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AN UNLAIID GHOST

A STUDY IN METEMPSYCHOSIS



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In Memoriam

A. W. S.

**TO WHOSE CULTURED ADVICE AND SYMPATHETIC ENCOURAGEMENT
THIS LITTLE WORK OWES ITS BEING.**

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AN UNLAIID GHOST.

PROLOGUE.

THE famous Platonic theory concerning the transmigration of the soul possesses far too genuine a vigor to be accounted defunct or even moribund, its hyper-visionary features notwithstanding. There can be no evading the fact that, though the superstition be fantastic, its speculation is philosophic. The veriest skeptic will admit that its peculiar tenets underlie all the religions of mankind; and even if, in our Pyrrhonism, we ignore the uncivilized races who have testified their allegiance to the romantic dogma from time immemorial, surely we can not close our eyes to such enlightened systems as those of Thales, Pherecydes, and Plato. True, the doctrine of the latter was refuted by Aristotle, but it embodied sufficient vitality to revive under the Neoplatonists, and has been transmitted with renewed vigor and significance to our own time by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.

It is this eminent philosopher who remarks: "This, my system, is certainly the oldest of all philosophical systems, for it is in reality none other than the system of the pre-existence of the soul and metempsychosis, which occupied not only the speculation of Pythagoras and Plato, but also before them of the Egyptians, Chaldeans, and Persians—in short, of all the Sages of the East. . . . What if it were as good as proved that the vast slow wheel, which brings mankind nearer to perfection, is only put in motion by smaller, swifter wheels, each of which contributes its own individual unit thereto? *It is so proved!* Over the self-same road by means of which the race attains to its perfection must every individual man—one sooner, another later—have traveled, have traveled in one and the same life. Can a man have been, in one and the same life-time, both a sensual infidel and a spiritual Christian? Surely not! Therefore, why should not every individual man have existed more than once upon the earth? Is the hypothesis absurd simply because it bears evidence of extreme age; because the human understanding, unbiassed and undebilitated by the sophistries of the schools, immediately hit upon it? Why may not I have already performed those steps toward my perfecting which bring to man only temporal punishments and rewards, and why not at another time all those steps, to perform which the promise of eternal rewards so potently assists

us? Why should I not come back as often as I am capable of acquiring fresh knowledge, fresh experience? Do I carry away so much at one trip that there is nothing left to repay the trouble of returning? Perchance I forget that I have been here already. Happy is it for me if I do so forget! The recollection of my former condition might inspire me to make but a faulty use of the present. And even were I to forget in one instance, must I necessarily be oblivious forever? Now the supposition that so much time has been lost to me may militate against the hypothesis of metempsychosis. Yet who shall dare affirm that such time *is* lost?—Lost! What can I lose when all eternity is mine?"

Such is the text upon which we venture to found our two contrasting parables—parables suggested, respectively, by an episode in history and a significant pendant derived from the archives of the forgotten drama. We claim but the humble post of showman, craving the indulgence of our audience in favor of any technical deficiencies. Our object is simply to group our puppets with sufficient effect to induce the inference that the transmigration of the soul may be, if not an irrefutable fact, at least a possibility.

And yet, despite the logic of our guides, we feel ourselves to be posing somewhat in the attitude of the soliloquizing Sebastian when, to the congenial shadows in Olivia's garden, he admits:

For though my soul disputes well with my sense
That this may be some error, but no madness,
Yet doth this accident and flood of fortune
So far exceed all instance, all discourse,
That I am ready to distrust mine eyes
And wrangle with my reason that persuades me
To any other trust but that I am mad.

PART I.
THE STORY OF POPPÆA.

Huic mulieri cuncta alia fuere,
præter honestum animum.

TACITUS. ANN. XIII, 45.

I.

THE IMPERIAL FAVORITE.

DURING the consulship of Caius Vipstanus and Caius Fonteius the peaceful holidays of the Quinquatria, sacred to Minerva, having ushered in the Roman spring-tide with hyacinth and violet, with sunny skies and tranquil seas, the imperial court betook itself to Baia.

A goodly, glittering train set out from Rome, by land and sea, to accompany the youthful emperor * to Bauli, revered Hortensius's stately villa, there to while away the balmy days and nights in sumptuous revelry. Thither journeyed Poppæa Sabina, whose grandfather had borne a consulship and had been graced with the insignia of a triumph, and Acte, the Asian slave, whose barbaric beauty had been purchased at a price; these among the favorites. Among the courtiers went

* Lucius Domitius, Nero.

the war-like Afranius Burrus and Annæus Seneca, eloquent and urbane—tutors and monitors to the empress-dowager's * aspiring son.

The imperial mother had her country-seat at Antium, and was not numbered among the royal guests at Bauli; neither was the gentle Empress Octavia—poor child that she was, left to wander through the deserted chambers of her ancestral home, mourning for her betrothed, † and ever listening for an echo of her murdered brother's ‡ death-cry, that must ring in her soul until the assassin's blade should set her free to seek him in a happier realm.

But at Baiæ these discarded ladies were forgotten, and with reason; for had not Claudius's widow been accused of conspiring against her son? and had not the virtue of Messalina's daughter long since palled upon her imperial lord? Heinous crimes both, so decreed the *incorruptible* Senate, though viewed with a merciful eye.

So the sun by day and the stars by night shone upon scenes that robbed them of something of their sovereign luster. Even the winding sea, that here finds ingress to lave the base of smoke-crowned Vesuvius, contributed her myriad wavelets to frame as brave a picture of mortal splendor as was ever chronicled. With her massive moles and baths and hot springs, her villas built by Marius, Pompey, and the great Julius,

* Agrippina.

† Lucius Junius Silanus.

‡ Britannicus.

and her slopes draped in the luxuriance of almost tropical verdure, Baiæ held her own among the daughters of the sea, graced as she was by the signal favor of successive emperors.

Here, freed from restraint, hungering for diversion, pandered to by a horde of sycophants whose sole tenure upon life was the novelty and enormity of their suggestions, and alternately soothed by the artful prudery of Poppæa or roused by Acte's savage dalliance, Claudius Cæsar Nero lived a life of luxurious license which, in the words of Racine,* caused Narcissus to exclaim, "The universe smiles upon thee: Fortune obeys thy mandates!" And yet, despite his apparent omnipotence, Nero was but an instrument that might be played upon with tact, and it was his favorite, Poppæa Sabina, who adjusted her clever fingers to his stops, and forced him to discourse music eloquent enough to suit the ear of even her vicious ambition.

Long had she nursed the insatiable craving for power. For no evanescent fancy had she deserted her knightly husband's † home to court the favor of the emperor's intimate friend; ‡ not without a heart-pang had she seen that fascinating friend practically banished into Lusitania; and not without Spartan prowess had she smiled and hung upon the lips of the wretch who had doomed her only

* "Britannicus," Act ii, sc. 2. † Rufus Crispinus.

‡ Marcus Salvius Otho.

son* to a watery grave for the innocent misdemeanor of impersonating the emperor among his playfellows. It was at the supreme title the lady Octavia bore that Poppæa aimed, and it was with feline cunning that she awaited her opportunity.

All too soon that opportunity presented itself.

A perfect vernal day was drawing to its close. The westering sun had transformed the sea into an expanse of fluctuant gold upon whose gently heaving bosom the imperial fleet, anchored off the Promontorium Misenum, rode like a flock of gigantic gilded swans.

Lapped in profound slumber after their noon-day orgy, the inmates of the sea-side palace lay like overdressed corpses upon the couches that lined the breezy corridors. Silence reigned supreme, save when some careless fisherman upon the beach below forgot himself and sang aloud in the exuberance of his spirits, save when the sunset clarion shrilled its summons to relieve the guard upon the terraces. But the sleepers slept on, undisturbed by the melodious voice or the trumpet-call; all slept save one, and that one a woman beautiful enough to have summoned admiring Phidias from the nether world to worship. Wrapped in a veil whose immaculate whiteness only vestals ventured to affect, she sat upon the tessellated pavement that roofed a protruding portico, her slender hands clasped about her knees,

* Rufinus.

her face upraised to the effulgent sea. Above her head fluttered an awning of opalescent silk that might have been furled for any shadow that it interposed between the crouching figure and the sinking sun.

Suddenly the call of the sentinel disturbed the charmed silence and put to flight the intent reverie that had held her spell-bound. With a sigh that betrayed the chafing tenor of her thought, she unclasped her hands and languorously arose, displaying the statuesque perfection of a figure which the voluminous folds of her garment vainly strove to conceal.

“Another day *lost!*” she murmured, petulantly; “another day gone to join its unprofitable fellows, and taunt me with faint-heartedness. . . . Oh, why should I not speak to Cæsar? Why delay? What should I fear when Burrus spurs me on, and even Seneca smilingly approves? My plans are laid, and only Agrippina blocks the way to triumph. And Cæsar fears her, hates her though he owes her all! Oh, a pest upon me for my cowardice! Have I risked my precious life for naught? Have I lost husband, child, friend, only to be spurned when the imperial fancy veers? Have I toiled so far only to be driven to retreat? . . . No, no! Cæsar shall share his throne with me; Poppæa shall reign!”

“But Cæsar shares his throne with thee; Poppæa reigns,” echoed a low-pitched voice in

accents so exquisitely melodious as to be almost effeminate.

The woman turned with a sharp gasp of surprise and throwing back her veil, bowed her head until the loose masses of bronze-brown hair shadowed the lowered eyes. Alarm struck to her startled heart, and in that moment she would have relinquished her hope of empire to have recalled her inconsiderate words.

For it was Ahenobarbus's son who stood before her, . . . Nero in the flush of his early manhood, bearing no likeness to the Cæsars, but favoring his beautiful mother in the soft curves and lascivious plumpness of his boyish face. Attired in a shining vesture of white and gold, the undignified curtailment of which displayed his shapely limbs to advantage, a slender diadem of fretted gold mingling with the crisp tendrils of his glossy hair, rich ornaments of the same precious metal upon his naked throat and arms and glittering among the filaments that bound his sandals, he stood with folded arms in the sheen of the sunset, the very incarnation of the spirit of degenerate Rome.

"They told me you were sleeping, Cæsar," Poppæa faltered, raising her eyes and timidly stealing a glance at the face which, handsome as it was, held her in no such thrall as did a certain vanished face.

"I was sleeping," was the reply, "until

aroused by the arrival of messengers bearing advices from Lusitania."

"From Lusitania?"

A timorous gladness overspread her lovely features which she took no pains to conceal; more, she inwardly rejoiced at her power to make the imperial eye grow darkly stern with jealousy.

"And what news from Lusitania?" she ventured, daringly.

"They need not have awakened me; there is no news worth hearing when a province is at peace."

"Then it is wisely ruled! Ah, I knew it! And Otho—he is well?"

"Apparently."

"The gods hē praised! . . . He sent no message to . . . to me?"

"He desired to be commended to your memory."

"Ah!" she sighed, tenderly, "what vain ceremony! He *knows* he needs no such commendation."

"Poppæa!"

His arms were about her and she felt the passionate pressure of his lips upon her brow. Her ambitious heart bounded within her bosom. The emperor was at her feet. The dream was upon the eve of realization. Her opportunity was at hand.

"Can you not forget him?" Nero murmured enviously.

"Why should I?" she breathed, artfully.

"Why should you not? Does not my love suffice?"

"It might, if you were at liberty to love."

"And am I not?"

She glanced up into his face with a smile of ineffable coquetry, and there was a hint of railery in her tone as she replied:

"Not yet, Cæsar; you are but a mere pupil, subject to the orders of another, and so far removed from wielding the authority of emperor that you are curtailed of liberty in every form!"

