in yawning gulfs, and piled it high in beetling barriers of foam, and flung it over the quivering vessel as though it were some living thing they strove to stifle and entomb, help from the hand of man seemed hopeless; nothing but a life-boat could have lived through such a sea.

He stood looking in silence outward, his head uncovered to the winds, his eyes meeting the electric glare unflinching, behind him the granite pine-crowned slope of the cliff, at his side the group of men, silent, too, and watching him with something of wonder, for they had never seen their lord take heed of the waste or cost of life upon the coast; with much of anxiety and hope, as the light flashed flickeringly about them, for they knew how bold a swimmer he was, and had heard through what storms he had brought his yacht in

distant tropic seas in years gone by. Unseen by him, for she knew he would forbid her braving the risks of the night if he saw that she had followed him—stood Lucille. Her arms were close wound about a tall pine to lend her resistance against the gusts that swirled through the forests, and bent the old witch-elms like silver larches; her long hair was unloosed, and filled with sear brown leaves blown in it by the wind; her eyes were gazing on him through the blinding flashes, her face white to the lips, but in awe with which fear for herself had no share, awe that was filled with the pity, the terror, the sublimity, the grandeur of the storm. The ocean, in her imaginative creed, was the mighty servant of God, moved by his voice and ruled by his will; eternal power spoke to her in the rushing of the storm, as eternal mercy smiled on her in the sunlight of the seas. She had no fear; and she stood with her arms wound about the knotted pine, and her hair floating backward from her brow, as in the pictures of old masters the young angel stands, serene and filled with an infinite compassion and love, while the earth is tempest-rocked beneath his feet.

On the beach Strathmore looked outward over the boiling waters, and alone far out to sea the lost ship laboured.

The heavens were riven by a sheet of flame, the vessel was distinct against the glare, so nigh, that from the shore the crowd swarming on the deck and clinging to the ropes were seen in the spectral light. Then one huge wave dashed over her and laid her down on her leeward side; there was a crash, a crushing splitting noise, that echoed to the land; darkness fell over the face of the waters; the moaning wail of perishing lives pierced above the tempest roar—the ship had struck.

When the blaze shone out again, the wreck lay with its hull out of water, stranded on a sunken rock, a black and shapeless mass, a bow-shot only from the shore; more than a third of its freight of human life had been swept off by the sea that had engulfed it, and the remnant left clung to the shattered timbers, their faces turned towards land, their shrill

shrieks ringing through the night. Strathmore's eyes glanced over the short stretch of the channel which lay betwixt the shipwreck and the beach, and measured it unerringly—as unerringly he gauged the danger, almost the impossibility, of any swimmer living through those seas. Nevertheless he turned to the men beside him:

"Fetch me a coil of rope."

"I've got rope here, my lord," said his head-keeper, as they hauled the great coil nearer.

"We can't do not nothing, your lordship," said another man, one of his tenant farmers. "God knows I'd risk a bit to save those poor drowning wretches; but even a boat, if we had one, my lord, wouldn't live through that ere storm."

"Most likely not," answered Strathmore, indifferently, stooping to try the strength of the cable with his hands, while the men grouped about him with white scared faces and eager wistful eyes, that strained now towards the wreck where it lay in the heaving waters, now towards his movements, with the dull mechanical anxiety and marvel with which those, whom peril and emergency stupefy, look on at him whom they only nerve and arm. He was flinging off his evening dress, lashing a lantern to his shoulders, and knotting tight about his waist one end of the rope. He knew that hazard ran a thousand to one that the boldest and surest swimmer could ever breast the mad fury of the seething waves and return alive; death waited for him in a hundred forms. He had no pity, no yearning for those dying in the darkness of the night; and his philosophic creed had held in its calm logic that death, as the universal law, reaps its sure average every year, and that the mode of its advent is of little import. Life was precious to him, for his power, his intellect, his ripened triumphs, his gathered honours, his influence over men and nations; it was as wide waste to risk his existence for that of a ship's crew—common sailors, wailing woman, useless children—as to risk a man's for that of a dog. It was not for them that he came to wrestle with the storm, to rescue them or perish; it was for the memory of the

dead; it was for the wretched law of expiation, which he had set to himself with the iron sternness of Mosaic law; it was for the remorse which in its dark hours forced him to any travail, to any sacrifice, to any ordeal, which could wash the blood-stain from his hand. Thus he had done great things unknown to men, things of a noble charity, wrought on one inexorable principle of atonement, in silence and unseen of the world, even as in monastic days the soul strove to cleanse and justify itself by pitiless penance in cloister and in battle, among the plague-stricken and the infidel, in the death-ranks of the Crusade, and the reeking pestilence of the Lazarwards.

He knotted the cord close about his waist, and glanced once more across the boiling seas; he was a skilled and daring swimmer, and held all danger in the sure measurement, yet the cool disdain, of a sagacious courage.

"For heaven's sake! my lord, you won't try those seas!" said the men, involuntarily crowding nearer, their deference to his rank, and their first awed wonder at his cool rapid movements, breaking down before the imminence of the peril that he was about to encounter, single-handed and unaided.

"Strathmore, for the love of God, what are you about!" shouted one of his guests, who, with Caryll and another, sprang down from the cliffs above, having left the drawing-rooms soon after him to visit the shore, not naming where they came lest they should alarm the women; the thickness of the pine-boughs and the wood parted their path from where Lucille stood, and they saw her no more than he did on the beach, as they plunged headlong through the blaze of the storm down the slippery precipitate path, strewn with broken branches and with loosened boulders.

"Nothing wonderful," he answered simply; "only what any of my yacht's crew would do in a second."

"But no man can live in those seas!"

"Oh, I don't know. I have swam the Bosphorus in rougher weather still."

Young Caryll laid his hand on his arm.

"Lord Cecil! let *me* go! I swim like a water-dog, and your life is too great to be flung away on a risk."

The youth's face was very pale, and his eyes shone with excitement; he was of a generous, impressible nature, and it touched him strangely to see one whom he had known but as a haughty ambitious and caustic man of the world, ready to face death for (as he deemed) the mere sake of those who suffered, ready to peril life to succour perishing strangers.

"My life is required of me; yours is not."

The brief, calm words bore no meaning to the boy's ear, save that they refused to yield up place to him, but his hand tightened still on Strathmore's, and his voice, hurried and low, was drowned to any other ear than his in the din of the storm.

"Let me go first at least, sir! *She* would never forgive me if I stood by to see you perish."

Strathmore started, and Nello could not tell whether the quiver which passed over his face was one of pain or was but the shiver of the flickering flash. He put him aside with a brief command:

"I forbid you to peril your life!—and while you talk the wreck is sinking."

Then, shaking himself free from the other men, he plunged without pause into the dark, seething breakers;—the wild, broken cry of a young voice rang out upon the night, as the waves closed over him, but in the crash of the tempest, and the tension of high-strung excitement, none heard, or none regarded it.

In the glare from the rent skies, those clinging to the wreck saw him fling himself down into the boiling chasm of the seas to save them, and gave him one ringing cheer that pierced above the thunder and drowned the dying, stifled shriek of those who were washed at that instant into the darkness yawning round. He knew that death was nigh; he knew that the keenest skill, the boldest daring, could do but little against that mad mass of loosened waters; he knew that in a second's space the chance was, as a million to one,

that he would be flung back upon the rugged granite of the rocks, torn, mangled, bleeding, lifeless, or be beaten down under the weight of the waves, never to rise again. Yet he gave himself to the fury of the seas without hesitance, and let their surging billows yawn for him and close above his head, while over the wide waste of ocean the great darkness again fell, and those who gazed, awe-stricken and with tight-drawn breath, knew not whether the issue would be life or death. The lightning shone out afresh, and he rose, flung to and fro upon the heaving foam, grappling hard with death and danger, and refusing to be conquered: then, from the broken, shapeless wreck a great cheer rose again, and rang over the seas, sublime as a Te Deum, grand as the Io Triumphe of the victor's pæan;—it was the "Morituri te Salutant!" of the dying to him who died for them.

Thrice he was hurled backwards to the shore; thrice, bruised, buffeted, borne down by the weight of the waters heavily as by an iron mace, he swam out again, striking the waves with steady, unceasing strokes. The salt foam was in his teeth, and in his eyes, the seas threw him hither and thither, and flung him down into their depths. They cast him, now, outward to the waste of the ocean, now, backward towards the jagged beach rocks, where, once dashed upon the granite, he would lie a shapeless corpse; now high upon the crested billows in the lurid glistening light, while the great bulk heaved and rocked beneath him; now, down into the chasm of the yawning seas, while the breakers swept over his head, and in the darkness he heard the sullen roar sounding in his ear and beating in his brain, and felt the surging of the waves seeking whom they should devour.

Neither from wreck nor shore could his path be traced, —now and again when the lightning lit the skies they saw his arms stretched out upon the black expanse, where he wrestled with the winds that blew in his teeth and drove the waves upon him, and swayed him to and fro as the current sways a straw. Once through the shroud of darkness that covered the deep, on which the wail of the drowning lives

alone was heard, the light lashed to him shone out for one fleet instant, to be lost in the impenetrable gloom. When it sunk from sight they could not tell whether he yet lived amidst the fury of the seas, or whether he were dashed upon the sunken reefs to rise no more, until a rigid, sightless, broken corpse should float upward in the dawn of the morrow's sun.

A great awe fell on those who watched and waited for the issue of this contest of one human life with the tumult of ocean and storm; their lips were white, their breath was held, their brows were wet with dew. They feared, they trembled, they suffered for him as he never did for himself; for in the jaws of the grave Strathmore was calm, and with danger the dauntless and defiant courage in his blood rose resolute. He beat his path through the salt blinding water, recovering again and again every yard from which the wind drove or the sea dashed him back. None wrestling through the tumult of the night, to reach what they loved best from the fast-sinking wreck, would have fought a more enduring conflict with the death which menaced him on every side, than he who, with no human love, no human pity for one of those for whom he gave himself, cast himself into the devouring seas, for sake of a sterner and nobler duty, for sake of the atonement which should save life by the same arm which had once taken life, and wash out the stain of blood-guiltiness by the ransom of lost souls.

The night was holy, the storm was sanctified to him. With each time that he arose from the salt, fathomless abyss, he was nearer to the expiation for which he laboured. With every stroke by which he forced back the murderous waters, he was victor over the remorse which in its dark hours made him accursed in his own sight. With all the bruised, exhausted pain of that wild work, as the ocean flung him downward, and the winds hurled him against the rocks, and the salt surf dashed in his aching eyes, he felt but as in ancient days, those guilt-laden and athirst for freedom from the memory and the burden of their guilt, felt the points of the

iron in their flesh, or the torturing baptism of fire, as an atonement welcome and hallowed, a purification before God.

For in these hours the dark, grand, wild barbaric nature latent in him broke out and ruled; and shattered down the creeds of the Statesman, the Courtier, and the World.

At last he neared the rock, beating his way through the uproar and the gloom, while above him the great waves were like the towering crest of an Alpine slope. For a moment the lightning died out, and in the thick darkness he lay, waiting till in its glare he should be able to reach the side of the stranded and shattered hull. The blaze flashed out afresh, illumining sea and sky, the measureless waste, and the dark woodlands of the shore; and—at the instant when the dying saw their deliverer, and in the stead of death hope came to them—the curled, reared waters rolled, and swept up with a hoarse roar, like a lion's when he is an hungered and baffled of his prey, and broke upon the wreck. When they again severed and left it free, the crowding lives had been swept with them, and garnered to the grave; a remnant alone was left: he was too late. The elements themselves mocked and denied him his expiation!

Where he looked upward to the shapeless, sinking mass, the cry of the drowning, devoured ere he could reach them, rang on his ear; and from his own lips a moan broke in the silence and solitude of the vast waste.

"My God! my hand is too accursed to *save!*"

As though in answer, from the riven clouds the soft radiance of the moon shone out for one brief space, bathing land and sea with its pale light after the lurid glare of the storm. A few were left upon the wreck—four or five women and children and youths; these, in their mortal misery, turned their eyes upon their saviour, and with that mute and terrible prayer besought his succour. No wild shouts greeted him as he swam to the wreck, and made his footing on its slippery woodwork; those who would so have welcomed him, had a second before been swept away to death; yet, as he reached the sinking ship, one, yards distant, wrestling for life in the

trough of the sea, saw him, and gave him a single ringing cheer, the Moriturus te Saluto of the dying to the victor;—then the voice ceased which in the throes of death had been lifted to hail him who had come too late, and in the black whirling water the sailor sank, with that greeting on his lips to the stranger in whom courage found its comrade.

The moon was shrouded now in darkening clouds, that were driven swift as the hurricane across the skies; but the almost ceaseless play of the lightning made it clear as day. He saw the white faces of dead men rise up about him, and the dark floating hair of women's corpses was blown over his hands as he swam towards the reef, through the seas, which were strewn with the flotsam and jetsam of the shattered ship, and mounted with steady grasp the shelving, slippery mass, which was all that was left of the stately vessel that when the sun had gone down had been steering calmly before the wind, with white sails set, through a fair and balmy evening, over a laughing azure sea. When the few who were gathered together, trembling and praying, waiting for instant death, and scourged by the brutal stripes of the salt billows as they broke, saw him ascend and stand amidst them, giving his life for theirs, they fell upon their knees and lifted their blanched faces, and blessed him and prayed to him with tears of agony: their saviour looked to them not man, but deity.

And as they wept and clung about him, and worshipped him as their deliverer from death, he neither saw nor heard them; but in that moment when he stood upon the deck, with the tumult of the storm between him and the land which he might never reach again—between him and the life which was filled with wealth, and power, and honour, and the ripe fruitage of a great ambition—Strathmore remembered but one, the Dead who in the long-buried years had fallen by his hand: and from his lips a prayer broke, more bitter and more yearning than any which those who wept about his feet prayed for their deliverance from the grave:

"Oh God! Let *this* atone!"

He bade those trembling and quivering in the terror of the night be still and of good cheer, and with the aid of the youths—lads who had been passengers in the ship, and could not swim—he unwound the rope from about his waist, and fastened it tightly to a ring-bolt; the other end had been held by those on shore, and, made taut, it stretched a narrow bridge through the pathless waters, a frail yet precious aid through the great abyss that yawned between the drowning, and the land where lay deliverance and safety. It was a hideous passage—through the curved walls of the giant waves, through the black salt chasm filled with the hollow roar of voracious billows, through drenching, merciless blows of solid waters, with but that one vibrating cord as plank between them and their destruction!

Yet the love of life is a master-passion, and makes the feeble strong, the coward daring, the weakness of womanhood cope with the force of giants. It was their sole chance: one by one, in the glare from the heavens or by the flickering lantern-light, he directed them to descend, and pass along the rope where it stretched through the foam and the gloom. There were wild disorder, delirious panic, the fever of hope conflicting with the horror of despair, the abject anguish of helpless women. But the same tranquillity and resolve which bore down the opposing factions of states and ministries made their might rule here; he who is calm and resolute in peril is a king among his fellows. One by one he made them descend, holding back the reckless, encouraging the fearful, warning, guiding, commanding each, bidding each be of strong heart and of sure courage through the perilous and dire passage. Seven lives were launched by him on that frail bridge which he had perilled his own life to give them, where it hung vibrating above the boiling surf, and passing through the gorge of the waves. One alone was swept down into the abyss, and perished; six were rescued, and one by one he saw them reach the shore, and received by those waiting there, in the ruddy gleam of the beacon-fire hastily piled on

the sands from the broken pine-boughs and the resinous firs. He had saved them. Six lives wrestled for with death, and brought from out the grave;—might not these expiate *one* taken?

Standing on the wreck, which he refused to leave while any were still unrescued, he looked across the sea as the wild shouts which welcomed those whom he had succoured, and saluted the grandeur of his act, rang loud through a pause in the uproar of the storm; and on his face a light shone which had never been there in the days of his youth, and in his eyes came a sublime serenity; the peace, the gratitude, the rest with God and man, of the soul which, after lengthened years of travail and remorse, is at the last released from the brand and burden of its crime, and purified by expiation.

The holiest hour of Strathmore's life was this in which he stood alone in the wide desert of the ocean.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### Lost in the Hour of Redemption.

Two yet remained, young boys but little out of infancy, for whose delicate hands and fragile limbs the passage by the rope was hopeless. Their mother had been swept from them when at the first crash upon the reef the vessel had parted amidships, and half her human freight had perished: the children, by the wild caprice of the seas, had been spared, and sat locked in each other's arms, the elder comforting the younger, strangely stilled and in the awe of a voiceless terror. Strathmore looked down on them, then stooped and touched the elder, a little fellow of some seven years, whose fair locks were drenched in the brine and surge.

"Leave your brother and trust yourself to me. I can only save you one at a time."

The child gazed up at him with sad and dreaming eyes; the horror of the awful night had left him passive, his eyes were tearless, and his face very white. He loosened his arms

from the little four-year-old, and motioned Strathmore to take him instead. They were French children, for the ship was a Havre vessel bound for America.

"Take Victor first, not me; my mother loved him best."

The plaintive heroic answer was drowned in the hurricane, but Strathmore heard it, and lifted up the younger, as the boy bade him.

"I will save you both. Have no fear. You are a brave child."

He took the other in the grasp of his left arm, who was all but unconscious from cold, from terror, and from the blows of the heavy billows, and plunged down once more into the waters. As he quitted the wreck, he saw one whom he had not noted—a woman lying prostrate, insensible, perhaps dead. It was too late to go back; when he returned for the boy he could rescue her if she lived; and he gave himself once more to the madness of the ocean, this time with the dead weight of the young child hanging wearily upon him.

From the shore they saw him leave the deck thus laden, then they lost sight of him in the deep trough of the heaving seas; in the darkness they knew not whether his life had been laid down in ransom for those whom he had saved, or whether he wrestled with the seas again to be again their victor. The blackness of night brooded over land and water, while the sullen roar of the thunder rolled through the air, and the equinoctial fury of the winds lashed the storm to its height—they knew not whether he lived or perished.

Then, where the gleam of the fire on the beach was cast red and lurid upon the breakers, as they rolled upward, crested with white hissing surf, they saw him rise, bearing the burden of another life.

Swift as thought, Lionel Caryll flung himself into the sea, and swam to meet him. Strathmore threw the young boy to him, and, without pause, turned and went backward to redeem the word he had given to the child left there by his own will to perish, that his brother might be saved. Once more back through that terrible travail of life with an im-

pending death; once more through the passage of the trackless seas, through the darkness of the tumultuous night, through the massive waves, with the brine in his eyes and his teeth, with the bodies of the dead floating around him, with the winds hurling him hither and thither, and striking him blindly with great masses of curled water. Once more; —while now, his breath came in laboured gasps of pain, and every sinew throbbed with the unnatural strain, every muscle quivered, every bone ached;—while his throat was parched, his eyes starting, his temples aching; while he had to combat with a yet direr and more insidious foe than the ocean, in the exhaustion which was slowly gathering over all his limbs, and stealing out the life and power from his frame.

Yet strength of the will conquered weakness of the body; he reached the rock afresh, and the wistful eyes of the boy, gazing into the night, saw his deliverer return faithful to his word, though it was but pledged to a lonely child. Strathmore ascended the stranded wreck, and paused to rest, and gather force to reach the shore in this last passage, whose peril was more imminent than all. A brief breathing-space sufficed to give him back some strength; his muscles were of steel, his powers of endurance great, and his ascetic life had left his frame firm knit as in his earliest manhood. As he paused, and looked down to where in the darkness the waves were dashing the wood and iron of the devoured ship together, and whirling the dead bodies of the drowned men in wreathing phosphorescent light, he heard a sullen menace roll and groan through the shattered hull on which he rested —it was the sure and ominous sound which preceded the parting of the few broken timbers which still held together. They were no longer safe for a single second: one moment more and the sea would break away, destroying all life which should remain near the abyss which yawned for then. It was quite dark; the uncertain glimmer of the lantern he had left upon the deck was cast about his feet, but it shed no light on the wide waste around, where the cry of the waves was like the cry of desert lions, and the bodies of the dead were

washed against the reef, lit only here and there by the weird phosphor-glitter on the surf. There was no time for pause, for thought; he stooped and touched the woman lying at his feet; she was unconscious from terror or from a swoon, but he laid his hand to her lips, and felt them warm; in her bosom, and her heart was beating. She lived; he could not leave her there to certain death.

He bade the child mount on his shoulders, and cling close so as to leave his arms free and his limbs unshackled; the boy, quiet and intelligent beyond his years, comprehended and obeyed him; then Strathmore raised the woman's form, and grasping her firmly in his left hand, felt his way with his right along the rope down the side of the wreck, which every moment might yawn, and crash, and disappear, and so committed himself yet again to the fury of the seas, thus heavily laden with the burden of two lives. The thick darkness was around him; he could see neither the waste that stretched before, nor the vaulted skies which brooded above him. He sank as he first swam out from the side of the ship; the great waves washed over him, and he held himself as lost, with the child's hands clinging round him, and the weight of the woman hanging on his arm. The waters closed over his head and over the boy's fair curls, and he felt the salt billows surging in his ears and stifling his breath: he heard the rushing of the surge, he knew that he was sinking to his grave. Better, he thought, for him to perish so—better to die thus in the supreme martyrdom of a grand labour, in the great ransom of a holy expiation. His death might absolve his life; he might then yield up his soul in peace with God and man; having sinned much, yet much atoned!

But death was not for him in that hour.

The long hair of the woman swept across his lips; he shuddered and sickened at its touch, he knew not why, as he had never done at the sharp agony on the jagged rocks, or the blinding blows of the massed water. By his involuntary movement his foot touched the projecting timber of the sunken wreck; instinctively he struck with all his force

against the beam, so that the impetus given might send them upward to the surface; he rose, and they breathed again, floating in the impenetrable darkness on the face of the ocean. Life was yet his and theirs whom he had saved, and he lay on the waters, parting them with the strength of his single arm, while afar off through the dense gloom gleamed the leaping flames of the beacon fire. His hand grasped the woman's form, which he bore up against the force of the hurled billows, and her hair swept again against his lips, and her breath was on his cheek, while she faintly awoke to consciousness from her trance, as they moved through the icy air. Thus they passed together through the darkness of the night, through the tumult of the storm, through the valley of the shadow of death.

Thus they passed together amidst the devouring waters, with the innocent face of the young child nigh them, and the cold limbs of the lost dead washed against them.

As the last ransom of his soul from guilt, as the last travail in his ordeal of redemption, he was bidden to save this woman's life.

Above, in the brooding skies, the dense clouds driven by the hurricane were hurled on one another; the shock vibrated through the air, and pealed over earth and sea. There was a hideous light which lit in it land, and heaven, and ocean—and in its gleam he saw her face, the lips close to his own, the eyes filled with a fearful agony, the trailing length of the amber hair lying loose upon the waves.

And they knew one another, they whom guilt had bound together, while they looked down into each other's eyes, where they lay on the boiling, hissing, bitter waters with the livid light upon their faces, as, in the vision of the Poet, the doomed behold and recognise each other sinking in the liquid fires of the Lake Avernus.

She gazed on him with a dumb and terrible appeal, for his will alone upheld her from the yawning abyss, and back upon her ear through the midst of many years rang words once uttered to her in the hour of her extremity:

"If you were drowning before my eyes, and my hand stretched out could save you, you should perish in its need."

Beneath her, around her, leaping up to seize her as hounds leap on their prey, the waves surged and roared; between her and destruction there stood but the mercy of him to whom mercy was unknown; death was upon her unless he gave his life to save her—he whom she had made a murderer!

A worse temptation than any that ever had assailed his life, assailed him now, in the hour of his atonement: had he still strength to rise above it?

Afar off, on the hanging rock, under the monastic woodlands, with her arms wound about the great stem of the pine, her fair hair floating in the wind, her eyes gazing down into the raging seas, unblinded by the storm, and opened wide with straining, yearning pain, stood Lucille; and her young face, white and pure, and filled with a sublime light, was as the face of an angel, and on her lips was one voiceless unceasing prayer to God for him, in whom she saw but the deliverer from death, the saviour of the lost. Had he looked *there* he might still have conquered, still have endured; and saved himself from the fresh guilt which uprose and curled about him from out the slimy bitter waters like some loathsome shape from the depths of the sea. But the ringed lightning circled him, eddying round in its ghastly glare, a whirlpool of flame—fire burning on the icy gulf—and by its light he and the woman who had betrayed him gazed alone on one another as their faces rose above the seething mass.

They met again.

In his eyes there came the dark, merciless gleam of the passions which were not dead but sleeping, the ruthless thirst of the vengeance which no time could satiate, no draught could slake: she was his temptress still. The noble serenity, the thankful rest of one who has laboured for absolution, and won his way to meet atonement, passed from his face—perhaps for ever. Where the lurid flame gleamed on it as he rose above the foam, it grew white and rigid with deadly menace.

And his hand unloosed its hold, and left her alone upon the fathomless seas.

"Die—as you condemned him to die!"

The words hissed to her through the tumult of the storm, and her eyes gazed up to his with a mute, appealing terror, yet with a hatred bitter and brutal as his own, where she was left to perish, the water reaching to her livid lips, her brow turned upward in the scathing light. Then, in the circle of the azure flame that played upon the chaos, Marion Vavasour sank, downward, downward, till the loose trail of her floating hair was beaten beneath the billows.

A moment, and he knew what he had done. An agony of horror fell upon him, he plunged down again into the depths—again and yet again,—he swept the waters with his arm; he searched for her in vain search; he grasped the gliding waves, the salt and slippery foam:—that was all!

Darkness fell over the ocean, and darkness as of the night covered his own soul, which for one hour of travail and of martyrdom had soared upward to God's light, and had failed in the supreme instant of victory, in the crowning ordeal of temptation. She had been his temptress again, and again he had fallen; again through her he knew himself accursed! And on his face a great misery gathered, for the weight of his guilt lay afresh upon his life, and the work of his expiation was tainted and shattered, and in vain;—his ransom had been lost even as it was redeemed.

No human sight had looked upon that awful meeting on the waste of the ocean; its history was hidden in the shroud of the storm, in the wildness of the hurricane, in the beating of the seas; the darkness brooded over land and water, darkness impenetrable, filled with the rushings of the winds and the roar of the ice-chill breakers. When the light broke forth again from the riven skies, they saw him towering above the boiling waters, and holding the young child aloft; erect, and with measured movement he came through the surf breaking breast high upon the shore, the glare upon his face, the cold surge parted by his arm. Then, as the shout of those who

welcomed their deliverer vibrated through the midnight, Strathmore reached the land—and, without word, without sign, reeled and fell as one dead.

A cry, wailing through the night, rang on the silence as he fell.

There was a swift, noiseless sweep, as of a sea-bird's wing, past those who gathered round him; in the beacon's light they saw what seemed to them a face, rather of heaven than of earth. Lucille sank down beside him, where he lay on the wet beach.

"He is not dead? He will be saved?—he will be saved?"

Her voice, in its anguish of appeal, thrilled above the tumult of the storm, above the hoarse roaring of the breakers; it pierced through the mists of the exhaustion which clouded and dulled his reason; a shudder ran through his frame where he lay stretched, felled in his spent strength, like a stately pine that the tempest had broken and laid low.

"Saved? No. *Lost!*"

His mind awoke to its guilt ere his senses revived to the world; but the low delirious words died muttered and unheard upon his lips. Life was dark and meaningless to him; he remembered nothing save that dim horror of unexpiated guilt; the noise of the rushing seas was in his brain, the throes of a great suffering throbbed and quivered through his strained limbs, an iron weight seemed to lie on him, crushing the breath from out his chest, as the lead and beams were piled on the condemned in ancient days; he was sinking down, down, into a fathomless abyss, while the amber hair of his temptress twisted and writhed and netted round him, and would not let him loose!

His eyes unclosed, and opened blindly and in pain to the wild fury of the night, to the whirling of the lightning blaze, till he saw the child-face above him, with its fair angel light. What had she to do there, in the night, in the storm, with the black seething waters, with the giddy flame? In a faint, unconscious gesture, he stretched out his arms:

"Lucille!"

Their eyes met;—and with a low, delirious laugh of joy she sank senseless down on the dank sands, her head bowed unconsciously on his breast, her bright hair trailing in the surge, the virginal flowers that crowned it tangled with black beach-weeds.

And in that moment, as he met her eyes in the dizzy glare that swept over earth and sky and ocean, a light more terrible than the death-fire that played upon the sea flashed through the blind mists before his brain.

He knew that Lucille loved him.

## CHAPTER XV.

### "And Retribution arose."

THE dawn broke, the pine-boughs were bathed in the light, the snowy surf was tossed upon the beach, the waves swept up with stately measure, and broke in melodious murmur on the shore, and the curlews flew through the fresh air. Earth, and sky, and ocean kept no record of their work, and over the sunken reef where the ship had found her grave, the wild blue waters, rearing in the sun-gleam, broke in joyous idle mirth, crested with snow-white foam.

Beneath the waves, far down in the salt depths, were floating lifeless limbs and trailing hair, tangled with the noxious weeds and briny grasses of the sea-bed; on the shore dead forms were stretched and dead faces were turned upward to the light, presently to be lain, nameless and unmourned in the shadow of the old monastic church, in the shelter of the still Druidic woods; and—as the sun rose, and shed its warmth upon the waters—one life trembled between earth and eternity. It was that of Lucille.

Through the horror of the night, through the peril of the storm, an unnatural strength had upheld her while his life was ventured; when he was saved, the tension broke like a bow over-strained. The nature which had found its power in

love, and had kept its vigil in the air laden with death, was like the sacred light which burns in a porcelain lamp; the brighter, the fuller, the purer the light from within, the frailer the human-wrought porcelain which prisons it, the surer to break and be shattered to dust, that that light may escape heavenward, to be lost amidst its own likeness, which it has not found on earth.

With her cheeks deeply flushed, with her hair still wet by the heavy sea-spray, with her eyes closed in a stupor that was never sleep, or opened wide in vague wild fear, she lay unconscious of all which passed around her. She deemed herself still on the sea-shore, clinging to the fast-rooted pine, and beholding the war of life with death, waged in the dark seething waste below. Her low, swift voice, full of the softest music, was never silent; incessantly and incoherently, with a sad, sweet, wild pathos, it spoke—now, of the black mountainous waters, that were burying him beneath them; now, of the terrace-roses which he had told her were the flowers of sin, the flowers of revel—why had he said that?—what was it that he meant?—now, of the solitary, nameless grave lying under the ivy coils and woodland grasses by the old monastic church, which she had seen in the morning light; why was it Lucille's grave?—was *she* to lie there when she died?—and now—ever and again—of the wild storm-night, of the dying cries ringing above the tumult of wind and water, of the dead floating in the white lightning glare of the seas which stood betwixt him and her, of the fathomless ocean-depths where he had sunk for ever, of the death whence he would never return.

It was strangely piteous that delirium which spoke of him unvaryingly as dead, and betrayed in its unconsciousness a love which was the core of her life.

Pacing the terrace beneath her windows, which stood open, Strathmore heard it; and had his foes beheld him in that hour, they would have known, then, where to strike, and reach the life which, in all else, was chill and invulnerable as the cold polished steel.

Those who did see him when the day came, thought that the haggard, broken look which his face wore was the weariness of shattered strength; that the dark and hollow circles beneath his eyes, the air of spent force and worn-out pain, which had displaced the repose of his face and the proud, negligent dignity of his bearing, were but the result of the past night, were but the physical prostration attendant on his physical injuries. They did not know them *as* they were; they did not know that bodily suffering, and the exhaustion of powers overstrained, were unfelt by him. What made him sick unto death was the dark knowledge of the guilt shrouded in the blackness of night, buried in the sepulchre of the seas; what bruised and broke the haughty egotism of his strength, was the impotent, baffled sense of despair, before the expiation which was undone before his sight, and beyond the power of his hand to stay.

He had striven to a great atonement, and he had given his life to its travail; and as he reached it, it had perished from his grasp, and left the guiltless to suffer for his sin!

He knew that Lucille loved him.

Standing there, where he had made his way into the cool fresh air, he heard in every accent of the voice, which thrilling with pain and rising in plaintive appeal echoed to him through the opened casements above, the love which he had never dreamed or feared until that hour when his eyes had met hers, and he had known it as no words could ever have told it to him. And his first sense then had been one of fierce, sweet, sudden joy. No other could steal her from him! The next, remembrance returned, and a revolted self-accusing agony swept away all touch, all chance, all thought of that forbidden gladness which it only needed memory to destroy for ever.

He knew himself a murderer; his hand could not seek hers with a husband's touch, knowing that on it lay the stain of blood-guiltiness; knowing himself for what he was, he could not take a soilless life to lie within his bosom. Shrouded from her sight, between them arose the eternal barrier of his

crime, severing for ever the guilty from the innocent. Though through long years of joy she were never to learn the secret of the heart on which she were bidden to rest her own, never to hear in the still watches of the night one unconscious word which should unfold her the covered crime which haunted sleep, the union would yet be unholy—a dark, forbidden sin against her sacred innocence.

For the blood-stain was fresh upon his hand; and where he stood in the silent dawn, looking outward to the sea, he shuddered. In the light of the breaking day he saw but the black chasm of the yawning waters, and the livid face turned upward, and sinking slowly in the guilty night downward and downward till it was lost for ever.

He abhorred himself, as he thought of the atonement so hardly laboured for, so nearly won by the strength which had passed through its martyrdom, to be vanquished by its own passions at the last ere it had grasped the victor's crown. For although the one sin lay buried in the past, and the other had been shrouded for ever from all human sight and ken, in his conscience he was none the less branded as the destroyer of Life; in his own knowledge divided none the less from all innocent and hallowed things, from all pure and holy youth.

And Lucille loved him!

He, who for the sake of the dead would have given his life for hers, was powerless before the retribution which arose from out the office of his solitary expiation. She must lose all the beauty and the glory of her youth in the shame of a hopeless and an unaccepted love; and he must never let loose one word of consolation, one caress of tenderness! He was powerless; she must suffer, and he must behold the life he had sworn to guard from all breath or consciousness of human grief and worldly evil, smitten and accursed through him!

He had never by the faintest thought foreseen this issue of the care, and the fidelity with which he had followed and fulfilled the trust bequeathed to him by Erroll; he had never

feared or dreamed that she could ever feel for him any emotion deeper than the filial and childlike tenderness she bore him as her guardian. Of the good that he had done, the fruit was evil! And far back through the stretch of many and forgotten years the words of Redempta the Bohemian came to him:

"The past has been wrought by your own hand, but the future will escape you . . . . . The sin to the guilty has been avenged, but the sin to the innocent will never be washed away!"

The future escaped him. And a great despair was on him: he fought against fate, he strove as with God's vengeance for a slaughtered life!

From above, in the silence of the waking day, he heard ever the plaintive wail calling upon his name with the delirious words of an unconscious love. He could not hear them and not seek her; he felt that he must silence them at all or any cost. Were she to die for him, to die through him!

He entered the house and approached her chamber; on the threshold his mother met him, but he motioned her aside.

"Let me see her! I stand in her father's place."

In the hour of extremity the world is forgotten; she let him pass, and he stood in the stillness of the early day, in the chamber filled with the ceaseless moan of the voice that called upon his name.

Where Lucille lay, the light from the sunlit east fell on her, deepening the golden hue of the hair, damp and clogged with the clinging sea-water, the fevered, scarlet flush upon the cheeks, the wistful, haunting pain in the dreamy eyes; and as the full light on the heather-bell, where it lifts its delicate head, on the bloom of the flower, or the hue of the sea-shell, shows their beauty, only also to show their fragility more, so in the brightness of morning he saw, as he had never seen before, how frail was the life on which the work

of his expiation was garnered. All of atonement that could be made by him to the dead hung on this brief existence.

He stood in the shadow of the chamber and gazed on her; in that hour he loved her, purely, deeply, willing to give his peace for hers, as he had never loved;—the one sacred and unsullied thing in a life world-corroded and sin-stained.

Where she lay her face was turned towards him, her hair swept backward from her brow; her eyes looked upward with a sad, wild pain, and she raised herself, with a piteous gesture of appeal, as the vague, unconscious words came swift and plaintive from her lips, murmuring the strange burden of a weird, mournful, Scandinavian legend, woven in her thoughts by the unbidden wanderings of fever:

> "Roses my secret keep,
> While those around me sleep!

What does that mean? The roses may hear, but they cannot whisper again? He would not have me gather them; he called them the flowers of sin. Why, why? Others must have sinned to him; *he* never sinned. He is so great, so noble. He cares for me for my father's sake; only for that! If he loved me he would not have bidden me go to strangers? He knew Lucille had no love but for him. Perhaps he was angered because I gathered the roses?"