"You are indeed a heroine so to browbeat Cæsar!" he exclaimed, with a mirthless laugh; "I fail to fathom your hardihood."

"Because you have never tested the courage of disinterested love. Think you, because the sterile Octavia holds her peace amid impending dangers, that she is worthy of your love? How long will you accept her inglorious apathy for devotion to your interests? Oh, Cæsar, you are blind, blind, blind!"

He had loosened his hold upon her while she spoke, doubting whether he should be incensed or not, but as her voice, vibrant with sincerity, ceased, he caught her in his arms again with renewed ardor.

"Oh, brave heart!" he cried, with genuine

passion; "may the immortal gods forgive me for doubting you! How shall I assure you of my gratitude and love?"

She wreathed her arms about his neck and set the seal of doom upon him with a kiss.

"If you love me, as you say, why do you delay to marry me?" she breathed; "is it forsooth that you have objections to my person, or to my ancestors, men distinguished with triumphal honors; or to the fruitfulness of my body and the sincerity of my affections? No!—if the truth be told, your advisers fear that, were I your wife, I should expose the injurious treatment of the Senate, and force you to recognize the indignation of the people at the insolence and rapacity of your mother. But if Agrippina will suffer no daughter-in-law who is not virulently opposed to her son, I beseech you to restore me to Otho's love!" Here tears interrupted her utterance, while in wavering accent she added, "Oh, Cæsar, deign to permit me to retire to any quarter of the earth where, though I may hear of your degradation, I may not behold it and impotently watch the perils that beset you!"

Her beautiful face, tear-stained and pallid, seconded her eloquent appeal, each word of which penetrated the soul of Nero, fully prepared as it was for parricide and the indignity of divorce.

In an access of passionate enthusiasm, he ex-

claimed, "Thy will shall be my law! Command! I am thy slave; *thou* art Cæsar!"

Not one precious instant of her privilege did Poppæa lose. By her command Anicetus,* the enfranchised slave, was bidden to sup that night with the emperor. No festal air did the entertainment wear, since Burrus and Seneca were the only additional guests invited to attend the prince's table. Even pampered Acte, slighted, was left to sulk about the corridors, muttering unintelligible disgust in her barbaric tongue.

Upon the arrival of Anicetus, the future empress, unattended, descended the spacious stairways and stood in the starlit garden to receive him. As soon as she descried his cadaverous countenance lighted with its hungry eyes, she went to him, laid her hands in his, and smiled with evil significance.

"You must have guessed that you were not bidden here to-night simply to carouse," she said; "you are no Claudius Senecio, though you are a freedman. Cæsar selects his messmates from among younger and fairer-favored men."

"Then why am I bidden, lady?"

"To counsel Cæsar. . . . Anicetus, among all your enemies whose destruction would you most willingly compass?"

He cast a wary glance about him and shrank

* Commander of the fleet at Misenum.

slightly at the dense umbrage of the environing shrubbery.

"Is this some trap?" he demanded, under his breath.

"To prove that it is not," she replied, "I will answer for you. The monster of impurity whom you would annihilate with your scorching hatred, the creature whose downfall you would bend every energy to effect, is Germanicus's daughter, foul Agrippina!"

"True, . . . true," he breathed, in a terrified whisper.

"Good! . . . Weary of her aggressive infamy, suspicious of her every action, Cæsar will generously reward the man who suggests a means of liberating him from her thralldom. You are ingenious. Who shall say that *you* are not the man? Such being the case, your position in the empire is assured. You have your freedom, but you lack wealth. Compass Agrippina's death and you may yet bid for the possession of even this imperial estate. . . . But let me warn you: suggest no poison. Britannicus's death is fresh in her memory; besides, from her long familiarity with crime she is on the alert for treachery of this description; moreover, she is an adept at antidotes. The sword is equally impracticable. Cæsar may be a butcher, but he has no fancy for the savor of his own blood. So be original, or attempt nothing. . . . Come, let us go in."

So saying, Poppæa led the way to the private chamber where the prince's table was laid that night, the freedman following in her wake, lost in profound speculation.

A triumphant smile rested upon her features as she thought :

“Agrippina's doom is sealed! With her removal the abasement of Octavia is assured, and then . . . and then a new empress reigns in Rome, an empress who, so the gods permit, will ere long share her throne with banished Otho!”

Meanwhile, neglected Acte roamed from end to end of the palatial villa, nursing her jealousy and vowing vengeance upon the favorite who had so ruthlessly usurped her right. In the distance she could hear the murmured converse of the imperial party, and it aroused her suspicions that never a laugh or snatch of song, invariable accompaniments of her master's banquets, disturbed the even tenor of that mysterious symposium.

Were they plotting against *her* welfare? Could it be that Poppæa had found her a serious obstacle in her path? Had she offended Cæsar?

Poor Acte! insignificant insect, Poppæa never considered thee; and hadst thou offended Cæsar, thou wouldst be removed forever with the fragments of thy last feast!

As she stood listening in the shadow, a cup-bearer passed, inadvertently leaving the door ajar. Like a spirit of air the inquisitive slave glided

through the aperture, and tremblingly crouched in the folds of the tapestry that shielded Cæsar's shoulders against the night wind. Thence she descried the emperor lolling idly upon his couch, Burrus with stern visage downcast, Seneca with an enigmatical smile upon his thin, cold lips, and Poppæa with her soul in her burning eyes. Anicetus was upon his feet, and speaking.

"Send for your mother, my lord," he was saying; promise an entertainment in her honor, and we will see her *safely* home. She has a passion for ships, and we will construct a vessel in such a manner that a portion of it will, by a clever contrivance, fall to pieces and plunge her unaware into the water. Nothing is so prolific in accidents as the sea; and if she is thus cut off by shipwreck, who could be so injurious as to ascribe the offense of wind and waves to the malice of men? You can erect a temple and altars to the deceased, and adopt every other means of parading your filial reverence."

Startled by the discovery she had made, comforted yet terrified, Acte crept from her hiding-place and fled with streaming hair and fluttering robes through the silent halls. The words which she had overheard had rent the veil from before the mystery of that conclave. She had waited with bated breath until Anicetus had divulged his infamous plot in its entirety, and she had been vaguely conscious that amid the acclaim of

congratulation that greeted the speech, Poppæa had wrenched a priceless chain from her throat and flung it at the commander's feet. But all that she could positively grasp in her exalted state was that Agrippina's life was menaced—and Agrippina had been gentle and considerate with her.

Panting with excitement she reached a basement chamber where slept the only slave deputed to attend upon her, one of her own people, a faithful ruffian, fearless as the martial molussus. Him she shook with violence until he sprang from his sleep, grasping his arms.

“Awake, awake!” she cried; “away to Antium! Seek out Agrippina and remind her how the Chaldean soothsayer warned her that ‘Nero would surely reign and kill his mother!’ . . . Stay! if she demands who sent thee, tell her Acte, the slave!”

II.

THE MURDER OF AGRIPPINA.

Two days of matchless weather, such as still renders the spring-time of Italy peerless, ushered in a starlit, balmy night, the night set apart for Nero's splendid banquet in honor of his mother.

Under Poppæa's supervision the tables had

been laid, and with her own deft fingers she had wreathed the cups with fragrant blossom; after which she had retired to her apartments lest her undefined position at court might annoy the empress dowager. And to her side she had summoned Acte, astutely surmising that the undisciplined girl had best be held in restraint while such grave interests were at stake.

Despite the warning of the Asian slave, Agrippina had arrived at Bauli toward the close of day, in a sedan, attended by Crepereius Gallus and Acceronia, her faithful lady-in-waiting. Heaven alone knew what pangs of suspicion it had cost her to meet her imperial son with smiling lips and submit to his questionable caresses; but she had come apparently in good faith. From her chamber Poppæa watched the torches flitting like fire-flies along the beach, and with bated breath counted the lights as they twinkled forth, one after another, until the fated galley burst into illumination—a glowing gem upon the tranquil sea. Then for the first time Acte, lying at her feet, sprang up and broke the silence.

“What mean those lights?” she cried; “for whom is that ship prepared?”

“Agrippina returns to Antium by sea,” Poppæa replied.

“By way of *Hades!*” supplemented the intrepid girl, “for only her wandering soul will ever reach Antium!”

“Silence, fool!” commanded the would-be empress angrily.

“Oh, I have said my say, have warned Agrippina. She goes to her doom with open eyes.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that this night brands thee and Nero and Anicetus with *murder!*”

Rash Acte! hadst thou had less heart and more wit thou wouldst not have felt those strong white fingers about thy throat, thou wouldst not have found a nameless grave far from thy native land, but mightst have lived to see the downfall of thy rival! But now thou liest a victim to thy humanity, while within earshot of thy expiring sigh the dupe thou wouldst have saved passes to her death!

Pallid as the innocent dead, reduced by terror of her violent deed to a wraith-like semblance of herself, Poppæa let fall the dark head from her nerveless clutch and sprang to her feet as a harsh flourish of trumpets burst upon the ominous silence, announcing the departure of the imperial train to take ship. With flying feet, to which her cowardly dread of death lent fleetness, the guilty creature sped away by unfrequented galleries until she gained the portal opening out upon the mole. Here she sank coweringly in the dense shadow of the clustering acacias, drawing the feathery boughs about her against the searching glare of the passing torches.

Scarcely was she concealed ere a group of white-robed courtiers swept by, and parting, revealed the young emperor, laurel-crowned, escorting his stately mother, his eyes fixed upon her with an intensity that betrayed the agitation of his brutalized soul. It was but a passing glimpse, and ere she was aware of it, he was back again, hurrying on alone before his jesting attendants. With a sudden dash she cleared her ambush, and flung her arms about him.

“Cæsar!” she cried, and kissed him.

But without heeding her salute, he cast his arm about her and bore her into the villa, whispering, pantingly,

“Quick, quick! They have put to sea! Every bank is manned, and we must witness the master-stroke that sets the empire free!”

Hastily they mounted to the open esplanade whence two days previously Poppæa had beheld the sun set upon her atrocious resolution, and with arms fast locked they stood in breathless silence, looking seaward.

In the offing they could descry the trireme heading away for the Lucrine Lake, the twinkling lights tracing her dusky hulk, a phosphorescent streamer trailing in her wake. For a time they could hear the measured beat of the banked oars as they disturbed the unruffled deep; then all was silence, and only the watchful stars bore damning testimony against the impious deed. More and

more indistinct grew the twinkling lights until the distance, momentarily increasing, welded them one by one into a single floating planet that in its turn paled and paled until . . . ah, it has *vanished!*—Gods! what is that ominous detonation that comes rolling shoreward, rousing the guard and summoning the torches back to the strand? Could the pair upon the portico laugh so wildly if they knew? Is it the accusing wail of Acte's voice that urges their flying feet to the chamber where she lies so low?

Well-nigh stumbling upon the prostrate body of his slaughtered favorite, Nero paused and bent a swift, inquiring glance upon Poppæa. But she did not blench.

"With her life has the impious slave paid the forfeit for meddling with the salvation of the empire," she boldly declared; "she dared accuse Cæsar of parricide, and *I* have avenged Cæsar!"

"Faithful Poppæa! . . . Farewell, Acte! Cæsar loved thee well, but he can spare thee to Pluto; therefore go laurel-crowned, in token of his favor. At last thou art free, so seek a lord and master in the realm of darkness. And when you meet, commend me to my mother."

So saying, he raised the chaplet from his blasphemous brow, cast it beside the dead, and went his way laughing.

That was a night of revelry long to be remembered—the last indeed that ever Bauli saw. Per-

haps some vague prescience of impending doom lent zest to the carousal. The profligate court assembled. Even the meanest of his soldiery were summoned to the banquet-hall to applaud the emperor, attired as Orpheus, in the execution upon his lyre of some ditty borrowed from the Roman brothels, while the bacchanalian rabble danced. Often amid his subsequent grandeur Nero recalled that night, which marked the boundary-line between his careless boyhood and corrupt maturity.

Not until the wanly-blinking stars presaged the approach of day was the slightest restraint placed upon the mad orgies, and even so they might have continued until the rising sun put the shameless horde to the blush, but for the sudden apparition of Agerinus* in their midst.

No specter from the tomb could have imprinted a more deathly pallor upon the youthful tyrant's cheek. He had risen from his couch and had raised aloft his mother's half-drained goblet, which he had reserved for the final toast, when the freedman, entering, confronted him. Overpowered with alarm, Nero flung the goblet at the intruder and bid him begone, but the man held his ground, saying in a tone which commanded respect:

“I have tidings for Cæsar which it behooves him to hear.”

“This is no place, no time, to discuss the dis-

* Agrippina's freedman.

position of my mother's property!" cried the craven wretch, in his perturbation unwittingly betraying his guilt; "since you are the appointed guardian of her villa here at Bauli, go back; I will grant you audience when it is day."

"This is no question of the lady Agrippina's property," came the steady reply; "I have tidings for Cæsar which it behooves him to hear."

"Proceed!"

"The imperial galley is lost; Gallus is dead; Acronia drowned; but Agrippina. . . ."

"Well, well, . . . *what* of Agrippina?"

"Has, through the mercy of the gods and the auspicious influence of your fortune, escaped a grievous casualty, though seriously wounded. Having been brought safely to shore, she now lies at her villa, of which I am guardian. Therefore am I come to beseech you, however terrified you may be at the danger which has threatened your august mother, to postpone the attention of visiting her, for what she needs at present is rest."

Overpowered with terror and dismay at this intelligence, and scarcely waiting to hear the concluding words, Nero staggered into an adjoining chamber, dragging the quaking Poppæa with him.

"This is *your* work!" he exclaimed, in anguish, sinking upon a couch and bursting into puerile tears; "what now is to be done? Ere another day has passed over my head she will come, eager for revenge, . . . and what resources

have I to meet her? She will arm the slaves, kindle a flame among the soldiery, or force her way to the Senate and the people, and charge me with her shipwreck, her wound, and the murder of her friends, unless . . . unless some one can devise an expedient! Oh, send for Seneca, Burrus, Anicetus . . . Quick, dispatch!"

Spurred by her menaced fortune, Poppæa flew to obey her lord's command, aroused the sleeping monitors, and summoned Anicetus; and when they were convened, she calmly and distinctly stated the alarming complication which had arisen, Cæsar having lost all command of himself.

"What do you advise?" she eloquently besought them; "matters have now reached such a climax that either Agrippina must be cut off, or Nero perish!—Speak, Seneca, what say you?"

But for some moments, which seemed ages of fateful suspense, the cautious Annæus held his peace; at last, fixing his eyes upon Burrus, he inquired,

"Think you the orders for this execution may be given to the soldiery?"

"If you refer to the execution of Claudius's widow," replied the soldier promptly, "I answer no! The pretorian guards are so attached to the whole family of the Cæsars, so devoutly revere the memory of Germanicus, that they would shrink from executing any severity upon a descendant.

But here is Anicetus, . . . why should not he fulfil his engagement ? ”

“ Why not, indeed ? ” echoed the fawning knave. “ I ask no greater favor than to be permitted to complete the . . . the task. ”

At these words Nero quitted pacing of the chamber and wringing his hands, and with an ecstatic cry fell upon the freedman’s breast.

“ If you can bring me some token of the accomplished work, ” he exclaimed between tears and smiles, “ this day now dawning will have presented me with the empire, and *you* will be the author of the costly gift ! . . . Away, then, and take with you such trusty men as will promptly execute your orders ! ”

Scarcely pausing to salute the imperial presence, such was his ardor to ingratiate himself among his superiors, Anicetus hastened away along the outer corridor, where in the fresh morning breeze the suspended lamps were expiring in their sconces ; but ere he had reached the portals of the villa the voice of Poppæa arrested him.

“ Stay, stay, Anicetus, ” she called ; “ remember, he that runs may stumble, therefore make haste slowly. ”

He paused, and turned about with a look of annoyance upon his lean visage, and waited for her to join him.

“ I doubt not that you appreciate the magnitude of your undertaking, ” she said, placing her

hand upon her minion's arm, "but bear in mind that the fate of the empire depends upon your address this day! . . . Are you well advised? Whom do you take with you?"

"Herculeus, captain of a galley, and Oloaritus, a naval centurion," he answered, promptly.

She smiled significantly, as she inquired:

"Are they *trustworthy* men?"

"As any in my employ—a pair of ruthless, mercenary rascals."

"Good!—they shall be rewarded from my privy purse. . . . Now listen!" Her hold tightened upon his arm, while with her disengaged hand she pointed toward the door of the adjacent guard-chamber; "hark! you recognize that voice?" she asked; "it is Agerinus descanting upon his royal mistress's miraculous escape. Agerinus has one besetting fault—he is *too* loyal. Now should he sacrifice his garrulity to his sense of duty, and hurry back to Agrippina's villa, his presence might seriously conflict with your . . . little enterprise."

"True!" exclaimed the man, "but how avert his interference?"

"Why, how devoid of expedients you must be! Go into the guard-room, snatch his dagger from its sheath, and accuse him of conspiring with his mistress against the emperor's life! He dropped the dagger upon the pavement while he was addressing Cæsar; all noted the fact. Cry

treason, order him to be put in irons, and leave the rest to me."

In an access of sycophantic enthusiasm, the wretch pressed her hand to his lips, murmuring:

"Ah, lady, why are you not empress of this realm?"

"I may be empress some fine day, good Anicetus," she answered, artfully, "and when I mount the throne, be assured that I shall not forget how you helped hew the steps for my ascent!"

Upon her return to the chamber she had quitted, she found Seneca and Burrus alone, engaged in close converse.

"Where is Cæsar?" she demanded.

"Gone to his apartments," they answered; "lost in the distraction of despair."

"Oh, faint heart!" she cried; "see what a boy he is! Where would he be to-day without strong hands at the helm? Such steady guidance must you and I supply. As soon as it is day, do you, Burrus, command the tribunes and centurions to come, grasp his hands and congratulate him upon having escaped an unforeseen peril in the treachery of his mother. Meanwhile, do you, Seneca, repair to the temples and set an example whereby the adjacent municipalities of Campania shall testify their joy by victims and embassies. And I will go to Cæsar, cheer his flagging spirit, and dictate a letter to the Senate. Do not delay

an instant! The sun is up, and ere it sets our fates will be sealed!"

It was one thing to stir ambitious parasites to exertion, quite another affair to rouse the remorseful potentate from his apathy. She found Nero prostrate upon his couch, his head muffled in his mantle, muttering inarticulate words. She laughingly bid him arise and note how gloriously the day of his redemption had dawned; but he only shrank from her touch, turning his blanched face toward the garish light.

"Oh, I blush for you, Cæsar!" she cried, at last, venturing to assume a scornful tone; "one would say that you are like a child teased into fright by some tale of ghosts!"

"Ghosts!" he echoed, half rising and clasping his arms about her waist as if for protection against some lurking horror; "oh, the spirits of the murdered dead will crowd about me soon enough! Even now, as I lay here, I heard the weird sound of a trumpet echoing among the hills and wailings in the air as though the Furies were abroad with pendent tongues, red with lapped gore, with flaming torches and snaky scourges in their hands, famishing for revenge!"

"Oh, this is the coinage of your wearied brain! Be calm, be reasonable."

"I shall never be myself while the offensive prospect of these shores and sea is continually before my eyes!"

"We will go to Neapolis, and thence to Rome."

"Rome! . . . and how will they receive me there?"

"You shall first indite a letter to the Senate in substance stating that Agerinus, a confidential freedman of your mother, sent by her to assassinate you, has been detected with a dagger in his possession, and that Agrippina has atoned for her crime."

"Yes; but Agerinus?"

"Has already been arrested. . . To this you will add a catalogue of her past offenses, which are fresh in the public mind, how she aimed at a co-ordinate power with you in the empire, how she drew from the pretorian bands an oath of submission and fidelity to the disgrace and abasement at once of the Senate and people, and how, finding her wishes disappointed, she became enraged against the soldiery, the fathers, and the populace, and hence opposed a donative to the army and a largess to the people, further wreaking her vengeance by trumping up capital prosecutions against the most illustrious men of Rome. Believe me, these sufferers are not fools, not blind to their best interests. . . . And should not all this suffice to insure your welcome, restore to their native country and inheritances Junia and Calpurnia, Valerius Capito and Licinius Gabolus, men and women of quality and dignity, iniquitously exiled by Agrippina. Finally, and as the supreme master-stroke,

command the ashes of the noble and outraged Lollia Paullina to be brought home and erect a sepulcher for them. Oh, I could suggest means of building up your popularity upon your mother's sins until my tongue should cease to wag!"

With such specious arguments did the wily Poppæa gradually restore the contrite emperor to himself; he even smiled, calling her his "precious mentor," and was upon the point of attiring himself to receive the congratulations of the embassies, when a sudden clamor arose and in the next instant Mnester, a freedman loyal to Agrippina, burst into the royal presence, and fell prostrate at Nero's feet.

"Cæsar, Cæsar!" he cried, in anguish; "your mother is slain! Great Agrippina is dead! murdered by Anicetus and his men. . . See yonder column of black smoke rolling heavenward! It is her funeral pyre stained with her royal blood! Oh, Cæsar, avenge your mother's most unholy murder, absolve yourself from the blight of parricide!"

"Agrippina dies by Cæsar's order!"

It was Poppæa who spoke, and half raising himself the faithful freedman drew his sword and fell upon it.

"Then die, Mnester?" he breathed; "thy spirit had better wander through the realm of darkness for all eternity than tarry here to deplore the ruin of imperial glory, blasted by a despicable courtesan!"

III.

OCTAVIA'S DIVORCE.

AN eclipse of the sun * and divers prodigies preceded the return of the imperial court to Rome ; and yet, so far were his loyal subjects removed from being impressed by the baleful portents, that upon the receipt of tidings of the approach of Claudius Cæsar Nero, the tribes went forth to meet him, the Senate in their robes of state, with troops of women and children, alike eager to display their zeal and fealty ; while the populace at large viewed the pageant from temporary erections along the route as though a triumph were in progress.

Elated with pride at such a reception, assured of the absurdity of his cowardly fears, and conscious of his victory over a servile public, Nero repaired to the Capitol to return thanks to the gods for his deliverance, ordered the statues of himself and Poppæa Sabina to be set up on either side of the golden Minerva, and decreed that henceforth the birthday of Agrippina should be regarded as an unlucky day. Then, having lodged his favorite as became an empress, he abandoned himself to all his inordinate passions ; he completed the circus begun by Caligula, that he might delight the Roman populace with his skill at horsemanship ;

* April 30, A. D. 59.

he enrolled the Augustani, noble knights, to applaud his god-like prowess and address; he instituted quinquennial games in his own honor, calling them Neronia, and, finally, he appeared upon the public stage to sing his own halting verses to the vulgar groundlings, assuring his grieving advisers that song was sacred to Apollo, and that he but emulated that pre-eminent and oracular deity.