The words died away wearily, while in her gaze came a troubled, wondering look. And he on whose ear that innocent voice rang, stood, with an iron calm on his face and the darkness of guilt on his soul; smitten by those words as by the voice of an accusing judge.

Then a wild terror leapt into her eyes; she lifted herself, with her hands outstretched, and a wailing cry:

"He is dead! He is dead! The seas have covered him; he cannot rise! Look, look!—it is so dark,—there is no light; the waters are on him; they have buried him! Let me go, let me go—oh my God!—and die with him!"

Her voice rose in passionate anguish, her hands were stretched out to the empty air, her eyes were filled with the

misery with which they had followed and sought him through the horrors of the storm; she lived through all the torture of that awful night, in which she had seen his life ventured and given to the mercy of the storm.

He heard the piteous appeal of the love which in that hour he would have suffered a hundred deaths rather than have known, given to himself; and he saw that if any could save her he could alone. He moved from the shadow where he stood, and drew near her bed. He took her hands within his own, and his voice was calm, with that tranquillity with which Strathmore could rein in and veil his deepest passions, his most bitter agony.

"Lucille, look at me; I am with you! My life is safe, and what harm can touch you whilst *I* am near?"

His words pierced through the mists in which her brain was wandering; he held her hands within his, and his eyes looked down with a serene and loving light into her own, which met them with bewildered pain. And slowly and soothingly the calm fixed gaze magnetised hers, and tranquillised her like the stealing peace of the lotus-fumes, which give rest to the weary limbs, and lulling dreams. The love which had endangered now restored her life; she knew his voice, his touch, his gaze, as she had known no other's; the terror passed from her face, a smile, faint but sweet as the glad light of the dawn, shone on it; and, as her head drooped and sunk in exhaustion, her eyes looked upward to him with the love so unconsciously betrayed.

The sun rose higher over the laughing seas, the white mists of the hills rolled back before the brightness of the day; still she lay there, her head resting on his arm, her hand lying in his, her hair sweeping his breast, and while a touch could waken her he would not move. His strained sinews ached and throbbed, as those of men taken off the rack, his limbs were bruised and torn by the conflict of the waves, sickening pain and blindness were still on him from the unnatural tax his strength had borne. But he did not stir, nor seek to release himself from the constraint of the

attitude in which he leant over and supported her, till her restless, wakeful, still half-delirious slumber had deepened in the hushed calm of the silent chamber into the surer sleep of safety, with which the fevered flush faded from her cheeks, her breathing grew low and tranquil, her face lost its look of pain, and the life of Lucille was spared. Then he gently loosened his hands from hers, unwound the hair which had coiled about his arms, moved her from him without breaking her rest, and going out from her presence passed to the solitude of his own chamber.

Unseen, his mother followed him. He did not move, nor turn his eyes to her; he stood silent and motionless, while the dark, heavy folds of the portière swung behind her; he knew her words ere they were spoken in his ear.

"It is *you* whom Lucille loves!"

"I know it."

"You *know* it, Strathmore?"

"I knew it last night."

His mother's hand tightened where its light tenacious hold lay on his shoulder, and her voice, haughty and mellow still in her declining years, sank lower yet:

"And you——"

He put her hand from him, and moved to the deeper shadow of the mullioned window. She was answered.

A shudder ran through her frame, and her lip quivered, her voice sank lower still, as in the awe of an unutterable horror.

"Oh, my God! It must never be?"

"No. It must never be."

His voice was calm; but there was that in its tranquillity which appalled her with a great terror; she was his mother, and she loved him. It was not for *her* voice to lift itself and say, "Behold! the guilt was yours, it is but just that its chastisement should overtake you, and be also yours! It is but meet and due!"

She was his mother, in his remorse she had succoured him, in his retribution she yearned to him.

"My son! my son!" she cried, wearily. "You suffer——"

"I!"

The word rang out in passionate loathing and condemnation of himself; Strathmore had in him the nature of those who, in the days of Basil and Chrysostom, in the austerity of remorse, gave up to pitiless torture their bodies for their sins.

"I! What matter how *I* suffer; it will be but just. It is she—she—the guiltless!"

His voice fell, the dark veins swelled upon his temples; he moved from her again, and sank down with his head bowed upon his arms. She had broken the deadly calm which in men of his blood and race she knew and dreaded most; but where she stood by him, she—the aged and imperial woman, who, in all her years, had known no fear—trembled, and was afraid, for she had never until this hour beheld the bonds of his passions loosened, or the cold pride of his strength beaten down.

"Heaven help her!" she said, brokenly. "She will suffer—she must suffer. But it could never be, Strathmore? It were too horrible! You—you——"

"A murderer! Say out the word."

His voice rang loud and hoarse, with his hatred of his own life, of his own soul; and she did not know that the darkness, as of night, which was upon his face, was that of fresh guilt; that in the morning light he saw but the whirl of the giddy waters, and the white face upturned in the phosphor glare, and the amber hair floating out on the black waste, and beaten down beneath the foam.

"You have striven to atone—you have done all you could," she murmured. "Effort is man's, Cecil; but the result is with God."

"Atone! Ay! I have laboured to atone, but the end of the atonement is accursed. I can destroy—that is devil's work!—but I cannot expiate. My peace, my life, my soul, I would give them all for expiation! and I cannot reach it. Cain bore his brand for ever; so do I."

The words were wild and hollow in their pain, their bitter

futile yearning; the one cry wrung from the shattered strength of a great lost soul.

And his mother shuddered as she heard, and covered her face, trembling even as Eve before the guilt which wrecked the mighty sin-stained life which she had given, and which had once been nurtured guiltless in her bosom.

For a long space there was silence between them, and he seemed not to note nor remember her presence where he stood looking outward to the early day, with the darkness on his face, which had come there when his hand had unloosed and left the dying to her grave, and the light of sacrifice offered, of redemption won, had died for ever from his eyes.

His mother lifted her head and looked at him, and in her haughty eyes, which had rarely known such weakness, blinding tears gathered—tears for the force and the weakness, the grandeur and the guilt, the sanctity of remorse and the brutality of hate, so strangely blent and woven in his nature, whose will had power to conquer all save the passions which wrought their own curse. She drew nearer to him, while her voice was dropped so low that its whisper scarcely stirred the air:

"Strathmore—one word—you will not seek to expiate the past by what would be but added sin? Love between you and his child could never, must never, be?"

"Love!"

He shuddered as he spoke, and the haggard weariness upon his face deepened, while his eyes were bloodshot and filled with pain. The word was horrible in his ear; the name of that mad, sweet, delirious sorcery, which he had known once, never to know again; which even now, in hours of memory, he longed for, as men yearn for their dead youth; which had been the well-spring of his crime, the poison on his lips, the tempter in his soul, the beautiful vile lie which had betrayed him and driven him to his crime.

"Love!—from *her!* My God! if she knew me as I am! .... She would abhor me—she would hold my very touch damnation. Wed her to her father's destroyer! Ay! it would

be but added sin. *My* life cannot—and yet—who would have cherished her as I . . . .?"

The last words his mother did not hear, they were stifled almost ere they were spoken; and with a gesture he signed to her to leave him, and let him be. His nature was too kindred with her own, she knew too well the intolerant and silent souls of the men of her race and blood, to disobey his will, or rob him of the sole solace which is left to suffering—solitude. She stooped her proud head, and her lips rested on his brow, and trembled there in the tenderness which in his childhood and his youth she had never given him, and which throughout her life had been very rare in the high-souled imperious woman.

"My son! God comfort you; I cannot!"

Then with that broken, murmured prayer, his mother left him; and Strathmore was alone. Alone to see ever before his eyes the white upturned face, met, after the lengthened stretch of many years, in the darkness and tumult of the night, his temptress and destroyer still! Alone to know the labour of his expiation stricken from his hands, the atonement he would have yielded up all sacrifice to attain, broken from out his grasp; the life he would have given his own to save, wrecked and condemned through him!

## CHAPTER XVI.

### The Choice that was Left.

BEFORE long, sleep, unbroken and restful, became the sure saviour of youth. Lucille was left fragile, fevered, with a certain startled fear in the dreamy depths of her eyes, a certain weariness in their drooped lids, but restored from the exhaustion and the pain which turn by turn had succeeded to the exposure of the night which she had braved.

The days passed slowly by, heavy, gloomy, early autumn days, with white mists on the yellow woodlands, and stormy sunsets in the dark western skies above the sea. The guests

had all left, and the hours wore lingeringly away at White Ladies, while the spent strength and physical injuries, consequent on his recent peril, with whose story the country rang, gave sufficient reason for Strathmore's brief retirement and rest there.

"'Heroism,' 'Sacrifice,' 'Nobility!' God help me! If they knew me as I am!" he muttered, where he stood in his private library, his eyes falling on the newspaper which lay open before him, where were painted in vivid detail the terrors of the shipwreck, in which alone and unaided one who was of value to the nation, had given himself to the madness of the waters and rescued six lives at peril of his own. The act was grand and simple, and thrilled through to the heart of the people. They gave him but that which was his due; yet Strathmore turned from it abhorring himself; for this man judged himself more rigidly and cruelly than others would have judged him, and in that innate truth which remained to him through so much that was evil, recoiled from homage which worshipped that in him, which *he* held solely as atonement for his crime, and atonement wrecked and forfeited at the last beneath temptation.

"They kneel to a false god!" he said, bitterly, as he flung the paper from him; yet, perchance, he might be judged more mercifully than he judged himself, and the travail of self-sacrifice was not wholly worthless, though imperfect and guilt-stained at its close?

He rose, and walked up and down the chamber; he had an office to perform, and he feared the durance of his strength, for—he loved her. Not with that sweet, wild passion which had broken asunder all laws of duty and man, and been world, conscience, eternity, to itself—*that* comes but once in a lifetime—but more holily, more tenderly; and with the intensity which those natures alone know, which are, like his, cold to all the world save one. And—God help him!—he longed to be enabled to believe his love hopeless and unreturned, with more agonised passion than ever a man prayed to have his love echoed in the heart he sought. Loneliness, pain, misery;

ay, even the fate which should bid him give her with his own hand to her husband's embrace, he knew he would have strength to bear in silence, without self-betrayal; these, in all their suffering, would have been mercy to that love which would curse her through himself, while on his soul lay the memory which forbade him to shelter, and shield, and mingle with his own the young life which was guiltless!

For one long hour his steps unceasingly paced the room in solitude, then they turned towards hers. It was the first day that she had risen—the first hour that they had met—and he feared that ordeal as he had never feared the death with which he had stood face to face.

Her couch stood near one of the windows, and she lay resting her head on her hand, and looking outward to where the deer swept beneath the golden foliage; there was a fitful hectic on her cheek, a weary drooping of the eyelids, a certain look of pain and fever on her which smote him with sharp agony. *His* was that touch which he had bidden be accursed, by which her childhood and her peace had for ever been scared from their rest! Yet he must live as though blind to it, speak as though he had no knowledge of, no tenderness for it, as though he were steeled and dead to the innocent fondness of the sole living thing for which he cared!

Lucille knew nothing of the delirious words by which she had betrayed herself. She had been vaguely conscious of his hands holding hers, of his eyes gazing on her, till the sense of his presence soothed her pain and fear, and lulled her into happy rest. She had been sensible of no more; and it was with no fuller consciousness of her own heart than that which instinctively awoke with the first touch of love in a lofty, delicate, and but too sensitive nature, that she saw him now. It could have no alarm, it could have little strangeness for her, this affection which was still that of her childhood, only deepened and taught to know that no other could ever reign beside it; to love Strathmore seemed as much the religion of her life as to love God. Her head turned swiftly as he entered, a glorious light beamed upon her face. With a low cry that

thrilled his heart with anguish, she rose and sprang towards him, all forgotten save that peril from which he had returned to her, the heroism with which he had offered up his life for others through the hideous dangers of the storm.

They were alone; Strathmore stood silent, motionless, his face white, the veins standing out darkly upon his temples; *he* could suffer, he had passed through enough to be well used to that, but the trial that awaited him was one far deadlier, it was to see *her* endure the fruits of his own guilt!—to know that with one whisper, one gesture that should bid her come to his heart and rest there, he could make her happy, yet to have that single word, that single sign, forbade him, and made horrible even in his own sight by the foul crime of his own past!

Power, riches, station, fame, the world's homage, and the dignities of men, he would have given them all to have stood *guiltless* before that one unsullied life.

With that glory on her face which pierced him to the quick, she drew his hands in hers, and laid her soft lips on them in reverent worship, and looked up in his face with broken words of love and honour, and tears beyond all eloquence, beyond all gladness; he was a thousand times more beloved and reverenced, come from the conflict where storm and death had been braved, with martyr sacrifice, for the pure sake, as she believed, of one grand, simple, human duty. And he stood beside her, chained back by the bonds of crime from all communion with the only thing he loved, while on his hand her sinless lips gave their kiss of sweet religious veneration, as to the hand which had *saved* the sanctity of life!

All utterance of her affection had been so natural with her to him from her childhood, that her heart could not wholly awake to the knowledge that this was that love which others begged from her; a desert child whom no breath of the world had ever touched, and to whom no lips of man had ever whispered, could not have been more divinely unconscious of all profanities of passion than Lucille. Yet—at the look

that was in his eyes as they met hers then—the words of homage paused on her lips, a light shyer, sweeter, than had been ever there, came upon all her face, with a flush sudden, and warm, and fitful, bright as the blush of the wild rose; she loosed his hands, and her head sank. It was so lovely that tremulous, half-conscious dawn of love! One who should have had no love for her in answer, looking on her then, would have known but one instinct and one response, to raise her in his arms, to gather her to his heart, and bid her rest there; to soothe with fond caress the loveliness startled into new beauty with the new pulse that stirred it. And *he*—who would have given his life for hers—stood beside her, silent, responseless, forbidden from her by every law of conscience.

Silence fell between them.

In that brief hour Strathmore suffered deadlier chastisement than pursues guilt in the scaffold and the grave; he suffered as those suffer who behold what they love and cherish slain through them. Yet still—that moment of silence given him—he addressed her with his accustomed gentleness; he rebuked her tenderly for the peril she had braved for his sake; he let her note no change in him. Only—his voice unconsciously grew cold in the strain which kept it calm, and he never sought or gave that familiar caress which at meeting or at parting Lucille had used to receive from him, as she would have received her father's kiss.

That was for ever ended: the peaceful guardianship of the life bequeathed to him could never again be as it had been; her love seemed to sunder her farther from him than her loss to another could have ever done; his very hand was not fitting to touch hers *now*, stained with the fresh guilt of an added crime.

He moved suddenly from her side. He had a duty, bound by honour, to perform to an absent man, and Strathmore had no thought to be false to that—not even to spare her. He had a trained strength to endure, and his code of truth was lofty and severe. His face was somewhat turned from her, but his words were calm as he spoke:

"Lucille—you read the letter I left with you some days since?"

"Yes!"

Her voice was very low; a heavy misery began to weigh upon her young fair life, still vague, still nameless, the same which in delirium had found its plaintive shape in the words; "he does not love me, or he would not bid me go to others!"

His eyes were still turned from her; his voice was still tranquil and sustained. Such honour to the one absent, who had trusted him as he could still keep, he kept most faithfully.

"Lucille, I owe it to you and to him, both, that you should know I wrote no word there that was more than barren justice to Valdor and to—to the love he bears you. In a few days I shall be in Paris for political matters: he will come to me for his reply. He believed that your heart was his—I believed so also——"

"*You!*"

The one word stayed those upon his lips; the accent quivered to his soul in its wondering, piteous reproach. He could not plead another's cause whilst he knew that every fibre of her life clung to himself; he could not bid her go wed where she had no love, and live in the abhorred pollution of a joyless union.

He was silent many moments; when he spoke, his voice was hoarse and forced:

"It was not so?"

Her eyes looked upward with the gaze that had been in them when they had met his own in the light of the storm, then her head drooped upon her hands, while a flush of pain and of shame stole to her face.

"Oh no, no!—never!"

He heard the words, barely above her breath though they were, and he knew what was uttered in them; that loyalty to himself born of gratitude, of reverence, of every hallowed and endearing memory, which closed her heart to all others.

He had no need to question now what had parted them, when, in that which was her love for him, he had believed he saw her love for the one who wooed her. He knew but too well.

"It was I who misled him, then," he said, slowly, letting no sign appear of the effort his words cost, save that which made them sound cold in all their gentleness. "I told him but what I honestly believed, God knows, and to you I have done him no more than honourable justice. He loves you well—it might be better if——"

The phrase died unfinished; his lips could not end it; her face turned to him one moment with an unspoken reproach more plaintive than all words, and her eyes mutely questioned him why was the fostering tenderness of his guardianship abandoned and forgot, that he should send her to another's home and bid her be an exile to another's love? Before that look his forced tranquillity, his strained composure, broke down. Master of his own suffering still, for sake of her, the misery of his life, which saw his solitary power of expiation shattered from his hands, broke out in one involuntary utterance as he bent to her:

"Oh, Lucille—Lucille! why is your childhood over! I could guard you *then!*——"

He had said, without words, that they could never be again as they had been, and all the loneliness of abandonment weighed on her with the loss of that guardianship which had never let her know one touch of pain, one wish ungiven, or one desire unforestalled. She felt as he felt, though she knew not why, as he knew, that the bond which had bound them was severed, and could not be replaced by any other. Of a nearer tie to him she had never thought; her love was too pure, too high, too wholly born in an ethereal and reverent nature, to take grosser form and definite shape; she only knew she had no love for any save for him, and that the tenderness which he had lavished on her was for ever chilled and lost, and that he had bade her trust herself to other care

and go to other hearts. He was the world to her—and henceforth she was as nothing to him.

He saw the peace he had sworn to save at any cost desolate and broken through him; he knew that he had but to lift her to his heart, and bid her lose her guardian's in her husband's love, to make his own for ever the life which had no law but his will, no joy but from his hand, and to see beneath his roof, within his home, before his sight by day, and hushed on his heart by night, the beauty of those young years, in which was garnered his sole atonement to the dead. And the work of his dead passions divorced them; the knowledge of his own sin bade him stand aloof, barred out from the life that suffered for him and suffered through him.

That his crime might be veiled from her, he must let her deem him insensible to the beautiful faith and love she bore him!—he must leave her alone in her desolation, powerless to solace or to save the life bound in him and wrecked for him!

He was strong to endure himself, but he had no strength to behold her suffer, as men have borne the torture without a moan, tearing their own sinews and rending their own limbs, but have been vanquished when they were chained to witness the same ordeal wrenching the delicate form of the woman whom they adored.

For one moment more he knew he could command himself; he stooped and laid his hand gently on her bowed head.

"You are still weak, my child. Rest now; I will see you later on."

Then he left her. A little longer, and his control would have been wrenched down, his strength would have failed him; she would have seen betrayed the darkness of a buried crime, the despair of a sleepless remorse, on the face of him whom she thought great and sinless, and held second only in her worship to that God in whom she believed not more holily and utterly than she believed in him.

Hours afterwards, as he crossed before the open door of the great library, he saw Lionel Caryll; the young man leaned against the embrasure of one of the oriel casements, his forehead bowed upon his arm, his whole attitude full of a deep restrained dejection, his face very pale as the light streamed through the coloured panes upon his bright tawny hair.

On a sudden impulse—one of those vague, unstudied, and blind impulses which never before had had place in his temper or his life, an impulse of desperation rather than of thought or of belief in its own inspiration—Strathmore entered and approached him; the youth started and looked up, the warm blood flushing his face.

"I absolve you from your promise. You may urge your love to-day—this hour—when you will."

They were brief words, and uttered coldly, but to the young lover they spoke of heaven: yet even as the first startled gratitude flushed over his face in its wondering happiness, he was chilled and awed by the look upon Strathmore's. He could not translate it, but in some vague sense he felt that the proud, silent man beside him suffered.

Strathmore stood where his own face was unseen by the youth.

"You are honest, loyal, and without guile. You love purely; her life will be safe with you. If you can win her of her own will, without pressure, do so. Keep her years happy, innocent, sheltered, you whom she loves as a brother, and you shall ask nothing from me that I will refuse. Go; and speak as your heart bids you."

He turned abruptly away, with a sign silencing all reply; for one moment he heard the rush of breathless words with which the young man strove to thank him, and saw the flushed, tremulous ecstasy of joy which beamed on his face as it only beams upon the face of youth; with the next he had left the library, and the door of his own study had closed on his solitude.

Hours more might have gone by, or only minutes, he knew not which, when the door unclosed, and before him stood the boy, whom he had sent from him a brief space before, in all the wild, sweet hope, the rich undoubting happiness of youth. Words were not needed to tell his story; one glance, and Strathmore knew the issue of his errand, and the sudden rush of a hot, swift joy which swept through his veins felt to him like guilt. In all sincerity he would have given up his life to any torture to know that hers was safe where his own could never attaint it with regret, or shadow, or the dark curse of his own past.

He rose and laid his hand, with an unwonted gentleness of pity, on his nephew's:

"Poor boy! I only sent you to more pain!"

Lionel Caryll shrank from his touch, and his face was turned away, while his voice shook:

"I only dealt *her* more! She loves me as a brother! I was mad to think it could be otherwise. I have but wounded, startled, grieved her—her for whom I would——"

His words died, his head sank, and in the desolation of his grief he forgot all pride, and strength, and shrinking shame of his young manhood, and, throwing himself down, sobbed like a child.

Strathmore stood and looked on him: he had no scorn for *those* tears—they were for her—but he had a weary envy of them! and a smile of unutterable sadness came on his lips. What was this boy's first guiltless grief, beside that with which Life brims over for those who suffer and give to the world no sign?

His hand fell once more on the young man's, and his voice, deep and softened, had a solemnity and a compassion in it which had never before been in its tone:

"Lionel! your grief is bitter to bear, yet be grateful that you *can* grieve—there is suffering which cannot! Live so that you never know it; keep your life as it is now, without

remorse, and it will be peace beside *that* hell, however you suffer!"

The youth lifted his head, startled and awed; then it sank again, and his stifled sobs were heard upon the stillness, vainly striven with for love of manhood, while Strathmore paced to and fro the chamber, with his head bowed, forgetful of Caryll's presence. Some moments passed; then the young man arose slowly and wearily, and the change was piteous which had come upon his frank, bright, careless face; all the sunlight was dashed from it, and a pale, drawn misery left there in its stead. He stood before Strathmore, and something proud and noble came on him as he spoke—vainly seeking to make his voice steady and calm:

"Sir, I dreamed a fool's dream, and it has been broken by—God shield her!—the gentlest heart that ever pitied pain. *I* can be nothing to Lucille; less, now that I have lost my title of 'brother,' than I have ever been. *I* have no power to make her life, as you bade me, 'happy, innocent, sheltered.' That power lies in your hands, for—it is you whom she loves."

Where they stood together he saw Strathmore shudder, and his cheek grow whiter; watching him keenly, the youth saw that it was not with wonder, but with a revulsion almost of terror that he heard him—the look which he had seen once before break down the pride and reserve of the man whom he feared, in the summer night at Silver-rest. And even in the blind pain of his sharp sorrow, Nello noted and marvelled at that look; whence could be its spring?

"You think this?—and why?"

The tone was haughty, but there was forced tranquillity in it; Strathmore ceased to stand before him, and passed again down the length of the library.

"I feared it long; I know it now," the boy answered him. "She may not dream it herself—I cannot tell—but *I* read it in the very words with which she put back my love, in the very pain with which she shrank when I told her you had sent me, free to plead with her as I would for—for——"

The joy which could never be his!

His voice failed him; and Strathmore paced with swift and restless step the silent chamber, his head was sunk upon his breast, and in his heart was a bitter cry:

"*I* deal her pain! Oh, God, which sin must I choose!—the sin that spares her, or the sin that smites her?"

"Lord Cecil! have you so much tenderness for her, and yet have no love?" cried the young man, brokenly, for Lionel Caryll's devotion was untouched with the selfishness of that passion which would slay what it cannot attain.

"No love!—*I!*"

The words were stifled—Caryll did not hear them, and pursued his generous, unselfish prayer:

"My lord! my lord! You must know that she loves you? Will you, who are so tender a guardian to her, close your heart to a fonder tie? She cannot love in vain! Men call you—you have seemed so to me—stern and heartless; but a cold nature had never been gentle to her as you are, a merciless one had never perilled life for suffering souls as you imperilled yours. Will you not have pity upon her? Can you give her in her youth to misery, to hopelessness, to the anguish which must be hers when she has learnt her own secret—for Lucille will never love *twice!*"

"Boy, boy!—hush! You do not know what you tempt."

Strathmore had sunk into a chair, his head was bowed, his face covered by his hands.

The young man stood before him, awed, marvelling, deeply touched at the power his word had to break the icy calm and the haughty pride of the nature which for one moment he saw rent asunder.

"Forgive me," he faltered, while his unselfish devotion to Lucille conquered every thought of self, and impelled him to plead for her as he would have pleaded for himself, preferring her peace at loss of his. "But—but—oh, Lord Cecil!—I spoke for *her*. It cannot be that you have no love for her? Can you refuse her a nearer place in your heart, in your home? *I* have learned the bitterness and the desolation of a

hopeless love. I would give my life that *she* should never know them; they would be her death-blow!"

"Peace! for Heaven's sake!"

His voice was hoarse with a terrible anguish, and barely above his breath; his head was still bowed, his face still covered. Each word which the boy spoke in his guileless and unselfish prayer quivered like a knife in his soul. Awe-stricken, and arrested with a terror to which he could have given no name, Lionel Caryll stood mute; the great tears slowly coursing down his cheeks, his bright and gracious youth sorely shattered and stricken; yet even in all the bitterness of his own despair, vaguely conscious that he was in the presence of some grief beside which his own was dwarfed. For a moment there was a dead silence; then *in* that moment, the proud man gathered back his strength, the statesman resumed the armour of ice which he wore with friend and foe. Strathmore rose; he dreaded lest he had betrayed his secret; but his face, though haggard and dark with the traces of a deadly conflict, was calm.

"There are reasons, in my past, why the thought of marriage is painful, almost impossible," he said, slowly, and with forced effort. "And—and why should you urge this upon me? You have confessed you love her?"

The young man raised his heavy eyes:

"It is *because* I love her that I would know her peace secured, though its security left me only the more desolate."

The answer was proud and touching in its sad simplicity; it went to the heart of him who heard it; Strathmore leaned his hand heavily upon his shoulder.

"Lionel Caryll, you are nobler than *I* ever was!"

The youth's lips quivered, and he moved with a quick shudder; he had pleaded against every selfish dictate of passion for Lucille's sake, but he shrank from the touch of the hand she loved.

"My lord, you will forgive me if I leave your roof to-night. I could not stay now that—that——"

His voice failed him, and he turned his head with a quick

gesture, that Strathmore might not see the tears which choked his utterance; but Strathmore's hand was not shaken from its hold, and his words were gentle—strangely gentle for him:

"As you will. But, ere you go, remember, for your tenderness to her, you shall still ask of me what you choose, and there shall be nothing that I will refuse. Think of me as your best friend; your future shall be my care."

The young man gave him one swift heart-broken look; "the future!" to him it looked beggared for all time. Then his hand closed on the one held to him in a convulsive pressure, the dull echo of the closing door vibrated through the silence, and Strathmore was once more alone.

In solitude, beside which his nephew's fresh guiltless grief, even in all its poignancy, was mercy. He must of his own hand deal to her the deadliest blow that could smite her life; or he must seek her as a husband, hiding for ever the death-stain upon the heart on which she would be cherished!

The words that the youth had uttered, the lovely light which he had beheld on her face as he drew near—these were his tempters, his torturers. He could have bidden his own life suffer and be silent to his grave;—but hers! Too well he knew the truth, that never would that nature "love *twice;*" that never for another would dawn and smile that beautiful gladness which, through him, must be changed to a curse. He knew it—he knew it. As he had destroyed her mother's life in the morning of its youth, in the sweetness of its joy, so he must now destroy hers.

They stretched before him; that terrible, lonely loveless course of years through which she, the soft and fragile child steeped in sunlight and sheltered in tenderness, would be condemned to pass. Could he send her to them? Could he leave her to believe that she was barred from out his pity? Could he bid her be taught, that he, who had sheltered her with more than a father's care, was cold, and brutal, and dead to the holy love he had fostered? Yet—breathe in her ear the whispers of love, seek her lips with a bridal caress, gather

her to a husband's heart in her soft dreaming sleep!—he could not, he who knew himself the slayer of more than one human life.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### In the Cabin by the Sea.

THE gloom deepened in Strathmore's solitary chamber; the joyless autumn twilight stole over wood and moorland; the shadows grew more sombre: still he sat there, his head sunk, his strength broken. Of what avail were pride, will, power, iron force, and haughty dominance *here?* They could not shield the innocent from the curse that fell upon her from his crime; they could not compel the expiation which he had vowed the dead; they could not assoil his life and render it purified and free to seek the sinless.

Hours had passed; he had not raised his head, nor moved, when suddenly—he knew not what it was—there stole over him with a chill sickening shudder a sense as of a presence *felt* but unseen, which froze his blood and made him start, and lift his head and look outward to the twilight. And his eyes fastened there with a blank, distended gaze; a great horror came upon his face;—in the sickly autumn mist, in the black shroud of the leaves without, he saw the features which he had seen, ghastly and livid in the phosphor glare, swept downwards to death beneath the waters.

Had the sea given up its dead?

His veins were ice; on his brow the dew gathered thick and cold; terror like a hand of steel gripped his heart, stilling its beating life; while up from the darkness, through the white cerecloths of mists, rose the form of his Temptress, until he saw her face with its grey blanched hue of haunting pain, and its amber hair driven by the autumn winds, and the eyes with their remorseless, cruel, thirsting hate, claiming him still *her own*—her own by right of their companion guilt; her own by title of their evil past.

He gazed out into the falling night, his limbs powerless,

his voice paralysed, his lips cloven, while the spectral shape grew whiter and whiter, clearer and clearer, in the stormy air, and he saw her as he had done when his hand had unclosed and left her to perish, bidding her die the death that she had given.

They looked on one another thus, under the shadow of White Ladies;—one moment, one fleeting second, that to both seemed lifelong—then the phantom faded, lost in the dull gloom, while the sough of the leaves swept alone through the silence: and he trembled in every limb, and quivered as after a blow that had felled him to the earth. The ice grip loosened from his heart, the awe of an unearthly horror unfroze its hold; and he thanked God aloud, as one released from doom, and led back to life by a gentle and compassionate hand.

For he knew that the sea had given up not the dead but the living; and that he was freed from the guilt which had risen from the depths of the ocean, and tempted him. Not wholly freed, for crime lies in *intent*, and is not washed away, because a merciful fate baffles its committal and its consummation. Yet, freed in much; and humbled in far more.

The face that he had seen in the yellow weirdly gloom was before him still; still he felt as though it stole nigh, and breathed around him—the presence of the temptress, the traitress, the assassinatress. Fierce and deadly, evil hatred, burning passions, had leapt swift as flame into life, when in the tumult of the storm he had been face to face for the first time, since he had bidden her go reap the whirlwind she had sown, with the woman who had been his destroyer, and who had been driven out to misery and shame by the flail of his vengeance. But now, in the sudden release from crime, in the chastened awe of stricken pride, freed from a fresh sin through the wild and wayward mercy of the waves, these were not on him. These for once were drowned and stilled. Truly had she said to him, in the years gone by, "If *I* sinned, were *you* guiltless?" And, strangely, as all things are

strange in human life, with the sight of the woman who had betrayed him, there came upon him again the agony of that sweet, idolatrous love, the impotent regret for all that lay buried in his youth, never to be known again—never to have resurrection or successor. It was dead—dead for ever; and the great tears forced slowly from his eyes, and his head sunk lower and lower on his arms. If that love had been guiltless, if that beautiful lie had been worthy the worship, in what living warmth and light would have been bathed the life of the man whose god was Power, and whose tyrant was Remorse!

Through long hours he lay there with his head on his arms, as in the sleep of a profound exhaustion; it was the sleep of the soul, though not of the body, worn out with crime, with conflict, and lulled to rest through sheer weariness of misery. Then, after a while, he rose, and his steps ceaselessly paced his chamber, as though he trod down the memories that thronged around him, the passions that uncoiled from the past and claimed him for their own, the warring duties, the severed thoughts of the dead, and of the living, that tore him asunder as the wild horses tore the quivering limbs of the condemned. Across him for one moment glanced a thought that seemed to scorch him like the physical touch of fire, making him shrink ere it was grasped. The fresh sin, hidden from the sight of men and buried in the secresy of the seas, was not upon him to bar him from the touch, the tenderness, the presence of the youth that was pure and without soil;—for the dead years gone, had not atonement been striven for which might avail to wash out *that*, without the martyrdom and sacrifice of the life that was both innocent, and unconscious of that brutal past?

Lucille loved him: what if—— He shuddered from the thought and flung it from him, as though in its very sweetness it were added crime; cast it away with the same revulsion, almost horror, with which he had first heard its suggestion in the summer evening from his nephew. *He* wed

her! Now, when, for the first time, the thought of its possibility came over him, it looked tenfold more forbidden and unholy than it had ever done when he had refused to glance at it for an instant, when he had had no knowledge that her love was his, no imagination that it would ever become so. With newly committed crime upon his soul, he had known that never could their lives ever have bond between them; now that he stood freed from this, he had seemed for one instant nearer to her, for one moment he had thought that he might guard in his own bosom that fairy youth, that sacred innocence, that beautiful dawn of purest love, fulfilling, till death should take him, the trust which Erroll gave; for one instant his heart had gone out with a pang of passionate yearning, a thirst of unutterable longing, to lock her close into his life, where none could ever assail her, and to make her his alone for ever, beyond the touch of evil or the accident of fate. But with its very thought, came the memory of all that severed them, making in the knowledge of his own sin divorce more wide than law could frame, divorce against which there was in his own conscience, no appeal.

*He* wed her!

He shuddered at the darkness and sin his life had known. Could he, more utterly condemned in his own sight than any felon that ever stained the earth, approach her with a husband's love? he, who held from her in lifelong secresy the tragedy of her father's death, bid her lie on his heart in the soft stillness of the night, and give him the dearest name that men can claim from sinless lips like hers? The more because now his own desire pleaded for it, his own peace sickened for it, his own love longed for it, did the mere hope, the mere thought strike him as with the horror of crime, as with the shock of blasphemy. *He* become her lover, her husband! It would be impious to the sanctity of the dead; impious to the innocence of the living!

He went out into the still late night, alone, when no eyes were on him, and the earth lay hushed and darkened as a grave. His steps wore their track in the damp grasses as he

walked unceasingly on and on, to and fro, under the gloom of the woods, within the sound of the moaning seas. All the misery of his life seemed to fall short of this: she loved him: his own heart recognised it, other lips had said it; she loved him; and he had no choice left, save to give her up to a solitary and unpitied desolation, or—to do what his soul revolted, and shrank from, a thousand times the more because the answering love in him craved for it, and self-pity pleaded for it with a passionate pain that he stifled as some vile infamy towards the dead and her. Where question had arisen of sacrifice of himself to her, he had known no temptation, no hesitation, no struggle; he would have given his life for her, and would have doomed himself without a thought of pity to an eternity of woe to have saved her a single pang. But here—sparing her, he spared himself; or, thrusting back the temptation that coiled about him, and accepting the just chastisement of his past, he must sacrifice with him all her life, and through himself, destroy what he had sworn to cherish!

A young poet once wrote:

> "If sorrow could be won by gifts to barter prey for prey,
> There is an arm would wither, so thine revived might be,
> A lip which would be still and mute to make thy music free,
> An eye which would forget to wake to bid thy morning shine,
> A heart whose very strings would break, to take one pang of thine."

Strathmore, no poet, and to whom the gentleness of self-sacrifice was by nature alien, felt not less than this in all its absolute self-negation, in all its passionate tenderness and fidelity to the only one that he had ever purely loved, to the only trust bequeathed him by his friend. And now he could alone spare her, by binding with his own the life that every memory of the past, and every law of conscience forbade from him, and banned from his very touch! Which choice could he make?

To the man whose path even through guilt had been firm and incisive, as though cut with steel through wax, who had never hesitated, who had never doubted as to his own course,

or to his own resolve, an agony of indecision was the worst torture life could hold. Whatever he had suffered, he had never before endured this; his will, however erring, had been resolute and prompt to act, as the will of a tyrant; and this helplessness of doubt, this conflict of opposing duties, this struggle in which he could see no light save from one path that he dared not follow, was greater anguish to a nature like Strathmore's, than any clear shape of action could ever have been, even though it had taken him to a martyrdom.