Meanwhile, left to herself and her own devices, Poppæa planned and plotted during the ensuing months with a fury commensurate only with her desperate longing to feel the weight of the imperial diadem upon her brow. She had no need to be reminded that, though utterly neglected, the gentle Octavia was still empress, the idol of the people who, if they never saw her now, were satisfied to feel that she reigned in her dignified seclusion. This circumstance exasperated the chafing aspirant almost beyond endurance; even the sudden demise of the warlike Afranius Burrus, under suspicious conditions, and the consequent rise of the profligate Sophonius Tigellinus but slightly mitigated the harrowing anxiety in which she existed from day to day.

Politically as she had sought to be, she shortly discovered that in certain ways she had overreached herself. In some respects she found ere long that she had been too generous, too inconsiderate, that she had sadly lost sight of her own best interests. She had counseled her lord and

master, for the sake of his popularity, to recall the noble exiles who had suffered dishonor at the hands of the vengeful Agrippina; but unfortunately she had been so short-sighted as not to foresee the complication likely to arise out of the return of Junia Calvina to Rome.

As the sister of the ill-starred Silanus, naturally this lady's first impulse was to seek out the sorrowing betrothed of her brother, and by her intelligent society attempt to comfort the grieving girl and alleviate the misery of her forlorn estate.

As a consequence, Octavia and Junia became inseparable companions. Thanks to this noble lady's ministrations, the well-nigh forgotten smiles once more visited the lips of the fair young empress, and if into her drear existence there crept any cheer it was due to Junia. Nothing escaped the watchful eye of Poppæa; therefore this close intimacy of her rival with a member of one of the cleverest families that Rome had ever known filled her with a vague suspicion and fear.

More than once she essayed to poison the mind of Nero against his innocent, uncomplaining wife, but he invariably put her off with some excuse: he was far too full of engagements to busy himself with idle gossip concerning a pair of stupid women; he had his young courtiers to rehearse for the Juvenales; he had a poem to compose and was pressed for time, or he was going on a frolic to the Milvian Bridge with a band of

congenial roisterers; he could not be bothered; another time he would hear what she had to say.

Thus repulsed, Poppæa grew desperate, and hungrily scanned the social horizon for expedients to carry her artifice to successful issue. Among the mercenary and ambitious courtiers none was more ready to ingratiate himself than Tigellinus. Upon him she applied her potent spells with promises of advancement if he espoused her cause. Together they mounted guard over the unsuspecting Octavia, and shortly concocted a plot between them sufficiently cunning to wreck the reputation of the *Stata Mater* herself.

Perhaps the only entertainment allowed the neglected empress was music, of which she was passionately fond. To this end, one Eucerus, an Alexandrian slave, an adept at flute-playing, was attached to her meager court. Many a lonesome hour did he beguile with his skilful performances, many a tear did he put to flight with his simple melodies. And this inoffensive hireling the heinous conspirators marked as the principal factor in their scheme.

The very convulsions of Nature and the condition of the times conspired to the support of the infamous plot. Just as the phenomenon of a blazing comet had compassed the retirement of the noble Rubellius Plautus into Asia, so his premeditated murder brought the cunning Tigellinus into prominence as a counselor of value to the

emperor. It was to the mischievous advice of this degenerate prefect of the pretorian guards that Nero lent a willing ear.

“Plautus is of noble descent, and in close proximity to the armies of the East,” he said, with lynx-like cunning; “for myself, I harbor not separate views, as Burrus did; I consult purely the security of Cæsar; but though your safety at Rome may be insured, where you are on the spot, yet by what measures could remote insurrections be suppressed? The several peoples of Asia are suspected of an attachment to Plautus, because of the illustrious memory of his grandfather, Drusus. Plautus is master of vast wealth, not even pretending to a fondness for quiet, but boasting that he copies the examples of the ancient Romans; moreover, he has adopted the sect of the Stoics with all their superciliousness and pride, a sect which prompts men to turbulence and a life of action.”

“And what do you advise?” demanded the suspicious Nero.

“The instant death of Plautus.”

“But will the Senate and the people support my action?” inquired the doubtful monarch.

“If you doubt your authority, test it,” was the wary reply; “it is quite time that Cæsar knew whether he is emperor or not.”

When the vile deed had been consummated, when Pelago, the eunuch, stood before Nero with

the head of the slain between his gory hands, while the tumult of the public processions and devotions, on this account decreed to the deities, rang up from the streets of Rome, Tigellinus bent a triumphant glance upon his royal master.

“Does Cæsar still doubt that he rules?” he demanded, with a smile, and dismissing Pelago with his grewsome burden, he added, with respectful solicitude:

“And now, why does not Cæsar, banishing all fear, set about expediting his marriage with Poppæa, which has been procrastinated solely on account of such alarms as these? Why not put away Octavia? Though she has given no *open* offence, yet the name of her father and the affections of the people have made her an eye-sore to you.”

But Nero hesitated, while the cowardly pallor of his cheek betrayed his weak vacillation of spirit.

“Send letters to the Senate,” pursued the voice of the tempter; “believe me, there is not a man in Rome but longs to see an heir to the empire. That heir Claudius’s daughter will never bear.”

“Ay, but upon what grounds shall we base the decree of divorce?”

“If you do not consider the sterility of your wife sufficient cause, go to Poppæa; let her tell what she knows, what she has seen.”

Thus like a senseless shuttle-cock did this

weak scion of as noble a house as the world has ever known fly one trickster only to fall into the toils of another. They had woven their net together, and were *in omnia parati* for the game.

Upon entering his favorite's chamber, he discovered her demurely busied with her embroidery, like some latter-day Lucretia among her women.

Hastily dismissing her attendants, Poppæa submitted to the usual caresses, but instead of returning them, she turned away, bursting into a flood of well-feigned tears.

"Oh, Cæsar, Cæsar!" she wailed, and hid her face as though the sight of him caused her poignant grief.

Touched in his most vulnerable point, his curiosity, Nero raised her in his arms, eagerly demanding:

"What means this strange reception? Why do you weep? Are these tears poured out for me?"

"Cæsar," she cried, sobbingly, "do you recall that night at Bauli, when with tears like these I besought you to restore me to Otho's love? . . . Nay, nay, do not start! The gods are my witnesses that it is not that I love Otho more than you, but that I long to retire, . . . that I beg you now, as I begged you then, to permit me to retire to any quarter of the earth where, though I may hear of your degradation, I may not behold it and impotently watch the perils that beset you!"

“Then Tigellinus spoke truly!”

“Tigellinus! . . . why, what has he said?”
in a scared tone.

“That *you* knew cause why I should divorce Octavia.”

At these words the scheming hypocrite shrank out of his embrace and stood before him, trembling in every limb, as if dreading his indignation.

“I know no more than Tigellinus,” she breathed.

Piqued to the top of his bent, Nero exclaimed:
“What do you know, either of you?”

“Let Tigellinus speak,” she pleaded; “he is a man and has nothing in your affection to lose. I am but a poor, weak woman, wholly dependent upon your love. Were I to forfeit that love through any inadvertence of speech, albeit in warning you of a grievous wrong, . . . oh, Cæsar, in that self-same hour would Poppæa’s doom be sealed!”

Blinded by his passion, fooled by her artifice, even moved to tears by her seeming anguish, Nero caught the cowering creature in his arms, and kissed away her tears.

“Speak, Poppæa,” he besought her, “tell me all you know. Any fact that you can adduce to prove Octavia unworthy to share my throne will but increase my debt of gratitude to you. My dearest wish is to have just grounds for putting her away and making you my wife. I never

loved Octavia, never sought her in marriage; she was my vicious mother's choice; but the Senate, the people must be satisfied. You have saved me from the one peril, now rid me of this incubus."

Thus emboldened, Poppæa exclaimed:

"Though I pay the forfeit of my daring with my life, I can no longer hold my peace! . . . Cæsar, you are dishonored, disgraced, outraged beneath your own roof! Octavia is false to her royal marriage-ties."

"*Octavia! . . . Octavia false!*"

"False as the fickle wind, inconstant as the shifting quicksands."

"Immortal gods! . . . Who would have believed it? . . . By whom is my honor tarnished?"

"By Eucerus, the Egyptian slave. Both Tigellinus and I have seen . . ."

"Enough, enough! She is Messalina's issue, and I can picture what you have seen. Octavia has sealed her doom; *Poppæa is empress in her stead!*"

At last Poppæa Sabina had attained the pinnacle of her fondest hopes, the acme of her ambition, and was Cæsar's wife, Empress of Rome!

The servile Senate had in accordance with the royal will issued a decree of divorce, and perceiving that all his villainies passed for acts for exemplary merit, Nero rudely repudiated Octavia; whereupon the gentle creature was sent into Cam-

pania, escorted thither by a guard of soldiery, like a refractory prisoner of war. Certain courageous souls there were who opposed the heinous act even to the emperor's face; among these was the freedman Doryphorus, the imperial secretary; but he was warned to hold his peace on pain of instant death.

With the loyal folk who were neighbors to the banished empress the case was different. Comparatively unrestrained by prudential motives, and from the mediocrity of their circumstances being exposed to fewer dangers, they boldly decried the daily outrages and humiliations to which the daughter of Claudius was exposed, while so undisguised were their complaints and reproaches that in due course the popular disturbance reached Rome and gained the imperial ear.

Ever suspicious of the stability of his throne, Nero sought out Poppæa and informed her that, in order to silence the querulousness of the people, Octavia must be recalled. Naturally, a tempestuous scene occurred, but with a will born of misgiving at his atrocious villainy, Nero carried the day, and messengers were forthwith dispatched to bring the deposed empress home.

“What should Poppæa fear?” demanded Cæsar, by way of casting a sop to Cerberus; “Poppæa is empress; she is omnipotent; Octavia is degraded; since she is divorced she has no more voice in the state than the veriest slave.”

"Blood can not be degraded," muttered Poppæa, with sullen prevision; "the blood that flows in Octavia's veins grants her diviner right to the throne of the Cæsars than does the blood of the usurper who occupies it!"

Astute Poppæa! Well must thou have weighed thy portentous words!

Scarcely had the fair young Octavia appeared within the gates of her ancestral city than the faithful populace rushed in transports of joy to the Capitol, there to pour forth unfeigned thanks to the gods. With ready hands the patriots threw down the statues of Poppæa, while others went in search of the effigies of Octavia relegated to ignominious obscurity. These they bore upon their shoulders, wreathed with garlands, and set them up on the forum and in the temples. Some, more hardy than their fellows, even went so far as to offer the tribute of their applause to the emperor, making him the object of their grateful adoration.

The streets of Róme, the very palace of the Cæsars rang with the acclaim; even the life of the usurping empress might have been threatened had not bands of soldiery been ordered forth to beat back the crowds and threaten them with the sword, thus terrifying them into submission and dispersing them. Within the hour the tokens of honor to Poppæa were restored, while the statues of Octavia vanished forever from the public eye.

But, though her dumb image had been replaced beside the golden Minerva, though slavish throats were ready to cheer her to the echo, that day had dealt the pride of Poppæa Sabina a fatal thrust. By the hand of the people a mirror had been held up to her unwilling gaze wherein she could not but recognize the hideous distortion which her reckless ambition had imprinted. Maddened by the summary frustration of her fondest hopes, ever prone to atrocities from the impulse of hatred, and stimulated by her fears lest either a more violent outbreak of popular sentiment should occur, or that Nero should succumb to the inclination of the people, she flew in search of the emperor, and flung herself at his feet.

Fresh from bidding his discarded wife and step-sister welcome home, she came upon Nero, by chance, alone and unattended.