Do what he would, it seemed to him that he must each way sin to her and to her father; whether he left her and let her fair youth consume in the bitterness and shame of an unanswered love, or whether he crushed the past down out of sight and memory, and took her in his heart and in his home —his wife; whichever he chose he thought that guilt must lie upon his choice. With the one he must break for ever his loyalty to the trust he held, and lose for ever his only expiation to the dead; with the other he must woo her to a union that seemed to him an outrage against her innocence, a forbidden unholy treachery that would betray her in her unconsciousness into the arms of her father's destroyer. Do what he would darkness and crime seemed to rest on it; and all he had done turned into evil. All gentler things, all nobler effort, in him had been vain; and out of his fealty to the dead man's trust came the doom that wrecked it. His tenderness for her had been pure and unsullied, the holiest thing his heart had ever known; yet even the fruit of that was evil. Unwitting what he did, he had taught her a love that he would have died rather than waken! With every caress, every gentle word, every unremitting care, given her for her father's sake, he had in cruel unconsciousness sown the seeds of a misery he had never dreamed as possible. Was there none in the wide world for her to love but the criminal whom a brutal past divided from her?

And yet—and yet—who would ever cherish as he would cherish her!

All through the autumn night, till the dawn broke greyly

over the dusky seas, he walked alone with steps that wore a weary track through dank grasses and on heavy sands; and the day broke and found him no nearer to his choice, no better able to meet and vanquish the fate that had suddenly risen up from the ashes of his dead sin, and mocked his dreams of redemption by seizing the pure life he guarded, and flinging it out to misery with his own.

* * * * * * *

In the little hamlet that nestled above the sea on the borders of the great forests of White Ladies, and in the dip of one of the wild western valleys, stood a shealing, scarce wind and water proof, with the blasts of the early autumn moaning through its time-browned thatch, and the pomp of the autumn foliage sheltering its rotten timbers in a wealth of reddening gold. Those who made their home there were very poor, a woman old and feeble and her grandson who was yet but a child; still in their poverty they would break half their last crust for one poorer still, and such as their roof was would share it.

When the sun had risen after the night-storm, and high upon the beach were washed black drift-wood and broken wealth, and nameless sightless corpses that the fish had spared, they had found one woman tossed by the mad mercy of the waves in safety on the beach, and living still by one faint scarce-felt pulse of life. They had raised her, and brought and lain her gently on the heap of hay that served them as a bed, and, though she was poorer yet than they, since the seas had only left her this flickering remnant of uncertain life, and robbed her of all else, they did their best for her, and served her as they could, with that most touching charity of all—the charity of want to wretchedness.

Here, on the pallet of dry grasses she lay;—the woman who once had slept in the palaces of kings.

Broken, bruised, stricken, having lost almost all likeness of herself, delirious, though she kept even in fever the secrets of her past, with something still of lingering matchless beauty that *would* not perish;—beauty even yet in the voice that

murmured wild words, in the hair flung in wild disorder, heavy with brine and tangled with black weeds, in the hand which closed on the dry hay with unconscious pain, in the eyes which never could utterly lose their lustre. She was still living, she who would have thought death a thousand-fold gentler than life, yet who had shrunk from it when it was near, with the cowardice of a criminal, and the physical terror of womanhood. Living—in such last depths of woe, that she owed the cold water held to her lips, and the wretched bed on which her aching limbs were stretched, to the charity of the lowest and the poorest hirelings of the man who once had been her slave.

He had bidden her live to suffer—and retribution had driven and scourged her into obedience to the uttermost letter of that brutal Mosaic Law.

The woman and the boy who tended her, one in extreme age, the other a young child, did their best for her, but they feared her and shrunk from her, they could not have told why. About her there still remained something of inalienable grace, of patrician haughty majesty, and on her in vague yet awful shape, that they rather felt than saw, guilt had left its seal, and shameful years their trail. Long ago, the cruelty and crime within her had flashed out even in her young soft dazzling beauty; now they reigned alone, and gave her a terror to the simple peasants who gathered round her. Yet they did their best; and when the night before, being unwatched, she had risen, and wandering in the mechanical action of delirium, had dragged her weak, bruised limbs through brake and woodland, and wide grassland and dense thickets, till she had crossed the park of White Ladies, and gazed vacantly through the windows of the Abbey in the dull mists of falling night, they had followed her and found her lying senseless and exhausted among the dank yellow ferns, and had brought her back in redoubled pity to such shelter as they could give.

There she lay now in the risen day, insensible still, and moaning wearily, with strange pathetic murmurs now and

again upon her lips, and eyes wide open to the light with a blind gaze that looked out upon the earth where she had now no place, and on the sunlight which now to her could never be but mockery and pain. The broken rafters yawned above her, while through them poured the chilly autumn winds; the air was heavy with the lowering smoke of a low peat fire burning on the hearth; the pile of sear grasses and straw was beneath the form once beautiful as a dream of Phidias; squalor, misery, darkness, were around her, and in that wretched cabin by the sea lay the woman who once had bowed monarchs to her smile, and swayed a sceptre wider than sovereigns own, Suffer as she would, her suffering could never yet be so great as her sin had been.

Without, the noon was at its height, and the glancing waters stretched serene and bright; within, even the day could lend no fairness to the den where human lives lived in penury that made the kennelled hounds of White Ladies seem lapped in luxury. The old peasant rocked herself before the labouring smoke of the damp fire; a broken pitcher of cold water stood beside the pallet where she had let a stranger lie; the place was black, and close, and noisome.

Suddenly, and softly, the door opened, the freshness of the mellow autumn day flooded the cabin floor, on the threshold stood, like a child-angel that gleams out in all its golden glory from the dark backgrounds of old altar pictures, the bright youth of Lucille.

To those whom the wreck had flung homeless and beggared on the shores of White Ladies, she seemed like such a spirit, bringing balm, and healing, and hope, coming to their bereaved and desolate lives with her fair young face and her loving, exhaustless charity, which from her earliest years had known no happiness so great as to give succour to suffering, and had found compassion for the vilest, "driving away all things of sin and guilt" by its own divine unconsciousness of their shame and danger.

Lucille's life was love;— for all who suffered with that suffering whose shadows she had never felt, for all who sinned

with that sin whose meaning she had never known. Earth was so beautiful to her, and the smile of God so near her, that her heart ached for those who dwelt in pain, and who denied his love. She longed to make them as herself; she longed to lead them where she knelt.

Alone, leaving her attendants without, she came into the dark and wretched shealing. She had heard from the boy without, that a shipwrecked stranger lay there ill and delirious. Lucille had her father's nature; with all her soft brightness and her childlike delicacy she had a high courage, and an unselfishness as rare as it was elevated. She never had known fear. And she came now into this pent hovel—came to serve and succour the outcast lying there. In the dusky smoke-thickened air, she stooped, as the old peasant rose to her in reverence and wonder, and shook into her lap a bright shower of silver; wealth Strathmore lavished on her, and it ever went to those who were in want. She gave, too, with that generous grace which took all sting from any alms, and made those whom she relieved not her debtors, but her idolators; she gave her charity as widely, and as unconsciously of merit in the gift, as a flower gives its fragrance. Then, while her words still lingered on the woman's ear like some gentle chime of music, she swept with hushed steps towards the dark corner where the strewn grasses were tossed down, and where, on that miserable bed, with sightless eyes and fevered limbs, and lips that murmured wearily words without meaning, Marion Vavasour, homeless and nameless, lay.

They were together;—the innocent and the guilty life; and with the infinite compassion of her youth, Lucille looked down upon her father's murderess, lying there at her feet in darkness and wretchedness, where the rays of the sun did not enter, and the autumn winds made their dull moan about her. Thus they met at last.

"Ah!—how she suffers!"

The soft words stole, wistful as a sigh, from her lips, as she gazed down on the bruised, shattered, destroyed beauty which yet *was* beauty, and survived the wreck of all else in

this lost womanhood, this doomed and accursed life. She suffered!—the eyes burning but without light, the lips that moved with senseless words, the weary pain of limbs that could find no rest, and brain that could know no sleep,—in these she suffered with every breath she drew. And beyond these there was a darker, direr suffering still; where the wild thoughts wandered, was over the course of an evil life; where the blind memories went, was into depths of guilt. Sin is sweet in the noon of its power; but it is terrible beyond all terror in the midnight shadow of the grave. And its reflection fell on Lucille with a vague dread; in her young and carefully-guarded life she had never seen the look that she saw now on the face of the woman before her;—that wreck of ruined beauty, that unconscious wild defiance, that lost and broken grandeur which gleamed still through all the darkness of evil and of shame. She had never seen it; it had awe and fear for her, all strange and nameless as it was, yet her first instinct was that of the infinite pity which could shrink from nothing that was human, and could be denied to nothing that was in misery.

She sank down, kneeling beside the wretched bed with all the grace of her own loveliness, all the gentleness of her own nature; and with a musing pain in her eyes gazed down at the woman to whom she had owed the deadliest wrong of all her life, before her life had known its loss. Her heart was heavy with its own first bitterness, with a weary aching sadness that hardly yet knew its own spring; life seemed unclosing about her in all its hidden mysteries, its solemnity of pain; and in the insensible anguish on which she looked, she seemed to see, as by some sudden revelation, how terrible this world could be, which to *her*, until so late, had been one sunny Eden of eternal summer. She touched, with lingering caress, the amber tresses that were tangled with the brown rough grasses of the bed; she laid her hand with cooling perfumes on the brow that burned like fire beneath it; she bent over her with pitying words, whose melody insensibly soothed and silenced the moaning wandering murmurs on the parched lips.

Unconscious what she did, she brought her compassion, her tenderness, her angel ministration, to the assassinatress by whose lie her father perished. And there, in the deep shadow of the leaning rotten roof, she knelt beside her;—her youth, her innocence, her fair ethereal life, beside the bruised, stricken, guilt-steeped outcast, who owed a stoup of water to a beggar's alms.

The day had risen and become noon. Strathmore, who could find no rest, was up, after a few brief sleepless hours on his bed, walking still, scarce conscious where he went, alone in the wild forests and solitary shores of White Ladies. No nearer to his resolve, no closer to decision between the divided duties that had their conflict in him—the duty which bade him guard her life without a cloud, the duty which forbade him to make that life one with his. Choose which he would, he must err to the dead and to her; which error would be the less? That he himself loved, that he himself longed to have the sweetness of her young lips, the love-smile of her eyes, the keeping of her peace and joy, he let weigh nothing in the scale. A haughty egotism had once too entirely ruled him; but now he would have crucified every thought of self with an unswerving martyrdom, and thrust his own remaining years into any depths of woe, if by so doing he could have saved or aided her.

He did not know how the hours had passed; he did not remember how his absence would be noted, since men who have the triumph of eminence, can never have the luxury of solitude. He walked on and on, feeling a strange relief in that ceaseless movement, in that physical exhaustion.

Which must he choose?—the betrayal of his trust in consigning her life to sorrow; or the betrayal of her innocence in wedding her, with the past stifled and buried from her?

Either seemed equally accursed to him.

Wandering without aim, almost without knowledge, he came to where the sea-side cabin stood, with the sound of the waves under the cliffs below, and the great woods locking it

in their depths. The group about it fell back at his approach; he looked at them with surprise, recognising those who specially attended her.

"Why are you here?"

"Mademoiselle Lucille is within, my lord."

"Within?—*there?*"

He laid his hand upon the door and pushed it open. For a moment all was hazy and dim before him, coming from the full and mellow light into the darkened shed; then the leaden clouds of smoke seemed to roll back, and beyond them he saw, kneeling there in the gloom, the bright child who was the fitting minister of a godlike compassion, beside the bed on which the homeless exile lay. A sickness of horror came upon him; the darkness whirled before his sight; dizzy, breathless, stunned, he leaned nearer, gazing on them in the blankness of a ghastly fascination;—one glance, and he had known the face of his destroyer.

And he saw them together!—he saw Lucille beside the woman who had tempted him to his crime, and had been, more yet than he, the assassin of her father!

Life seemed to have held no retribution for him until now. Remorse, remorse! where was its use? It was vain as to seek back the dead from their tomb, since his guilt could follow him thus!

He looked on them together, the life of cruelty and sin, beside the soilless youth, pure as the flowers that opened to the dawn; he met the senseless, blind gaze of the eyes in which his heaven once had shone; he saw Lucille, kneeling before that bed of shame, with a prayer upon her young lips —a prayer of *pity!*—and on her face the light of a beautiful mercy, of an exhaustless love. In all the width of the crowded world must *these* meet! One moment, while his gaze fastened there, in what appeared to him an eternity of dim, unutterable horror; in which he saw them in that dark and wretched place across the rolling smoke, that seemed like the pestilential breath of his dead years rising round the innocence of Lucille to destroy her for ever;—one moment, in which a

hideous unreality possessed him, and the burning eyes of the woman he had loved gazed without sight or sense in his;—then, with an unconscious gesture, an unconscious cry, like that in which he had once before answered her love and betrayed his own, he stretched out his arms.

"Lucille! Lucille!"

She looked up, rose, and sprang towards him with the fond instinct of her childhood, stronger in that moment of surprise than the estranged pain which was between them. Not knowing what he did, or who beheld him, he pressed her to his breast with unconscious passion, and drew her into his arms, away from that bed of misery, away from the senseless gaze of those haunting eyes.

"My God! what brought you here?—what madness sent you to this accursed place? You—you——"

There was a jarring violence in his voice, a passionate force in the embrace which closed on her, that he was insensible of, that she felt with startled, wistful awe, half gladness and half fear; her heart shrank from it, and yet knew that this was greater love than the gentleness which she had always known. The doubting, wondering look of her lifted eyes, the instinctive movement with which she drew herself from his arms, wakened him to the knowledge of what he did, of what he said; to the memory of how his own words might betray him, of how, before all, above all, *she* must be spared. In the presence of Marion Vavasour his hand had no right even to touch her own! In that moment he could have flung himself down at her feet, and told her all, bidding her hate him, revile him, lay what vengeance and what misery she would on him, so that only there were no secret between them,—so that only she forgave him as her father had forgiven!

He loosed her from him, and his voice was broken and indistinct, while he dared not look upon her face, he dared not meet her eyes, though still he forced her out farther from that place, and nearer towards the pure day.

"I startled you—forgive me! This is no place for you; there is danger here, and evil," he murmured, incoherently.

"Come—come! Do you hear me! Come! You are too young for these dens of vileness!"

"They are only very poor?" she pleaded, softly, while her own words were tremulous, and her heart seemed stirred with the passion that for one moment had vibrated with such force in his. "The people know me well—and—and she suffers so much; let me stay with her a little while?"

He shivered under the gentle words which pleaded with such pity for the outcast lying there. He took her hands one moment and pressed them against his heart, that beat beneath them with loud laboured throbs.

"Oh, my love, my child! your life is too fair to be near mine—or hers—or any that sin has touched! You are pure as the angels; and *we*——! Come, for the mercy of Heaven, come! *I* bid you!"

A deep flush came on her face, her eyes looked at him wistfully, her lips trembled slightly; vaguely and sweetly, yet with something of pain and fear, she felt that the love which spoke now in his words was another than that which had sheltered her childhood. His will was her law, and with one pitying, lingering, backward glance to where the nameless stranger lay, she went with him, and was borne out by him into the tranquil noon, into the silence of the solitary woods. He knew nothing that he did; he had one instinct only, to force her from that presence as from some pestilential place, to carry her far away down to the fresh waters, into the depths of the fresh forests, anywhere—anywhere—from the search of that burning gaze, from the breath of that destroying life!

She did not move, she did not speak; once she looked upward at him with dark dreaming eyes; that was all; a strange solemnity, half of awe, half of terror, yet sweet beyond all words, seemed to thrill through all her life. She heard the quick, loud beatings of his heart; she felt herself borne on and on by his hand, as if by invisible wings, in silence through the bright sun-lightened forest aisles; alone with him, while the stillness of the great woods was round them,

and beyond the glorious freedom of the sea lay flashing in the light.

His arms closed on her as though in their strength to hold her back from the vileness of the past that rose to smite her, his head drooped over her while hot tears fell upon the brightness of her brow, his eyes looked down with a yearning anguish into hers. All his life longed for her; and yet—love between *them!* Love while her father's splendour of manhood had fallen by his hand, and there, beyond the reddened wood, still lived the temptress and companion of his sin! He shuddered at it, he shrank from it as from fresh crime; yet his arms drew her nearer to him; his breath was on her cheek; the moment's instinct was stronger than himself, it shattered every other thought aside, and drove him on unconscious what he did, while all his heart went out to her in passionate pain:

"Oh, Lucille! my child! my treasure! my angel! my lips are not fit for yours; my life is not meet for yours, and yet—— Oh, God!—I love you!"

Her face grew white, he felt her tremble in his hold, she quivered like a delicate animal under a blow, and her eyes glanced up to him with a swift appealing glance, with all the deep and dreamy wonder of a heart freshly startled to its own knowledge. He pressed her closer yet in his embrace:

"My love you have ever had; but *another* love, Lucille;—the love of a husband for the life that is dearest to him on earth——"

His voice, broken into indistinctness, spoke more of tenderness than words can ever hold, and as she heard it, over her brow came a deep changing flush, a soft tremulous light, her lips parted with a quick sigh; a glory touched her life, in which the golden world of sea and sunlight reeled before her sight; her eyes sought his in one fleeting look, and his lips met her own in the kiss which they had never given, often as they had rested there;—the kiss of love. The choice was made;—her life was his for ever.

And there, at her feet, unnoted beneath the tangled grasses and the ivy-coils of the sea-shore, lay one forgotten grave, with the leaves covering the solitary word of record—

"Lucille."

Even while the gladness of morning glanced on the serenity of the waters, and on his own lips was the soft warmth of her first caress, a sudden icy chillness swept through all his veins, and he drew her with a passionate gesture closer to his bosom, farther into the forest solitudes. Their first love-words had been uttered by her mother's grave!

## CHAPTER XVIII.

"Ist auch Diess ein Irrthum, so schont mich, ihr klügeren Götter."

WHEN the night had fallen with its grey gloom of twilight, a shadow came towards the threshold of the cabin by the sea.

The hut was forsaken; the low peat fire burned dully on the hearth, casting a dusky, fitful gleam; on the pallet in the darkened corner the nameless wanderer lay, in blindness, in stupor, in feverish, restless pain. There was not a dog to watch her sleep, or to grieve for her now;—for her for whom once sovereigns had waited, by whom human love had once been gained and spent, and broken, idly and cruelly as a child wastes king-cups in a summer's day.

The shadow crossed the threshold, and the bare mud floor, and came towards her bed in the sullen crimson light; Strathmore stood and looked on her again, drawn there by a force he had no power to resist—the force that makes men their own accusers and avengers. He was alone, and she lay stretched unconscious at his feet.

Once he had said that vengeance had a sweetness which none could ever steal; now he knew that it may bring in its

fruition, a pang as deadly for him that strikes, as for the stricken.

His eyes dwelt on her one moment in a long shuddering gaze, this life that was his own crime, incarnate, and ever pursuing him.

Was *this* the loveliness which had seemed immortal in its deathless splendour? Past him there floated, as in a dream, all the dazzling hours of her youth and his. The woman *he* had loved was dead; dead long years ago in the grave where their youth lay. *This* was not she; no more than the yellow faded leaf that, scentless and withered, is trodden in the dust and drifted down the wind, is the rose that yesterday swung in the light of palace-gardens! No more—no less!

He stood and looked on her under the black leaning roof of the hovel, while the sullen blasts poured down through the broken thatch, and the dull flame threw a weird flickering flash over the bed of straw and rough sand grasses. Those who have seen what they have cherished lie still and peaceful in the calm of death, have known an anguish that is mercy beside what he knew now. For he had loved her; with a love that would have given his very life for hers ungrudgingly; a love that now, in all its cheated crime-stained hate, still lived in passionate, hungered misery for all it once had been!

His vengeance had made her what she now was, and now, beholding it, he suffered in it as much as she. That sun-crowned glory of his past!—it was gone for ever; gone like the bloom from these white lips of pain, for whose kiss he once had staked his soul; like the lustre from these dull tangled tresses, whose golden light had once made all his world; like the empire from this ruined life, whose beauty lay before him bruised, shattered, torn, and perished for evermore. And a great agony came on him, mightier than vengeance, vaster than hatred, deep as remorse. He had loved her as never now could he love again—he had loved her, paying down the peace and guiltlessness of his whole life at

her word. And freshly, as though dealt but yesterday, the blow of her faithlessness smote him; he could not look on her; he could not breathe near her; he staggered from her where she lay, and felt his way blindly and feebly out into the evening air—down into the core of the woods, where no eyes beheld him;—down to the silent shores, where no step came, and the grey sea stretched in solitude.

He had thought his strength as iron, and it was weaker than the reed. He had thought to mould fate like deity; and an outcast's life, saved by the wanton caprice of the waters, rose in his path inexorable as destiny.

Hours later on he returned to White Ladies by the side-door of the western wing. His step was slow, his proud head stooped and bent. Strathmore, to whose nature defeat had once seemed impossible, was vanquished, broken, netted in, in the meshes of his own past acts; and while an innocent life loved him and was pledged to his, the darkness of his own left him no fitness for its pure presence.

Marion Vavasour was once more in his fate; so near him that his own peasants sheltered her, that the woods of his own lands shut in the wretched shed where she was harboured. And he could do nothing; he could not thrust her out from the beggars' charity she was given; he could not drive her from his home, and forbid those who succoured her to give her the pile of straw and cup of water that alone kept existence in her. Lord here though he was, and free to command what he would, he could not exile an outcast from the cabin of the poorest that lived upon his land! His hands were bound. She must haunt him as she would—there was no refuge. One thought alone remained to him. Lucille must leave him; she must not stay where the murderess of her father had once been in her sight, had once been *pitied* by her tender charity! What he had said to her, even in its sweetness, even in its first soft and forgetful moments, weighed heavily on him, with a sense as of evil committed, of danger drawn down on her. What

right had he to her love? What right had he to have bound her life with his? Fear, misery, the instinct to save her from her father's destroyer, and a resistless longing impulse to tell her how he loved her, and take her to his heart to shield her there for ever, had hurried him in one unconscious instant into what had all the day through—what even still—seemed to him a sin and an impiety against the dead and her. The die was cast; yet none the less did the gain of her love seem crime in him, did the future that must unite their lives seem darkened and forbidden.

As his steps wearily paced the length of the long corridors, at a distance he saw her, alone in the conservatories, lying under the clusters of oriental foliage, with the great palm-leaves drooped above her, and the brilliancy of autumn flowers clustering at her feet. The white light shone on her, and on the careless grace, the dreaming joy, the abandoned happiness, the childlike rest of her repose, pure and without a shade; happiness so deep and new that it still trembled at itself, was still told in all her attitude, in the very droop of the lashes over her musing eyes, in the very smile that lingered on her parted lips, in the very flush that even in solitude was bright upon her cheek.

He had erred? Surely not, since she was happy through him?

As he approached, she started and raised her head; the light which would never dawn there save for him chased the thoughtfulness from her eyes; the colour deepened in her face; she sprang up, then paused with the wild, shy, delicate grace of the deer—in that moment she was so exquisitely fair! Doom to grief and loneliness that fairy child in the years of her earliest youth? It would have been as brutal as to stifle the young bird in the first music of its song, as to slay with a blow the trusting fawn as it looked up with earnest, lustrous gaze, and caressed the hand it followed!

He stretched out his arms to her, and forgot all save that her life was his to treasure and to guard:

"Oh! my child, my love, my darling! God send that

all pain falls on me; that none comes to thee through *my* love!"

With his accustomed measured step, Strathmore crossed the great length of the withdrawing-room, and approached the place where his mother sat alone; she looked up, and as the light fell upon his face, she saw a change on it, a great softness that changed its melancholy and its resolve.

Her thoughts were weary, the farewell of her young grandson had filled them with his grief; but in the presence of Strathmore she ceased to remember the sorrow, bitter but innocent, of youth, and a sudden fear fell on her: that look upon his face told her much.

Her son stood before her, and his words were very brief:

"Mother,—let the past be buried for ever. Lucille will be my wife."

"*Yours!*"

"Yes. Why not? Why not?"

His voice was defiant, almost fierce, as though challenging the power which should dispute his will and sever them.

"Why? *You* ask that, Cecil?"

She had risen, and fronted him; in her eyes the pitilessness which he had inherited with her blood, on her face the coldness which in her earlier years had been unchastened and unsoftened.

The words struck Strathmore keenly as a knife; his head bowed, his lips quivered—this man bent silent and without defence before the sternest and most unsparing cruelty of words which rebuked him with his sin.

"Have pity!—for her sake!"

His voice trembled in its humbled prayer; and his mother's heart smote her for the stripes with which she had struck him where he was defenceless. She laid her hand softly on his shoulder, her face no longer stern, but blanched with a great horror.

"Forgive me, forgive me! But, oh, my son, it cannot be, it must not be——"

"It *shall* be."

She knew the tone of old; the inflexible will of the Strathmores of White Ladies, than which iron were easier to bend, fire were easier to cross; and she was silent. This marriage! She shuddered from it as from some great sin, from some inevitable evil; yet—she had no power to avert it, no power to arrest it; she could not turn traitress to her son, she could not unfold to the life which was centred in his, the history which would be its surest death-blow?

"It shall be—who shall prevent it?" said Strathmore, and his voice rose slightly louder. "My own peace I would sacrifice, my own life I would give up—what I had suffered would have mattered nothing—but hers I will never surrender. That course is right which most shields her. I swore to keep her years from every grief; I will redeem my oath. Shall *I* strike her? shall *I* curse her? Where would be the atonement I vowed to her father? Would he bid me destroy her young life? Would he see expiation to himself in her misery through the very love which he bade me foster? To whom, had he now been living, would he have given her so gladly as to me?"

The swift, imperious, resolved passion in his voice ceased suddenly, his lips quivered again; he thought with what gladness and what faith Lucille, drawing closer the bond of their brotherhood, would have been trusted to his keeping as to the friend best known and best beloved, by the man whom he had slain, had he been living now!

His mother looked at him; and her courage failed her to pierce by one added sting the wound laid open so deeply and bared without defence. She knew that his decision, once declared, was unalterable; she could not dispute it, or persuade it, and there was truth in what he said, that to consign to bitterness the young and joyous years of Lucille, were to cancel all that had been done as obedience to the dead, and

leave worse than unfulfilled the office bequeathed him. Yet —he her husband—*he!*

She shuddered, and her hands locked close upon his arm.

"Strathmore! Strathmore!—wait. If she should ever know——"

His face grew whiter for the moment; the thought froze his very heart.

"Know! She *cannot.* No living soul could find a trace of her birth."

Her hand leant heavier on his arm, and her voice was sunk to a tremulous whisper:

"But is crime ever buried? It sleeps, but it is never dead; and oh, my son, my son! its prey is so often the innocent!"

He laughed—a hopeless laugh, bitterly, bitterly sad.

"What! even *you,*—my mother!—deny that my guilt can reach atonement! Then remorse is a fool's travail, and the sinner must live for ever in the hell he has made to himself! It is a harsh law—still—not harsher than *I* merit."

The despair in his voice recoiled back on her own heart, and her eyes filled with tears, the slow, salt tears of age.

"Cecil, my son, my son! would *I* condemn you? Remorse is holy to God, sacred in man. The prayer of my life is that yours may be blessed. But—but—I confess it, for *you* to wed her——"

"Peace!" broke in Strathmore, with passionate force. "We have said enough. My resolve is taken; my hand is pledged; Lucille will be mine. Let us never speak again of what we have spoken to-night. Seek her, the innocent child! rejoice with her, give her tenderness, give her love. Henceforth you must show her that she is more to you than she has ever been."

With these brief words of command, rather than of entreaty, he bowed low with his distant and punctilious courtesy, and left her presence; his mother knew that what he had chosen was irrevocable.

"You love him so well, my darling?" she said, softly, that night; and as Lucille's head was raised for one swift moment, and her face uplifted in its shy joy, the aged and world-worn woman who looked on her ceased to wonder that he bade the dead past lie sealed within its grave, and sought to shield for ever in his own bosom the dawning life which had known but the cloudless sunlight of childhood till it awakened to the richer, deeper lustre of its future.

Yet the shadow of the past was on her; and she dreaded it.

On the morrow he left for Paris, and Lucille, with his mother, quitted White Ladies.

He could not wait there, could not have *her* stay there, while in that cabin on the shore Marion Vavasour lay, tendered by beggars' charity!

## CHAPTER XIX.

"And Unforgiving, Unforgiven."

It was twilight as Strathmore paced slowly up and down one of the deserted allées of the Bois de Boulogne, while the fallen leaves were strewn beneath his feet, and the shades of the night drew on: he waited for Valdor.

The fiery Henri Cinquiste, rarely given to prudence, had now a value and sweetness in his life too great to let him risk it rashly; and he was proscribed in Paris, and could only venture out when evening fell. Strathmore waited for him, pacing the long aisle under the red-brown boughs, hanging stirless in heavy air;—the same allée where, in the years that were gone, in the amber sunlight he had watched the speeding of his vengeance as the Discrowned had passed through her long pilgrimage of insult and of outrage.

In the twilight a man's form came swiftly towards him, and he saw in the rapidity of the step, and the look, which by the still lingering light he could read upon his face, with what joyous and fearless hope Valdor came to the meeting.

For him he felt the deepest pity he had ever known; Strathmore now grieved sincerely and unselfishly for the grief of another. The tenderness of his own love for Lucille had softened the coldness of his heart; it had made him humane—it had made him compassionate. He was in no wise blamable towards Valdor; on the contrary, he had fulfilled his word, and acted with the strictest justice and generosity in his dealing with the cause of his absent rival; and yet he felt something of self-reproach for the hope which, in honourable though erroneous belief, he had been the one to confirm, and which he must now be also the one to destroy.

With glad eagerness Valdor came up to him, and Strathmore held out his hand with the generous cordiality of his earlier years; but, as he met his eyes, the coldness of a sudden and unlooked-for dread came over the French Noble: he saw in them a look wholly new there—the look of *pity*.

"Tell me the worst at once, Strathmore," he said, quickly. "I cannot bear suspense. Is it——"

Strathmore, in the simple impulse of a genuine sympathy, turned from him as he answered, and his voice was gentle and mellow:

"It is I who am to blame, though, God knows, I believed honestly what I told you. Forgive me; I misled you, you misled yourself, Valdor."

He did not look upon the face of the man to whom he was compelled to deal so deadly a wound, but he heard the quick, sharp catch of his breath.

"Is there no hope?"

His voice was husky and inarticulate; that which answered him was tender and compassionate.

"None. I grieve that I ever deceived you."

They stood together under the yellow autumn trees, and, looking on him now, Strathmore saw how keen and mortal was his pain. Valdor had forgotten all in that moment, save the bitter, sudden desolation which struck down all the tender and vivid hope that he had cherished, until it had become well-nigh as sweet to him and as sure as certainty.

He turned, and walked swiftly up and down the allée with his head bent for some seconds; he could not bear that another man should look on what he felt. His belief had been so strong that his love was returned!—and the hot ardour of a Southern's passion was blended with the chivalrous tenderness in which he held her, till the thought of Lucille had become the core and the soul of his life.

He paused suddenly before Strathmore, and in the gloom his cheek was pale, and his lips worked painfully, while in his eyes and his air there was a hot and haughty defiance.

"She loves another?"

Strathmore looked steadily at him, and in his gaze there was a deep compassion still; he grieved honestly and generously for the pain before him.

"She does."

"Who is he?"

There was menace in Valdor's answering glance: his own sudden sharpness of anguish made him unjust, and his fiery anger rose in revolt against his unknown rival.

Strathmore looked at him, and spoke with a rare and singular sympathy in the gentleness of his voice; the young love of Lucille lay warm in his heart, and made him more merciful to all men, specially so to those who had sought her in vain.

"Valdor, hear me first. What I said to you I honestly believed, or I had never spoken it. I thought that Lucille loved you. I told her word for word what you desired me. I did your cause every justice—you know me, and you know that I should do so. I give you my word of honour, that I dreamt as little as yourself that I should have now to tell you what——"

"*Who* is loved by her?"

The question broke fiercely and swiftly in upon his words; suspicion flashed on him, for the glance of her rejected lover saw the altered look which had come upon Strathmore's face since the night when they had parted beneath the palms, a

look of light, of rest, of relief, of something that was *almost* happiness.

"I am."

"*You!*"

They faced each other in the twilight, and their eyes met. Strathmore's face was calm, filled still with much of compassion, and free to all scrutiny, for to Valdor's cause he had done his duty honourably and fully, and he deserved no reproach at his hands. Valdor's was deeply flushed; there was danger in it, and the tumult of a jealous passion.

"You! God in heaven, then you lied to me!"

Strathmore's face grew dark; the lightning leapt to his eyes for a second—only for that,—he could make extenuation and have patience here, and there was nothing harsher than a proud and just dignity in his look and in his words:

"In a calmer moment you will see you do me injustice. It would not be possible for any man who knows my name to accuse me of cowardice or dishonour. I kept my word to you strictly; it was an after hazard which revealed to me what when we parted I dreamt as little as you."

"She loves *you!—you!*"

There was something almost of terror and incredulity, mingled with the jealousy, with which he stood before Strathmore in the gloom of the early night. Strathmore bent his head; some passion was rising in him, and he would not allow it rein; with the soft touch of Lucille's lips in their first kiss, gentleness had stolen into his heart, and wakened compassion in him towards those who suffered.

"And you—you return it? you allow it? you will wed her?"

A haughty anger passed over Strathmore's face:

"Assuredly. I shall become her husband."

As he spoke the words, the winds, slowly rising, swept up with a hollow and melancholy moan through the dying leaves of the autumn trees.

Valdor looked at him, the blood staining his face, his breath thick and laboured, his words stifled in his throat:

"*Her husband!* Never, if I live! You have betrayed me, and you shall renounce all thought of her!"

Strathmore's teeth clenched, but he strove to hold down his wrath, and he succeeded; it was with a melancholy and proud forbearance, the more worthy that it was so alien to his nature, that he answered now:

"Those are strange words, but you have a right to feel bitterly, and I must wait till with reflection and time you do me more justice. I can but give you my word that I acted in honour and honesty to you, while I had no thought that her love——"

"Her love, *hers!* I swear to Heaven you shall renounce such an unhallowed, unnatural, forbidden union," cried Valdor, wildly and blindly, with imperious command. "Strathmore! listen to me. I may never wed her, but neither shall you. I forbid such a marriage, I arrest it; you shall renounce it to-night and for ever!"

"You? Are you a madman?"

He spoke calmly yet, but the forbearance was passing from his soul and the pitying tranquillity from his face, though the meaning of the words he heard did not as yet dawn on him, for he deemed the secret too safely buried to be ever brought to light; no living being knew Lucille as Erroll's child.

Valdor drew nearer still to him, his hot blood up, his eyes lit with dangerous menace, his pain blinding him to all memory, save that the man before him was his rival, who had robbed him of what he loved.

"*I* arrest it, *I* forbid it! By the God above us you shall never be the husband of Lucille."

Strathmore's arms were folded with his habitual attitude across his chest, and his eyes looked steadily into the face of Valdor, in the deepening of the night.

"*You* forbid it?—and how?"

"I shall tell her that you were the murderer of her father."

The words broke, abrupt and hideous, on the silence,—Strathmore started, his face grew white in the grey gloom,

and into his eyes came a terrible hunted agony; was he ever to strive towards peace, and ever to have it shattered from his grasp? He lost the strength, the memory, the calm which might still, at cost of truth, have baffled his accuser; any who had looked on him then would have pitied to their heart's core the man whose haughtiest pride, whose humblest remorse, were alike powerless to wash out and to atone for a repented past: any,—save one who loved where he loved!

"You—you——" he gasped; then his voice died, his dread, his anguish were less for himself than they were for her whose death-blow would be the knowledge of his crime.

Valdor looked on him *without* pity, for the evil spirit of a jealous passion possessed him, and while it reigned darkened his heart, and drove thence all compassion, all mercy, all generous chivalry to his rival.

"Ay! Here, where you slew him, I swear she shall know that the hand which she would caress as her husband's, took the life which gave her own. Will she wed you *then?* Ask yourself!"