“Oh, Cæsar,” she cried, for once with genuine emotion, “my circumstances are not in such state that I have the strength to contend about my marriage with you, though that object is dearer to me than life; but my very life is placed in imminent jeopardy by the dependents and slaves of Octavia who, calling themselves the people of Rome, have dared to commit acts in time of peace which are seldom the outcome of war. But, Cæsar, those arms were taken up against *you* as well! The traitors only lacked a leader; and who ought to know better than you that a civil commotion once

excited they would soon find one. Can you not see that Octavia has only to leave Campania and come into the city, when at her nod such tumults are raised?"

"No, no!" Nero interposed; "I will answer for it that Octavia seeks to incite no rebellion."

"Then if that was not the object of the people in dishonoring my statues," she pursued, "what crime have I committed? Whom have I offended? Is it because I am about to give a genuine offspring to the family of the Cæsars, that the Roman people choose that the spawn of an Egyptian flute-player shall be palmed upon the imperial eminence? To sum up all, if that step be essential to the public weal, why should you not have called home Octavia voluntarily rather than by compulsion?"

"Poppæa!" . . .

"Cæsar, consult your safety by a righteous retribution! This first commotion has subsided under moderate applications, but if the people should despair of Octavia being reinstated in Cæsar's favor, they will give her another husband!"

This artfully compounded harangue produced the desired effect; it excited fear and rage while it terrified and inflamed the imperial auditor.

Raising the fallen woman, Nero placed her at his side, and took her trembling hands in his.

"Again I find you in the breach in defense of

my menaced honor, most valiant and wise heart!" he said; "how blind should I be without your watchful eyes! . . . Octavia shall be removed beyond the chance of doing us injury. But the evidence of disgrace, resting only on suspicion, is not strong enough for this purpose."

"Some one can be found," suggested the wily witch, "who, for a price, would confess the guilty commerce, and might also be plausibly charged with the crime of rebellion."

"Can such a caitiff exist in Rome? . . . Yes? Whom have you in mind?"

"Anicetus. Surely he has proved himself a fitting instrument."

"Oh, I hold him in extraordinary detestation!"

Poppæa smiled; perchance she thought how true it is that the ministers of nefarious deeds seem in the eyes of their employers as living reproaches of their iniquity. Nevertheless, the murderer of Agrippina was summoned to a private audience with the emperor, at which Poppæa, a chaplet of blush roses resting upon the masses of her bronze-brown hair, presided, at the imperial request. As soon as the lantern-jaws and sunken, gleaming eyes of the naval chieftain appeared, Nero sprang from his couch, the nervous curtness of his words betraying his well-nigh ungovernable aversion, saying:

"Anicetus, you alone have saved my life from the dark devices of my mother. An opportunity for a service of no less magnitude now presents

itself. I would be relieved of a wife who is my mortal enemy."

"I am at the emperor's service," was the slavish reply.

"There will be no need of force or arms," continued the prince, "you have only to admit adultery with Octavia."

"You will be granted ample reward for your service," here interposed Poppæa, "and a delightful retreat for the remainder of your days in the event of the people proving hostile to you."

"But I threaten you with death if you decline the task," supplemented the emperor, taking a secret satisfaction in the utterance of the menace.

"Since I would gladly give my life in Cæsar's service," remarked the politic knave, "Cæsar has no need to threaten."

Simultaneously with the perpetration of this infamous falsehood, an edict was issued stating in substance that Octavia, in the hope of engaging the fleet in her conspiracy, had corrupted the admiral, Anicetus. Thereupon, the innocent sufferer was hurried away into exile upon the island of Pandataria and exposed to the rude society of centurions and common soldiers, while Anicetus was banished to affluence in Sardinia. Never within the memory of man did exile touch the hearts of all beholders with deeper compassion than did the gentle lady Octavia. Some there were among her attendants who still remembered to

have seen the heroic Agrippina, the grandmother of Nero, banished to the same desolate isle by the suspicious Tiberius; the more recent sufferings of Julia, the daughter of Agrippina I, exiled thither by Claudius, were also recalled to mind; but these ladies had experienced some degree of comfort, some alleviation of the horrors to which they were subjected in the memory of their former splendor, whereas the unhappy Octavia had naught to reflect upon but the memorials of woe: the suicide of her betrothed upon her nuptial day, the untimely end of her father, her brother's murder, the wedding of a courtesan to her husband to the disparagement of his lawful wife, and, finally, a crime laid to her charge more intolerable than death in any shape. And here, bereft of the sweetness of life under the presage of impending woes, the poor child was not even permitted the repose of death.

And yet, even after an interval of intensest anguish, when the imperial death-warrant arrived from Rome, such is the love of life, Octavia fell upon her knees before her executioners, crying piteously:

“Have mercy! I am now a widow, and only the emperor's step-sister. I appeal to the Germanici, common relatives of Nero and myself, to defend me in my innocence! I invoke the name of Agrippina! Had she lived, my marriage state would not have been made wretched;

at least, I should not have been doomed to destruction!"

But the Germanici were leagues beyond the hearing of her grievous appeal, while Agrippina, hearsed in death, had at last found a resting-place beneath the humble monument, raised to her memory by her domestics, upon the road to Misenum.

Deaf to her entreaties, the ruffians bound her fast with thongs and opened her veins at every joint, and because her royal blood, coagulated from the effect of fear, flowed too slowly to suit their inhuman fancy, her death was accelerated by the vapor of a bath heated to the highest point. Thus ignominiously expired the virtuous Octavia in the twentieth year of her age, daughter of an emperor, repudiated empress!

Meanwhile, her infamous husband and yet more infamous rival were holding sumptuous court in distant Rome. Relieved of all anxiety in this direction, her vengeful spirit thoroughly at peace, Poppæa but awaited the final tidings from Pandataria; but by reason of inclement weather her hope was deferred, so that when at last the messenger, a centurion of the guard, arrived, she was in some sort unprepared for his coming.

Beyond closed doors, in the guarded seclusion of her private chamber, she received the ruffian, and breathlessly demanded his news.

For answer, the man discovered a small square box of cypress-wood from beneath the folds of his

mantle, and placing it upon a tripod, observed a profound obeisance, and withdrew in silence.

IV.

THE CURSE.

A STUDY that might have tempted Aristides of Thebes did Poppæa Sabina offer as she stood in the center of that splendid apartment, her pendent hands fast locked, her head in graceful, upward pose, her ear idly attentive to the heavy receding tramp of the centurion, her brown eyes fixed with eloquent intensity upon that mysterious casket of cypress-wood.

“What hideous secret cowers in the heart of yonder somber cupressus?” she murmured under her bated breath; “cupressus—funeral offering, emblem of mourning! Pah! its resinous odor fills the chamber, infiltrates my very being, suffocates me with the sickly scent of death! How dared they bring this hated substance into my presence! . . . What does the box contain? Octavia’s jewels torn from her stiffening limbs?—a cloth dipped in her detested blood? . . . Perchance, her *ashes*, gathered from the pyre? Oh, avenging gods! tell me, *is* Octavia dead?”

As if in answer to her desperate query, beyond

the palace-walls there arose the tumult incident to the progress of a procession bearing to the temples offerings that had been decreed by the fathers in commemoration of the *valiant* deed done at Pandataria.

Familiar enough were these votive trains to the Romans of the day, since, as often as a banishment or murder was perpetrated by the prince's command, so often were thanks rendered to the gods.

Thus reassured, the conscience-stricken woman plucked up her waning courage, and, stealthily approaching the tripod, she laid one trembling hand upon the casket.

"If her jewels lie concealed within," she breathed, "I will give them to the slaves; if her ashes—they shall be sown upon the sterile bosom of the wandering wind!"

With these impious words she raised the lid, and discovered a damask napkin edged with gold. It was the contact of her finger-tips with some resisting object beneath the soft, white folds that sent the expectant flush flying from her cheek, imprinting in its place a craven pallor bedewed with icy beads. Still, as if impelled by some extraneous will, the nervous fingers accomplished their task, loosened the envious folds, and, spreading them apart, disclosed, not jewels, nor gory tribute of ensanguined cloth, nor precious ashes, *but the severed head of Nero's lawful spouse!*

—Octavia's head, as if instinct with life, crowned with fair hair, the soft blue eyes burning with intelligent reproach!

A vital tint and pliancy rested upon the perfect lips, bent from their wonted exquisite arc by a look of stern resolution.

Wearing far more the semblance of death than did the countenance of the innocent slain, Poppæa recoiled with a stifled shriek, knotting her hands in the masses of her bronze-brown hair; but, ere she had shrunk beyond the pale of those rebuking eyes, a voice, low, yet distinct as the clarion's call, pierced the sepulchral silence of the chamber.

“Poppæa! Poppæa! Poppæa!”

“Who calls?” gasped the affrighted woman, heedless in her terror and dismay of the parting of those resolute lips.

“Octavia calls—Octavia, thy slaughtered victim.”

“Ye merciful gods, have pity upon me!”

“Hadst thou pity upon thy faithful husband, upon thy loving child, upon the mother of the man thou hast bewitched, upon me—his virtuous wife? . . . Poppæa, know that Crispinus, Rufinus, Agrippina, Octavia have gone before thee into the realm of eternal judgment to accuse thee of their most untimely murder!”

“Oh, I repent!”

“Too late. . . . Wrap thee in thy pilfered

purples as thou wilt, the hour is at hand when thy naked soul, stripped of its meretricious mask, shall wander forth into the grayness of the nether world, there to await its summons back to earth."

"Back to earth! Oh, rather let me die and sink into oblivion everlasting!"

"The oblivion of ages thou shalt know; thou shalt hang suspended 'twixt Heaven and Earth until, in the divine economy that rules the universe, a place is found suited to the incipience of thy penance. . . . But, first, thou shalt know the pangs of ignominious death, spurned by the man whose immortal soul thou hast conspired to ruin. Then thou shalt be born again. In the flesh thou shalt taste the temptations to which thou hast succumbed, but with this difference: Thine eyes shall be opened, thou wilt be no stranger to the dangers which encompass thee, and yet thou wilt be mortal! Such will be the penalty of thy crimes. Thou wilt yet live to learn that not only mayst thou do evil voluntarily, but unwittingly, simply by thy presence in the world, by reason of the fact that thou hast existence. It may not be thy will to injure, thy object in life, nor even thy fault; the possible harm will reside in the fatality of thy nature. Know that no spirit returns whence it sprang unpurified. Should it be smirched in its original existence, it will be tried and tried again in the fiery furnace of successive experience until it assumes the immaculate purity

of its archetype. . . . Farewell, farewell! Octavia's spirit, too long detained, hastens to its account, relieved of its last behest. . . . Poppæa! Poppæa! Poppæa!—a long farewell!”

Long after the Roman twilight had deepened into night, her startled attendants discovered the empress lying prostrate upon the floor of her chamber beside an overturned tripod, near which lay a box of cypress-wood containing a dagger encrusted with dry blood, and wrapped in an embroidered napkin.

Upon being apprised of the critical condition of his imperial consort, Nero issued instant commands for the removal of the court from Rome to his ancestral estate at Antium, averring that his wife's need of fresher air and quiet was peremptory.

But, from the moment of her resuscitation from that deathlike swoon, Poppæa Sabina's lips never again framed a smile. Not even amid the exceeding joy of the emperor at the birth of a daughter did the rigidity of her wan visage relax; not even when the little one was named Augusta, the same stately title being conferred upon Poppæa, did the mother testify the slightest satisfaction. The sweetness of life for her seemed to have turned to gall; apparently her heedless feet threaded a narrow way, whose walls were darkness. Nevertheless, Nero, in the transports of his

paternal pride, decreed that a temple should be raised to *Fecunditas*, and that a contest after the model of the *Actian* rites should be performed. Further, he ordained that golden images of the *Fortunæ* should be placed upon the throne of *Jupiter Capitolinus*, and that *Circensian* games should be celebrated at *Antium* in honor of the *Claudian* and *Domitian* families, just as they had been at *Bovillæ* in homage to the *Julian* race.