"Wed me—you would be her death!"

His voice was filled with a fearful misery, for it was her life which hung in the balance and not his alone. He had no thought to mislead the man who thus accused him; for his strength had broken down before the sudden danger, and the nature of Strathmore, when the world had not warped it, was instinctively truth; truth, be temptation, or cost what they might.

"Her death! Better that than marriage with her father's assassin!" broke in Valdor, bitterly, in his despair he grew cruel and reckless. "If you would spare her, renounce that; swear to me that never, whether I live or die, shall Lucille be your wife, or I arrest your union at any cost, by letting her know you as you are. She is the daughter of Erroll; she shall hear how he fell by the hand of the friend he trusted more than a brother!"

Strathmore quivered like a woman who is dealt a brutal blow; he was struck where his strength was paralysed, he

was wounded where he had no shield. In the reality of his remorse, he held the vilest words which could scourge his sin but his due chastisement, to be taken in silence and submission; and here he had no force, no defiance, no power, for *she* was menaced! And for her he stooped as for himself he would have never done.

He stood before Valdor, his head drooped, his face livid, his hands outstretched in the first prayer of supplication to which he had ever bent to any living man.

"Your words are bitter, but *I* merit them; were they a thousandfold harder I should have no title to resent them. I, 'a murderer!' I am at your mercy, so is she; I would not ask it for myself, but for her—for her."

His voice dropped inarticulate, with strong effort he commanded it, and spoke again, lifting his head with the dignity natural to him, touchingly mingled with the self-humiliation so alien to his nature.

"You have my secret; measure my thirst for expiation by the vileness of my crime—it is as great, greater it could not be! She was his trust to me; in her peace, her life, lies my sole power of atonement to him. For the love of God, spare me *that!* By your power, be generous! By your tenderness to her, do not deal her her death-blow! She is innocent, would you strike her?—destroy her?—curse her soul with that deadly tale of vilest guilt? Not as rival to rival, but as man to man I implore you. Have mercy—not to me, not to *me*—but to her!"

Not in the most victorious hours of his powerful oratory had his eloquence been so true as now, when it lay but in the broken, hollow words of a great agony—his haughty nature bent and stricken, his guilt confessed, his soul laid bare.

Alas! he who else had been swiftest to be touched and won by the prayer of a proud life laid subject, here was blind, and steeled, and without pity in that hour, for—he loved.

"Renounce your marriage, and she shall not know her father's blood is on your hands."

In the gloom of the night the words fell from the lips of the man who had his secret; and Strathmore learned the bitterness that lies in mercy denied to extremity.

"Renounce? I cannot! *My* peace I would surrender, *my* life you should have to torture as you would, I have no claim to pity, no right to joy!—but I cannot give up hers, I cannot leave her forsaken, insulted, her youth embittered, her life more than widowed? My God! it is *her* happiness that is my solitary atonement to her father. Wreck that! by my own hand, my own consent! Are you brute or man that you ask it? Would you be nearer her love because she were divorced by me?"

The blood stained Valdor's face, and on it came no pity.

"Renounce her!" he said, fiercely, "or she shall know you as you are!"

"You are resolved?"

"Yes, by the God above us!"

"So be it—do your worst!"

Then Strathmore lifted his head and stood erect; he pleaded no more, and on his face, calm now, the look of iron pride, of chill tranquillity—the look which was evil—had returned. It was his special and unhappy fate that whenever he strove—strove earnestly—towards better things and gentler thoughts, there circumstance arose and turned him backward into darkness, and denied him to rise into the purer light.

In the night which had now only descended they fronted one another, the fiery menace of his foe met by a cold and fathomless defiance; and in Strathmore's eyes, although the memory of him whom he had slain yonder in the poisonous gloom beside the old deer-water, still lay like a sacred chain binding down his passions, there was a glance dangerous to the man who had driven him to extremity. Then, without word or sign, he turned away from him and went slowly through the avenue, with his arms folded on his breast, while Valdor, with swift, uneven steps, swept onward, whither he cared not and knew not, into the dark sear woodland of the deserted place.

Fear need have followed him close as his shadow; he had wronged, and denied, and stung to extremity, when it was abased, and unveiled, and suppliant, a nature which never forgave.

## CHAPTER XX.

### Evil done that Good may come.

THE knowledge that Valdor held the secret which, once told, must part for ever Lucille's life from his, left Strathmore stunned like a man felled by an unseen blow on the brain. He had believed that no living soul could find trace of her birth, and the stroke fell suddenly and without warning, paralysing the hand which had deemed its strength strong to all control of circumstance. He was wound beyond escape in the folds of fate, as the Laöcoon in the serpent coils. And the sickening sense of *powerlessness*—the most terrible torture, I think, which this world holds, certainly the most terrible to one whose will is forcible, and whose habit is to rule—tightened about him, and stifled his very life.

He lost all sense, save that of an impotent despair, in which he tore at his bonds and writhed beneath the retribution of his past; a maddened, feverish agony, under whose goad all the evil of his nature rose, a giant in its desperation. His own life he would have flung down a prey to any fate that could have seized it; but hers!—there was no sin that Strathmore would have shrunk from to ward off from her fair and sacred innocence the dark curse of his buried crime.

It left him no more than the sheer wild instinct of self-preservation, such as that on which men and brutes act in a moment of supreme and hideous peril. His calm had been shattered, he had lost that keen acumen which in statecraft placed him beyond rival—that cool, clear wisdom which led him, unerring, to men's every weakness and every impulse. Else, had he judged more truly of his foe; else, had he known that—his swift Southern passion once bated—justice and

mercy would have revived in Valdor, and his hand would have withheld the blow which could not have avenged him, save by striking at the one whom he loved most gently and most chivalrously. It was not in the nature of the French Noble to be merciless or cruel; a generous repentance followed swiftly on every thought or act of passion—it did so now.

The jealousy of a love which, at the very moment of its sweetest hope, had been denied and dashed to earth, had goaded him for the hour into hatred and resolution inexorable as those of the man they menaced. He saw in Strathmore but the rival who had robbed him; he wronged him, in the hot haste of a bitter disappointment, by the belief that he had betrayed the embassy entrusted to him; he grasped, in the desperation of his love, at the revenge which would sunder her for ever from the lover who stood before him. And for the hour Valdor was blind with that passion which makes men devils; and was without pity for him who had been pitiless.

But, as the grey morning dawned, and the day rolled on, through whose dreary length he was chained to his chamber for the sake of the cause which he served, lest his presence should be known in Paris, the selfish spirit left him, and the nobler regained its hold. The bitterness relaxed, with which he had been drunk as with raki, till humanity was deadened by it, and no thought was left him but revenge; justice came back to him, and all the softer thoughts of a love which was essentially pure and true arose, and made him shrink from a vengeance which must strike at *her*. His heart smote him for the mercilessness with which he had been steeled to the prayer of the proud nature which had stooped to plead, and to the remorse which had been laid bare before him in its anguish for expiation. He saw that, as great as had been the crime of this man, so was his repentance sacred; his conscience recoiled from undoing the labour of such repentance, from destroying the innocent with the sin of the guilty, from

smiting him who strove towards a just atonement with the deeds of his own past.

He knew how Lucille loved Strathmore, for he had studied that love, and feared it, till a false hope had blinded him with its traitor-sweetness. He knew now how the man whom the world called heartless and conscienceless, had been scourged by the flail of remorse, and had centred his sole power of restitution in one young frail life. And the nobler nature wrestled in him with that which was more evil, and overthrew the baser. "His remorse is holy—it is not for me to touch it. Had she loved me I should have reverenced his secret; because her love is his, shall I turn traitor?" This was the true instinct of a gallant heart; and as the long brown autumn day ended and night stole near, he rose armed with such strength as men may best bring to meet the bitterness of cheated hope and joy dashed down for ever, and went out into the falling twilight to say this, and this only, to him whom Lucille loved.

And as he felt the first cool rush of the evening wind, and left the solitude of his chamber for the chilly yellow night, a shadow stole towards him, and he was arrested—a State Prisoner.

In the stillness of that midnight Strathmore stood beside the tomb where deep in the stainless marble was carved the record of his crime. The white autumn mists were heavy on the air, the winds sighed among the long grass that blew above Erroll's grave, and the gold-leaved boughs of the dying trees swayed over the stone where he was lain in the dark dank earth—forgot by all save one.

Strathmore stood there beside the resting-place of the man whom he had slain in all the noon and glory of his manhood; and his heart was sick with the deadly pain of the past, and with the burden of the future. For evil had seized *both.* And the sin-taint from that which was gone, breathed over, and reached, and poisoned the fair years ungrasped.

He knew that the past, once told, would be as surely

death to her as the touch of poison or the breath of pestilence; he knew that Lucille, living but in his love, would be smitten more gently by the fellest disease that ever seized the loveliness of youth, than by the words which should bid her see in him who sought her with a husband's tenderness the destroyer of those who gave her birth. It was not his own passion, his own peace, his own joy; not the shelter of his crime, or the years of his future, or the desire of his soul which was at the stake and in the balance—*these* he would have given up a prey to any fate, a meet sacrifice to any vengeance that befel him; what were in jeopardy were *hers* —his trust from the man whom he had loved as David loved the son of Saul, whom he had slain as Cain slew the son of Eve.

She must be spared.

This was the sole thought, the sole sense that was left him. He had been denied mercy. And, swift as naphtha to flame, under the torture, all the worst in him leapt to life. With that denial his resolve was taken, blind, and knowing neither how nor when its way would be pioneered, but fixed and inflexible—the resolve to silence at any cost, at any peril, the rival whose knowledge of his secret menaced Lucille. Alas for him! Strathmore had not yet learned that it is not given to man to mould the shape and way of fate at will, and that to do evil that good may come, is but to add sin to sin, sepulchre to sepulchre.

When he left his foe in the still autumn night his will was set, forged to iron in the fires of an agonised and imminent terror. Crime itself looked holy in his sight if for her, and all that could save *her* was justified to him. And he had ever in him too much of the passionate imperious Cæsarian choice: "Let him murder, but let him reign!"

Yet, it had been truly said of him, "A bad man sometimes, a dangerous man always, but a false man—never." He recoiled from the sole means of preservation which rose within his grasp as he would from some dastard poison with which he had been tempted to still the foe who held his

secret. Strathmore, guilty in much, and cruel where his will was crossed, had no taint of the traitor in him. Great crimes might stain him, but baseness or perfidy had no lodging in his nature. His creed of honour was lofty, knightly, unsullied—the creed of the stately nobles whose blood was in his veins—and an act that even drew nigh the vileness of betrayal was loathsome, and had ever been impossible to him.

Yet here, in the blindness of dread, in the suddenness with which he saw Lucille threatened, and knew that he must either silence the lips which could breathe his secret, or see her life destroyed—here, there rose but one means of salvation for her, and to shield her he grasped it. Anything, I have said, looked just to him which should be done to save the innocent from the burden of his guilt; all, that for himself he would have withstood, grew to him a resistless tempting, a sin righteous and imperative, when it stood out before him as the sole force by which he could rescue her from destruction by his own hand—the hand pledged to her as her husband's.

The ordeal was fearful to him. His soul recoiled from evil, and, "as the hart panteth for the water-springs," thirsted for peace—peace of heart, peace of conscience. And it escaped him—ever, ever. He was driven on and on unceasing—forced to sin that the innocent might be saved, forced to do evil that good might come.

His influence was not seen in his work; none knew that his mind had conceived it; silently, wisely, with a master's finesse, with an unerring skill the web was woven, the mine was sprung, by means the subtlest yet simplest; a word, a hint—nay! scarce so much—and the State hounds were set on the slot of Henry Cinq's Royals. Strathmore had known the projects of that too frank and too chivalrous party; a thread dropped which could not be traced to him, a suggestion lent which could not involve its speaker, a counsel given which was but the well-advised warning of a foreign minister to a friendly court; and he who had been so rash in the bitterness of cheated love as to menace one who never

spared friend in his path, and never aimed save to strike home, was flung into a State prison, where the loyal heart would consume in silence, and the knightly spirit would break in solitude, till the cell should be changed for the galley bench of the Bagne or the malarious swamp of Cayenne.

Strathmore had wrought the ruin of the man who had braved him—wrought it with the subtle, yet passionate and unfaltering will with which his race destroyed whatever was bold enough, and mad enough, to cross their road, and oppose their power. But his soul had revolted from it, and in it he had endured for Lucille what for no other stake he would have suffered. He would have refused to save himself by such a cost; he paid it to save her. He, whose honour his foulest enemies could not impeach, knew himself false to the man who had placed faith in him; the cowardice of betrayal tainted, in his own sight and his own knowledge, the act by which his rival and his foe had been given up to a doom not less inexorable, scarce less cruel, than the grave; for the single time in a long life, which, unscrupulous, pitiless, and darkly stained, had yet never been soiled with one unknightly taint, he knew himself a traitor to his trust, a traitor to his creed.

And he stood there beside the tomb of the dead man for whose sake he had done this thing.

"Traitor! traitor!" said Strathmore, in his teeth, and in his eyes was a terrible wistful misery as they gazed down on the black grass that grew thick above Erroll's grave. "I only needed to be *that!* Heaven help me! I said her life should be before my own. So it has been, so it shall be. It is done for *your* sake, in *your* trust. Oh, God! surely for you, though not for me——"

Not for himself—never for himself—but for the dead whom he loved, and the hallowed life that he guarded, surely, he thought, the work of his expiation would not fail at the last?

Following the consequence that links one sin on to another, he had plunged headlong down into additional crime; as a man, having once set his foot into the loose quicksands, is drawn step by step, lower and lower, powerless to wrench himself free from the devouring mass, sinking farther and farther, locked in and sucked downward till he is lost for ever, while the sun is bright above-head, and the horrors of the grave yawn for him alone—for him by whom one false step first was made.

In the very hour when all his heart ached with its yearning for a purer life; in the very moment when he had taken to himself the treasure and the trust of another existence to be bound in his own, in the very instant when all that was vile in him seemed to have fallen away, and he had sworn to consecrate such years as might remain to him, to unremitting effort to assoil his life, and give it such worthiness as he could still reach, to be in union with Lucille's—in that very instant temptation had again assailed him, and he had fallen beneath it; crime had again come ready to his hand, and he had stretched out his hand and taken its iniquitous aid, its shameful succour. Were the idle myths of superstition true, were the fables of benighted priests real, he asked himself, with cruel self-mockery and self-reviling; and had he sold his soul to some fiend of darkness that he could never make his escape from sin, but always seized it and became one with it like this? Was he devil-possessed that he could never resist the guilt he loathed, but was forced down into it, and dwelt, as though he loved it, always in some deeper depth of its pollution, some closer bond of its fellowship and communion?

No man living on earth could have hated him, as he hated himself. No man have thought his infamy so deeply damned, as he himself knew it to be. The act that had made him a murderer, was scarce so vile in Strathmore's sight, as the act that made him a traitor!

He had saved her—but at what a cost! For her he would have given his life at any hour; but he had given far more now.

His oath had been to sacrifice all things past, and present, and future, to the keeping of her father's trust; and the fulfilment of his oath had become more than the sacrifice of mere existence: it was the acceptance of a long and living martyrdom —the martyrdom, not of renunciation, which guiltless may bring strength to its own torture, but one that could have no such solace—the martyrdom of shame! Shame! none the less, but the more, because like his doom, it was unknown and unchastised by man.

Traitor!

The word sounded in his ear night and day; it lay like a curse upon his name; it mocked him in his memory with every honourable phrase that others uttered to or wrote of him; when he went among his peers he knew himself not fit to have place near them; when their unstained hands met his, or their frank words applauded him, he knew that if they could tell the infamy that was upon him, they would leave his presence as they would leave any blackguard's who had robbed their treasuries—he had been false to all the dignity of his order, to all the honour of his manhood. He knew it; the open scorn of Europe could not have made him know it more terribly. Strathmore—in all his guilt a man who held, with all the loyalty of a proud nature, and the ingrained instinct of a patrician creed, to the most stringent laws of honour; a man who, in all his worst errors would never by nature have become false, but who would have cut off his right hand rather than have sullied his lips with a lie, or betrayed the meanest thing that crawled if it had once trusted him—suffered in the consciousness of disgrace, in the enforced shame of this sin so alien to his every instinct and his every act, a torture which beggared all that life had ever brought him.

It might have been less terrible if he could have suffered openly for it; for with every time that he took the world's homage, every time that he moved amongst his own order, he felt himself afresh a traitor against it and them—letting them honour what *he* knew dishonoured. His nature, more-

over, was one to give itself up without appeal to all the chastisement that was his due; and here no hand chastised, no voice upbraided, and no judges stoned him; what he had done was unknown, unseen, and he was compelled to go to what *was* joy, even all darkened and tainted as it was; joy that he was conscious by every justice should never have been his. He had to go to the sweetness of Lucille's tender words, to the caress of her young lips, to the beauty of her reverent and happy love; he had to go to all these things that make earth while they last an Eden, with the knowledge in his heart that turned them into bitterness. It was this loveliness waiting for him as reward for the treachery he had wrought, this happiness given to him as recompense for his sin, that made him seem to himself a thousand times more loathsome. If he had done this thing to save her, while giving her to another's arms in his own sacrifice, he might have forgiven it to himself in some faint measure; but now although no thought, no memory of self had prompted him to it, although it had been done simply and solely *for her*, the joy that came to him through it made it beyond all pardon in his sight. And it had a tenfold anguish, striking him back into the darkness of accumulated guilt at the moment when some beam of light, some ray of peace had strayed in on him; when with the love of Lucille he had vainly dreamt of regained tranquillity, of joy that would come to him out of her joy, of a purer happiness that might still be his, of a better life in which his later years might take their fairer hue from hers, and be spent with her in the effort towards nobler things. This hope, this dream, had come to him with the treasure of her innocent affection; it was gone for ever now. He almost dreaded the gaze of her eyes; he almost shuddered from the touch of her lips.

For the sin that he had sinned for her was heavy on him; and he had gained her by the crime of an Iscariot.

There is no guilt so terrible to him by whom it is done as the guilt that is *abhorrent* to the nature which yet stoops to it.

Late in the fall of an autumn evening he reached Silver-rest to meet her for the first time since he had done this last thing for her sake; in so utter yet so erring a sacrifice. The twilight was darkening over sea and land, though here in the sheltered south, flowers still blossomed and woods were still in full leaf. A little while,—and when he had parted from her, in the sweetness of her love he had thought that there might still be in some sort peace for him, and pardon for his past; he had thought that the future might still bring him some blessing, through her, and through the trust so loyally, so passionately obeyed. *Now*—he shrank from her presence; he had not right or title to one shadow of the tenderness she gave him; he felt that what he had done for her must, soon or late, bring its own punishment, that in *his* embrace even her own angel-like beauty must be tainted, her own fair God-given life be doomed and destroyed with his!

All the wild untamable nature in him suffered now;—suffered, flinging down like film the philosophy of his creeds, the languor of his world, the egotism of his habits; suffered with the dumb agony of an animal, the blind pain of an untutored barbarian. Nature was stronger even now than all the force of intellect, custom, sophism, and reason.

He believed at last in his own utter weakness; he believed at last that he could not command oblivion.

He paused now, as he went to where they told him that she was, in the stillness of the twilight, on the wooded shores of Silver-rest. He longed for her with unutterable longing, yet he dreaded to see her as he had never dreaded any thing on earth; a chill tremor passed over him, and he stopped to still the beating of his heart. He would have gone to the scaffold like Montrose or Derwentwater with unmoved serenity, without his pulse quickening its throb one instant;—now going to one who revered him almost as a deity, and for whose sake he had wrought the iniquity he loathed, he shook like a woman in every limb, and paused, as in the days of Hellas, the guilt-stricken paused before the threshold of the sacred temple they dared not enter.

Yet;—he must smile on her as though no chasm lay between them; he must look down into her trustful eyes; he must take her life into his own; he must become her husband. Was it not for this, this only that he had sinned?

In that moment he recoiled from his offered joy as he would never have recoiled from death. In that moment—once again—to lose her, or to wed her, seemed alike an anguish passing his strength. The brown still depths of leaves enclosed him, there was no light about his steps, the lull of silence was oppressive, the chiar'oscuro of the falling evening was only broken by the deeper blackness of some towering rock that lowered through the gloom; he paused there, hearing only the beating of his own heart; the darkness was like the darkness on his years, that had no place beside the bright spotlessness of hers. Then, with a sudden gesture, almost of despair, he dashed back the boughs, that parted them with that black barrier, as his own acts parted them in his own sight. He saw her there; in a flood of warmth from the setting sun that found its way about her, and bathed her in its halo, as, in the Old Masters, the Children of God are bathed in light; the crimson shafts of the red rocks slanting upward till they were lost in hanging wreaths of mist; the scarlet and golden foliage encircling her; at her feet the violet waves of the calm waters; and full on her face the lustre of the dying sun's rays as they poured down from the west. Coming from the shadow of the gloomy woods, he saw her in that glory of radiance, pure as her life, radiant as her smile, divine as her innocence. What place had he beside her? With a great unconscious cry, that in that moment forgot all that must be sealed and silent for her sake, he threw himself before her ere she knew that he was near; there, at her feet, in that sunlit luminance that never now could touch his own dishonoured life, emblem of the peace and beauty he had for ever flung away; his arms about her, his head sunk in a suppliant's entreaty, his burning lips upon the hands he clasped.

"Oh! my child!—my treasure!—my darling! I have come

back to you, but my life has no fitness for yours. And yet—oh, God!—I have given you more than my life; I have suffered for you more than a hundred deaths; I have denied you nothing; I have lost for you all I had left on earth. Love me, for the pity of Heaven! love me, come what will! It is for you that I have sinned, for you only that I live——"

The wild words died almost in their utterance, stifled in his throat, as he knelt before her, his head bowed, his arms thrown round her in the passion, less of an embrace than of an agonised prayer and supplication. The last, only, reached her ear; the last which told her it was for her alone he lived, and which implored her tenderness. Vaguely, with a great terror, mingling with the dizzy sweetness of his sudden presence, she felt that he suffered, she saw that his life had a misery in it untold, unconfessed; and the love, greater still than all fear in her, and far deeper than her young years, gave her its truest instinct;—she had no thought of herself; she only felt that *he* suffered. Her soft lips, with a tremulous hesitance, met his in their first self-offered kiss, her eyes with a dark dreamy lustre gazed into his own through tears that rose but did not fall; her voice was broken with a deeper music than it had ever known:

"Ah, my lord! my love! have you yet to learn that my life is yours, and that your death will be mine?"

The words were few, and very low; but there was an accent in them that told that this, and nothing less than this, was the love she bore him; in the golden light and scarlet foliage that circled her, the radiance from the western skies shone in her eyes and bathed her still in its bright aureole, as though loth to leave a thing so fair to the cold shadows of the night. Looking upward he saw her thus in the warm glory from the evening rays;—sin should not have been *her* saviour! He knew it now.

He had sacrificed to her all he valued upon earth; he had beggared himself more utterly than poverty could have beggared him when, for her sake, he had lost Honour;—at the last, would even this be done in vain?

"Evil done that good may come." Rash and unhallowed work which tampers with the Unseen, and sows the poison-seeds that the golden fruit may bloom;—at the core of the fruit will not the poison ever be found?

Yet if the cause of any earthly life could have justified that touching of unfolded destiny, hers would have been that one; hers which he deemed he had done justly to spare at *any* cost, as he looked on her in her loveliness, and met the sweet, shy, half-veiled joy of her fair eyes.

His approaching marriage was made public, and the world saw nothing save that which was most natural in it. There was, true, some wide disparity of years between them; but then he had altered so little in person from what he had been at thirty, and had an eminence of so brilliant a fame, that the world felt no wonder that in his maturity of prime and of power he should have fascinated, and been fascinated by, the beautiful youth of his ward. Once pledged to it, on the impulse of a moment that had been stronger than himself, he hastened his marriage with the least delay that was possible —hastened it with a restless, fevered impatience that shared far more in the disquiet of dread than in the softer anxiety of passion. The knowledge that one lived who knew his secret filled him with a ceaseless and bitter fear ever gnawing at his peace; *he* was silenced, from the grip that held him, Valdor would never again be free to come forth and lift up the veil that hung before that ghastly past; yet, that this secret should be in the power of one living man, however that man were stricken powerless, filled with the deadly unrest of an ever-conscious, never-banished dread, the heart which, through a long life, had never learned before what it was to *fear*. In Lucille's presence this was lulled, in her absence it fastened on him resistlessly with a haunting, nameless terror. For Marion Vavasour, too, lived!—of her he could learn nothing, save that she had recovered in the peasant's hut that had given her shelter, and had gone from White Ladies; gone none knew whither;—she lived, though lost in the desert

of the world. Danger had risen once; never more could he feel secure it would not rise again, not again to be thus grappled with and hurled down before its touch could reach Lucille. It was this which made him hasten his marriage to its earliest; he felt that her life was unsafe until placed beyond the power of man to sever from him, until guarded by him with the title and the power of a husband.

It was still but autumn, not a month from the hour when he had first betrayed to her his own love, when he stood with her the night before their marriage-day, looking on that life which still seemed to him too pure for the grosser touch of passion; with which his own was well-nigh to him as much profanity, and desecration, as the love of other men had seemed. There are lives in their first youth, ere childhood is wholly left, ere womanhood is one-half learned, which look too heaven-lent for *any* love, even the noblest and the best. Lucille's was one.

Without, that night, the seas ran high, and dark waves were flung against the granite headlands, and winds were wild among the tossing gorse; but where they stood in solitude there were warm scented air, and delicate bright hues, and flowers in all their summer blossom, and she neither saw nor knew the darkness of the night. His kiss was on her lips, his voice was in her ear.

"And you are happy?" Strathmore murmured, as he bent over her. Restlessly, wistfully, incessantly he asked this of one who took all her joy from him—the question whose answer he knew so well! But of that answer he was never weary—never weary of watching as he did now the rich love-light in her face, the gladness in her smile, while she nestled closer in his breast as to her best-loved, best-trusted shelter, half shy, half ashamed still, in the awe and beauty of her new and wondering joy.

She was happy—happy through *him*. Strathmore asked no more than this, and asked not this for his own sake. For, in his remorse, and in his expiation, the haughty arrogance of his nature was smitten down, humbled to lowest depths;

and where he stood, on that marriage eve, with her lips against his cheek, and her life sheltered on his heart, he bowed his head over her with an unspoken prayer:

"For her sake—in his trust—oh, God! that I may have power to keep her thus for ever!"

And in his heart a voice spoke—that voice so often stifled, so often disobeyed, so often rebelled against as weakness, that voice which men call conscience. "Why was evil done that good might come? Sin added yet again to sin is but barrier piled on barrier between a soul and its atonement."

It was noon on the day of the solemnisation of his marriage, and Strathmore stood among some of the proudest of his order, speaking on the trifles of the hour with his habitual soft, low, slight laugh. The accustomed serenity was on his face, the courtly smile upon his lips, the languor in the cold, harmonious music of his voice; they saw in him but one of themselves, a subtle statesman, a consummate courtier, pursuer of a lofty power, reaper of a ripe ambition; *they* saw no change in him. But in his heart was the restless fever of a passionate disquiet, born from the gnawing consciousness of traitorous infamy wrought that good might be its offspring.

"God is my witness no impulse of passion, no vileness of self-pity, no thought of my own peace actuated me—it was for her, for her alone," he told himself perpetually, and said aright; for passion he would have trampled out, self-pity was a weakness that was unknown to him, and his longing to fulfil the trust of Erroll was holy, sincere, and without taint, though its fruit and its action were error. Yet a terrible unrest was on him; a sickening dread possessed him—he who had feared the laws neither of nature nor of man. Was the darkness of his own life fit to blend with the pure dawn of hers? Was a hidden sin such shield as should have guarded her?

He thrust thought from him, and it would return. He bade the past be buried, and it rose again. He strove to behold but the fairness of the future, and the dead years

swarmed around and mocked him. He was master of all men save of himself!—and as he stood there, in his easy and courtly calm, on him were a foreboding, a fevered and nameless fear, unseen of men.

As Lucille came into his presence these were forgotten, and when he looked on her, he remembered nothing but the young love that was his own.

They who were gathered there were world-worn, languid, cold to much, indifferent to all; men and women who wore the purples of the patrician, and had long forgot the creeds, even where they still kept the years, of youth. Yet there were none among them who, seeing her on her bridal morning, were not touched to something of mournful and unbidden tenderness at sight of that fair and opening life. They did not know why they felt thus, they did not seek to know; thus, long ago, they might have felt, looking on the dawn of an early shadowless day, rising in summer light, conscious themselves how soon that day must die, scorched by noon heats, and sunk in shadows of the night.

The low, sad lulling of the seas, beating on the sands without, sounded audibly through the stillness in Silver-rest. Without, the autumn day was wild, and fitful, and tempestuous, while the grey curlews flew with startled cries over the surf, and the yellow leaves of the scattered gorse were whirled upon the wind. But within, the chambers were filled with delicate colouring, with fair women, with the gleam of diamonds and sapphires, with the scent of a myriad of exotics, while the light fell warm and mellow about Lucille, and on the white coronal of the virginal and bridal flowers. As he bowed before her, and, leading her out, took his place beside her, the courtliness of his habitual manner, softened and tinged by the infinite tenderness he bore to her, no memory was on him then save of her beautiful youth, as her eyes drooped, full of shy dreamy lustre, and her face flushed in her soft awe, in her sweet shame. Her heart was subdued at the weight of its own joy. What had she done, she thought, that she should share his life as no other had ever shared it;

that she alone, of all the world, should be thus loved and blessed by Heaven and by him?

The words of the marriage ceremonial commenced, while the ocean filled the stillness with the plaint of its mournful melody.

"I require and charge you both, as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgment, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed——"

The syllables fell slowly and solemnly on the hushed air, charging the confession of all sin or knowledge which could sever the lives that would be bound in one;—and he who heard them, while on his soul was the secret which uttered would part their lives for ever, stood silent: the words rolled onward, echoed by the melancholy burden of the seas where they broke, wave upon wave, on the distant shore.

*He* was silent; and what other lips could tell the crime of his buried past? None there. He had said, "Let the dead past bury its dead," and the dead speak not.

Once only his face lost its enforced look of calm and grave tranquillity; it was when her hand touched and lay within his. Then the ritual which was uttered was lost on his memory; the scene that was around him grew unreal; the surging of the seas beat and throbbed through his brain; his eyes shrank from the young loveliness beside him, and his voice, as it pledged her a husband's vows, sounded hollow in his ear. What he saw was the upward gaze of the dying man whom he had slaughtered, what he heard were the faint broken words, which, even in death, had *forgiven him;* and for one instant on his face came that look, hunted, terrible, guilt-stricken, which had come there when in the mists of the sunrise in the years long gone, he had read the message of the dead, the message of pardon, which had written him out for ever in his own sight a murderer. In that hour it was not Lucille of whom he thought, it was not Lucille whom he saw; it was the friend whom he had loved and slain.

The moment passed; Strathmore recovered the control so rarely broken. His hand closed upon hers, his voice fell

serenely on the silence, he bowed his head beside her, and unarrested the marriage words rolled on through the quiet calm, that was only filled with the dreamy lulling of the seas. His love was pledged her as her husband's. His hand closed on hers as the guardian of her life.

"Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder."

On the deep stillness the words were uttered which bound their lives in the bond which the world would not sever, nor death annul.

And with her face flushed, as with the glory of her future, and luminous with the angel-light that Dante saw upon the face he loved in the Vision of the Paradiso, Lucille looked upward in his eyes—his Wife.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### The Roses of the Spring.

It was the early springtide of the year.

The broad sunny waters by Sheen lay cool and tranquil in the light; the woodland was in its first glad freshness; the glades and gardens sweeping to the edge, and the white glistening walls of villas through the trees, were warm in the noon brightness; and it was restful and lovely here, in a bend of the stream, beechen-sheltered, and with mossy islands breaking the wide river, and drooping their willows lazily into its waves. Down the stream floated a boat shaped like the Greek feluccas, a graceful water-toy, with sails like the silver seagull's wings, and gold arabesques glistening on its white carved sides, and azure cushions piled up on its couch; —the nautilus-barge of a Nereid were not more daintily fair. And on the shore, under the sheltering trees, a woman sat wearily watching its course, half in apathy, half in fascination. She was tired, travel-worn, haggard, heart-sick, where she sat, resting drearily there, looking out with sunken, sun-blind eyes blankly over the stretch of the waters; and she

gazed as though bound by a spell at the joyous sweep of the vessel: they were in a contrast so strange—she, the bitter, hopeless, beggared woman, crouching in the shadow, and that bird-like boat winging its way through the light, with the sun on its snow-white sails.

And she thought of her past, when her course through life had been proud, and patrician, and cloudless, and in the light of a noontide sun, like the course of that boat through the waters!

Nearer and nearer glided the Greek barge, while on its cushions lay a young girl in the first years of her youth, the awnings of azure silk above her head, a pile of hothouse roses lying in her lap, the sunlight falling on the fairness of her face, bright with a softer glory still—the glory of a life without a shadow, of a joy without a wish. She who sat on the shore looked and noted her with envying, evil gaze; she knew nothing of her, but youth, joy, peace, the purples of the aristocratic order, the gladness of a loveliness gracious and beloved, these were accursed and abhorrent in the sight of the Outcast:—they had once been her own, though now there waited for her but the sepulchre of Age, the grave of Beggary.

Nearer yet floated the fairy felucca, as though bearing a Water-Fay to her river home, to her golden throne reared in the snowy bell of the lotus-flower;—floated till it was moored at a landing-stair close to where the solitary wanderer sat, who never moved, but gazed still, with the stupor of weariness at the toy-barge and its freight, as its young Queen rose from her azure nest, and passed over the carpets her attendants threw down before her feet, with a group of girl-patricians like herself, sunny as the morning.

Her white and delicate skirts almost swept the dust-stained dress of the lonely woman where she sat; and she looked down on her compassionately, pausing with that generous and loving pity for all who sorrowed and were in need, that was the divine instinct of a nature which, in the

fulness of its own gladness, would fain have decreed that none should suffer. Of her she had no recollection.

"You are ill?" she asked gently, while the odour of the roses that filled her hands was wafted to the travel-tired wanderer.

"I am very weary!"

The words had a heart-sick depth of misery, and the voice which uttered them was strangely contrasted with the want and desolation of her loneliness—sweet, rich, and full of music still.

The contrast struck upon the young girl's ear, and she paused, while her fair eyes, in whose depths the sunlight lay, gazed down on the hollow, sunken, haggard face at whose look she shuddered, even while it touched her to yet deeper pity, for there were in it something of fearful beauty, of wild grace, that nothing could destroy save death itself.

"Let me aid you," she said, stooping, while she dropped some gold into the wanderer's lap, the sweet and gracious compassion of the words robbing the alms of all bitterness that might lie to poverty in the charity of wealth. "This is but little; but if you come up to the house, we may be able to relieve you more."

The woman looked upon her, still with a blank stupor and an evil envy blended in her; and the sun shone on them—together; the wanderer, with the darkness of desolation and the shame of many years upon her, and the young girl, with the sun bright on her fair and fragile loveliness, on the fragrant burden of flowers that she bore, on the light gold of her perfumy hair, and on the beautiful smile that was less upon her lips than in her eyes, in their deep and happy radiance.

She moved to pass onward from the Pariah who crouched there in the beechen shadow; but as she moved she saw the look, which had flashed with something of proud, shrinking pain as the gold had fallen into her lap, fasten on and follow, with wistful, thirsty gaze, the blossom and the fragrance of the roses;—such a look as an exile gives on a foreign soil to flowers he remembers in his native land, whither he can

never again return. With an impulse and gesture of exquisite grace, she gave the rich clusters to the lonely and travel-worn wanderer.

"You love flowers? Take them, they will comfort you."

While the softness of the pitying words still lingered on the air, in charity more angel-like than the grudging charities of earth, she went onward with her fair, bright group of girlish aristocratic youth, soon lost to sight in the foliage of the villa woodlands; and Marion Vavasour sat in the gloom beside the reedy waters, with the roses lying in her lap, and their dreamy fragrance heavy with the perfume of the Past.

They were the flowers of her sovereignty, the flowers of her symbol; she had loved them with the poetic and artistic fancy which so strangely mingled with her panther cruelty, her murderous wantonness; a thousand buried hours lay coiled for her in the shut leaves of the moss-laden buds, a thousand memories uprose for her with the rich sweetness of their odorous dews, her youth, her loveliness, her power, all the golden glories that were for ever dead were sepulchred for her in the closed core of those scarlet roses.