But, as if the austere empress courted grief, the joyous acclaim was shortly turned to sounds of woe. From day to day the infant princess, fondest hope of a great empire, lingered until a merciful death claimed her for his own. Thereupon the emperor, as he had rejoiced, so he sorrowed immoderately, while, in the hope of relieving his affliction, the obsequious Senate voted honors to the dead babe as to a goddess, decreeing a couch, a temple, and a priest.

Yet nothing short of a return to his licentious course of life served to cheer *Nero*, already wearied of the morbid melancholy of *Poppæa*. The quinquennial games being at hand, the emperor prepared to appear among the hirelings upon the public stage, while the Senate, vainly hoping to avert the disgrace, offered him the "victory in song," as well as the "crown of eloquence," to veil the indecorum of his threatened exhibition.

"I need not the favor and protection of the Senate," declared the self-willed potentate; "I am

a match for my competitors, and would obtain the honors due my talents by the conscientious decision of my judges."

Thereupon he repaired to Poppæa, to find her moping alone in a retired corner of the palace.

"I shall recite a poem to-day," he remarked, standing erect before the crest-fallen sharer of his throne, "and, if the people importune me, I shall play upon the harp."

She raised haggard eyes to his glowing face, but made no reply.

"You will go to the theatre, will you not?" he continued.

"No," she answered, sullenly, "I am ill."

"Always ill!" he cried; "always morose. . . . Poppæa, I scarcely recognize in you the woman for love of whom I divorced Octavia."

A shudder of horror rent her frame from head to foot at mention of that name, but she commanded herself.

"Why do you not murder old Atticus Vestinus," she sneered, "divorce me, and take Statilia* to your bed, since you are weary of me?"

"Such is your will?"

"For myself I care not."

"So be it; we will consider your wish. . . . You will go to the theatre?"

"No!—nor ever again."

Thus they parted in avowed hostility, but so

* Nero's third empress.

far was the altercation from affecting the imperial humor that in the recital of his wretched doggerel Nero aroused the theatre to the wildest enthusiasm, while in order to stay the clamorous applause he seized his harp and mounted the orchestra where, in strict compliance with theatrical custom, he refused to sit when fatigued, and mopped the perspiration from his brow with the garment that he wore. Finally, dropping upon his knee and stretching forth his hand in supplicatory fashion to the multitude, he awaited the voices of the judges with affected agitation.

And the eventful day closed with a magnificent chariot race, in which the emperor by consummate handling of the reins outstripped all competitors. Night had spread her ebon mantle ere the festival closed, and in the glare of massed torches, with which the faint radiance of the crescent moon struggled wanly, Nero drove to the palace in a chariot heaped with the garlands and trophies of the day. With some remnant of his lingering fondness, he sought his wife's apartments, only to find each chamber as dark as Erebus, save where a stray moonbeam fell athwart the marble floors. At last, lying across one of these wavering shafts of light, he descried a shadowy form.

“Rise, Poppæa!” he cried, “rise and congratulate the victor!”

No answer rewarded his proud command.

“Poppæa! Do you sleep?” he demanded, with rising anger.

“No!” came the low response; “would that I could sleep! I am wearied of myself, wearied of you, wearied of life! I am tired of neglect!”

In a fit of passion provoked by her exasperating indifference, he raised his heavily buskined foot and dealt her body a violent blow.

A groan of mortal agony, dreadful in its significance, resounded through the silent chamber, and when the startled monarch raised her in his arms, Poppæa’s expiring breath was upon her lips.

“The warning of Octavia’s ghost is verified,” she moaned, “at last I know the pangs of ignominious death; I am spurned by the man whose immortal soul I have conspired to ruin.”

“Hush, hush, Poppæa!” he wailed, contritely; “your words will kill me! . . . Oh, dearest wife, faithful empress, canst thou forgive!”

“I forgive, and thank thee for this last, this greatest of all thy favors. I am released at last from hateful bondage. Freed, I may go, I know not whither, but I am satisfied to enter upon the penance too long delayed. Had I lived, I should have borne thee another heir, but the immortal gods in their wisdom have decreed that the issue of the guilty Poppæa shall fail; and it is better so. . . . Oh, Cæsar, repent ere it be too late! . . . Nay, do not kiss me so; this is not farewell, . . . for we shall meet . . . again!”

As a conspicuous honor, the body of Poppæa Sabina was not placed upon the funeral-pyre and burned according to the rites of the Romans, but was embalmed with rare spices and laid in the tomb of the Julian family with extreme dignity and homage. And it is recorded that all Arabia in an entire year never produced so prodigious a quantity of spices as was consumed at the obsequies of this degenerate princess.

Yet Nero mourned her death as he had mourned the loss of his apotheosized daughter, while from the public rostrum he magnified her beauty and gifts which he was pleased to treat as virtues.

Thus bereft of the pilfered purples and stripped of its meretricious mask, the naked soul of Poppæa wandered forth into the grayness of the nether world, there to await its summons back to earth; for, as the Gospel saith,

“Verily, verily, except a man be born again, he can not see the kingdom of God. . . . That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.”

PART II.
THE STORY OF HORTENSE.

Il n'y a pas que le mal qu'on fait volontairement, il y a celui qu'on fait sans le vouloir; et il y a des êtres qui, sans vouloir faire le mal, le font par leur seule présence, par le seul motif qu'ils existent. Ce n'est pas leur volonté, ce n'est pas leur but, ce n'est pas leur faute, c'est la fatalité de leur nature.

DENAYROUZE.

I.

THE PROTÉGÉE DE NOTRE DAME DE COMPASSION.

IN a gloomy thoroughfare that bounds the farther side of the neglected Cimetière du Mont Parnasse, an unpretentious façade of gray stone rears itself, weather-stained and altogether shabby. This, the asylum of the Sœurs de Notre Dame de Compassion, is decidedly as un-Parisian an edifice as it is possible to picture. The clotted dust upon the copings of its grimy windows, the straw and refuse which the wandering wind has swept into the corners of its dingy gateway, all eloquently attest the earnestness with which the inmates of the house court seclusion from the world.

Plainly it is not the world these holy ladies seek, but the world that seeks them in their retire-

ment, since a *fiacre*, or more richly-appointed equipage from the fashionable faubourgs across the river, standing before their portals is no unusual sight.

To the initiated, the place is known as a seminary, where the orphaned daughters of worthy but indigent parents are carefully educated to become governesses and *demoiselles de compagnie* to families who are able to afford such luxuries. It may seem harsh to put the facts of the case plainly, but, being compelled, we must admit that the House of Our Lady of Compassion is none other than one of the most favored intelligence-offices in all Paris.

The young woman whom the Sisterhood recommends rarely returns to the Rue du Champ d'Asile; her duties having been faithfully accomplished in one family, she is accredited to another, and so on; or perhaps she marries above her station, and gladly forgets that she ever was a pensioner upon charity. At all events it is an uncommon occurrence for the Sisters of Our Lady of Compassion to be called upon to provide for one of their *graduées*.

Bearing this fact in mind, we shall be able in some sort to appreciate the astonishment of Madame la Supérieure upon being suddenly informed one fine summer's evening that a *protégée*, one Mademoiselle Hortense de Barthe, had arrived bag and baggage from Fontainebleau, whither she had

gone to fill the post of companion to an elderly lady of great wealth, and was below stairs earnestly demanding an audience.

"Hortense de Barthe!" echoed the Mother Superior, incredulously.

"Hortense de Barthe, indeed, reverend mother," replied the sister.

"And you tell me, good Véronique, that she has brought her portmanteau?"

"Her portmanteau and a wrap."

"Send her to me at once! Something serious must have happened."

A crimson beam of the setting sun fell softly in at the casement, left open to admit the timid fragrance that exhaled from a little pent-up garden in the center of the building, and it was into this shaft of blood-red light that a young girl presently came and humbly knelt.

A brunette of the most refined type, Hortense de Barthe gave ample promise of becoming a woman of remarkable beauty. To already faultless features was added a figure of exquisite symmetry that lacked but the perfecting touch of maturity. Even in a quiescent state the face, colorless, as though chiseled from marble, with its intelligent eyes and firmly-modeled lips, was sufficiently attractive, but, when animated, it possessed an irresistible fascination.

Something of this witchery may have appealed to the good lady who stood before the suppliant,

one hand resting hesitatingly upon the *prie-Dieu* from which she had risen.

"Your blessing, reverend mother," murmured the girl in a voice which filled the gloomy chamber with its melody.

"You have it, daughter. . . . Now, rise and explain your unexpected return to us. . . . Do not tell me that my old friend, Madame Rochlembert, is—dead!"

"No, mother, Madame Rochlembert is enjoying her usual health."

"Heaven be praised for that! . . . Then why have you quitted Fontainebleau?"

"I have been dismissed."

"*Dismissed!* Dismissed by Madame Rochlembert, the gentlest, most amiable woman in the world? . . . O Hortense! *how* have you misdeemed yourself?"

A sparkle of indomitable spirit flashed into the dark eyes of Mademoiselle de Barthe as she replied:

"You wrong me, mother, by supposing that I *could* misdeem myself!"

"But the fact remains that you are dismissed. Madame Rochlembert is not an unreasonable woman. We were intimate friends until I took holy orders, and I know her as well as I know myself. Indeed, I considered your future happily assured when I relinquished you into her keeping."

“And I would gladly have remained with your friend forever. I was perfectly content until—”

“Until—what, Hortense? *What* has occurred?”

“Until I was dismissed,” answered the girl with evident effort.

Madame la Supérieure’s face darkened, and her voice embodied a threat as she exclaimed:

“You are mocking me, mademoiselle! It is plain that you do not intend to explain the cause of your dismissal; if such is the case, understand that our interest in you ceases forthwith. The young women we recommend to posts of trust must be without the shadow of reproach. You are, perhaps, the first of our pupils who has returned to us dishonored by being discharged from employment. If you persist in keeping the cause of this dishonor to yourself, we shall be compelled to say that we can not conscientiously recommend you in future; and, such being the case, we can only offer you the shelter of our house until you have made some independent arrangement for your future.”

“Mother!”

The woman of God had turned away with the intention of resuming her interrupted devotions; but, at the sound of that imperious voice, she paused.

“Mother, did you not recommend me to Madame Rochlembert?” demanded Hortense.

"I did," was the reply, "and conscientiously, since you have been as satisfactory a pupil in all respects as ever found asylum beneath this roof."

"I thank you, reverend mother. And now permit me to add that, during the eighteen months that I have passed in the employ of Madame Rochlembert, I have in all things striven to be as dutiful as ever I strove while your respected eye rested upon me. If I have been so unfortunate as to displease her, believe me, I have done so involuntarily. Therefore, when I tell you that I have been dismissed from her service, I have told you all that I know. I can give no reason, since none was given me. I was simply ordered to leave Fontainebleau."

The straightforward words, seconded by the evident candor of the speaker, carried conviction to the suspicious mind of the Lady Superior. She turned quickly, and, extending her hands, drew the girl into her embrace, even imprinting a maternal kiss upon the low brow.

"I believe you, dear child," she said, "though the whole affair is most incomprehensible. . . . But let us go down into the garden; it is stiflingly warm in this chamber, and I wish to speak with you concerning your future."