Beggared by the arrest which had spared her liberty, but had confiscated all that she possessed and had banished her the city; beggared more utterly yet by the wreck of the vessel in which she had been bound for the New World; she, who had been more cruel in the days of her triumph than was ever beast of the desert goaded and ravening for prey, had sunk to the lowest depths of misery, of keen and bitter want, of wild and impotent despair; and, still denying God, believed at last in Retribution.

And she sat there looking blankly and blindly down on the fresh fragrant roses that the compassion of a soilless life had laid upon those hands crime-stained as the murderer's palm; and she drank in, as with a desert-thirst, the fragrance that bore to her the perfume of her Youth, the fragrance of the emblems of her Past!

A step roused her: she looked up, wearily, from her stupor:

"Who was it gave me these?"

He who was passing, an old ferry-boatman, paused:

"An angel on earth a'most, God keep her! The great minister's young bride. He's cold as ice to look at, but they do say that he just worships her."

"*Who* is she?"

There was a terrible hurrying eagerness in the quiver of her voice.

"His lordship's wife, I tell ye, the Lady Cecil Strathmore."

"Strathmore!"

The boatman had passed onward, and he did not hear the echoed name, in whose dry, stifled cry ran the intensity of hate. From where she sat in the heart-sickness of fatigue and of privation, she sprang up as a panther springs from its lair at scent of its foe and its prey, her limbs once more instinct with eager life, her form quivering with passion. She dashed the roses down on the wet sward and trod them beneath her feet, till their beauty was ruined, and trampled from all likeness of itself, even as was her own. She flung out into the river depths, with loathing gesture, the gold that had been given by that tender and gentle pity; in want and weariness, in poverty and despair, footsore, and with none to give her bread, a wanderer, and knowing not when night should fall where she should lay her head, she cast out to the waters' waste the alms that were of *his* wealth!

The insanity of a blind, reckless, cruel hate possessed her; the hate, long-chained, baffled, powerless to find its vengeance; the hate which was athirst to coil itself with deadly poison-folds about the life that was omnipotent and honoured amidst men, and hiss back in his ear the words by which he once had doomed her: "Such mercy as you gave I give to you—no more!"

At last, at last, she had learned where to strike; and though her hands were empty now, some weapon, that would deal the death-blow to his life through what he loved, would not be long unfound.

To that reckless and tigress lust, what were the gentleness of the youth which had paused to pity her suffering, the divine compassion which had succoured the stranger and the desolate?—to the soul that was seared with evil and envy, and the deep guilt of murderous passions, they were but as oil to the burning, but as fuel to flame.

When the night fell over the river-maisonnette, which had been one of the bridal-gifts of her husband to Lucille, and where they came at the close of most weeks, that in the world she had now entered she should not wholly lose the freshness and the solitude in which she had dwelt from infancy, and which had made waters, and woodlands, and the sweep of free forest winds, the life of her life, Marion Vavasour, unseen, made her way through the aisles of the gardens, stealing with noiseless footfall, as the cheetah through the jungles.

Her youth for ever dead, her loveliness for ever lost, no end left for her but beggared misery and wretched age, and the death-bed of the homeless and the outcast, she had but one goal, one passion, one future—revenge; and like the cheetah she could crouch, waiting with untired patience for the hour when her spring could never miss. Love she had never known, save for her own beauty, her own guilty power; but hate, the cruel, cowardly, wanton, vengeful nature of Marion Vavasour—a woman in her wickedness as in her weakness, in her crimes as in her cowardice—knew in its deadliest and most ruthless desire. Not with philtre or with steel had she any thought to destroy what she hated; her hand would have shaken *there*, for her heart would have shrank from the physical peril that would have recoiled on herself; true to her sex, she thirsted for a more cruel and a more craven vengeance; she longed to destroy by some subtler torture—to say to him, as he had said to her, "You shall live to suffer!"

She made her way, shunning detection, through the still, cool avenues and gardens, where the starlight was trembling in the white spray of fountains, and the linden-leaves were

filling the night with their odour. She had no purpose, no object, save to watch as the snake watches what he dares not attack; save to feed, by looking on its goal, the hate which fastened full as brutally on the young life which had been filled with merciful compassion for her loneliness and poverty, as on his which had bade her perish in the darkness of the waters, and left her to sink downward to her grave.

Her eyes gazed round as she moved onward; the scent of the air, the gleam of the statues among the foliage, the voices of the nightingales thrilling through the silence—they belonged to her Past!—and the soul of this woman, hungering for her lost life, knew no passion but to destroy those who now dwelt in the paradise from whose gates the flaming sword of a pitiless vengeance had driven her forth to the desert. She stole on, shrouded by the fitful moonlight, till she found her way to a marble terrace, where some of the windows still stood open to the night; and, sheltered by the ilex shrubs, Marion Vavasour crept nearer and nearer, and gazed into Lucille's bridal home. Kneeling there, she could see the long vista of the lighted chambers, which had a few moments past been filled by the guests of the Cabinet Minister, a small, choice gathering, the roll of whose carriages still echoed through the still night that was stealing into the Sabbath dawn. The dank dews fell chill upon her brow, her limbs were stiff and weary, she had no clanship save with the great outcast multitudes, whose name is legion and whose portion wretchedness;—and she gazed upon the light and luxury and beauty, the rich colouring and delicate hues, and gleaming marbles veiled in the warm clusters of countless blossoms, where what Strathmore loved, lived in his honour and his shelter, in the grace of earliest youth, and in the purples of grandest power.

A sickly and deadly envy shivered through her veins, and she stretched nearer and nearer, as the reared snake darts from out the shadow its hooded head and poisoned barb.

She, kneeling there without, saw Strathmore in the light within;—and where he stood his head was bowed, while on

the coldness of his face was that fond warmth which never came there save for one. They were alone, and Lucille leaned against him; her arms were wound about his neck, and while his hand caressed the light wealth of her hair, her eyes looked upward into his with that love which was the holiest and fairest thing which had entered in with the ambitions, the passions, and the remorse, of an unscrupulous and erring life.

They were so near, that she who watched without, could see the look with which the eyes that had spoken their mute merciless doom to her when he had loosed her to the fury of the seas, gazed down on the young loveliness gathered to his bosom; so near, that she could hear the voice which had bade her perish in the devouring waters, soften to more than woman's tenderness, in answer to the fond words whose happy murmur had filled the silence:

"Ah! if it were not to wish you less honoured and less great, I should wish we were always alone, and that Lucille never lost you to the world?"

"Lucille never loses me to the world, for never is she one hour from my thoughts, though the world claims my time and my presence."

And as those answering words echoed on the stillness of the midnight to the ear of the hidden watcher without, she saw at last the single place in his armour of proof where, if one poisoned arrow ever pierced, the mailed and kingly life must reel and fall; and a whisper hissed from her own blanched, fevered lips, "He loves her—he loves her!"

Through the stillness there trembled the low sigh of that perfect joy which, like the hush of noon, is silenced by its own intensity, as Lucille looked upward to his face which, cold and changeless for all others, to her ever wore that gentle tenderness which, so long hers from her guardian, was a hundred-fold hers from her husband.

"Ah! how beautiful it is to live!" she murmured; and the words of happiness which had never known even a dream of pain, of love which lent its own divinity to all existence, stole

to the strained ear and thirsty hate of the woman with whom to live had been to sin, and who had but one seared and cruel passion left—the passion to destroy.

"Thank God it is so for you, my darling!"

"For *us?*"

"'For us'—yes. For me while for you."

She nestled nearer to his heart, while her voice was still hushed in its deep dreamy sweetness.

"I wish there were no suffering for any? I cannot bear to think that there is so much pain on earth; can you? I saw a woman in want to-day; I wish you had been with me. Her face has haunted me ever since; it looked so *lost*, so full of evil, yet so full of weariness. Why is it that some faces look like that?"

"Do not seek to know, my child!—you could never even dream."

"She grieved me, too," pursued Lucille, while the light from above fell white and soft upon her where she leaned against him, her head resting on his breast, the pearls woven in her shining hair, the costly laces of her delicate dress trailing on the floor, with bright flowers flung here and there upon them. "She sat so haggard and so desolate by the river all alone. It must be so terrible to be *alone!* I thought the very poorest had some one to love them?"

"But she was left less desolate when you had seen her, Lucille?"

He knew that her nature had no pleasure greater than in giving rest and succour to all who were in need, and he let her spend his wealth as widely as she would in charity; every fair and gracious mercy traced to her, every blessing that fell on her from the lives she aided, rejoiced him.

"I am afraid nothing could help her very much," she answered him, musingly, in the voice which had become to him the sweetest music that earth held,—it was so full of joy! "She looked so longingly at my roses; they might have been the faces of familiar friends! I gave them to her, for I thought they might comfort her if she loved them as I do."

Over his face passed a shadow of startled fear, of disquietude, heavy though nameless; he knew not why nor what he dreaded.

"Your roses! It was strange that a beggar cared for them, Lucille?"

"Why? Perhaps they recalled to her some happier past. Do you know I think—I fancy,—she is the same woman I saw ill at White Ladies, one of those who were shipwrecked, she whom you found me with, that day;—you remember?"

He shuddered, and drew her to him with a gesture of passionate tenderness.

"Do not speak to strange people, my darling," he said, rapidly and uneasily. "You are too young to discern whom it is fitting you should notice. Let none, save those I sanction, ever have access to you."

She raised her face, illumined with her tender and beautiful smile:

"Ah! I love to have anything to promise you and to obey you in!—I wish you gave me more, then you would know how Lucille loves you."

He bowed his head, and kissed the lips which had so sweet an eloquence for him, and drew her with fond care from the breath of the night breeze as it swept through the opened casements; his frame, firm knit as steel, and braced in his youth by desert heats and ocean storms, felt even the slight chillness in the summer wind, since it might have danger for the early life he cherished.

And she who watched without with burning, jealous eyes, while the darkness brooded over her hiding-place, where she crouched as a serpent coils beneath the leaves, saw him lead Lucille through the long vista of light and warmth, of renaissance hues, and tropic foliage, until their forms passed from her sight, and she heard the distant closing of a door falling behind them. Yet she knelt there still, sheltered by the leaves, and with her face looking out into the starlight, haggard and lit with a terrible baffled passionate desire, ravening for its prey; knelt there until the light died out

from the windows, and no sound stirred the silence but the gentle lulling of the river, and all was still in the hush of sleep.

The night was serene, the winding waters murmured in tranquil measure on their way, the stars shone down in holy solemn peace; and as the poisonous snake steals, dark and noiseless, through the gentle night where none behold its pestilential trail, Marion Vasavour stole through the dark shelter of the leaves, looking backward, ever backward, to where were sleep, and rest, and soft dreams only stirred by as soft a caress, while like the death-hiss of the snake gliding to destroy, the whisper hissed from her set lips: "He loves her!—he loves her!"

## CHAPTER XXII.

### "Sur l'Avenir Insensé qui se Fie?"

THE light of a fire, made of wood of aloes brought from the East, and filling the air with its incense-like perfume, shed its flickering brightness over a room luxurious as any palace chamber in the Arabian Nights. Hangings of azure silk, arabesques of gold, rich-hued Guido heads, and delicate white carvings, art-trifles of rarest beauty, and flowers scattered in profusion everywhere, bright in hothouse blossom, were lit by the fire-gleam into such a mingled mass of colouring as artists would have worshipped in its chiar'oscuro. Not less would they have loved the face on which the fire shed its glow; the thoughtful brow, the spiritual eyes, the lips on which was a dreaming smile. There was a light upon her face that had never been there, there was a perfection in her loveliness that it had never before reached, as Lucille leant back in a low chair, gazing into the bright wood embers, while a large greyhound lay stretched at her feet, and the warm glow played upon her gold-flecked hair, in the twilight of the spring day which had grown chilly in the great squares of patrician West London, six months after her marriage.

She was alone, but her reverie was sweeter than the companionship of any save of one, and her thoughts were fairer dreamland than any poet's song or romancist's story could have told her. Joyous, and without even passing shade, as her caressed and guarded youth had been from the days of her earliest memory, it seemed to Lucille that she had never known happiness until now; now that she was his own, of his name, in his home, unsevered from him, and dear to him as no living thing had ever been.

It was growing very dusk, but the half-light, the uncertain lustre crossed and deepened by the shadows, suited her imaginative and meditative nature. Had her own life known a touch of twilight, she would have learnt to find the twilight hour unendurable; her days were full of sunlight, and she loved the weird poetic pause between the day and night.

Suddenly the greyhound rose with a deep bay, shaking his silver chain, Lucille lifted her head in eager listening gladness; a step they both knew echoed without, the door opened at the far end of the chamber, the portière was flung back, and Strathmore entered. In an instant she had crossed the vast length of the apartment, and had thrown herself into his outstretched arms; her face flushed with delight, her eyes gazing into his as though they had been parted not for hours but years.

"My darling! my darling!" murmured Strathmore, as he bent over her; and in his eyes as they looked down upon her it might be read that in that moment at least he was happy; it might be seen how deeply this man could love, who, by a fatal error, had believed himself as cold, as he was, of a truth, inexorable.

He led her forward to where the fragrant aloes' flame flung out its ruddy heat upon the hearth, and as he sank into a couch beside the fire, she threw herself down at his feet, resting her bright head against him, while his arm was still about her. For the first time in his life his home was sacred and welcome to Strathmore; before, it had been to him but a residence in which to sleep, to dine rarely, save when he

entertained the world, to keep the state and pomp requisite to his public position, and to give his ministerial banquets and receptions; now it was dear to him, for it was also hers.

"What, you were all alone, my child, and in the twilight, too?" he said, fondly, as his hand caressed her hair.

She looked up, while the firelight shone in her eyes and on the radiance of her face.

"I would always rather be alone when you are not with me. It is solitude without you wherever I am, and if I am *quite* alone there is nothing to break my thoughts of you."

"Lucille! you should not love me so well."

She looked up, still with a smile which spoke beyond words.

"Love is all I have to pay you in. I cannot give too much."

"Pay *me!* I am the debtor."

Her caresses, her tenderness, her infinite devotion to him, were ever new, ever sweet to Strathmore; with any other he might probably have been satiated and wearied before now, with Lucille he was never tired of gazing on the fairness of her face, and he could never hear too many of her fond words. He had loved her ere he had wedded her, he had loved her far more since.

"As I said the other night, if it were not to wish you less great, I could wish we were always alone," she whispered him, while she lay at his feet, making a bright artistic picture with the greyhound at her side on the soft, rich-hued skins upon the hearth.

"I could wish, too, that I had never to leave you," he answered her, tenderly, his hand still wandering over the light gold of her hair. "Well, we will be alone for a time; there is nothing that needs me imperatively now, and we need not go to the Queen's ball till late. You shall have an hour or two to yourself, Lucille."

Her face beamed with delight.

"Ah, I am so glad! I feel how proud and glorious it is to bear your name when I am with you in the world, but I love

better still to be with you alone. Others are your companions as well *there;* but I am the only one who shares your solitude."

He smiled; the intensity of her affection for him, too great in its usurpation of all her life and thoughts, never alarmed him, as it might well have done, for her: he only saw in it the fulness of her happiness through him, the completeness with which her happiness was merged in and dependent on him, and thus also in it the completeness of his atonement to her father. The cool and daring nature of Strathmore was not one to fear the fatal adversities of chance. Accident is chiefly dreaded by women; by men rarely, by Strathmore never. When the sin that he had sinned to Valdor for her swept over him with a remorse scarce ever lulled, he strove to thrust it aside; he would have taken fresh guilt to his soul to have spared Lucille one passing touch of the knowledge of sorrow.

Lucille leaned nearer against him, while a warmer flush rose to her cheeks.

"There is something I want to ask you—may I?"

"May you!" he repeated, with a smile. "My own darling! have you need to ask that? What is there I ever refuse you, Lucille?"

"Oh no, no! Nothing that I could beg you to give or to do; but this is different—something I want to ask you of yourself."

"Of myself? Say what you will, my love."

He thought she alluded to political matters, for Lucille's intelligent and highly-cultured mind rendered her very far in advance of her actual years; and all childlike, guileless, and poetic as her nature was, she embraced and entered into his career with a depth of comprehension and of sympathy which made her no unfitting companion of a politician's life.

"I have never asked you before; but I think you will tell me now—now that I am so near to you," she said, softly, and half shyly, while the colour deepened in her face as she spoke the last words. Her reverence for her guardian had been so interwoven with her life, that it was still inseparably mingled

with the fuller, freer, and still fonder tenderness she bore him as her husband. "I want you to tell me"—and her voice sank very low, while her arm stole round his neck—"to tell me of that cruel woman whom they say that you once loved?"

Strathmore started violently, as if a snake had stung him; a look of terror and of horror glanced into his eyes. As the firelight shone upon his face and hers they were in strange contrast; the one worn, pale, blanched with a great fear, and dark with all the memories of the past that flooded on him with that single question; the other bright and fair in all the loveliness of earliest youth, its delicate colouring flushed, her violet eyes beaming, humid and eloquent, as her shining hair brushed his cheeks.

"Of her?—of *her?* My God? What do you know of her?"

In the passionate agitated words, to which a ghastly dread gave the first sternness, the first harshness which had ever tinged his words to Lucille, the cool wisdom of the statesman was forgotten, the truth betrayed; he had not remembered with what ease her question might have been eluded, her innocence blinded and misled.

Lucille looked at him; her eyes startled and filled with wistful pain, her colour faded, her face full of self-reproach and sorrow. She saw that he was wounded—and by *her!*—and she heard in his voice the first accent of anger that had ever fallen on her ear. She did not know how far removed from anger, how far worse than his worst anger could have been, were the memory and the dread which gave his words their first and momentary severity. She threw herself on his heart with loving, broken whispers of regret and grief; it was the first time pain had ever risen up between them—the first time she had ever known the misery of his displeasure.

"Forgive me!—do forgive me! I meant no harm; I did not know! Oh, for the world I would not grieve you!"

The tears that shone in her eyes, and quivered in her voice, recalled him to himself; he shuddered—already must

his accursed past fall on her, and bring sorrow to her even through him!

"Lucille, my darling! I have nothing to forgive. You have done no harm—*you* have not grieved me. You have asked me nothing but what you have a right to ask. It is only—only——For God's sake tell me what made you say that then—what made you speak of her?"

Lucille lifted her eyes to his, in which he read every thought, mirrored as in a glass.

"I only heard of her what Lady Chessville and Lady Castlemere said, long ago, last year at White Ladies; and——"

"I know, I know," broke in Strathmore, hastily, for his mother had told him of that conversation. "But why should you——"

"I could not tell you what made me think of her then; but I often do, because—because I have longed to ask you if it were true she was so dear to you, and if it is from any memory of her that you cannot bear the roses, and call them the flowers of sin? I longed to ask you if—if you regret her *now*, and if you loved her better than you love Lucille?"

Her voice shook a little in the last words, and her head was bowed on his breast as she whispered them; of restless jealousy, of evil curiosity, her radiant and ethereal life knew no taint nor shadow. But now and then she heard a sharp quick sigh from Strathmore; she saw a darkness come over his face when he thought her eyes were not upon him; she was awakened by restless murmured words in his broken sleep; and Lucille, who lived but for him, had wondered, dreamily, vaguely, as she had wondered when she had gazed out on the moonlit abbey-lands of White Ladies, whether the regret of that dead, nameless passion was still on him—had wondered who she had been, this traitress who had deserted him, yet whom he had perhaps never forgotten or replaced. In her true and childlike instinct she had not kept the fear by her in silence to brood over its pain; she had brought it at once to him.

She felt him shudder from head to foot, and his hand tremble as hers closed upon it. To speak of Marion Vavasour to *her!* and yet to the trustful innocence of Lucille he could not lie.

His voice was hoarse as he answered her, with a harsh impetuous passion vibrating in it that she had never heard there, yet which, like his violence on the sea-shore when she was a young child, she knew instinctively was not violent to her.

"For the mercy of God, do not speak of her! I loved her —yes!—with such love as you cannot dream. Heaven forbid that you should! Let my past be!—my present is yours. My name, my home, my heart are yours; do not taint them with what is accursed, with what is unfit for your lips!"

Lucille lifted her head, and looked up in his eyes with that gaze with which on the sea-shore she had looked at him in her infancy; her eyes were wistful, startled, but, beyond all else, full of a deep and yearning tenderness for *him.* Her lips quivered, her colour rose; his grief was hers, and his wrongs her own. She clung to him closely, her heart beating thick and fast.

"Was she so faithless to you, then—this wicked woman? Oh, how could any one whom *you* loved betray you!"

"For God's sake, hush! Her name on your lips!"

The words were muttered in his teeth, as he rose hurriedly, putting her from him, and paced the length of the chamber, the twilight only broken into darker shadow by the warm flashing gleams of the fire which shot across it, hiding his face from her. It was agony to him, this torture of her innocent questions, of her fond sympathy, of her tender grief at his wrongs! His self-control was destroyed, his calmness and his strength shattered down, all the darkness of the tragedy hidden from her came back upon his memory, all the inexpiable brutality of his guilt towards Erroll seized him as in the first fresh hours when he had stood beside the bier where the dead man lay stretched in the summer sunlight, with Lucille's unconscious words! He could not look upon

her face while she spoke to him of the assassinatress of her father.

Unwitting of the blow she dealt him, she, who only knew that she had grieved him, and had called back to him some past that was bitter in its remembrance, sprang to him with the soft rapid flight of a bird, and threw herself again upon his heart.

"Forgive me! forgive me! I did not know that I should grieve you—I, who would give my life to spare you pain! I had no right to ask what you had not told me of yourself. I was wrong, very wrong."

He pressed her closely to his bosom, her words of self-reproach seemed to him to heap coals of fire on his head. If she knew what that past was he "had not told her"!

"You asked nothing but what you had a right to ask," he said once more, while his voice, like her own, was broken. "Leave me a moment, my own darling—a moment; I will speak to you then."

Her eyes turned on him wistfully, beseechingly, but not to obey him never crossed the thoughts of Lucille; it was the unquestioning obedience, never of fear, wholly of love, which she rendered him. She left him as he bade her, and stood in the light of the fire with her head bowed on the white carved marble. Her face was very pale, the tears hung heavy on her lashes, her heart was touched with the first pang that she had known since the marriage-day which had given her to Strathmore. She thought how he must have loved this woman that her mere memory smote him thus, that for her sake alone he had shuddered at the mere scent and sight of the scarlet roses.

His step echoed on the silence of the chamber; the twilight shadows hid his face as he walked up and down for some minutes; then he approached her, and his features, while they were yet worn and weary, had recovered their serenity, and he drew her to him with his accustomed tenderness as he stooped and kissed her.

"My precious child, you have but asked what it is surely

your due to know," he said, gently and gravely, with that perfect self-command which never, save for a few moments, deserted him. "You have a right to ask everything of me; I have a right to answer; and I rejoice at nothing more than that no thought even which passes through your mind should be concealed from me. Confide in me freely—never more so than when your doubts are of me."

Lucille lifted her head in eagerness, her cheeks flushed again, her eyes full of love.

"They were not doubts of *you*. How could I doubt you ever?—what could I doubt you in? It was only that I doubted——"

"What?" he said gently, as she hesitated.

"That—that," whispered Lucille, softly and swiftly, "that you have never loved me as you once loved *her*."

A quick shudder ran through him; but his self-control, freshly reconquered, was not lost again.

"You thought truly, Lucille," he said, gravely. "In you I love innocence—in her I loved guilt. Is there matter for envy for you, there, my guileless child, who cannot even dream what such guilt is?"

Lucille's face grew awed and wistful while the thoughtful shadow which was ever more or less upon it deepened, but a beautiful light shone in her eyes.

"Ah, then,—I am dearest to you?"

"God is my witness, yes—a thousand-fold! And now, while I acknowledge your right to ask of me what you will, I, too, would ask one thing of your love. The past is dead; when you bid me look on it, you bid me look back upon years that are accursed in my memory." His hand, as he spoke, trembled where it rested on her shoulder, but his voice was calm and sustained. "The history of my madness for—for her of whom you speak, I could not tell without such suffering as the opening of old and deadly wounds brings with it. I ask of you to spare me that. If you bid me endure it, I will; what you demand to know I will not refuse to answer; but you love me, Lucille—I think you will not force

me to dwell on a past that can have no rivalry with you, a name that it would but pollute your innocence to learn. Am I wrong?"

"No, no! I will never ask you one word again!" she murmured, passionately. "*I* bid you suffer! Oh, my lord, my love, would Lucille be so little worthy you? I was wrong to say what I did. All I longed to know was that you loved me too well ever to regret another. I know it now—I want no other knowledge!"

Tears so rare in Strathmore's eyes, rose in them as he heard her words. He had judged aright her tender, generous, and lofty nature; he had known the chord to strike to make her young heart vibrate and echo to his will, but it touched him to the soul; though from all love, though in all justness, he was still deceiving her, and his eyes were softened to a deep gratitude, as before some divine and holy thing, as he bowed his head, and let his lips rest on hers.

Thus that danger passed—passed, leaving no shadow on Lucille's life. When once her fear was unfolded, it fled. She knew that she was alone in his heart; that knowledge, as she had said, was sufficient for her. He had wished his past unasked of; she banished even thought of it from a mind which best loved to mould itself by his law, and by his wish.

She was the incarnation of shadowless youth, fair as the dawn, in those hours which he had promised her they should spend alone, as she played, like the child she was, with the greyhound on the hearth, and sang in music like the gladness of a forest bird, and threw herself at Strathmore's feet, while the fragrant aloes' flame gleamed on her face, and she told him of a hundred poetic thoughts, and fairy fancies, and pure ambitions, that lived in him and saw in him the glory of their dreams. The evil of his past had touched, but glanced harmless off her, leaving no memory and no trail behind it. If her life could but be kept thus!

*If!*—vague, disquiet, nameless dread had fastened on him since those innocent questions, which had sought unwittingly

to unveil the tragedy, whose truth, beheld by her, would be death, like the unveiled face of the Medusa. The past was on him, like a fixed and recurrent dream; and while the night brought Lucille sleep as light, as soft, as smiling in its dreams as the rest of infancy, his own thoughts, sleepless and wandering through the darkness of dead years, went ever to one memory alone—the memory of Marion Vavasour.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### "Dios Consiente, pero no para Siempre."

A SCORCHING noon burnt the vast sandy plains around Marseilles, and the great pine forests beyond Grateloup, and the blue glittering sea had no motion along the whole line of southern shore, from where the olive woods of Monaco sloped down to the waters in the east, to where the chesnuts and the vineyards of the Western Pyrenees were withered by the intense and cloudless sun. The heat was unbearable, rare even for the Midi, and it was most stifling, most pitiless, most hateful, in its blinding glare, and its burning, breathless oppression on the dreary stone bastions, and the stone-locked harbour of Toulon, where the galley-slaves of the Bagne were toiling under their burdens, and working in long files under the lash of their *gardes-chiourmes*.

Hard, merciless labour, the toil of beasts of burden, dragging up the sloping planks the ponderous trucks of building-stones, or panting, like horses overladen, under the chains by which they were fastened to the timber, or the iron, or the loads of gravel that they brought along the fortifications in the parching desert-heat. Toil, terrible and bitter to be borne to the limbs inured by every hardship, and to the sinews, coarse and strong as oak fibres, of the Auvergnat or the Nantais; of the Cevennes charcoal-burner or the Paris felon, who had burrowed from birth with the rats in the Catacombs, and held his fête in the vile saturnalia of the Quartier de l'Enfer.

Toil, by the sweat of the brow, and to the uttermost limit

of strength, to those begotten in wretchedness, born in misery, reared in starvation, and braced to hunger and to thirst, to outrage and to crime. But tortures that were like the protracted throes of one long living death to the hands that were soft as women's; to the limbs that were enervated by luxury; to the lives that were accustomed to every delicate indulgence; to the pride that had never stooped to any living man, and now wore the fetters of the galley-chain as haughtily as it had worn the orders of a noble; to those who were thrown with common felons, their only sin that they had chosen the losing side, and had been Patriots instead of Placemen, or in lieu of prudent and purchasable creeds, which could have altered with the wind, had chosen, in an unheroic age, the chivalrous code of a hopeless loyalty. The red shirt and *bonnet vert*, the coarse food they would in other days have seen their dogs turn from in disgust, the irons that ate into their flesh, the nights of misery on their horrible beds, the ton weights under which the hardiest cattle would have broken down, the deadly labour under the long burning days—all these they shared with the common criminals of the land which they had only loved too well. And even these were mercy beside that fell companionship which lashed them side by side with the hideous pollutions of great cities, with the brute greed which had taken life for a copper coin, or a toss of brandy, with the vilest guilt and with the lowest vice that made manhood deformity and the world a hell.

One of these—waiting, as he had been waiting well-nigh for a year, deportation to Cayenne—manacled to a gaunt Liégois, who had been sent to the galleys for arson, was dragging a load of sand, fresh dug from the excavations, the ropes that fastened him to his burden cutting his flesh as his shafts cut a galled horse, the sun scorching to blisters his bared shoulders, the irons locked upon his ankle and his wrists, his taskmaster behind him to revenge each laggard step, each pause when in the heat he sickened and reeled under the weight, with a sharp scourge of the lash as to a disobedient hound.

Bound with criminals, and sunk lower than the dogs, stripped to the waist, and weighted with fetters, with his hair shorn away, and the sweat of an intolerable travail on his brow, the Aristocrat was still distinguishable from those with whom he was companioned; the hands which laboured with the pick-axe and the spade no suns could brown, the neck round which the cord was passed that harnessed him to his truck no indignity could bow, the proud silence which every outrage, jibe, and blow tried beyond human endurance, no insult and no torture could break. Namelessly, strangely, but with a chasm of difference between them that no unity of suffering, of labour and of bondage could bridge over, the Noble stood out apart from the Criminals with whom he was condemned to herd; never made like them, never made one of them, by any outrage, by any misery. For all else than this, Raoul de Valdor would have been unrecognised, and passed as a stranger, by those who had known and loved him best, as he toiled here, a political *condamné* in the Bagne of Toulon.

A yacht had come into the Toulon harbour, driven there overnight by a tempest, and at anchor that glittering, sickening, torrid day; while not a breath stirred the drooping sails, not a touch of coolness came over the lake-like waste of the Mediterranean; not a cloud, ever so slight, broke the painful steel-blue glare of the hot skies.

The yacht had been wintering about the Morea and the Levant, idly and purposelessly, for to the young man who owned it it mattered little whether he were under the skies of the East or the West, beneath the shadow of Mount Ida, in the Ægean, or of the frowning pine-crowned crags that overlook the Danube; for the glory was gone from his life, and he was in those years which refuse to believe that although one sun has set to-day, another will rise with the morrow. He cared little where he went or what he did; and he strolled listlessly now through the Bagne, hearing little what was

said by those who showed him over it, though his heart was stirred to a keen, unselfish pain as he saw the crime and the wretchedness locked in, in the vast stone jaws of that merciless trap. He, with liberty, youth, health, and "all the world before him where to choose," felt that the grief which overshadowed his life because one desire of his heart had been forbidden him, was egotistic, rebellious, and unworthy of manhood, when he looked upon the hideous mass of crime, the intensity of human misery, the lives, loaded with fetters and labouring like beasts of burden, which were about him in the bastions of Toulon, doomed beyond escape until death should come and loose them from their chains.

"Good God! is that creature a man?" he said, as he pointed out a Caliban with the frame of a giant, but with a face so loathsome in its mastiff-like brutality and its low dogged, sullen ferocity, that it well seemed to belong to those "lower beings beneath humanity," which the Spaniards of Columbus, Ojeda, and Nicuesa, expected to find in the Terra Nuova.

"A Nantais, who cut his father and mother's throats for a little matter of gold the old people hid in a pitcher," answered his conductor, carelessly. "They found him guilty, with *circonstances exténuantes.*"

"What in Heaven's name could they be?" asked the young Englishman, as he moved hurriedly with an uncontrollable horror from the place where the parricide was.

The other shrugged his shoulders:

"*Une phrase de paille, monsieur!* We do not love capital punishment. The executioner is your pet across the Channel; he is not so with us."

The young man was silent, his blue eyes ranging thoughtfully over the droves of men chained together for such incongruous causes, for such disproportioned crimes. Something of that profound melancholy and despair which comes over men of great minds when they reflect on the complexity, the vastness, and the diverseness of evil, and see no way which can sever justice from cruelty, or ally mercy with necessary

vigour in the law, weighed even on his naturally careless, unmeditative temperament. His gaze rested on the face and form of the Parisian Noble, as he laboured along the plank with his truck-load of gravel. Lionel Caryll had known him well; scarce twelve months before they had spent months together at Silver-rest and at White Ladies, but his eyes looked on him without recognition, so utterly was Valdor dead in the Galley-Slave of the Bagne. Yet that nameless air, that look of "blood" which still lingered, attracted Caryll; he gazed at him long and with compassion.

"*He* has committed no crime!" he said, involuntarily.

"He has committed the worst, monsieur," said his guide, laconically.

"Impossible!" broke in the young man, with that frank impulse natural to him. "What is he accused of that such a man can be here, with common felons, with assassins, and with parricides?"

His conductor stroked his moustaches, and smiled amusedly; he had seen many such men there, seen them live and die there.

"That one conspired against the government."

"What! For a mere political difference of opinion; for a——"

"Chut, monsieur!" said the polite but prudential functionary, with a smile, "that is not the way we talk in France."

"May I speak to him?" asked Nello, attracted by the pale, proud, weary, yet unconquered look of the *condamné*.

His companion hesitated:

"Yes, monsieur, if you wish it," he said, after a pause.

It was out of rule, but he was himself a considerable person in the Bagne, who could accord such liberties without suspicion or correction, and he knew that the young Englishman was highly connected with several houses of the British aristocracy. There could be no danger, and he called the prisoner to him roughly and imperiously, as he would have called a dog.

"Don't do that, I will go to him," said Nello, quickly,

wounded, half with anger, half with pain, as he felt, almost with a personal mortification, the harsh shout of the callous custodian to the man whose single crime had been that patriotism which, deified by us as we read the pages of classic history, is damned by us in our own day, if shaped in other form to that in which we choose to mould it for ourselves.

As he moved, Valdor obeyed the command, the Liégois incendiary, with whom he was coupled, following him perforce; obeyed, as one too proud for a petty and a vain resistance, and of too knightly a nature to show that the miserable outrages of an inferior's tyranny had power to sting or gall him. But the blood had risen to his hollow cheek, and his head was lifted with a certain grandeur as he approached his taskmaster; the man was great in his fallen might, in his captive's fetters, as he had never been in the days of his rank and his brilliance. There is a majesty in Adversity, though it is a king to whose purples the mocking multitudes will not bow down; for the world worships and censes only the sovereign which it calls Success, even though oftentimes its crown is tinsel, its path is infamy, and its treasuries are theft.

As he drew nearer, his eyes fell on Lionel Caryll, the colour deepened in his face, and a look of terrible pain came into his eyes. The last time he had seen the youth had been the night when he had believed that Lucille loved him.

Nello, with the chivalrous courtesy to misfortune of high breeding and of a gentle nature combined, lifted his hat, and bowed with a smile as engaging as he would have given to the proudest potentate in Europe, and with a deep respectful pity spoken in his glance, while the Bagne official stood by smiling in his sleeve, and thinking, "What eccentric animals they always are, these English! *Saluer un forçat!* Bah!"

"Monsieur," he began, hesitatingly, "pardon me that I have taken the liberty of asking to speak with you. I am an Englishman, Lionel Caryll, and if I could have the honour to serve you in any way——"

"Lionel Caryll! and you do not know me!" said the *condamné*, with a smile of such resigned melancholy that it pierced to the heart of the young man.

"Know you?" he echoed, wonderingly, while his eyes dwelt on the haggard, wasted features, the weary, lustreless eyes, and the browned gaunt face, shorn of beard and hair, of the forçat before him. And as he looked, slowly and incredulously, remembrance and recognition returned on him, he grew pale as death, and recoiled in horror.

"Valdor! Merciful Heaven!"

"Even I!"

There was an intense pathos in the simple words in which the late brilliant and chivalric Noble acknowledged his identity with the prisoner of the Travaux Forcés, in whom the friends of his lost life could find no trace by which to know him!

"Gracious God! how came you here?" murmured Caryll, while his voice shook with emotion, and the dank dew gathered on his forehead in the shock with which his youthful and fervid nature was struck at meeting the man whom he had known and feared as a dazzling courtier and a powerful rival, now weighted with irons, and leashed with a criminal in the convict works of Toulon.