When, presently, they were seated side by side upon a bench, above which a silver poplar spread its quivering foliage, while here and there a timid star pierced the faint olive of heaven's dome, the

good lady remarked, reverting involuntarily to the thought that was uppermost in her mind :

“Henriette Rochlembert must have changed since I knew her. . . . Was she ever impatient with you, Hortense ?”

“Never, mother,” came the dreamy reply.

“Did it ever strike you that she dwelt over-much upon the loss of the late maréchal, her husband ?”

“She mourned him as a dutiful wife should mourn.”

“Her grief did not become a mania ?”

“Oh, no ! Far from it ; she was genial and cheery to a degree.”

A momentary silence ensued, during which the stars twinkled with more assurance, and the rustle of the poplar leaves became audible in the rising breeze.

It was madame who resumed her train of thought.

“Monsieur le Maréchal left my old friend quite wealthy, did he not ?”

“Apparently very wealthy.”

“And the daughter, Angèle, is married, is she not ?”

“Yes ; she is happily married to Monsieur le Baron de Montravel, who owns a charming *château* near Vichy ; we passed the month of May with them.”

“Indeed ! Angèle was lovely. . . . And where

is Paul Rochlembert? Ah, what a model son he was! I used frequently to see him when he was studying at the *École des Beaux Arts*. He had decided genius. Where is he now?"

"Paul Rochlembert is *dead!*"

Had not the twilight deepened sensibly, the good mother must have noted the ghastly pallor that overspread the countenance of Hortense de Barthe at mention of that name; while, had she been less interested, she could not have failed to be struck by the vibrant anguish in the voice that murmured:

"Paul Rochlembert is *dead!*"

"*Dead!* . . . Alas! poor Henriette, unhappy mother! Oh, may the good Lord be with her in this, the death-stroke to her fondest hopes! . . . I live so removed from the world that I have heard nothing of this. How did he die, Hortense?"

A precious moment had been granted her, during which Mademoiselle de Barthe had found time to repress her emotion, and consequently was able to answer with some show of composure:

"Monsieur Rochlembert was induced by his friends to join a regiment departing for Algiers."

"And he was killed?"

"Killed in an engagement near Oran."

"Mother of Mercy! How long since?"

"The news reached Fontainebleau day before yesterday."

"So *recently*! . . . O Hortense! what did you do for the poor, stricken woman?"

"Nothing, mother, though Heaven knows I should have been glad to comfort her. But she shut herself up in her apartment, stoutly refusing to admit any one except her maid. Early yesterday morning Madame la Baronne de Montravel arrived, and was admitted to her mother; and, after a day of indescribable misery, Javotte, the maid, brought me a note from Madame Rochlembert, directing me to pack up my effects and leave Fontainebleau at once."

"How mysterious! . . . Did you not see my old friend again?"

"No, nor Madame de Montravel. Both ladies pointedly refused to be disturbed."

"Poor souls! They were beside themselves with grief."

"Perhaps so."

"Oh! you may be sure of it! . . . As soon as I can arrange it, I shall go to Fontainebleau and offer such consolation—as I have to offer."

Hereupon another silence, longer and more significant than the preceding one, ensued, during which Hortense stooped absently and gathered a snow-white blossom that glimmered wanly among its fellows in the parterre at her feet; and, as she inhaled its perfume, she said:

"If you go to Fontainebleau, perhaps Madame

Rochlembert will deign to explain to you the cause of my dismissal."

"Undoubtedly she will; in fact, I shall insist upon an explanation."

"In the mean time," continued the girl, apparently heedless of the remark, "I shall be ill at ease if I remain out of employment, and am obliged to subsist upon your bounty. I am far happier when my time is fully occupied. . . . Have you no opportunity for me, mother?"

Though listening with but an indifferent ear to the words, so absorbed was she in the calamity which had befallen her friend, Madame la Supérieure suddenly started with renewed interest, and laid her hand upon her pupil's arm.

"Hortense," she exclaimed, "would you go to England?"

"Willingly," came the prompt reply; "why not? What matters it whither I go?"

"But I would like you to be happy and well suited."

"Oh, I shall be all that if I can lose myself in the interests of others. . . . What opportunity is there in England for me?"

"An English lady of title has visited me within the past few days," exclaimed madame; "she is most desirous of securing a competent person as governess to her little son; of course, it is a *sine qua non* that the governess shall speak the English

language. . . . Would you care for the position, Hortense?"

"I should be thankful for it, mother!" eagerly cried the girl; "I should have the advantage of seeing a new country; my English is my strong point, and I love the care of children."

"The more I think of it, the more I regret the opportunity you may have lost."

"Lost! Oh, do not say that, good mother!"

"But the lady called upon me on Saturday of last week, and it is now Wednesday. At the time I had no eligible candidate in the house, and was obliged to so inform her. She seemed in haste to return to her husband in London, and, in all probability, I fear she has secured a governess elsewhere, and has left Paris."

During this speech Hortense had gained her feet, and was standing before the Lady Superior in an attitude that betrayed her agitation.

"Oh!" she cried, almost bitterly, "and I would have given *anything* to have left France, . . . for the sake of the change. What is the lady's address in Paris, mother? Let me go there at once, and ascertain whether she has gone to England. There may be a chance, and, if so, I—"

"I will write to the lady, and dispatch the note by messenger this evening," interposed madame, rising, and making use of her most authoritative tone. "I should not sanction your visiting an hotel alone, and after dark, and probably

you would find that it would not serve your purposes to do so. You may safely permit me to manage the affair for you, . . . and, if you are weary after your journey, you may retire to your old chamber, which you will find vacant and in readiness for you."

Being thus dismissed, Hortense de Barthe sought the prim little room, every slightest object within which had grown familiar to her by reason of long years of occupancy—years that ran back into the misty realm of childhood. The usual candle stood upon the little table beneath the crucified Saviour in plaster that decorated the unpainted wall; but she did not light it; instead, she closed the case-ment to shut out the incessant rumble that reached her ear from the neighboring Boulevard d'Enfer, and even drawing the dimity curtains to veil the lambent starlight, she sank upon her knees beside the bed with hands fast locked.

"What would she say—oh! what would she say if she knew *all*?" she wailed in tearless anguish. "What would she say if she knew how I have loved in vain, what a blank life seems to me, how like a dead weight my heart lies in my bosom!"

Here her hands unclasped, and presently she pressed fervently to her lips some object that revealed a fleeting gleam of gold.

"Paul! Paul!" she breathed, "*dead*, and blistering among the dead upon the sands of that

burning desert! O God! if I thought that I had had any hand in his most untimely murder—it matters not how innocently—oh! I should go mad, and, making an end of my worthless existence, go to seek him in that realm where all is peace!”

Meanwhile, Madame la Supérieure had retired to her oratory, where, with her wonted composure, she had indicted a brief missive in accordance with her promise. Thereupon, touching a bell, she gave the note to a sister with the request that it be forwarded to its destination without delay.

And the superscription, in a firm, round hand, read as follows:

“LADY CONSTANCE LOCKROY,
“*Hôtel Bristol, Place Vendôme.*”

Matins were scarcely concluded upon the following morning when the gate-bell of the House of Our Lady of Compassion clanged loudly, its brazen vibrations penetrating even the refectory where the sisters and their pupils were discussing stale rolls and aqueous coffee to the intoning of Latin prayers. Presently a respectful rap sounded upon the oaken door, and, upon its being opened by Sister Véronique, the *concierge* appeared with a glitter of excitement in her pretty birdlike eyes, and a card in her hand.

Upon the presentation of this card to the Mère

Supérieure, the lady rose, with her habitual composure, be it observed, and, pausing an instant before the table at which Mademoiselle de Barthe sat among the gaping *élèves*, she remarked, in a lowered tone :

“Prepare yourself to appear when summoned, Hortense. Lady Lockroy has condescended to answer my note of last evening in person.”

Thereupon she swept majestically away to receive her client in the guests’ parlor.

Lady Constance Lockroy stood before an open window, which gave upon the inner garden, and admitted a flood of glorious sunshine. A typical daughter of Albion, she was fair to look upon, and gracious with that indefinable charm which English women of breeding possess. Young, intelligent, well-favored, if not positively beautiful, she seemed, from the topmost of her sunny curls to the soles of her dainty feet, the very embodiment of the title she so gracefully bore.

Some poetical genius has been pleased to associate womankind with the floral kingdom. Were we to admit his flattering fancy, we should liken the Lady Constance Lockroy to a starry spray of her native primula.

“Pray pardon me for disturbing you at so unseasonable an hour,” she said, advancing to meet Madame la Supérieure, “but I had arranged to leave for London by way of Boulogne this morning, and I can not well defer my departure. Con-

sequently, I have been forced to call upon you before Paris is awake."

"Permit me to assure you, madame," was the courteous reply, "that you have not disturbed us in the slightest degree. We are *pas à la mode* here, in that we have already been to chapel and have breakfasted."

"Indeed! . . . Then I may at once proceed to business. The young woman you mentioned in your note of last evening is with you?"

"Yes, madame, she has unexpectedly returned to us. But pray be seated. . . . I thought at once of you and your requirements the moment Mademoiselle de Barthe appeared yester evening."

"You are very kind!"

"But perhaps you have secured a governess for your little son?"

"No; and in consequence I was about to return to London in despair. My husband telegraphed me yesterday to return at once on account of the unexpected arrival of my brother from India; so I should have had to go without the governess for Floris but for your very thoughtful note."

"Perhaps, however, Mademoiselle de Barthe may not please you, madame," remarked the Mother Superior, who had been watching the play of expression upon the lovely face with unfeigned admiration.

"If she speaks English and has your recommendation, I shall engage her," was the prompt

reply; "I shall engage her though she were a Gorgon in appearance."

"On the contrary, Hortense de Barthe is a very beautiful young woman."

"So much the better!" exclaimed Lady Lockroy with a gay smile; "my Floris is quite as much of a cavalier as any of his illustrious ancestors, and is already a devout admirer of feminine loveliness."

"He has learned to be a critic in an incomparable school, madame," observed the Lady Superior, with an admiring glance.

"Oh, you flatter me! . . . No, no; I am simply a supremely happy wife and mother. . . . So, then, mademoiselle speaks English?"

"Fluently, and I can recommend her with the utmost confidence."

"It seems almost too good to be true!" cried the Lady Constance, pressing her slender, gloved hands together in childlike enthusiasm; "has she ever taken charge of children?"

"Never, madame."

"Ah, well—Floris is a docile boy and very gentle."

A moment of hesitation ensued on the part of the Lady Superior ere she rejoined:

"I feel it my duty to inform you, madame, that Mademoiselle de Barthe is in some respects rather a peculiar person."

"How peculiar?"

"She is a child of moods, and suffers seriously from melancholy at times."

"Oh, we shall soon charm her from any such weakness," laughed Lady Lockroy; "blue-devils are not at ease in our cheery home at Surbiton."

"I can well imagine such to be the case while *you* are there, madame; but Hortense's is a restless spirit; besides innate refinement she possesses an indomitable pride which has sorely perplexed me. She is a lady born, to the very tips of her fingers."

"We shall make her one of us; she will soon forget her station. *Apropos*, does not the *de* in her name signify that she is well-born?"

"Her father was of gentle birth; her mother was an Italian *cantatrice*, Antonia Rosa, a charming singer. She died in giving birth to Hortense, and her unfortunate husband committed suicide in desperation at her loss. The child was brought to us, and we appealed to her father's relatives in vain; they discarded her on the ground that she was the offspring of a *mésalliance*."

"A genuine romance! Indeed you excite my curiosity beyond measure. May I see Mademoiselle de Barthe before I go?"