"I suffered for my cause. Many better men than I have done as much, and more," answered Valdor, briefly.

If he knew that one whose hand was without mercy to strike, and whom in one mad hour he had threatened when the haughty soul of Strathmore was flung down before him in the humility of supplication, had been that which, unseen and indirectly, but none the less surely, had sent him to his doom, Valdor was not made of that nature which could have told this to Strathmore's young kinsman.

Nello gazed at him blankly, and with a paralysed horror still; it seemed but yesterday that he had envied this man all his versatile fascinations, all his courtier's graces, as they were together, where they gathered round Lucille in the lighted drawing-rooms, or shot over the deer park, or rode

through the forest aisles of White Ladies. And now they met here in the white blinding glare and the stone-locked prisons of Southern France!

It was very terrible to the warm young heart of Lionel Caryll, whose sympathies were all quick, and whose compassion had not been worn away by the constant claims upon it which years bring with them. He could have shed tears like a woman at the sight of the man before him, while all his English blood was up in hot revolt at the tyranny which bound the political offender in the same brutality of chastisement, as was incurred by the vilest criminals, by the fratricide, the incendiary, the poisoner, and the assassin.

"Merciful God!" he cried, passionately, "can such things be? What! only because you held to the creed of your ancestors, and wished to win back for your King his legitimate throne, the country that was once ruled by Henri Quatre flings you here with the vilest criminals upon earth!"

Valdor gave him a swift glance, which counselled him to hold back his indignant protest, for the overseer of the Travaux Forcés was looking suspiciously at the young man's flushed face, and heard all the fiery words, as Nello spoke in French.

"*Dios consiente, pero no para siempre*," he answered, in the Spanish proverb, with a mournful and restrained dignity, which perhaps, more than anything else, showed how captivity and degradation had worn away the hot impulsiveness and the brilliant insouciance of the French Noble, while at the same time they had brought out in him a grandeur which had not been there in the days of his fashion and his fortune.

"God's vengeance should fall here, then!" muttered Caryll, in his teeth, too ardent and too full of impulse himself wholly to obey Valdor's sign, though he had seen and rapidly comprehended it. "How long are you sentenced to this iniquitous, accursed misery?"

"For life. I am one of the *déportés* for Cayenne."

"Cayenne! Why, it is death itself, they say, those pestilential swamps! Is there no hope possible?"

"Hope does not enter here," said Valdor, with a smile more unutterably sad than the most bitter lamentations could ever have been.

The young man ground his heel into the hot sand on which they stood with a mute passionate gesture; he was by nature generous, sympathetic, and ready to do battle for any wrong, however foreign to him, and the constant action of Lucille's mind upon his own had lent him some of her unselfish and fervent pity for those who suffered.

Valdor looked at him, and even on his sunburnt face the blood rose as he leaned forward for the moment, forgetting that he was in chains.

"Tell me," he said, hurriedly. "Tidings of the world never reach here more than they reach the dead in their tombs! What of Strathmore?—of——"

Caryll knew the name before which he paused. With the rapid instinct of a lover, he had seen that Valdor also loved her, though of what had passed that night under the palms he had known nothing. His heel ground the sand under it with a fiercer force than before, his eyes fell, he half turned away.

"My uncle has wedded Lucille," he said, briefly; and, while he uttered the words, all the anguish which that marriage had cost him in its first hours tightened afresh about him: he forgot the Bagne of Toulon; he forgot the men before him, and the stone walls around him; he only remembered the love of his youth.

Valdor answered nothing; he had known well enough what the answer would be, though perhaps, as with us all, until certainty fell like the axe of the headsman, he had, without knowing it, hoped against hope. He was silent; he had learnt of late to endure; but a grey pallor overspread the dark bronze of his face, and the heavy iron fetters that bound him to the Liégois criminal shook against each other as though struck together by a sudden blow.

"Is she happy?" said Valdor, after a long silence, while his voice was very low. The thoughts which were passing

within him were little dreamed by the young man beside him —thoughts of the dark tragedy which had ushered in and still overhung the life of Lucille.

Nello's face was still half turned away, and was flushed with the keen pain which the subject brought him. He answered, however, with frank truth, as it was his nature to do, and moreover, since the night in which he had seen Strathmore's coldness broken and his pride levelled by the community of suffering, he had felt to him as he had never done before.

"Happy? Yes. At least they tell me so; I have not seen her since—since before her marriage, but I know how great her love was for my uncle, and that he would give his life to spare her a moment's pain."

"He is so dear to her?" asked Valdor. The chains he bore, the misery he endured from one dawn to another, the sentence which devoted his whole life to a fate beside which the Noble's death upon the scaffold had been mercy, were scarce so bitter to him as that question, for what he loved and had for ever lost, was in the instant of its asking.

"Her life is centred in his," answered the young man in his teeth, for he had not yet learned to speak calmly of what had struck him a blow that for the time had withered all the beauty of his youth. "If harm befel him to-morrow, I believe it would be Lucille's death."

Valdor was silent, his head drooped, his lips grew very white where he stood, while the massive irons that linked him to the Liégois trembled as they hung from his wrists. Gazing down upon the yellow glare of the sand, he thought how wide and fearful a vengeance was in his hands upon the man who had consigned him here if liberty alone were his! Liberty! He shuddered as the word merely passed, mute and colourless, through his mind; its very memory was mockery, whilst around him were the white inexorable walls, the galley-gangs, the fettered criminals of the Toulon Bagne.

The overseer, tired of the conference, and afraid of allow-

ing a foreign visitor longer intercourse with one of the *galériens*, broke in, turning to Caryll:

"Monsieur, it is out of rule for a stranger to speak with a forçat! I can permit the interview to last no longer. *Au travail, numéro six cent quarante-cinq! Va-t-en donc, animal; vite!*"

Passionate words of rebuke, remonstrance, and unavailing wrath, rushed to Caryll's lips, while his blue eyes flashed with longing to seize the official in the strong grip of his right hand, and hurl him down into the midst of the excavations beside which he stood. But a meaning, warning glance from Valdor arrested him, as he whose whole individuality was lost in "numéro six cent quarante-cinq" bowed with his old grace, and with that majesty which calamity nobly borne ever confers.

"M. Caryll, I thank you from my soul. The sight of your face has been like water in a desert to one who is shut in a living grave, and to whom the world is dead."

Then, without resistance, or without sign that he had even heard the brutal voice of his taskmaster, he moved away to the plank where his labour awaited him. Swift as thought, Nello followed him with eager words of pity, sympathy, and indignant grief; but a hundred lynx eyes were on them, and the glance of Valdor mutely warned him, as he would serve him, to fall back with those generous but rash words unuttered, while from his own lips a single phrase was whispered, so low that the young man could barely catch it: "*Doucement!—et conciliez Lavigne!*" Lavigne was the government employé who was conducting Nello over the Bagne.

His senses, quickened by the keenness of sympathy, and by the desire which Valdor had divined, to serve in some way, though he had no knowledge how, the man whom he had suddenly found in such terrible captivity, Nello caught the cue rapidly, though vaguely; he fell back, letting Valdor and the Liégois return to their toil, and turned to the official with as much carelessness and courtesy as he, no good hand at

diplomacy and deception, could assume on the instant. He accounted to Lavigne for having known the political offender by his having met him at his uncle's house. Strathmore's name was too familiar in France not to be well known even to the Toulon officer, and was in a great measure a voucher to him that no harm could result from the young Englishman's recognition of "Numéro six cent quarante-cinq;" and Nello obeyed, as far as he could bring himself to do, Valdor's whispered injunction, "*Conciliez Lavigne*," by entering with apparent interest into the official's explanations of the working and the regulations of the Bagne, and by inviting him to the inspection of his yacht, and to luncheon there on board with him. Most surely Caryll, with not a little of the pride of his family in him, with an honest hatred of wrong and a heart sick at the tyranny to which he was witness, had never so stooped, but that a warm, eager, indefinite longing was already on him to loosen by some means or other those cruel fetters with which a man innocent of all crime, save a mistaken cause and a quixotic loyalty, was flung amongst thieves, bondsmen, and assassins.

When he had quitted the Bagne, and sat at evening on his yacht-deck, seeing the sun go down in all its golden glory in the Mediterranean waters, and musing on the mass of misery and guilt where the galley-slaves, when night closed in, would lie down manacled and side by side, in worse beds than kennelled dogs, the young man's thoughts revolved incessantly and restlessly round a thousand vague, wild, chivalrous, impossible plans for Valdor's rescue. He could see no way to it that was feasible; he could devise no scheme, however rash and reckless, that it was possible to obtain a chance to put in execution, but his nature was sanguine, his heart was generous, and he came of a bold race, who let nothing daunt them or oppose them.

Strathmore, in England, little dreamed the projects that floated through his young nephew's mind, till they settled into a matured and resolute will to liberate the condemned man, if daring or skill could find any means to do so, as he

leaned over the side of his vessel looking at the stone bastions of Toulon, where they glared red in the ruddy sunset light. How, when, at what risk, and by what measures he could not tell; but to free the French noble was as resolved in the youth's heart as though the Eumenides of Greek fable had place and sovereignty in human life, and had appointed him the chosen instrument by which the evil which had been deliberately wrought should recoil on the life that had begotten it.

When the sun had sunk and the stars had come out, he still leaned there, looking down on the phosphorescent water, musing on this thing; while in the Bagne of Toulon the prisoner, lying in the cramped misery which makes sleep torture, and denies even the merciful oblivion of slumber, and the restoration of lost joys which dreams may bring with them, thought of Lucille gathered to her husband's heart,—thought of the vast and awful vengeance which was his upon Strathmore *if—if* he had but LIBERTY!

And the yacht stayed off Toulon.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### The Symbol of the Dying Flower.

SUMMER in the heart of the great city—mockery of the name! Summer! with the incessant roll of traffic, never ending from the dawn of one day to the dawn of another; with the loud beating of steam-presses throbbing and thundering through the nights; with the glory of the skies in azure warmth or starry stillness, shut out from sight by the great wilderness of roofs; with the dense heat of the noon burning on arid pavement, on whirling dust, on grey, gritty, barren walls; with the brightness of the sun shining on toiling crowds, on panting horses, on thronged narrow thoroughfares filled with noise, with stench, with reeking heavy heat; on dark, noisome courts, where, when its rays steal in through some

broken chink or loosened shutter, they find men labouring and lusting for gold, with their eyes blind to the day and their souls lost to heaven. Summer! with the only bird a prisoned lark in some garret window, that shakes its dust-covered wings and strains its parched throat in song that is but a long quiver of agony, while its beak plunges into the dry sear sod as though in some wild memory of the fresh woodland grasses far away. Summer! with the only flower a sickly drooped plant, whose leaves hang lifeless, and whose blossoms are colourless with smoke; with the only living water the ink-black, poisonous river, forest-thick with masts; with the only murmur through the day and night the toiling of the weary feet of crowds who have forgotten what green fields are like.

Summer!—it is a terrible and ghastly thing in the pent alleys of a great city, and Marion Vavasour, when she stood leaning her arms on the sill of her narrow window, and gazing down into the noxious street below, sickened at it as under a physical torture. Beauty, colouring, poetry, luxury, they were the life of this woman's life; her eyes longed, her heart thirsted for them, as the lark's for the woodland shadows, as the flower for the light of the sun and the sweetness of the morning dew. Years of evil and of infamy could not trample this out of her nature; she had been born for all the luxuriance of power, all the delicate lustre of sight, and scent, and touch, and ever-changing scenes, which are the prerogatives of wealth; she lived in *them*, without them she perished famine-stricken. The heat, the noise, the dusty glare, the barren, vulgar hideousness of the life about her were bitter torture to her, the death to which she had sunk in the whirling ocean had not been one tithe so accursed to her, as the living death in which she dwelt. Proud, she was steeped to the lips in degradation; a poetic voluptuary, her life was sheared barren of every memory of beauty; once a patrician and a ruler, she lived now a pariah imprisoned in want and misery. Vengeance could not have been more subtle and complete.

Where she looked down into the hot, vile unsightly street,

with its crowded wretchedness, and its narrow strip of sunny sky left between the high pent roofs as though in mockery of all the glorious world beyond, laughing in loveliness and light, that was lost and unknown to those who were dwellers here, her thoughts wandered to her dead and golden past.

The hours of triumphs, the homage of courts, the rich perfection of her peerless loveliness, the days of her glad and splendid sovereignty, they floated before her in memories tangled and lustrous like the glories of a dream. A thousand summer days, a thousand summer nights, the perfume of Southern climes, and the fragrance of luminous seas flashing in phosphor light, whilst the air was balmy with flowers, and filled with music from palace-stairs, gleaming marble white through deep odorous thickets of myrtle. The murmur of love-words whispered low, and the radiance of her own resistless beauty, with the gold light on her hair, and the proud challenge in her eyes, and the throngs of princes and of courtiers waiting on her steps, that swept like Cleopatra's over rose-strewn paths:—they drifted past her, the phantoms of dead years, and a dull, sickly sense of unreality stole on her, looking on that glorious sun-lighted, diamond-crowned vision of her youth.

Had hers ever been this fair and sovereign life? Was she what the world had known as Marion Vavasour? The soft grace, the rich lustre, the divine fragrance of that bygone life, were they all dead for ever? Could the light never come back to her eyes, the laughter to her heart, the beauty—her loved, lost beauty!—to her face, for which men had deemed the world well lost?

And the ceaseless ebb and flow of the black river-tide, and of the surging throng in the weary glare below, seemed to beat as answer on the stifling air,

"For ever, never! Never, for ever!"

Yet among the living, as though condemned ghost-like to wander without rest among the world that knew her not, and in which she had no place, Marion Vavasour was dead!

She gazed down into the colourless dust-strewn street, while the air was filled with stifling odours from which she shrank, and up from the river swept pestilential vapours in the arid noon, in which the pale leaves of the garret-flower drooped, and the caged lark sat huddled and blind, with wings that hung nerveless, and a little life without song. And, as she gazed, through the weariness of her beggared years, one human passion rose, still sweet, still unexhausted, still the right and the lust of the outcast as of the monarch—the passion of revenge.

The hatred which had destroyed her, was scarce so cruel and so pitiless as the hatred that she bore; for men at their worst never reach the depths to which a woman sinks when once unsexed, and cast into the fathomless sea of unlicensed evil; the tigress is more cruel than her mate. Men strike at what they hate; women, more subtle and more merciless, strike at what is best-beloved by the life they would destroy. It is the difference of the sexes; one tramples out under an iron heel, the other poisons unseen and with a smile.

Vague, shapeless, hopeless, her vengeance rose before her sight; she knew now where to strike—but how?

Sunk amongst the lowest, destitute, and banned from every household, how could she sever two lives, lifted far above her in the security of rank, and power, and peace? How could she learn the force to forge a bolt to reach and pierce the kingly mail of the patrician and the statesman? She had seen where the single weakness lay in the steel-clad strength of the man who had denied her mercy; but her hands were empty, she had no weapon with which to strike. All that brutality could have compassed, all that a serpent subtlety and an insatiate thirst could have schemed and been slaked in, she would have done; but her power was paralysed, whilst her passion to destroy burned but the fiercer for its impotence.

"He loves her!—he loves her!" the words that had been hissed from her lips in the night stillness as she had looked on them, broke from them now, as though in them she felt

the whole measure of her hate were gathered, as though in them lay the mystical incantation at whose summons vengeance would rise incarnate, to be her minister and slave. She hated Lucille as that which is evil ever hates what is pure; the compassion which had pitied her, the sweet graciousness with which the young girl had smiled on her and offered her her roses, were but memories which made her savage greed the thirstier to destroy her.

She knew nothing of her save what rumour, floating to her as rumour floats amongst the masses of those above them, told; that she was a young, highborn girl, of whom many idle stories wandered downward through the ranks of society, till even the lowest caught and retailed them, touching her gentleness to all who suffered or sought charity, and her husband's devotion to her, rumour's hundred tongues outlying one another in what they babbled of the beauty, the luxury, the brilliance with which it was his pleasure to surround her, and of the idolatry in which he was said to hold one whom he had wedded when the world had deemed him bound solely to power and ambition.

This was all she knew; but it was more than enough to overfill the measure of a deadly hate, sole lingering passion of a ruined and ruthless life, which, driven out itself from every fairer and every holier thing, loathed and panted to destroy all beauty that lived in another, all light that shone on other lives.

Strathmore had been her slave; in his passion, in his crime, *she* had been his temptress, even as she had been his destroyer; and a burning, poisonous jealousy consumed her, twisted in with the lust for her vengeance. She hated him with a hate unutterable; but a thrill of thirsty *envy* ran through her when she knew that this young and graceful loveliness was in his home, in his heart, in his life.

If the vain and sensual nature of Marion Vavasour had ever loved, she had loved—for a brief while—the man whose mad devotion had been lavished on her in that imperious force which wakes the heart of women in their own despite;

the cruel tyrant had valued most the costliest toy she most utterly, most brutally destroyed; the sweetest, richest hours of her rich, sweet past had been those in which Strathmore had lain subject at her feet. She had believed that love was for ever dead in him, and rightly; the feeling which he bore to Lucille was too pure to bring the passion he had known once, and once alone. But this *she* did not know; she only knew that in another lay the joy of his life; that to another was given his kiss, his thoughts, his riches and his tenderness. And the poison of a fierce and brutal jealousy was in her—the jealousy of a woman who hates, and who has lost all that makes womanhood human.

"He loves her!—he loves her!"

The thirsty words were on her lips as she leaned out, looking on the heavy, sultry street; in them she seemed to feel the prophecy and surety of her vengeance. Yet how touch those who dwelt as far above her now as the skies were above the wretched companions of her infamy? How, with the impotent hate of an outcast, reach and sever the lives surrounded with the might and the purple of power?

The serpent is powerless as the dove to harm, unless it can wind its way in to wreathe around and breathe its venom on the life it would destroy. She had the will, the thirst, the passion to strike, and to strike without pity; but her hands were empty. It was hopeless.

Where she leaned, the flower on the pent, dark casement was blown by the wind against her lips; she shuddered from its touch; she thought of the rose—rich, fragrant, dew-laden—that she had drawn from its leafy nest of foliage on the terrace at Vernonceaux. As that scarlet, odorous rose, had been her life in the Past,—like that withered, prisoned flower in the closeness of the sunless, noxious garret, was her life in the Present! The poetry which still lingered in this woman's nature made her lean over the yellow faded leaves drooping there in the sickening air, and see in them companions to her fate, and caress them with a weary hand—the hand that once dealt life or death at pleasure, and was touched with as

reverent a kiss of homage as that which queens receive. Susceptible, impressionable still, a thrill of terrible joy ran through her, as at some symbol and metaphor of vengeance, sure, if slow, as she saw gnawing at its roots the poisonous fungi—they were to her an omen and an augury.

"Ah!" she whispered to the flower, with the graceful, imaginative fancy which once had been her softest charm, now warped, usurped, and darkened, and made evil like herself, "they have shorn you of beauty, of fragrance, of glory, of life. No sun shines on you, and none think you fair. You are dead, and the world will give you no place—but you hold what will poison still!"

"Was any one ever so happy as you make me?" Lucille asked him, with a sigh of joy, as she leaned against him, in the lateness of that night, looking upward at the stars, while there stretched below the casement, the winding waters and the dark woodlands of the home that had been her bridal gift. She did not know why, for all answer, he pressed her closer to his heart.

"Thank God!"

"And you!" she murmured, while her eyes looked upward into his, "with all the glory and the greatness of your life, you never forget Lucille."

"When I forget Lucille, my life will have ceased!"

His head was bowed over her, and his voice was sunk to that deep tenderness which changed so utterly the chill languor of its habitual tone, and was never heard save by her. She was an exquisite child to him still, with all her soft caprices, her poetic earnestness, her fairy fancies that were law to him, her unsullied innocence that was hallowed to him, and only became tenfold the fairer, tenfold the fonder, to his sight and to his heart through the changed ties which made her young life one with his.

The keenest remorse sleeps often and long, as the deadliest serpent lies dulled, and still, in peace through many

hours; and in the happiness of Lucille almost he found his own, for in her he saw his atonement and his expiation.

She lifted her head with a fond caress;—those kisses of Lucille's lips seemed to purify his own; remembering them, callous words had not seldom been checked, a pitiless sneer not seldom been foregone. He strove—as far as his nature could—to *be* what she believed him.

"How beautiful the night is! The day smiles on us, but the night always seems fullest of God's love and pity!" she said, while her eyes gazed up to the still starlit skies with that meditative love of nature which beheld "God in all things," and found poems in all, from the lowliest flower to the darkest storm.

He smiled tenderly on her;—to comprehend this was not possible to him; in his youth he had never known it, in his mature years it was yet farther from him; but in her it was sacred to him from disdain, safe even from a jest.

"You see beauty in all the world, Lucille! If these chill, lustreless nights of England are so lovely to you, what will the Southern ones be—the nights of Baiæ, of Sicily, of Greece?"

Where they leant against the balcony in the moonlight, he spoke of all to which he would take her some leisure time, when the pressure of office should relax and leave him free; of hours on the Mediterranean, where the lateen-boats were filled with fragrant freights of violets or olive-wood; of luminous waters, with the golden orange fruit and purple grapes hanging above the waves; of nights in the Carnival time, when from some lofty casement she would look out on the Roman throng and on the dome of St. Peter's, studded and circled with light; of moonlit evenings, floating down the soft, grey Bosphorus, with each stroke of the oars leaving a trail of phosphor gold, and the snows of Mount Olympus towering in the lustrous radiance of the stars. Of scenes and hours which he drew from the memories of a long life, accomplished eloquence and facile words supplying that poetic temper which, so vivid in her, had never, even in youth,

existed in him, so that its absence could not strike coldly or harshly on her, as she listened to the mellow music of his voice, and the graphic painting of his words, and let her thoughts float over the golden glories which steeped that rich dreamland, her future.

And in such hours as this—letting memory drift from him, and the fevered ambitions and bitter contests of his world be forgot, while his thoughts and his words took their colour from hers—Strathmore himself was *almost* happy. "Almost"—for the great lost soul of the man could never wholly cast aside the burden of its sin; and the light of his life, that "light which never was on land or sea," had died for ever for him when Marion Vavasour had betrayed him, and Erroll had fallen by his hand.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### Quæstores Paricidii.

It was far past midnight in Westminster, and as the Minister, whose sweeping and polished eloquence withered like an ice-blast all it smote, passed out from the House, after a great field-night, the approaches were hemmed in by a crowd breathless to see and eager to welcome him. Successful, but never popular; firm rooted in the confidence, but holding no place in the love, of the nation; wondered at, but scarce understood, in a country which deifies the Commonplace, and calls its best Man of Business its best Statesman, the subtle and profound intellect of Strathmore was little comprehended; his genius was state-craft, his aspiration absolute dominance; born to rule, to command, and hold an undisputed sceptre, he was as little capable, at heart, of sympathy with the English nation, as the English nation with him. Solely beneath his sway, they would have been ruled with the steel of a Sulla at home, but they would have never been degraded and ridiculed abroad. The hand of the tyrant might have been iron, but it would have grasped a sword

never to be bribed into its sheath by an appeal to a trader's instincts.

Thus, England had little comprehension of him, and as little love; but the spirit of his policy was essentially the spirit which ennobles the blood of a country, and gives her the fear of her foes and the faith of her allies; and although this is the spirit which of all others is most lacking in the politics of the nation, and is deemed by her most costly and "idealic," there are hours, now and then, when the blood stagnant in her veins is roused by it, as the war-horse which has long worn the girths of the huckster's saddle, and borne the trader's pack, still rouses to the trumpet-blast of the charge, and scents the battle afar off with eager, restless memories of glory gone.

This night had been one of them, and for once the old grand temper was awake in the country, and it recognised its exponent in the man, who, if his hand were iron, would at least uphold with it the might of England, and not put it behind him for the gold of a shopkeeper's bribe, to be slipped into the closed palm.

As he passed out into the night the crowds pressed closer and closer, and cheered him to the echo: that night in the autumn of the bygone year, when he had given his life to the peril of the seas for the sheer sake of those perishing in the storm, had brought his name home to the hearts of the people with a warm human sympathy, which the aristocratic exclusivism and the rapid brilliance of his career had banished, rather than won. It had made his name loved by thousands whose eyes had never rested on him, and whose lives could render his no comprehension. It was in the hearts of the people now, and they were stirred as by one impulse; their shouts of welcome echoed to the night, roused by something higher than the trading interest, nobler than mere popular clamour; it was homage given, unbought and unbidden, to that which was loftiest, truest, grandest in Strathmore's nature.

For the moment he was moved to something holier than mere lust of power, to something warmer than the mailed pride of ambition, as he bent his head to the assembled multitudes; it was not the patrician who acknowledged the acclamation of the populace, it was the man who recognised the sympathy of his brethren.

He sank back in the solitude of his carriage, with a new and softened light within his eyes, and a weary sigh of rest after conflict.

He had done evil, but he had done also good—good, he hoped, wide, lasting, wrought for his country and for the sake of millions, who yet lay in the womb of the future. Might not this suffice to wash out the blood-stain on his life?

Scattering the people clustered in the narrow ways, the carriage moved forward in the clear light of the summer moon. The cheers rose deafening on the air; the masses swayed and surged in the fitful shadows; the great stone piles pealed back in echo the name the multitude hurled in honour to the starlit skies—"STRATHMORE! STRATHMORE!"

As the waves of a sea part and roll back, so the waves of human life swept aside with their mighty murmur, and, as it had risen from the sea-depths, with all its lost and evil beauty, known through all the change of years and ravages of a dishonoured life, so there rose to his sight, from the waving crowds and flickering shades of night, the face of Marion Vavasour. For a moment seen, and in a moment lost. Yet *in* that moment they had looked on one another, and an eternity could have told neither more.

The new and better light died out from Strathmore's eyes; a great anguish tightened about him; a dread, such as had seized him when he had seen her face in the yellow autumn mists of White Ladies, clenched upon his life, withering all hope, all peace, all future unborn years. The temptress and companion of his sin was that sin's avenger.

"Atonement!" The lurid cruel eyes of the woman for whose beauty he had steeped his soul in guilt, mocked at it,

and drove him out from rest, as the Furies drove Orestes, even when remorse had brought him weary, and worn, and sick unto death, to lie, if but for one brief hour, at the foot of the altars of God.

It was long past midnight.

His face was haggard, and his step had changed from its firm and stately tread to one slow and weary, as he passed through the halls and corridors of his ministerial residence, through the glow of white light, rich hues, delicate marbles, and clustering foliage. He had come from a proud success, with which Europe would teem on the morrow; he had come from the homage of the peoples, rendered as by one voice to him as the upholder of the honour of their nation. Yet it was not as a victor that he returned, and had the world beheld him in his solitude, it would not have found one memory of its triumph remaining with the man who, but a few seconds before, had spoken in the name of England the grand challenge which would uplift her ancient fame in the sight of a listening world, and who now came, as the guilty come into the presence of the innocent, with the knowledge and the burden of a dead sin alone with him, and upon him.

He passed through the silent chambers into Lucille's, where the aromatic silvery lamplight was soft and shaded, burning low.

Early in the evening he had returned with her from a state gathering, and had bidden her go to her rest; for used to the child-like simplicity and even tenor of her years at Silver-rest, she was too young to be much in the restless vortex of that great world, of which her loveliness and his name had made her at once a queen—a queen as guileless and unconscious in her child-sovereignty now, as when her crown was of the woodland violets, and her wealth of the ocean shells, by the sea-shore at Silver-rest.

She had obeyed him; she had no will save his, the gentlest guide, the surest guardian her life could ever have

owned, since he had bent the iron of his nature like a reed, and changed his very character, until all its coldness, egotism, and ascetic indifference to all which weaker men hold dear, were lost in tenderness for her. Listening long for the echo of his step, she had sunk to sleep, with words of prayer for him the last upon her lips. He moved through the long space of the chamber, and stood beside her couch, looking on that rest to which the night brought no evil memories, and whose dreams were pure and joyous as the dreams of infancy.

Her bright hair fell unloosed about her, a flush was on her cheeks, for the night was warm, her head rested on her arm in all the grace of profound repose, and that unconscious and dreaming youth smote him tenfold with the bitterness of guilt as he stood looking down upon her in the shaded silvery light; was his heart one on which it should be hushed, were his lips those whose kiss should wake her from her slumber?

Once more in the shadows of the night the eyes of his temptress and destroyer had looked on him, rising up from the surge of the multitudes as she had risen from the surge of the waves, forbidding him peace, claiming him hers by right of their dead sin, by right of their mutual guilt to the life which had been slaughtered by the lie of the traitress, and by the hand of the assassin. What place had *he* beside the rest of innocence? It were juster that he were driven out to dwell with the lost, and the accursed, in the shame and the hatred of all things pure and sinless, of all lives loved of God.

As though even in sleep conscious when he was near, Lucille stirred, and awakened, with the light in her fair eyes, and the smile upon her face with which she had awakened from the sleep of childhood in her dead mother's bosom, and had looked upward to the gaze of him whose crime had made her desolate ere yet she knew her loss or felt her wrong. Her low cry thrilled his heart with its waking welcome, the flush of a beautiful gladness deepened the warmth of her

cheeks, her arms were thrown about his neck, while her lips breathlessly whispered sweet, eager questions for his honour, his triumphs, his greatness, all dear to her, as the life to which, in *her* sight, they gave the sanctity of the Patriot and the grandeur of the Ruler.

The voice which answered her quivered slightly; the lips which met her caress were cold; the face which bent over her was dark and worn with the memories which thronged about him in the hush of night. The colour died from her cheek, the light was quenched in her eyes, the shadow of his own fate fell upon her.

"You suffer? You are ill? What is it—what has grieved you?" she asked him, in the rapid dread, the vague terror of any evil which menaced him.

He drew her closer to his heart, and the dissimulation, the self-control which were alike his nature and training, did not desert him now.

"Nothing, my own love. I have been speaking two hours, and the debate has been a tempestuous and lengthened one, till for once I am weary and fatigued; that is all."

She did not doubt him: that his lips would have spoken other words save those of truth, she dreamed no more than she dreamed of the blood-stain on his life; but the eyes which took all their joy from his gazed wistfully upward to the face which, waking from her slumber, she had seen, not for the first time darkened and careworn, with the resurrection of a guilty past, the futile yearning of a great remorse.

"All? You are sure it is all?" she asked him, wistfully. "You would not keep anything from me even in love? You would not withhold even a thought? You would let Lucille share your pain as she shares your glory?"

His heart sickened, his conscience shrank under the tender words; his eyes, fathomless and unrevealing beneath every gaze and every torture, fell under the questioning appeal of those uplifted to him in their innocence, unconscious of the anguish that they dealt.

Evil should not have been the salvation which had saved her; guilt should not have been the secret of the heart on which hers leaned! A quick shudder ran through his frame; he drew her to him with passionate force.

"None would have loved you as I love? None could have been to you as I am, Lucille?"

"Ah! No, no. Why ask?—you know that so well!"

And as she clung to him, her bright hair falling over his arms, her eyes full of such liquid light as painters give to the pure and happy eyes of angels, she heard but in his words the tenderness of her husband's love, and had no knowledge in them of the sleepless dread of that remorse which strove to lull its suffering, and to find peace where no peace was, with the remembrance of her guiltless life, blessing and blessed by him.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### The Outcast by the Gates.

LIGHT, and colouring, the coolness of water, the shade of leafy depths, the fragrance of flowers, the green belts of sloping lawns, and the sparkling spray of fountain columns tossed aloft among the brilliance of blossom and the lofty heads of trees, all she thirsted for were here, where Marion Vavasour stood looking through the iron tracery of gates, as the prisoner through his bars gazes at the world to which he can never go forth again. They were the lodge-gates to the grounds of the Thames villa of S. A. R. le Duc D'Etoile, filled with the choicest gathering of England at a brilliant fête, that was simply called a garden party. Where she stood, crouched down against the iron scroll-work, in the dust of the highway, she could see the velvet slopes of turf, the pyramids of bloom, the glimpse of white distant terraces through the breaks of stately avenues—she could hear the swell of far-off music, even the low murmur of a laugh when a group swept near—she could breathe in the rich fragrance

of flowers and of perfumes—she could look, in one word, on the life of her Past.

A few years since, and he who was host there had led her through the salons of the Tuileries, bending to her word in homage, seeking no empire so precious as one smile from the lips that poets hymned, and the eyes that recalled all the glory of Helen's. A few years since, and she had been of them, with them, omnipotent by right of every sovereign grace—unrivalled, were it only by the light of that *angelico riso* which played upon no other beauty as it played on hers.

*Now* the Prince d'Etoile would have passed her by unknown;—and she stood without his gates among the outcasts of the great highway, one with the roofless, nameless beggars, who, in the whirling dust and summer scorch, crouched among the trampling hoofs and crowded wheels to look with hungry, wondering eyes through the bars at these stray glimpses of the life, so unlike theirs, that their sight could not grasp, nor their fancy realise it. Her hands were clenched upon the bars, her brow was pressed on the cold iron; she saw the blent light and shadow, with the sun-gleam on the lawns, and the glimpses of blossom and of colour that glanced between the trees; she hungered for her life that was lost for ever; she stood an alien and an exile looking on the things that knew her no more!

The white wand of a lacquey struck her on the shoulder with a sharp reprimand; the same action, the same words with which, in the years that were gone, the chasseur of the Marchioness of Vavasour and Vaux had used to the Bohemian Redempta. There is a wild, wanton Nemesis at times in human life. She started at the blow and the indignity; for the moment she forgot that she had no longer the power to *resent*—most bitter loss of this world's losses!—and turned with her old superb grace, with her old proud patrician rebuke.

In the carriage, whose way she stopped, its occupant leaned back among the cushions alone, bowing, something

haughtily and distantly, as the throng, gathered about the gates, lifted their hats to salute him. As she raised her head she met his eyes; *he* knew her; a quiver passed over his face; he shrank visibly, irrepressibly, as though a knife had struck him; and his carriage swept on through the ducal gates, leaving her without in the dust and the throng of the parched highway.

A moment before, full of the projects, the contests, the purposes, and the successes of power, of the attitude of the session which hitherto had been in all its triumphs his own *aristeia*, and of the far-stretching foresight and matured calculations of the ambition which had been from his youth, and would be to his death, his master-passion, Strathmore, at sight of her, forgot all save his past, its dead guilt leaving its weakness in the life in all else strong—its buried crime claiming him slave, who in all else was ruler. Leader and chief, master of men, and moulder of circumstance, he could not purchase or enforce oblivion—he could not choose but bow, conscience-stricken, before the eyes of an outcast in the throng! He had loved her, he had sinned for her: she was in his life for ever, its burden, its retribution, its destroyer.

All his past came back, with that one look from the sleepless eyes of Marion Vavasour.

While he joined his own world, while he spoke the courtly nothings of the day, while he chatted with princes and with peers, and moved through the brilliant groups of the gardens, her memory was on him, and the sense of a remembered crime, fresh as though born of yesterday, upon his life.

A few lengths of leafy avenue, a few stretches of sward, and he looked on the fairness of Lucille's face, in its first and loveliest dawn of youth—youth without a shadow, without a fear, without a soil. The centre of a group whose polished homage she still heard with naïf surprise, and still turned from with graceful carelessness, she stood on the broad white steps of a terrace, where a thousand blossoms encircled her in their luxuriant colours, like a young Angel of the Flowers. Against her leant a handsome boy, a little heir of the house,

who looked up at her with loving eyes, while she smiled down upon his beauty and wound a wreath of half-opened lilies among his golden locks, as much a child as he, as joyous and as innocent. She was a picture, soft as a poet's dream, in the haze of earliest summer; yet he looked on it with a shudder: he saw it through the darkness of his past. A brief while, and he knew that she would smile thus upon the laughing eyes, and toy thus with the sunny hair, of a child born to his race, and bearer of his name,—and he from whom her child would take existence, had been the destroyer of her father!

Thus ever his own sin recoiled and struck him, in his gentlest thoughts, his purest hours.

Strathmore, to whom fear was unknown, and in whom the common weaknesses of men had no place, dreaded with untold horror to see the eyes of Marion Vavasour fasten on Lucille; he felt as though the very air must tell his secret when she passed the woman whose lie had made him slay the man whom he had loved.

In his vengeance he had bidden her go forth to the fate that waited her; to live as they live, who trade in beauty, to die as they die, craving a crust. His bidding had been obeyed, the condemnation to which he had sent her out had become hers to the uttermost of its law; and now—the Outcast he had made was in his path, stronger than his strength, more powerful in her abject wretchedness than he in his haughty eminence, an Até that dogged his steps, and rose, haunting and abhorred, between him and the light of the summer sun, between him and the holiness of innocence. Where he stood, with a calm smile on his lips, with serene and witty words at his command, flattered, honoured, sought, a courtier, a statesman, no ambition beyond his grasp, no rank but what could be his at his will, his thoughts were filled with restless, fugitive schemes to banish from his sight, and thrust out of his world, that nameless beggar at the gates!

A homeless wanderer was more powerful than he; he had

had his vengeance, whose sweetness he had once said could never escape him, but its fruit was his also, and of whatever it brought forth must he eat.

An hour later and his carriage swept with swift and silent roll over the turf, and under the pleasant shadow of the trees, in the warmth of the setting sun. Lucille lay back beside him, her bright, rapid words broken with sweet melody of happy laughter, her face turned to him, radiant with the gay softness of her father's smile, while she told him a thousand brilliant, airy trifles of the world that was so new to her, and of which she saw but one phase,—full of graceful beauty, and harmonious as music to *her*. And he heard her while his thoughts were heavy with deadly memories, he looked on her uplifted eyes while his own restlessly sought the face of the woman to whom he was for ever bound by the indissoluble bondage of a mutual crime. He dreaded the gaze of his traitress, as he had never dreaded the close presence of death when the waves beat him down, and the cold, curled mass of the reared waters buried him beneath them—he dreaded for it to fall on the one beside him, as men dread the breath of a pestilence to pass over what they love.

The carriage swept on through the green avenues and the sunlit freshness of the park, along the side of glancing water, and with the low gladness of mirth on his ear. Suddenly Lucille's voice dropped, her laugh was hushed, over her face stole the earnest sadness of a deep compassion; she leaned nearer to him, and her hand stole into his.

"Look there! That is the woman to whom I gave my roses. How weary, how wretched, how *lost* she looks! Could wo do nothing for her?"

And he heard the pitying words spoken of her father's murderess!—he saw her eyes fill with a divine tenderness for the woman whom he had loved with a madman's passion, and sent out to a vengeance great as her guilt and his own!

By a ghastly fascination his glance followed hers into the throng about the gates through which they passed, and he

saw, fastened on Lucille's face, a look like the chained and baffled panther's, thirsting for her prey; a look that sent through all his veins an icy shiver.

Lucille turned pale, and her large soft eyes, which rested on the outcast with such mournful pity, filled with a startled fear like those of a young fawn, as she leant farther back in the barouche, and her hand unconsciously closed nearer on his.

"How strangely she looks! She frightens me!"

For his life, for her life, he could not have answered her, while upon them was the gaze of Marion Vavasour quoting the past, claiming the future, by right of that mutual, unexpiated crime which had destroyed the guiltless. His face grew white, his courage shrank from Lucille's exclamation, he shuddered beneath the clinging touch of her hand; and the woman who watched them saw that even now the first hour of her vengeance had come, that even now she had pierced through the single weakness of his mailed strength, and forced him to *remember*.

A moment more, and the carriage swept on through the light and shade, leaving the homeless wanderer in the throng; and he saw but his own memory of the woman he had worshipped, of the woman who had betrayed him, with the diamonds crowning the gold wealth of her hair, and the lustrous, languid light in her antelope eyes, as she had been in the glory of her youth, in the sovereignty of her beauty, on the night when, at her tempting, he bowed and fell, knowing nothing save the sweetness of her kiss!

Lucille looked upward at him with anxious wistfulness.

"Are you in pain? Are you ill?"

Life could not have held for him a more bitter pang than lay in her question!

But he was long used to wear the impenetrable armour of an unmoved serenity, and live beside a guiltless life without a sign of self-betrayal. His voice had its accustomed calm as he answered her, and his eyes met hers with their old

tenderness, if in them there was a deeper and more weary melancholy.

"No, my dear one, it is nothing—save heat, perhaps, and I am somewhat tired. But,—Lucille,—do not look at those unhappy outcasts again; you cannot help them; the vastest wealth could not avail to succour all the wretchedness of a great city; it only agitates you, and is injurious for you, my darling, and, as such, pains me."

Those who had best known his past, could not have heard in his words or in his voice the betrayal of anything save solicitude for her; still less could she have done so.

She looked upward at him with a smile that was earnest and almost mournful.

"I will not, if I can help it; but when I see any who look so hopeless as that, I wonder why life is so beautiful for me and is so stricken for them! Why is there so *much* misery? All would love God, and do good, I think, if they were happy?"

"A beautiful and simple code of ethics, my child!—if you could give the world your innocence and your faith, it might be true."

"But is it not true?" pleaded Lucille, while her thoughts travelled wistfully over the mysteries of evil and of pain which were vague and strange to her dawning life, which had been one long, cloudless day, under one guardian care since her birth. "Love is born of gentleness, and gentleness, I think, would win the harshest and the most lost to *something* better. Perhaps if even that woman we saw just now had been shown mercy when she first suffered, she might not be so utterly callous as she looks? How strangely her eyes fastened on me, did you see? Why was it?"

How could she know that every one of her words was worse than a dagger in his heart?

"Why, my love?" repeated Strathmore, wearily. "Why? Because those who are lost and evil, hate all that is guileless and pure! Because her life is guilty, and yours is sinless!"

As the night follows the day, Marion Vavasour followed the lives she hated. Having once seen that her sight and her presence had power to pierce him to the quick, she never released him from it; wherever one of the people could follow a man of rank and eminence, she followed him; secretly, so that no other noted her, but surely and constantly, until that vigil, veiled but unceasing, grew intolerable to him, with that torture which he had dealt out to her, when, before the stroke of his vengeance fell in the sight of assembled Paris, go where she would his eyes were upon her, seek escape as she might his silent presence was ever near, mutely quoting to her the Past, mutely menacing the Future.

When he left the Lower House, or drove out of Downing-street, he saw her: when he passed from State ceremonies he met her eyes, where she stood amidst the crowds which thronged the approaches of the palace, and were trodden by horses' hoofs, and driven asunder by the whips of lacqueys. Leaving the fond words and lingering farewell of Lucille in the brightness of morning, there, near his gates, in the sunlight, would be the form of the woman whom his vengeance had driven out among the lost, nameless, hopeless multitude. Going from the closeness of contests, from the struggle of parties, from the question of peace or war, weary with the heated pressure of lengthened debate, or the success of a hard-won victory, his pride was stricken, his victory was embittered, his strength beaten down, his greatness made miserable and worthless in his sight, by the guilt that was brought back upon his memory as he saw the face of his temptress in the midnight gloom, or in the greyness of the breaking dawn.

Her presence—almost *felt* rather than actually seen—grew intolerable to him; the sight of that haggard face, with its thirsty eyes and its wreck of womanhood, its fearful relics of grace and of beauty, lingering there as though in hideous mockery of what she once had been, became feared by him to whom fear was unknown, with a nervous and unconquer-

able dread. He strove to bury his past, to live it down, to wash it out with the assoiling of atonement, to steep it to oblivion in the fair life that he cherished and guarded, and force it into silence under the grandeur of a dazzling and ambitious career,—and Marion Vavasour was for ever before him, the haunting wraith of those dead years, the avenger, as she had been the temptress, of his crime.

He could not free himself from her; he was powerless here. Wealth, station, command, were impotent to force out of his path the woman who dogged it; eminence and authority were of no avail to put away from him the pursuant presence of an outcast. Life was hers as it was his, and where she came was common to the poorest as to the proudest, the broad and crowded highway of the world. True, he could have given her into arrest as a vagrant, but that he dared not do; he knew the menace that spoke in her eyes, he knew that from her lips enough might be told of the past that bound them, and of that hour in the solitude of the sea-storm, when his hand had loosed her to the grave, to crush and break for ever with its horror Lucille's love and life.

She knew not the vengeance which she held thus unconscious in her hands, but *he* knew it; and it chained him from every act which might have otherwise released him from the woman who, under the scourge and agony of his denial, had prophesied the hour when he should ask in vain of earth or heaven the mercy he had refused. Now and again wild, dark, baseless thoughts drifted through Strathmore's mind, for his nature could not wholly change; but they were each perforce abandoned, each fraught with too close danger of waking the very evil that he feared. The sense of weakness and of dread tightened upon him, worst tyranny of all to the man to whom feebleness and fear were craven things, unknown and unpitied; a baffled impotent hopelessness began to gnaw into his life as it had done when he had first learned that Valdor had unearthed his secret; a sense of despair grew on him; atonement was a madman's dream, since guilt was deathless thus!

He dreaded, moreover, lest Lucille should note the constant vigil of the woman to whom she had given her roses; lest she should question him of it in her ignorance, whilst he, powerful in wealth, in rank, in command, would be powerless to drive out from her the presence, and ward from her the gaze of the one in whom she saw but a beggared wanderer of the People. When he was not with her, he sought with almost morbid solicitude that she should never be alone. His own days, claimed and absorbed by public life, he provided that all her hours should be so filled with a succession of pleasures, entertainments, and companionship, that in his absence no space should be left for her to spend in solitude, that she should never observe how closely the outcast to whom she had tendered her flowers watched her when she drove from her own gates.

For Marion Vavasour, in the strange caprice of a hopeless hatred, which grew the more bitter because each day as it rolled by brought her but a more vivid sense of its own utter impotence for vengeance, never wearied in following the young girl whom she longed to destroy not less than to destroy him. Day after day, night after night, she spent the long hours watching and waiting for one glimpse of Lucille.

Under the park trees, where those more homeless and more wretched yet than she had slept through the summer nights, and lay in the dry long grass in the sun, staring blankly at the delicate glittering throng of the life with which they had nothing in common,—scarcely their humanity—she saw her sweep by through the light, whilst men checked their horses, and the crowd without the rails turned to gaze after a loveliness that touched all those who looked on it, who bore it away, rather in their hearts than in their thoughts, as men who have looked on a face of Titian, or a dream of Delaroche, bear its memory away into the heat and noise of the busy streets and the avarice and struggles of their narrow lives, and are the better for it, though they scarce know why. In the stillness of a Sunday noon she would steal down and hide amongst the hanging foliage,

where she had been given alms from Strathmore's wealth, and watch, from the distance, where Lucille wandered among the aisles of her rose-gardens, or rested near him where he sat, as they believed unseen, under the shadow of cedars or acacias, whilst he listened to her words with the smile upon his lips that was—for the moment at least—a smile of peace and happiness. In the heat of a summer day, while the pavement was white with the driving dust, and her temples throbbed with a dizzy pain under the incessant thunder of the street traffic, she heard the long shout roll down the ranks "for the Lady Cecil Strathmore's carriage," and saw her passing from concert, or déjeûner, or drawing-room, as her outriders made way for the stately equipage, while the woman to whom power, and luxury, and homage had been the very core of her life, envied these, the outward symbols and privileges of rank and wealth, more hungrily than worthier and fairer things. In the depth of midnight or in the breaking dawn, one amongst the ever-toiling crowds whose feet know no rest, and whose ebb and flow are like the unceasing roar and murmur of a sea, she saw her, beside Strathmore, passing from some palace dinner or court ball, the bearer of his name, the sharer of his honours, while she herself stood there, in the gas-glare and the hurrying throng, alone in the vast inhospitable city, with no life waiting her, no companionship, no shelter, but those she shrank from and abhorred;—since the haughty patrician, the proud aristocrat, the delicate, refined, poetic epicurean, still lived in Marion Vavasour's nature, and could not perish until death itself.

Thus—day after day, night after night—a ferocious, poisonous hate grew up, and strengthened in her, for the young life that was made one with his; strengthened the more, because powerless to injure; and he knew it, yet he could not thrust her from his path—he could not force her from the earth in which she had common right to dwell. The tide of human life was beyond his control, and had swept them together even whilst furthest sundered by every social barrier. She lived, and in her lived also his buried crime;

here the proud statesman had no power, the negligent man of the world no shield, the polished courtier no armour, the "iron hand under the silken glove" no weapon;—he knew his sin, and lived in feverish, broken, shapeless expectation, lest its retribution should rise, and pass over him, to smite the life that was sheltered in his bosom.

"I see that woman so often—that woman to whom I gave my roses!" said Lucille, wonderingly, once, while with a gesture that was almost fear she shrank closer to him as their carriage drove from the French Embassy through the midnight streets.

"You allowed her alms, my love; it is sufficient to make her follow you. Notice her no more."

He kept his voice calm and indifferent, and the reply was given without hesitance, seemingly without effort; but instinctively, unconsciously, where she leaned against him in the darkness of the night, he drew her closer to his heart, as though she were menaced by some near and physical peril.

As his eyes had met those of Marion Vavasour, in the flickering light of the lamps, while his carriage had flashed past the place where she stood, and her gaze had travelled from him to rest on the face of Lucille, to the memory of both had returned the words that Redempta the Zingara had spoken, long years before, when they who had become each other's curse first met under the summer stars, by the Bohemian waters:

"There shall be love; and of the love, sin; and of the sin, crime; and of the crime, a curse; and the curse shall pursue and destroy the innocent."

The curse already had destroyed lives that were guiltless: —was yet another still demanded?

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## CHAPTER XXVII.

### Thalassa! Thalassa!

It was on the close of a burning day in the hot Midi; a day of intolerable glare, of destroying drought, of parched, stifling, cholera-laden noxiousness under those brazen skies, within those relentless walls of the Toulon Bagne. The horrible heat had made even the *gardes-chiourmes* heavy and listless, and they had suffered a few of the *forçats*, unchidden, to drop down, gasping and powerless, like panting hounds; nature wears itself out, and humanity is remembered now and then, even in a convict prison.

At one part of the fortifications a brace of galley-slaves was working, a little asunder from the rest, on a sandy level facing the sea, with a single overseer near them; brandy, and the heat, and the sand glitter, made the *garde* sleepy and inattentive; while heavy bribes from a young Englishman, who had of late been much about the Bagne, had something, yet more than the sultry air, and the fumes of the *petits verres*, to do with his unusual lack of vigilance and the separate post of labour he had given to the political *déportés*, on that stretch of sand excavations lying in front of the stirless summer sea. They were kept late at labour there, for the new stone curtain and redoubts that were to be erected at that point were pressing, and the government had directed that no time should be lost, but that separate parties of the *galériens* should be told off, to continue the works night and day until they were completed.

The *forçats* were of less value than the brutes whose toil they bore, and to whose labour they were harnessed; it mattered nothing how many hundreds of them might wear out, drop down, and perish in that giant travail—if they died by droves so much the better, there were the less expenses for the exchequer.

The hot day faded, the twilight fell lightly, rapidly, without stars, for the skies were black and stormy. The *garde-*

*chiourme* lit his lantern, the prisoners toiled on, with spade and pickaxe, deep down in the sand and gravel, with their backs bowed and their limbs weighted with irons, and their breath like blown and worn-out horses in that unnatural and herculean toil to which their lives had no habit, their limbs had no use; while scattered all along the sand level were the chains of convicts, with the crack of the overseers' whips sounding on the silence, and the glitter of the lanterns shining down the line in the descending twilight that would soon be night.

And beyond, on the water, the yacht lay at anchor, with a blue light, that she had hung out for many nights past, burning at the mast-head, to prevent, as it was understood, her being run down in the darkness by the *chasse-marées* and other vessels that came to or past the port of Toulon, trading from Italy and the East.

The *garde-chiourme*, with grumbling imprecations, turned to re-light his lantern that had gone out, setting it down on a block of granite while he adjusted its wick, growling coarse Bas-Rhin oaths at his prisoners for not doing their work quicker; it was a signal, though no word had ever passed between him and them; a slight risk made worth his while to bear by Lionel Caryll's rouleaux of gold pieces, with which he could purchase his escape from his hateful post, and buy the little strip of land in Alsace, which ever since his boyhood he had vainly coveted. His back was turned; with a wrench the *déportés* tore asunder the irons which had been all but filed through, and only hung together by a link, sprang up out of the pit in which they worked, and fled, fleet as hill-deer, over the sandy surface in the grey of the falling night, their footfall noiseless on the loose and yielding earth. Busy with his lantern, he did not, or seemed not to, hear their stealthy and sudden flight. When he turned the full blaze of his light on the gravel-pit, and, looking down, found the yawning hole untenanted, and raised the hue-and-cry, the *condamnés* had had three minutes' start—a priceless treasure in that race for liberty and life.

The alarm was given. Force, brutal and omnipotent, was out like a sleuth-hound after those who sought that most begrudged and costly thing on earth—their Freedom.

The bastions swarmed with soldiery; the *gardes-chiourmes* poured out with hunters' fury, petty tyrants who had lost their slaves; the shots rang on the still night, all Toulon was astir; two *forçats* had escaped, two men out of whom all sense and sin of that daring vice of Liberty should have been crushed and drilled in the granite walls and under the iron chains of the life that had lowered them to beasts, and robbed them even of their Names. The Bagne was in tumult, the hell-hounds tore out on the search over the wide sand level stretching to the sea, the bullets hissed through the air, the gendarmes hurled themselves, armed to the teeth, on the track of the fugitives. Inside the Bagne they would have been recaptured at once; outside the walls there was one chance, for that one chance was the Sea.

The Sea!—incarnate liberty itself, that held out freedom to the bondsmen. The shots seethed past them and fell round them, scattering the sand in their eyes and ploughing the ground at their feet, their ankles plunged into the loose soil, the yells, and shouts, and curses of the alarm were borne to their ears on the wind, their limbs were dragged down by links of the hanging chains, their strength was impoverished by toil and misery, a fate worse than death was close on them, with every second that brought their pursuers nearer and nearer ere they could reach the grey line of the gleaming water, longed for, panted for, so near and yet so far! Across the line of sand, yellow and level in the fitful shadows, with the severed fetters clanging like the trailing irons of escaping slaves, with the press of the close pursuit hunting them down, with the sound of the seas and the roar of the following multitude, the crash of the gendarmes' tread, and the hiss of the plunging shot deafening their ear and giddying their brain, with life and liberty beyond, and behind a doom more dread than death, they fled on through the heavy, breathless night.

They reached the water edge; the loose, fresh-raised sand embankment overhung the sea by some eight feet, the waves surging and churning below under the lash of the rising mistral. With that might, which desperation alone can lend, they cleared it with a bound of agony, and fell with a low, sullen splash and plunge into the dark waters.

A volley, fired by those in pursuit, thundered down the shore; the balls hissed and shrieked as they cut the water, while the oaths of gardes and gendarmes yelled furious upon the air. One, as he rose to the surface, was shot through the back; with a scream that echoed over the sea, he bounded out of the water in the reddened light, then sank never to rise again. The other dived, and the storm of balls passed harmlessly above him; ere he had leaped, he had torn off with such convulsive strength as is born of a supreme despair, the irons still clinging to his foot. He had no weight on him; he was a fearless swimmer; and there, at the mast-head, burned the signal-light, that to him, and for him, meant aid, succour, welcome, liberty, and all the breadth and freedom of the world. He kept under water, only rising rarely to the surface, and then so cautiously, that in the shadowy sultry evening he was unseen.* Those on the shore had seen both sink when the volley had been fired; they supposed both had been shot down when the death-shriek had rung over the sea. It was of little moment; both were dead instead of both *déportés*. The sea was alive for a while with boats, and lanterns, and men groping with grappling hooks and fishing-nets for the drowned bodies; while torches flung their ruddy glare over the white foam and black, angry waters, and he who lay under the waves, amidst the tumult and the flickering glare above him, knew—with every sound that passed, with every breath, for which he stole upward to the air in stealth and suffocation—the bitterness of death.

* In case any resemblance may be traced between the escapes of Valdor and of Jean Valjean, I may observe that the above chapter was written before I read the "Misérables," or knew that there was such an episode in the work.

Then—as though nature herself lent succour from the brutality of man to man, which outruns all the rage of desert birds, all the ferocity of forest beasts—the gathered clouds broke with a tempest of rain, driving, drenching, beating down the flames of the torches, and casting darkness over all the sea. The pursuit ceased, the search was given over;—the dead bodies of two *forçats!* what were they but carrion? At last—at last—he was alone in the sheltering water, and this darkness that to him was more blessed than ever is the sweetest light of summer moon, or gleam of bridal starlight. He rose, and through the denseness of the gloom and the ink-black sheet of falling rain, he saw, beaming star-like, the little azure light. Liberty, life, all the lost glories of his strength, all the robbed vigour of his manhood, swept back with a rush all through his frame. Even in that instant of mortal danger and physical misery, once more he had hope, and he had freedom; they are the twin angels of men's lives.

He swam out to the bright blue starry light—swam with that strength which comes in the extreme hours of our fate, making us "rend the cords even as green withes."

A few brief seconds more, and he stood on the deck; Lionel Caryll had saved him.

"Free—thank God!"

The words broke from both their lips as the wild rainstorm lashed round them; then, without sign or show of life, he fell down at the feet of the English youth, the blood gushing from his mouth and nostrils—his senses blind and gone.

Before the sun rose, the yacht was far on her way down the Mediterranean waters; Valdor was free.

Thus strangely does Circumstance turn avenger in this life.

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## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### Under the Wings of the Angel.

It was autumn at White Ladies.

The dying leaves were once more drifting on the wind; the sun set in stormy purpled skies and tawny pomp of tempest light: the seas ran high, and hurled their white foam-crested waves upon the sands:—it was the fall of the year, rich, grand, profoundly mournful, with here and there its summer hours few and fleeting, eagerly treasured, early lost, like the last lingering smiles on dying lips, in voiceless and eternal farewell to all that they have loved and blessed.

It was autumn, and evening; and Strathmore stood on the rose-terrace of White Ladies, while the lingering rays of the sun that had set poured a golden lustre over the crimson foliage, the brown rolling woods, and the river, yellow with the dead leaves of the water-lilies. The fever of an unutterable inquietude was on him—the fever of conscience, which knows no rest. He had left behind, in the rushing crowds and peopled streets of the great city, the face which had pursued him like a recurrent and inevitable fate; but she was in his life, she was in his thoughts, she poisoned all his peace, she accused him in memory of that past that he had sought to crush into oblivion. She had risen out of the surge of the vast throngs as she had risen from the waves; she had returned into his life, she who had cursed it. He did not know what he feared, yet he feared everything—*he!*—who had not known what fear was. Even the idolised life of Lucille had grown torture to him—he dreaded lest his unrest should lend its alarm to her, lest in his sleep dreaming words should betray him, lest in his eyes she should read the secret he veiled. Never yet was there crime which did not sooner or later know this doom!

He stood now looking over the sweep of forest, park, and sea that lay before him in the ruddy fading light. Power, honour, beauty of possessions, riches of heritage, the great-

ness which ennobles life, the love which softens and endears it—these were all his, and all were darkened, cankered, turned to misery and dread, by the shadow of one dead sin. All that was fair in his sight was poisoned by the past; all that was sacred for him was imperilled by his guilt; all that was dearest to him would be destroyed for ever, if one voice arose to whisper the knowledge his heart held.

His eyes filled with yearning and with pain as he gazed at the west, where the sun had sunk beyond the sea. He thought of Erroll.

"He is avenged—he is avenged!" he murmured, where he stood in the silence of the falling evening, "more utterly than if I had died upon a scaffold, as other murderers die!"

Yes—for the pang of the scaffold is but a moment, and Strathmore's chastisement was lifelong.

Like a promise of redemption, she whom the dead had bequeathed him looked upward in his eyes in the last lingering sunlight, as her hand stole into his.

"Why have you left me? We are alone for a day at the least, and when alone you are wholly my own!"

He shrank from the caressing words: "wholly hers!" while the darkness of the past claimed him, drawing him ever and ever down out of the innocence and light of her presence into its pestilential memories!

He pressed her to him with a passionate instinct, a feverish tenderness, born of a terrible and nameless prevision.

"Lucille!—Lucille! I have never given you an hour's pain—never denied you a single wish? I have made you happy? My love is sufficient for you, and you want no other?"

He spoke as he had spoken when she had wakened from her sleep, in vague, oppressive misery, in restless, irresistible longing to be told, again and again from her own lips, that through her the atonement of his sin was made. Oh, madman! who thought that atonement lay in the happiness of

another life, instead of in the purification from passion, the renunciation of evil, of his own!

She looked up at him with wondering pain, and on her face was the look of an unspeakable love—a love beyond her childhood's faith, beyond her joyous youth; spiritualised, exhaustless, "faithful unto death," mournful even in its intensity, as though the tragedy from whence it sprang unconsciously shadowed it, and made it less the offspring of joy than the angel of consolation.

"Oh, my lord—my love!" she said, softly and passionately, while the tears rose up and stood in the eyes where, to him, there ever seemed to lie the sadness of her father's fate and of her young mother's piteous doom. "Have you need to ask me *that?* He whom you loved, knows how Lucille loves you. My life has no thought, no wish, no memory, but what are yours, for is not my life—*you?*"

He pressed her in a close embrace, that she might not see how his eyes filled and his face paled at the reverence and the sweetness of those tender words;—she loved him thus, and of that very love would be her death-blow, if ever from her father's distant grave the truth should arise and be revealed.

A letter she had lain down on the marble gleamed white against the dark and crimson leaves of the autumn roses; the superscription lay uppermost; as his glance, mechanically and without note of it, fell on the writing, he started with a shudder that she felt through all her frame as his arms were wound about her.

He loosened her from him, and seized it—all the golden and purple glories of the sunset reeled before his sight. The writing was that of the man who held his fate—of the hand that he had thought to weigh and fasten down, paralysed for ever, beneath the irons of the Toulon galley-slave.

"That letter!—That letter!——"

The words died on his lips faint and ill formed; even from her in that moment he could not wholly hide the terror that fell on him, passing all cowards' fear of death.

She looked upward, with the swiftness of affection, to notice any shade of pain.

"Why? What is it? Nothing that grieves you? It came just now; I took it from them, and brought it to you?"

"Quite right!" In that instant he had recovered self-command, and his voice was measured and gentle. "It gave me pain at the moment, my love, for—for—it is the writing of one whom I believed worse than dead. Leave me alone to read it. See!—there are your fawns waiting for you. Go, and give them their roses."

She looked at him a moment with wistful uncertainty; his voice was tranquil now, and he smiled on her, yet she could not forget that shudder which she had felt convulse him as she had been gathered in his arms.

"Go, my darling," he said, with a smile—a smile while his hand closed on the letter of the man whom he had thought silenced, as by the silence of the grave! "Go;—I would be alone a few moments."

She looked at him again, wistfully still; then went, for his wish was her law—went with the grace and swiftness of youth, for she had still a child's sure pleasures, her hands filled with autumn roses, her hair glancing in the sunlight, while the young deer trooped to meet her with the delicate chimes of their bells.

And he stood there with the opened letter in his hand, and the prescience of calamity, which had been upon him since he had first seen the face of Marion Vavasour in the summer midnight, become palpable, and fronting him with the work of his own hand. The crimson from the west shone full upon the page, and the words seemed to reel in a scarlet haze before him as he read:

"Strathmore, I am free, and in England. You may have learnt, ere now, that your noble nephew gave me liberty, and regained me more than life. I shall await you to-night on the shore by the monastery church; you will come as soon as the night has fallen. "VALDOR."

He who had been so deeply wronged, wrote with the command of a monarch—he who had wronged, stood with the letter crushed in his hand, without sense, sight, movement; all his life blasted in him.

The blow fell unsoftened, unprepared; the letters by which Lionel Caryll, bound to silence for a while, had at last, from the East, sent the tidings of his rescue of the condemned, had not as yet reached him. The words he read were like the delirium of a dream; the force which had unlocked the prisoner's chains and set him free, seemed unreal, unnatural, as power that should have burst the bonds of death and given resurrection from the grave. This was all he knew; that he who had the secret of his life had risen from a bondage, certain as the tomb, and held a vengeance vast as his own wrong!

As a tiger leaps from the gloom ere its presence is seen or its passage is traced, so his retribution sprang upon him. All was dark round him; unintelligible, untold; the prison gates had been broken, the living sepulchre been unsealed; his wealth, which had sent his young kinsman to wander at will in foreign lands, had been turned into the power which had loosed the fetters, and released the captivity of the man he had betrayed and condemned; the net of his own acts was wound about him; the dishonour which had seemed wisdom in his sight had been forged into the weapon of his own destruction. *His!* not his alone, or he had borne it. It was the life of Lucille that his dead sin menaced. For her he had done this thing; against her it now rose beyond his strength to save.

A stunned silence and tranquillity fell on him; suddenly and mutely as poison kills, all his life was shattered, and all hope destroyed;—there is no resistance in an absolute despair.

He held the letter clenched in his right hand, his face was grey and bloodless as a dead man's, he gazed with a blank stare out at the rose-hued, golden light: the world was unreal about him, the sun-rays glared blood-red in his sight;

he saw the face of Lucille, but it seemed far off—gazing at him with love that was anguish, with eyes that pierced his soul and saw the history there, with holiness that barred him from her and divorced them for evermore, while she floated farther and farther from him, borne away by an angel-band.

Dizziness seized him, he felt his senses failing, his sight growing dim: instinctively he grasped the marble column near, and strove to keep his consciousness, his calm;—she must not know!

"*Not know!*" He remembered that when the space of that night should be passed the knowledge of all would have reached her. He knew that she must die:—the life that lived but in his own, and the yet unborn life that he had given, both perish through his sin.

* * * * *

She stood before him, with the fragrant roses in her hand, and the lingering stray beams of light shining in the spiritual sweetness of her eyes.

He shuddered beneath her gaze;—all that was dearest to him grew worse torture than devils frame. A little while,—and she would know him as he was. A little while,—and she would know that his kiss was accursed on her lips, that the barrier of an ineffaceable sin sundered them for ever, that the love she held the truest guardianship on earth was but a vain atonement for a brutal crime.

She came and knelt beside him, she wound her arms about him, she sought his lips with her caresses. Was he in suffering, was he in pain? He was silent to her! Why? He would keep nothing that grieved him from *her*, even in love?

And he had to smile on her while his heart was breaking! He had to look down into her eyes, while he knew that towards them stole the doom of his past! Imprisoned from her sight through all her life, his hidden sin was loosed to rend her from him and destroy her at the last. And in the failing light she gazed upward with her deep, dreaming love, and

her lips, with the sinless smile of childhood, were lifted for his kiss!

O God!—the throbs of his heart, as they beat against hers, must tell her he thought the secret they held; on the darkness of his face she must behold the darkness of his soul! She leaned her cheek upon his hand,—the blood-stain there must scorch her. She laid her head against his breast,—the guilt it veiled must scare her from her resting-place.

The guardian of her peace, the husband of her youth, the idol of her trustful life—and through him she must die!

His arms closed round her with passionate anguish, his lips clung to hers with endless kisses,—to him it was as the embrace of death, to him it was hopeless as an eternal farewell.

Yet he held from her all sign;—he spared her while he could all knowledge of his torture;—he sacrificed his misery to her, as he would have sacrificed honour, greatness, life itself, and given himself to an eternity of woe, could he have bought redemption at his cost for her alone.

He left her;—and she had seen no trace of the agony which could have broken its bonds, and flung him at her feet, with tears of blood at every smile her fond eyes gave to his, at every lingering touch her lips left on his own. But where she could not follow or behold him—out in the shadows of the falling night, under the shelter of the leaves—that agony had its way, nature conquered the force that had chained it down and forbidden it all utterance.

He stood and gazed at her through the unclosed casements;—he knew that in life they might never meet again. The light fell around her, flowers in a wilderness of bloom enclosed her, above her, there stretched through the shadows, the ivory spear, and the white wings, of a sculptured Angel, Ithuriel; and upward to the statue's face she lifted her soft, haunting eyes, the eyes where the sadness of the past ever lay beneath the smile of childhood. And she must perish!—she, the redeemer of his life, by whom atonement had come to him, through whom all holier things had touched his heart.

He wondered that he lived!—that dumb, stupefied wonder of despair which seizes those who suffer, those to whom death *will* not come.

He saw nothing but her—the light shed a halo like a glory on her brow; her eyes, looking outward to the night, seemed to look through his soul; and above, where the marble Ithuriel leaned, the white wings of the guardian angel enclosed her, and the white spear banned from her, the innocent and the sacrificed, his love that was accursed, his guilt that had arisen!

And out of the gloom of the ruined cloisters and the hanging screens of ivy, there crept a shadow darker than any on the night; that shadow looked with him upon the innocence that the white-winged spirit guarded; that shadow, unseen by him, followed him as he went down towards the sea.

It was the form of Marion Vavasour.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### "The Bows of the Mighty are Broken."

THE full autumn moon shone on the silent seas, the grey shades of the mediæval arches, and the stirless boughs drooping above the scattered ivy-covered graves, as Strathmore went through the night; went with his proud head bowed, and all the haughty serenity of his bearing broken and crushed. For he went to the man whom he had wronged.

Valdor leant against a shaft of the ruined abbey, with the light shining on his face; the ravages of captivity and of wretchedness were something worn away, but beauty, strength, brilliance, all the glory of manhood were gone, and gone for ever; and Strathmore shuddered as he looked on him. How could this man forgive? To have saved his life he could have uttered no word, have advanced no step; he paused, and stood silent. All the enormity of his sin seemed

to arise and stand betwixt them; all the vastness of the mercy he had come to seek seemed to stretch out, mocking and lost before him. "Mercy!" What title to it had he?—he who had ever denied it.

The night was very calm, and its stillness was unbroken as they met; the one saw the husband of Lucille, the other her avenger and destroyer.

"Strathmore! were *you* traitor to me?"

The words fell at last from the man he had wronged, low, almost gentle, but with reproach profound as that which alone passed the dying Cæsar's lips to him whom he had loved too loyally.

Strathmore quivered from head to foot; traitor he had been, but there was no treachery in his blood. With a lie he could have disarmed this man; with a lie have denied the charge; there was no proof against him save such as his own words should give; no living soul who could have brought this last sin home to him save himself. From him whom he had wronged, moreover, he came to seek a mercy so vast, that the mercy which spares from death is pale to it. But while steeped in so much error, lost in so much crime, he still clung, even in his darkness, instinctively, and at all cost, to Truth. He bowed his head.

"Yes! I betrayed you."

"*You!*"

That one word was all he uttered, but in it all else was spoken; the reproach, too deep for passion, too generous for revenge, of the betrayed who wrote: "It is not an open enemy who hath done me this dishonour, for then I could have borne it. It was even thou, my companion, my guide, and my own familiar friend."

"I!"—he lifted his head, and as the moonlight shone upon it, his face was filled with a terrible despair, and with that which is worse than suffering, and which had never before then reached his life—shame. "I betrayed you—for her sake!"

Viler than he was in his own sight, he could be in no

man's; abhorrent of his sin, the purest could not be, more than he was then; "a traitor!" many crimes had stained, but, in his creed, none had dishonoured him till this. And the tyrant nature in him, sickening at its own evil and its own shame, laid itself bare to the bone, making no plea, seeking no lie, craving no pardon, asking no palliation, save such, if any there were, as lay in those brief words, "for her."

A deep sigh broke from the man he had ruined; he had been dealt an injury so vast, that all the life that lingered in him could not suffice to efface or repair it; he had been flung into a living tomb, and been crushed under a more lingering torture than that which gives death at a blow; his cause had been lost, his manhood had been wrecked, his strength had been destroyed for ever; yet his deep wrong was less before him in that moment than the anguish which struck him like a knife, that the friend whom he had honoured and trusted, whose bread he had broken, and whose hand he had grasped, should have turned traitor to him.

"Better have dealt me death than have done friendship this dishonour!"

The words were brief and simple; wider rebuke lay in them than lies in invective or in curse: and Strathmore shuddered as he heard. None knew their truth more utterly than he; none honoured honour more sacredly than he who had violated it; none held its laws more just and binding than he who had broken through them.

He bowed his head as one who bows before the lash which he merits too deeply to arrest.

"Say what you will! The vilest words you give will never reach the vileness of my guilt. I wronged you more brutally than by a death-thrust; and yet—I sinned for her!"

As he spoke the last words, his head was reared with its old royal dignity of bearing, and through the misery upon his face there flashed the old untamable, inflexible passions which through life had wrecked his peace and stained his soul.

"I betrayed you to save her from my doom. To spare myself a thousand deaths I would have never turned a traitor to a dog that should have trusted me; you have known me, you know that! It was in *his* trust. I had sworn her life should be before my own; I kept it so. I have been true to *him!* You do not loathe me for my wrong to you more vilely than I loathe myself; my sin is not blacker and fouler in your eyes than in mine; and yet,—were it to be done again, I would do it, if so only I could save her! Crime is more accursed to *me* than it ever was to the best life that ever shrank from it. I sicken for peace, for rest, for expiation—oh, my God, for *guiltlessness!*—and yet there is no crime I would not take on me if it could spare her. I owe her all—my soul itself!"

The words rang out on the still night, floating far over the starlit sea; his wild erring sacrifice, his guilty grand defiance flung down before the man who held so terrible a power of vengeance, blent with the heart-sickness of despair, the pathos of a vain remorse, the wretchedness of an utter impotence, of a love that was powerless to defend or save.

He who heard stood silent and motionless, his eyes fixed on Strathmore's face, on which the light of the moon fell. His own wrong, his own love, the memory of all he had endured, the knowledge that he who stood before him was the husband of Lucille,—these were forgotten in that moment; he only saw the depth and vastness of this man's guilt, the passion and the despair of his remorse. All else seemed too poor, too mean, too utterly of self, to be remembered then; all else seemed to float far away into oblivion before the might of this man's misery, the greatness of his hopeless thirst and travail for expiation.

Strathmore met his eyes unflinchingly; criminal he was, but coward never. He stood erect, his face white as death and drawn as with the deep and haggard lines of age. He did not plead; he offered no word more that could have seemed to seek extenuation of his sin; not even for her sake could he stoop to pray for mercy from the man he had

betrayed. He knew that she must die—for he knew that the ghastliness of his past, touching her, would slay her, like the breath of the destroying angel.

"You have your vengeance—take it," he said, calmly, while his voice was changed to a hoarse and hollow utterance vibrating on the stillness. "Take it! It is your right. The innocent and the unborn will perish together for my guilt. It is no more than *I* merit."

Valdor shuddered, and the red blood flushed his face; for the moment he had risen above the weakness and the error of man, and had remembered alone pity such as Heaven itself may yield. But he was human—he had loved; with those words he was dashed back to the frailty of humanity and of passion. He saw before him the lover, the lord, the possessor of the life that he had worshipped—the husband of her youth, the father of her child.

A great struggle shook him, like a storm-wind. He turned and paced the long stretch of sward under the ruined aisles, his steps falling in heavy uneven measure on the silence that was only stirred by the sighing of the waves, far down below, beyond the glimmer of the moonlit leaves.

If ever man strove between good and evil, he wrestled with his tempters then. But not for the first time did he come to the conflict, nor for the first time had he conquered. Long ago he had striven to have strength for this hour if it came; and he had strength now.

He drew near and stood before Strathmore in the grey calm shadow of the monastic burial-place, beside the ivy-covered lowly grave on which that solitary word was carved,

## Lucille.

"Could you not trust me in so little? True, I spoke, to you in madness; I refused you mercy in the blind hate of passion; I knew not what I did! But could you not have known me well enough to know that, when that hour was passed, I should regret? Could you believe that, in cold blood, I should

have been so vile as to take from you what loved and was loved by you? Could you think that your appeal would not disarm me, that your remorse and your atonement would have no sanctity in my sight? I spoke in haste—I erred; but before the night was passed I had repented."

"*Repented!* Oh, my God!—and I——"

The words rang out like a great death-cry over the silent seas.

"And you—misjudged me! As you misjudge me now. It is not for me to revenge your guilt—and revenge it on the guiltless! It is not for her to suffer because I was wronged—such vengeance would be for devils! Your secret is safe—your remorse is sacred with me. Lucille shall never learn that you were her father's destroyer; she shall never know that she was Erroll's child. I came to say this to you—this only. Friendship is ended for ever between us; but there may be still, at the least—forgiveness."

In his eyes, as he spoke, there was a divine light, and in his voice a divine pity; noiselessly, swiftly, as though to put aside all answer, and to spare him whom he had pardoned from his own gaze, he turned and went through the soft shadows of the leaves, through the twilight of the ruined aisle, through the stillness of the night, away down to where the sea lay. And the man whom crime had not made a coward, to whom remorse had not taught mercy, in whom misery had not availed to bring humility and pity, who had trusted to the strength of his own hand, and the mailed might of his own will, and had been his own god, his own judge, his own law, trembled like a great tree stricken at its roots as he heard the words which *spared* him, the words of that mercy which he had ever denied; and he fell down on the sward, stricken there motionless, prostrate, voiceless, as in the years that were gone he had fallen by the side of the dead whom he had slain. Never had his sin looked so great to him as in that hour in which its vengeance was withheld from him; never had his soul been so near to its redemption as now, when its vileness looked darkest in his sight, and was

laid bare in the light of an unhoped deliverance, till he beheld it as it was beheld of God.

Out of the shadow of the arches stole the human shadow that had followed him. With the glide of a snake she swept through swathes of light and breadths of gloom, through tangled grasses heavy with rain, and wide, endless stretches of park land, broken up in hill and dale, with forest-trees and deep deer-pools. As the snake steals its rapid way, so she stole on hers, swift as a stag's flight, passing, as though borne on the wind, through the twilight of the still and silvery night.

She had his secret—she had her vengeance. And ever as she went, with her amber hair loosening in the breeze sweeping from the sea, and something of her lost dead beauty lent to her face in that moonlit gleam, as her eyes flashed once more with the evil triumph, the victorious and cruel lust of the years that were gone, Marion Vavasour murmured ever, till the words were borne in strange wild rhythm on the woodland silence far away, to join the ceaseless lulling of the waves:

"Such mercy as you gave, I give to you—no more!"

Lucille watched for him.

The night was hushed and very soft, with the light of the stars falling over the vast depths of woodland, stretching downward to the sea; and as she gazed upon it, while the west wind played among her hair, and the fragrance of dew-laden flowers rose upward from the grass below, her eyes filled with tears—the tears of a joy beyond words, that trembled even at its own intensity. She was so happy!—she who shared his life as no other had ever shared it.

The murmur of the sea, the low glad belling of the deer, the odour of every blossom that was borne on the wings of the wind, the silver gleam on every leaf that quivered in the moonbeams, these were all poems to her—sweet voices that chimed in with the rejoicing of her life. And where she

leaned, with the dreaming lustre in her childlike eyes, and the star-rays circling her fair bowed head, her lips moved in prayer, pure as the prayer of infancy, and as unquestioning in faith. Prayer for all things that suffered; for all lives that needed pity; for all who were weary and travel-laden, and had sinned against the holiness of love; for all the homeless and the desolate, who bore the heat and burden of the day, and knew the shadow of that merciless calamity whose knowledge had never touched her; prayer of that compassion which rises from the fulness and the gratitude of joy, and from the glory of its own hushed gladness remembers and looks back on those who suffer, and pleads for them even as angels plead.

The night itself seemed to grow holier about her, the silence to pause in purer and gentler vigil around the sanctity of those early years, and God's own presence to encircle and to shield the life which knew him without fear as Love alone.

And towards her, through the darkness, with the noiseless swiftness of the wind, stole the shadow of the destroyer.

## CHAPTER XXX.

"In the Silence of the Night."

He lay stretched on the dank earth without movement, save for the shudder that now and again ran through his frame. His guilt had been abhorred from the first hour of its committal, but his pride had remained with him unchastened, unbent, untaught, to work its doom by its scornful and blasphemous deification of will and of power. Now this, too, was stricken from his hands—his own weakness had come home to him, he had been strengthless before the recoil of his acts, he had recognised the supreme wisdom of the truth, without which all lives are at best but of warped beauty and of

splendid error—the truth which lies in following that which is just, letting result come as it may with the future.

He had been *spared!* The warmth, the redemption, the divinity of that mercy which he had ever denied, had touched him as the light of morning touches the gloom, till all that is dark and impure is bathed in its glory. Mercy,—likeness and attribute of God, which when it comes to earth makes man god-like,—he had always thrust from him; he had veiled his face and closed his heart to it; remorse had never taught him pardon; striving for atonement, he had never taken its first step—forgiveness. All its softness, all its nobility, all its serene and sanctified humanity, had been dead to him, rejected, scorned, destroyed:—and now it had risen and saved him, and in its light he saw the vastness of his own sin.

All his past life lived once more for him through those long and solitary hours: as men drowning in the great waste of the sea remember every face, every link, in the years that are ended for ever, so he saw all the forgotten things of his youth and of his manhood. He seemed to look back on his life as from the depths of a grave, and to behold it—proud, powerful, generous, honoured amongst men; but stained with error, wrecked by passion, riven at the core by the curse of one crime, and never reaching expiation because never bending to humiliation. For he had never forgiven!—he had never learned that frailty in his own life commanded from him pardon to others even for seventy times seven; he had never recognised that his own criminality forbade to him for ever the right of judgment, and enjoined on him to his grave the duty of an exhaustless clemency, unswerving, unweakened, whatever temptation might assail.

He had never forgiven!—there, worse than in the first-born crime which had sprung from the blindness of his passions, lay the depth of his sin, the vainness of his atonement.

The night was very still.

There was no breath among the falling leaves, no movement except the ceaseless ebbing of the sea below. Countless

stars shone without a floating cloud to veil them, and the long ivy coils over the lonely graves lay dark and stirless in the moonlight. There was not a sound borne on the air, not a shudder that stole through the autumnal forests; the silent hours swept on unmeasured and unbroken—for the night did not whisper the secrets it shrouded, the cold stars had no pity and uttered no warning, the world reeled on, and the innocent were unguarded, and the face of God was unseen.

Slowly and dully through the hush of the night there swung the midnight chimes of the abbey, iron strokes that dealt out the merciless passage of time, shadowy bells that echoed mournfully over the waters, wild beating cadences, now lost, now heard, dimly flung out in waves of sound upon the silence. Their melody fell upon his ear, and throbbed through his brain with a strange jarring echo, unreal and yet familiar; he rose slowly to his feet, and lifted his face to the coolness of the night. Beneath, stretched the silvered seas, where life and death had wrestled for him; around him was the deep and solemn tranquillity, when all things are at rest; above, the star-lighted vault that reached onward and upward to the infinite.

Mercy!—the whole night seemed to throb with that one word; the sea in its depths murmured it to him by whom it had been denied; the weary bells as they swung through the stillness bore it upon the wind. Mercy!—he had no right to it; no title to it; what his life had refused, his life could not claim. Mercy! Above, in the lustre of the skies, the light of Heaven seemed shining with the glory that is Forgiveness;—and below, in the black and endless waste of the ocean, lay the abyss into which his risen sin seemed to force the life that had been without compassion.

He stretched his arms out to the dark and fathomless gulf that had been his righteous doom, and upward to that cloudless light which never till now had shone for him, which now seemed dying from his sight ere he could reach it, or implore it to stay with him yet—yet to redeem him! That voiceless

prayer went up to God in the silence of the night;—who shall say that it was lost?

He turned from the solitary shore, and took his homeward way through the shadows of the old monastic burial-place, where the sepulchres were made above the sounding of the sea, and were turned eastwards, that the light of early dawn, breaking on the world, might shine first upon them—the dead.

He reeled back, struck as with his death-thrust.

Between him and the twilight of the stars, standing out from the darkness of the ivied gloom, like a wraith from the tomb, rose the form of Marion Vavasour.

With her amber hair floating on the winds, with a wild beauty come back to her from that hour from her past, with the light of a merciless triumph, and the shadow of a deathless grace strangely blent with the soiled torn garments of an outcast, and the lost misery of one in whom shame had perished for ever, she rose in his path—now, as before, claiming him hers by right of that companionship in guilt, by title of their mutual bond of sin. Temptress, traitress, assassinatress, she returned to him after the long flight of years, holding him yet her own by the close tie of died-out passions and of buried sins; and behind the ruthless cruelty of the destroyer there looked the grand and austere justice of the Avenging Angel.

For her the sin had been sinned; by her came its retribution.

There, between the skies and him, she rose, hovering, as it seemed, upon the watery mists, the shining brilliance of the night;—and he gazed at her, filled with the speechless horror that had come on him when he had seen her face rise out of the depths of the sea in the white storm-flame.

A mocking mirth rang down the stillness of the night, vibrating through the chimes of midnight bells, echoing above the sounding of the seas:

"At last, Strathmore!—at last!"

"At last!"

The words broke from his lips in an unconscious echo, while the great dews gathered on his forehead, and in his eyes came the agony of the stag hunted to bay and caught within the toils. The supreme hour of his life, the supreme retribution of his sin had come. A shiver ran through his frame;—he had loved her! So well, so well! as never man loved woman, and even now the music that still lingered in her voice thrilled through him with its melody. It was the echo of his past; the echo of his youth.

Had that love ever wholly died, though hate had trodden it out and been greater than its greatest? Love is its own avenger.

"At last!" She seemed to float still before him on the shadowy luminance of the starry night, her hair flung out upon the winds, her wreck of broken and dishonoured loveliness a spectre risen from the buried years. "My lover, who lived but in my life, who saw no sun but in my eyes, who held crime sweet if I but bade it! did you think we were parted for ever? did you dream that the years could long sunder us? did you not know I should soon or late claim you my own? You are mine—you are mine! To-night I take back my empire!"

Mute, blind, paralysed, he stood and gazed at her, the sickness of horror on him; on the silvery mists of the night the words lingered; a strange triumph blent with the rich and thrilling melody of voice. Ghastlier than any curse of vengeance, more horrible than any dagger-stroke dealt him, were those words that spoke to him in the love-tones of old! —were those words which across the great chasm of crime and enmity floated to him and smote him with his past!

Her laugh rang down again, breaking the murmur of the seas.

"What! no word when I claim back my sovereignty? No vow, no kiss? You! my lost lover—who adored the very roses that my lips had pressed, who let honour drift away, a

jeered and useless thing, to lie at my feet, to rest in my bosom, to gaze in my eyes; who wooed and courted guilt, as others glory, when *my* hand pointed, and *my* voice whispered it? What! no caress, no oath, no gratitude, when by our love I claim you, and own you, alone to-night? What! the roses are dead, is the love dead too? The murdered are buried, is the love buried too?"

"In mercy,—in pity,—be silent!"

The words broke, inarticulate, from his throat; he thought her senses gone, and in the chastened passions, and pride, the poignant remorse, and self-abasement of that hour, he knew himself too deeply guilty to have title to lift himself above her, or wreak his wrongs on his destroyer. The evil had gone from him, the hatred from his life: in his own sight his infamy was now so great that it lowered hers, and withheld her from his vengeance. The relentless and iron hate with which it had pursued her had died when the light of mercy had shone on his heart, and the appeal to Heaven been on his lips; if she had tempted, he had avenged; if she had murdered with her lie, he had slaughtered with his hand. What was he that he had title to condemn this woman, vast as were his wrongs, wide as were her crimes?

She drew nearer to him, leaning on the flickering brilliance of the night like a spirit borne upon the air; and as her eyes gazed closer into his, as her hair floated in the light, as nearer and nearer came that soiled, broken, ruined wreck of all that she had been, she saw him shudder and reel back, and close his eyes to shut out that mockery and resurrection of the past.

"Silent?—silent?" she echoed. "Why, the days were when the world had no music for you but my voice!—when but to hear me murmur those fool's words, 'I love you!' honour, duty, brotherhood, men's laws, and God's commands, were all thought worthless! 'Eternal love, eternal love!' that was what you vowed me: though the earth should be shattered, and the heavens should flame like a scroll, *we* were

to love for ever! Heaven itself was not to sever *us!* Ah! and the love lasted but the life of the rose!"

"Oh God, cease!"

Her words as they lingered down the air with all the unforgotten melody of old, mocking, terrible, yet with a strange and bitter sadness sighing through them,—the lament of youth, the weariness of despair—pierced him to the quick, till the pent suffering of years broke out and poured itself before the woman by whom his youth had been destroyed, his life been wrecked.

"Love?—love? Dare you speak it to me?" he cried aloud. "Ay, I loved you, Heaven help me! I loved you, better than life, or guiltlessness, or brotherhood, or God; sorceress, temptress, traitress, that you were! You had my life, my heart, my honour, all that was mine on earth and in eternity. What were they to you? Toys that you played with, and hurled back into ruin: slaves that you dragged at your feet for the whole world to laugh at, then steeped in blood and hounded on to murder!"

A tearless sob caught his breath, and broke heavily on the silence of the night, then the loosened rush of words swept on again, all the silent reproach, all the crushed-out misery of so many years breaking their prison before the woman who had known his madness, made his doom, and suffered from his vengeance.

"Is there measurement for your sin to me? Guilty I was, but not to you; shame was glorious for you, death welcome for you, dishonour sweet for you! I gave you all the glory of my manhood, I gave you all the peace of my whole life, I gave you more—a devil's gift, yet given because I loved you —*his* blood!—sacrificed, guiltless—his blood, that is on me and mine for me! Your crime is without end to me; to my dying hour the guilt you scourged me to, is on me; it poisons every innocent thing, it curses every hope of peace; every year the roses bloom, I think of you; every summer sun that sets, I see his death-agony, I hear his dying words, —I know I slaughtered him as wild beasts kill what they

hate. Oh, God! the vileness of your sin was never equalled upon earth—save—save by the vileness of my own."

Her eyes fastened on him with a strange look that seemed to burn through the misty brilliance round them, wildly mournful, cruelly triumphant; to-night, for one brief hour at least, she took back her empire, she ruled him, she tortured him, she shook his passions as the cycloon shakes the cedars; she alone was remembered by him. His proud and ice-cold life still was riven to its centre by her; in all its mailed and kingly power, within it had ever lived the agony of a cheated love, the torture of a deathless remorse; he had never forgotten the idolatry of his youth, he had never ceased to suffer! And the vain and evil triumph of her nature flashed out with exultation, even while her eyes dwelt on him with pain, which in her, too, wearied for the past—which in her, too, yearned towards all that was lost for ever!

"Vile as it was," she said, slowly, "you revenged it as brutally! Once you drove me out to what was worse than death, once you loosed me to death itself, and the storm and the waves knew more mercy than you!"

"Such mercy as you gave, I gave to you!" the words that he had spoken in the past, broke unconsciously once more from his lips, hoarse with anguish, pleading not with her, but with the condemnation of his conscience, the accusation of his past. "I pursued you, I destroyed you, I hunted you down to ruin, as you had hunted me to fratricide. I bade you die the death that you had dealt to him. I had no pity —*I*—who should have seen my brotherhood in the foulest criminals that taint the earth, who should have known that I had forfeited for ever my right to judgment! But it was not *my* wrongs that I revenged, it was not the curse on *my* life that I remembered when I smote you,—it was his! Guiltless, you slew him. Loyal, and just, and stainless, your lie hurled him to his grave. That was your crime—for that my vengeance. Answer me now, before God, you who made me his murderer, you who slew him without pity in his glory and his

youth—answer me, was the vengeance greater than the crime?"

Where she stood before him, she to whom crime had been triumph and duty fable, who had been without pity and without remorse, shrank for one moment as though struck to the heart; then she raised herself slowly in the starlight, with something of the old grand grace and sovereign gesture of the past, while for once in her eyes there was no evil, for once on her lips no lie.

"Greater?—No! But it was not *your* hand which should have dealt it, Strathmore."

He bowed his head where he stood in the bright mist shining from the sea.

"I know it,—*now!* Your sin was mine, and mine was yours. *I* had no right to strike you,—*I!*—who was guiltier yet than you."

He had drunk the bitterest dregs in the cup of his chastisement; he had vanquished the darkest passion of his nature; he had taken submissively as his due the cruellest stripe of his scourge, now, when to the woman who had been his betrayer he spoke in peace, and accepting her sin as his own, laid down his rights of vengeance.

She was silent, in her eyes passionate hate and wild regret, love that seemed to live again, victory strange and nameless, passions dead, and conscience wakened, seemed to gleam, all mingled and in conflict, and burn through the floating shadows of the night; while on the stillness there only broke the sighing of the midnight seas, the echo of the midnight bells. She leaned nearer yet towards him, her hair driving backward in the wind, the ravages of time and shame fallen from her in the softened shade; and with that gesture both remembered how she had once pressed his hand against her bosom and bidden him go sin for her, when with tiger-thirst she panted for blood, for life!

"Strathmore! I wronged you once; I came to-night to wrong you more. I murdered once; I came to-night to slaughter yet again! Years ago, in my extremity, you said

such mercy as I gave, you gave to me. Such mercy I came to-night to give to you—no more!"

She saw him stagger again, she heard one convulsed and tearless sob break again upon the stillness, she saw in his eyes gather the wild and hunted misery that she had known, —and in that moment the vile and cruel nature inborn in the traitress revived and ruled. He suffered!—he suffered! She had her triumph; she had her foot upon the haughty, humbled neck; she had her hand upon the proud, mailed heart, to wring it as she would. Through all the course of baffled years she had waited for that hour—and it was hers.

Her laugh, jeering, victorious, abhorrent in its melody, rang on the air.

"Ah! the love lived but the life of the rose—you have replaced it. Why leave what you cherish? We can strike you through her! While she sleeps in her innocence, and dreams of your kisses, the whisper can steal to her that will scarce sleep for ever, and tell her the life that her husband destroyed."

A cry from him broke her words—a cry so terrible, so heart-broken, that as it echoed down the lonely shore and far across the waves, those sleeping out at sea heard it, and woke and shuddered, thinking it the death-wail of some drowning man sinking, beyond help, in the solitude of the ocean. It silenced even her.

This had been her coveted lust; this had been the moment for which she had watched, and waited, and pursued, and endured the weary course of loathsome years. He suffered! where she hovered, shadow-like, before his aching sight, her eyes seemed to pierce through into his life, her laugh to echo with a devil's joy. His secret in *her* hands!—his darling's peace laid at her mercy!—than whom the panther were gentler to move, the vulture were more pitiful to spare! His lips parted, but formed no sound, the great drops stood like the sweat of death upon his brow, his limbs trembled, his eyes were fastened on her with a dumb, agonised appeal. If before that hour retribution had never overtaken him, in

it retribution would have fallen on him vast as his dead crime.

"Your lips were mine!" she cried, laughing still in that mocking mirth; "their kisses must poison hers. Your hand slew him! its touch must pollute hers. Oh, lover, who lived but in my smile!—did you not know the dead passion would rise up and curse the new? Oh, lord of the iron will!—did you dream that you were stronger than fate, and vengeance, and a woman's hate, and think you could strangle your secret, and shelter your darling for ever? What! while the earth held your crime, and I still had life?—while the red grasses had once drunk his blood, and I lived to tell her the hidden sin of her husband? Strathmore, Strathmore! was *that* your wisdom, *that* your strength! Oh, fool, who thought yourself as deity! Oh, madman, who hoped that the past could ever be silenced!"

The words vibrated through the air, ringing high in cruel mockery, throbbing on the stillness with their irony, piercing him with iron thrust; and his agony broke out in a single prayer, not to her, never to her, but to the Eternity that shone above and gazed upon him through the calm eyes of the stars.

"Lucille!—Lucille! Oh, God of the guiltless, save her!"

The prayer rang through the silence as though pleading at the very throne of heaven, borne there by all the voices of the night; before its anguish her laugh died, the triumph faded from her eyes, a sigh ran through her.

"God of the guiltless!—he is not *our* God!"

In the words there were the wild regret, the passionate derision, of a life dimly waking to remorse, and struggling under the heavy, stifling burden of unrepented sins and of inexpiable crimes.

"But he is *hers!*"

The answer was still a prayer, broken, hopeless, pleading; not to his torture, not to his destroyer, but to those serene and lustrous worlds in which were spoken the majesty and the pity of the Infinite. Could they look on and see the sin-

less perish? Would the God she worshipped in her childlike trust, with every sun that rose and every night that fell, desert her now? The night swam round him, the noise of the waves surged in his brain, his lips were white and cloven, his eyes saw nothing but the face of his destroyer, and the radiance of the heavens shining far away.

There was no thought of violence, no instinct to crime in him now, sin had lost its hold upon his soul, for belief in immortality had risen there; there was nothing but a stunned, dull despair, in which he saw his own deed recoil upon the innocent, and was powerless to shield or save her.

Marion Vavasour stood and gazed on him, and in her eyes there gleamed that strange and nameless blending of hate and love, of triumph and regret, of mocking victory and of futile pain, which had come there before; if ever in her life she had loved, she had loved him, and she thought of the glory of her womanhood, the splendour of her power, when his life had been hers, and her loveliness had bound him in its golden chains; she thought of the great passion that he had poured out at her feet, and that she had cheated, ruined, and driven to its guilt.

In his presence something of the brutality of hate perished; something of the memory of love revived.

She leaned nearer to him once more, with a relic of the proud and sovereign grace returned to the dark, dishonoured wretchedness of the Outcast.

"The God of the guiltless! We know no God, you and I. We know that if there be a God, he sends his sunlight on the criminal, and lets the sinless perish. You have lived in honour, and riches, and power, and men's esteem, and I in beggary, and misery, and shame. What justice is there *there?* Our sin was mutual! Since I am a wanderer and an outcast, so should you be; since I am homeless, and dishonoured, so should you be. Our guilt was equal, why not our punishments? If I deal you back your cruelty and your vengeance to-night; if I tell you such mercy as you gave I give to you;

if I smite you with your dead crime, what is it more than justice?"

His head sank; he knew it was no more. And a great darkness covered his sight, hiding the radiance of the stars; his life was held in the iron bonds of a pitiless retribution, and in his misery the voice of the woman who had been his temptress came to him like the voice of vengeance, inexorable but just.

"No more," she echoed, slowly. "No more—to you. Listen, Strathmore! Since the hour that we parted I have had but one aim, one toil, one thirst, one hope—to destroy you pitilessly as you destroyed me. To see you suffer, to see you fall, to wring your heart, to kill your pride, to make every breath a pang to you, to have you at my mercy and deny it you, to shame, dishonour, scourge you, curse you. I have only lived for that!"

The words had risen, hissing through the night like a snake's hiss, all the intensity of hate that she had cherished vibrating through them, and showing him the black and fathomless abyss on which he stood—one gesture of her hand, and he must fall, dragging downward the soilless life he loved, to perish in his guilt.

No word escaped him, no movement, his blood was ice, his breath crushed; all of life that was in him gazed out from the agony of his eyes;—it was the petrefaction of despair.

Yet—even now—even for the innocent—he would not plead to *her*. She might destroy—she could not abase him. She saw it;—and out of the poignant virulence of her hate, a kindred grandeur, a wild reverence, flashed from the proud instincts of Marion Vavasour's nature for this man, who even in crime, even in torture, never wholly lost his greatness.

"I came to destroy you! Why not? Why not? The tiger does not spare its fangs, nor the vulture its fury; while neither hate what they pursue as I have hated," she said slowly, while her voice sank lower and thrilled its rich music through the night. "I have your secret, Strathmore. I can slay what you love to-night. I can whisper to her what her

husband is; and the day when it breaks will find her dead. Oh, Heaven! I have longed for it! I have only lived for that —to strike her in your arms, to rend her out of your honour and shelter, to crush her down where your love cannot shield her or reach her, to take her youth, her loveliness, her innocence, and make them vile as my life, to have no pity on her, and torture you through her, till in all your years you should have learnt no misery such as *that* love should bring you. I hated her—I cursed her!——"

He stayed her with a gesture, grand in its command, supreme in its agony:

"Peace! Slay her if you must with my guilt, but never dare to curse her—you!—her father's murderess."

Her eyes dwelt on him with a nameless pain, a softened light, in which their evil and their lust were quenched: she flung her arms up toward the skies, and raised her shameless and dishonoured brow to the pure cool of the autumnal skies.

"Oh, God! to-night I too remembered *that!* I had your secret; I panted to destroy her; the wind was not swifter than I as I went to my vengeance——"

Again over the seas rang the cry of a man in his extremity —it was *past* then—her vengeance! God had looked on and seen the guiltless perish!

"It was so sweet—so sweet, that death-blow to strike *both*," and her voice rose higher, piercing through the air, while still she raised her face upward—upward—to the light of the stars. "She was alone—your love, your strength, your power, could do nothing to shield her *then*. The night gave her to me, there where she leaned in its starlight, watching for *you*. There was no arm to protect her—no eye to behold us. She was mine! mine to crush with my hand like a bird or a flower—mine to kill with more torment still by your crime, and I could have stamped her life out as we tread out an insect's;—and I longed for it, hungered for it, pined for it. And yet—*is* there a God? Does he keep even *us* from the last depths of hell? Where I crouched in the darkness, I heard her pray, pray for all things that suffered, for all that

were in sin and woe; in her joy, in her youth, she prayed for us—the guilty and the cursed! The light was on her—and I saw in hers her father's eyes, her father's smile; I remembered how I had murdered him! I could not slay her then—not *then*—even though you loved her. I could not touch her—look on her—breathe near her. Her prayer stood between us, her father's memory held her from me, the dead himself smote my vengeance from my hands. I spared her! *I*—the world must end to-night!"

Her laugh rang on the air in mockery of herself—then into her burning, weary eyes tears rushed for the first time since years of shame; she quivered from head to foot, and stood there, in the starlight, trembling and afraid. In fear of him? No; in fear of that long and shameless evil which was called her Life.

He heard her;—and on his face there shone a sudden light, pure, cloudless, glorified, like that of the planets above. In torture she had not abased him, in agony she had not humbled him, in vengeance she had not laid him suppliant; but now—in that hour of release, when into the darkness of his life the ransom of an unhoped mercy came—she had her victory. She saw him bow down before her, broken, blinded, voiceless, senseless, his haughty power smitten as a granite shaft is smitten by the lightning, his proud life pierced and shaken to the core, his soul laid bare and without shield, in the moment of his deliverance.

By her had come his guilt;—by her also came his retribution and his redemption.

The skies reeled round him in whirling circles of starry light; the silence of the night seemed filled with murmuring hosts of angel voices; the dead past seemed to fall from him for ever, and be swept away into those still and lustrous seas that echoed at his feet; and on the air, borne up on the winds and on the waves, he heard the dying words of the man whom he had loved and slain: "I forgive! Oh God! *I* forgive!"—as though by that forgiveness pleading there for the pardon of the guilty, for the safety of the sinless.

*He* had forgiven: who should avenge?

In the silence where they stood together, Strathmore lifted his head and looked on her, the vulture that had spared, the panther that had known some pang of pity at the last; and in her he saw, incarnated, his own merciless and brutal sin—saw it, loathsome as it was, denying the pardon which it lived to need, usurping the power and the judgment of deity to sate through them the vilest passions of mortality.

His limbs shook, his lips quivered, his forehead was wet with the dews of a great suffering, but on his face shone that light which once before had come there when he had stood on the wreck of the sinking ship with death upon him, and the mad waves leaping round; and in his eyes as they dwelt on her there was a profound anguish, gentle, fathomless, merciful, in the consciousness of his own weakness, giving forgiveness to her at the last, by whom his sin had come, by whom his years had been accursed.

It was the supreme expiation of his life.

He stretched his hands towards her where she stood, and his voice vibrated with an infinite pardon through the night:

"The mercy you remembered to her, be remembered to you at the last, by her God! We both murdered him with brutal guilt;—we have both striven to atone to him through the innocent. Let us part in peace to-night; let sin be dead in both our lives for ever."

She looked at him one moment, in one long, last, mute farewell;—then she bowed her head in silent acceptation of his words of peace, of his renunciation of the power of evil; and like a shadow on the air, a spirit on the wind, Marion Vavasour swept from him through the autumn night and through the white and wreathing mists that floated from the sea, and faded from his life for evermore.

And once again, like a man bruised and stunned by mortal blow, he sank down among the coiling ivy and the sea-splashed stones, his arms outstretched, his limbs shaken by a

voiceless agony, alone in the silence of the night. For he had loved her; he had sinned for her, and all the irrevocable crime of those dead years was but the darker and more deeply damned in his own sight, because the pity of God had touched his life with an exhaustless and unutterable mercy, and had spared him the just harvest of his work when his guilt arose to destroy the innocent, and the strength of his own hand was stricken powerless.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

"E poi uscimmo a Riveder' le Stelle."

In the still night Lucille lay sleeping, as the young flower sleeps, unconscious of the ruthless hand that has been stretched to break and to despoil it, and that has passed over it without harm because its loveliness brought back a pang of memory, an echo of lost youth. Through the lofty casement left open to the night there shone the tranquil and star-studded skies, there came the far melodious murmur of the seas; and straying through dark traceries of foliage and the deep hues of the painted panes, the light fell on her where she slept, and shed its halo round her.

Her hair swept backward in its golden masses, a dreaming smile was on her lips, a soft flush on her brow, on which the chastened brilliance of the moonlight fell, and in her sleep she murmured, as though her dreams were seraphs' whispers,

"God is Love!"

They were the last words of her evening prayer; the words that had stricken strengthless the hand which had been lifted to destroy her.

He heard them as, from the lonely shore, he came into her presence as to some divine and sacred thing, and stood to look on her in the repose of innocence and childhood, unconscious of the peril that had drawn near her in the silence and the solitude of the defenceless night, to strike her with

his sin, and sacrifice her for his guilt—drawn so near! so near! He shuddered and sickened at its memory, gazing on her with bursting heart and yearning eyes, listening for every soft pulse of her young life, watching for every noiseless breath that passed her lips, for every smile that dreaming lent its light to sleep, as though she had been given back to him from the hideousness of death by storm, by flame, by poisoned steel, or by plague-tainted air. His dead sin had risen, and had crept to her to slay her with his past. And he had thought to bury sin and bid it keep its peace, and have no resurrection! Oh, fool! oh, fool!

"God is Love!"

Yes! God was Love, since he had saved her. He heard the words murmured in her happy rest, where she dreamed of angel voices and of lands beyond the sun; and the smile upon her lips, where she lay in the serene and silvered glory of the heavens, lulled to slumber by the gentle echoes of the distant seas, smiled on him with pardon from the dead, with mercy for the past, with promise for the future, with light from Him by whom no prayer remains unheard and no remorse denied.

Burning tears rose into his aching eyes, deep sobs shook his frame—it was the agony of gratitude, the delirium of release; and as he threw himself down beside her bed, his arms cast over her in her sleep, his head bowed upon the loose trail of her bright hair, Strathmore laid down for ever the sins and the passions of his past, and gave, as to the hand of God, his dedication to a life that should know no law save of mercy, no governance save of compassion, no pause in self-humiliation, no pity in self-sacrifice, no effort but for redemption, no travail but for expiation—a life that should hold its holiest as nothing worth, its best as nothing given.

And the tender chastened light of the morning stars, growing clearer and clearer to the dawn in which the shadows of the night were fading, shone on him where he knelt beside the deep pure sleep of innocence.

* * * * *

Away in the deep heart of the great western forests, in the silence of the solitary swamps, where pestilence is abroad in the torrid noons, and miasma rises with every night that falls, where the dank leaves drop death, and the graves lie thick under the cypress-woods, a woman in the Order of St. Vincent de Paul lives ever among the poor, the suffering, the criminal, the shameless, sparing herself no task, fearing no death—dead to the world, as the world is dead to her. For the dying her voice has a strange rich music, far beyond all other; for the innocent her look has a nameless terror, it is often very evil still; for those who are in dishonour, or in danger, her lips have a wild, sweet eloquence that scares them back from their abyss, and leaves them saved but sore afraid; for none has she a history. Once, when in her path some summer roses bloomed, and in the sunlight threw their soft fragrance on the wind, they saw tears gather in her eyes, and fall, slowly, as though each tear were a pang; then alone did they ever see that she thought of her youth, that she remembered her past.

In the press of the great world, far sundered from her by whom his guilt came, through whom his guilt still pursues him, one man lives who joins to the life that is known of men, a life that is unknown by any. A life, in which those who weary and are heavy laden are aided by a hand that they never see; in which every shape of suffering is sought and succoured; in which all evil memories that tempt, are crushed out, as in a debt that is due; in which all deeds of sacrifice are done with a strength that is merciless only to itself; in which a sweet and sinless happiness sheds its radiance; yet in which the poignancy of one remorse, the memory of one crime, are never lulled to peace or to oblivion, but, following the appointed travail of a silent expiation offered only to the dead, and of a supreme duty rendered for conscience' sake alone, lay subject the stained greatness of a grand and guilty nature, and lift it upwards into holier light.

By passion his life fell, lost in darkness of the night, and sunk in lowest deeps; yet, though once fallen, who shall dare

deny that, in the end, it shall not reach that atonement which unceasingly is besought, obedient to the law which lies on every human soul, seeking for purification, striving for immortality, rising nearer and higher towards the perfect day, onward to

Other heights, in other lives, God willing?

THE END.

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