"With pleasure, madame."

Madame la Supérieure touched a bell, and the faithful Véronique was dispatched to summon the candidate. That the two young women formed an almost dramatic contrast need scarcely be said:

the one so blonde and blithe in her modish attire; the other so brunette, so *rêveuse*, so like some lovely Cinderella in her simple gown of gray cashmere. The picture presented as the pair spontaneously clasped each other by the hand—the broad belt of sunshine that glorified the dingy room, the glimpse of brilliant summer without, the chill expanse of bare wall within, and last, though by no means least, the imposing figure of the nun in her dusky robes standing apart in the shadow—can better be imagined than described. It was a picturesque moment in this prosaic century worthy the pencil of an artist.

“So you are Mademoiselle de Barthe!” exclaimed Lady Lockroy, waiving the formality of introduction; “I am Lady Lockroy, and I have come to ask you to go to England to be my friend and the preceptress of my little son.”

“Our reverend mother has assured you of my willingness to accept the position, madame?” replied Hortense, with a smile, which betrayed her instinctive liking for the fascinating woman.

“Not in so many words, and I warn you that I should not have permitted her to decline my offer for you.”

“Neither should I, madame, having seen you.”

“Then it is agreed? You will come to England?”

“Gladly.”

“Now I want you to make a conquest of

Floris, as you have of his mamma. You will find him waiting for me in the carriage with Kirby. Pray go and ask him to come to me here."

With a lighter heart than her bosom had known in many a day, Hortense hastened away to the court-yard, and presently the mother's ear caught the prattle of a childish voice filling the echoing corridor with its music.

"Ah! you hear?" she said delightedly to the Lady Superior; "mademoiselle has made a favorable impression upon the future Sir Floris Lockroy! Hear how animated he is!"

Hereupon Hortense appeared, gallantly escorted by a radiant boy of six years, whose sunny hair and smiling eyes found their counterpart in those of his mother. His slender figure was attired in jacket and knickerbockers of light corduroy, while in his disengaged hand he carried a tiny cane and Scotch bonnet decorated with a heron's plume.

"Floris," said Lady Lockroy, "this lady is Madame la Supérieure."

"*J'ai l'honneur de vous saluer, Madame la Supérieure,*" replied the boy, with a salute as gallant as his accent was exquisite, which madame acknowledged with an amused *révérence*. Then, turning to her ladyship, he added, "Mademoiselle tells me that she is going to England to live with us, mamma."

"Yes; and you are pleased, Floris?"

“Extremely much!”

“How superlative you are, my dear! But I do not blame you under the circumstances. Now you will have some one to row with you on the river, and walk with you in dear old Hampton Court. But, mind you, English will be prohibited!”

“I suspect that the little *milord* is able to choose his language,” interposed the Mother Superior.

Master Floris acknowledged the compliment by raising his cap to his lips and indulging in a deprecatory smile.

“But you speak the French fluently, do you not, monsieur?”

“*Oh, non, Madame la Supérieure; mais je parle assez de faire mon chemin.*”

At this the ladies laughed heartily, but the young baronet, quite unabashed, held his ground without a blush.

“Now, when will you come to us, mademoiselle?” inquired Lady Lockroy; “I need not assure you that we shall await your advent with much impatience.”

“Why should I not accompany you, madame?”

Her ladyship’s eyes consulted the clock upon the mantel-piece.

“But it is nine o’clock,” she observed, “and the tidal train leaves the Gare du Nord at ten; we are obliged to take it.”

“An hour is more than I require to make my preparations,” urged Hortense; “indeed, ten minutes will suffice.”

“In that case,” remarked Master Floris, “I insist that mademoiselle accompanies us. She looks like a good sailor, and you know, mamma, that you and Kirby are bound to be ill on the Channel, which is horribly stupid for me.”

“Appearances are deceitful, my boy,” laughed her ladyship; “mademoiselle may be as susceptible to a chopping sea as poor Kirby and myself; however, if she will hasten her arrangements, we can offer her a seat in the carriage.”

It was a joyous little party that the dust-begrimed gates of Notre Dame de Compassion closed upon, and it was a very self-complacent Lady Superior who returned to her oratory to find the morning's mail awaiting her perusal.

Uppermost among the missives lay one post-marked Fontainebleau, and superinscribed in an uncertain hand, which promptly brought an expression of pained recognition to the good lady's eyes.

“Alas, poor Henriette!” she murmured, “how I grieve for thee! and how I dread to read thy words, disconsolate, bereaved mother!”

Nevertheless, she broke the seal, and applied herself to the reading of the letter, which ran somewhat as follows:

“To whom should I turn in this, the hour of

my deepest tribulation, if not to you, my very dear and tried friend? Doubtless by this time you have heard how, for the second time, the good Lord has seen fit to lay his hand heavily upon me. When the prop and support of my life were taken from me by the death of my dear husband, I grieved, but was comforted, for had I not my blessed son, my Paul? How nobly he came forward, endeavoring, in gentle sympathy and devotion, to supply his father's place, to fill the aching void in my heart, only I, the object of such filial adoration, can ever know! There are sons and sons the world over, but my Paul was a very paragon of sons—a son without blemish, a man far, far too perfect for this earthly sphere. He was a blessing lent me by the Lord, and the Lord has seen fit in his wisdom to reclaim him, to take him back into his own bosom. But, oh! my dearly beloved friend, though I struggle, I can not feel myself reconciled to this grievous, this irremediable bereavement. I can not forgive myself for parting with my boy even for an hour. I can not but deplore to my dying day the causes that led to his going into Africa to be ruthlessly murdered by a barbarous horde. And this agonizing thought obliges me to mention a matter upon which I fervently pray I may soon cease to dwell. I beseech you to believe, dear friend, that it is in no captious spirit that I speak when I say that I have been absolutely forced to dismiss the young woman you sent

me as companion—to banish her forever from my sight. I do not blame Hortense de Barthe for loving my son—she must have been something less than human if she could constantly meet him and not love him—but I blame her—nay, I should curse her but for my Christian faith—that *she made him fall in love with her*. I know not what baleful fascination she possesses, what irresistible spell she exerts over men; indeed, I knew nothing of what was going on beneath my very eyes until one day Paul came to me and besought me to permit him to make the girl his wife. I was horrified, for, though I could give my instinctive aversion to the girl no expression in words, something within me commanded me to resist such an unequal, such a vaguely threatening alliance. In my dilemma I consulted Paul's friends, and they earnestly advised me to separate him from the object of his unfortunate love—in a word, to insist upon his accepting a lieutenancy in a regiment about departing for Algiers. At last I was induced to approve the plan, and soon persuaded my dutiful boy to accept my view of the case. I promised him that, if after a year's campaign he could not conquer his love, I would accede to his wishes, and grant my blessing upon his marriage. So, full of hope in the future, he left me—*never to return!* And, though my last hope in life has been crushed by his untimely death, I can almost thank Almighty God that he is safe in heaven rather than

looking forward to his marriage with a woman who inspires me with such distrust. I do not mean to convey the idea that I hold Hortense de Barthe responsible for the death of my son, though the fact remains that, had not an inexplicable fate brought them together, he would now be living, the cheer and comfort of my declining years. Unable longer to bear the presence of the girl, I have dismissed her. Should she return to you, I beg you not to mention these frank admissions to her. So far as I know, she has done no voluntary wrong. It may be due to my distressed frame of mind that I regard her with such distrust and aversion; and yet it is my firm conviction that she is ill-starred, a sort of Ate, as yet unconscious of her power to work human ill.

“I beseech you in your prayers to commend me to a comforting and forgiving Providence, for my present misery is almost heavier than I can bear. Pardon me for burdening you with my lamentation, and believe me, beloved and reverend sister,

Your devoted and suffering friend,

“HENRIETTE ROCHLEMBERT.”

The letter slipped from the reader's hands and fell fluttering at her feet, while a deep-drawn sigh disturbed the oppressive silence.

““A sort of Ate, as yet unconscious of her power to work human ill!” she breathed, quot-

ing the significant words with an expressive shudder.

A distant clock chimed the hour of ten to the brilliant summer day. The holy woman started.

“They have gone past recall!” she added; “God help them!”

II.

IN THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW.

It is that inherent predilection for privacy, that characteristic yearning for as complete segregation as his circumstances permit, that impels an Englishman to fashion the front of his dwelling with austerity, while upon its rear he lavishes those graces of decoration which render a British home the most charming in all the civilized world. The custom obtains throughout the entire kingdom, invariably in country towns, generally where neighbors are contiguous.

It need scarcely be said that the residences of the landed nobility and gentry are exceptions to this rule, since their domains surround their houses, and are held inviolate from the eye of the stranger. Such favorites of fortune hedge themselves with massive walls and barred gates, that remain a standing menace from generation to generation.

Possess but the "open sesame," and one can not fail to approve the advantages of the rigid seclusion that reign within; possess it not, and one may journey from end to end of the land, and leave it in absolute ignorance of the felicitous condition of an eminently domestic people.

A conservative by birth and breeding, Sir Ashton Lockroy, baronet, had been born and reared in a rather stately mansion at Surbiton-on-Thames—a mansion whose dreary, tenantless-looking front abutted all too closely upon the high-road, and was devoted to the servants' quarters and the various offices, while its rear, in startling distinction, was sunny, architecturally fine, and adorned with conservatories, terraces, and gardens, that swept downward to meet the bank of the tranquil river. From beyond its gates Lockroy Lodge looked a gray, forbidding pile; from the river it presented a captivating aspect, indicative of luxurious comfort and refinement.

The fact had never occurred to Sir Ashton's ancestors, and consequently never to him, that the front of the lodge commanded an exchanting prospect of the Surrey hills, while the view from the rear, though it included the river, fell tamely away over the Hampton flats. Sir Ashton was by no means ignorant of the existence of the Surrey hills, but his family had turned its back upon them from time immemorial, and he knew no reason why he should alter his attitude in that regard.

Indeed, he would have opened his fine gray eyes very wide indeed had he been counseled to reclaim the front rooms of his house from neglect, and enjoy the advantages they afforded.

It was to this typical establishment that he had brought home his bride, the lovely Constance Clavering, and it was to Lockroy Lodge that the Lady Constance, in her turn, imported Mademoiselle Hortense de Barthe.

Conformably to her mysteriously luxurious tastes, the place possessed an irresistible charm for the daughter of the Italian *cantatrice*; she fairly reveled in the richly-appointed drawing-rooms, with their curios from every quarter of the globe, and their great potpourri-jars exhaling a dreamy perfume; among the classic statuary and books in the library she was lost in Elysian fancies; in the palm-house of an evening she would stand vaguely dreaming, with the soft radiance of the glowing lotus-bells about her; but it was in the spacious picture-gallery that she realized an intuitive delight that puzzled her beyond measure. In this sequestered chamber presided two stately busts—the one of Boadicea, Britain's heroic queen; the other of Messalina the Dissolute. Both effigies exerted an irresistible attraction for the strange girl.

“I can not understand their fascination for me,” she once remarked to the Reverend Aubrey Clavering, the Lady Constance's brother.

"Perhaps because you are more than half an Italian," he replied.

"Ah! but Boadicea was an Icenian, while no woman would care to own herself the compatriot of Messalina. Still, I feel almost intimate with them."

"They were contemporaries; you may have known them."

"Pray, how is that possible?" she inquired, curiously.

"Through a pre-existence — metempsychosis, whatever you may choose to call it," replied the gentleman with a quizzical smile.

"Can it be possible that you give an instant's credence to such a preposterous fancy?"

"Plato did, as also some recent German philosopher."

"But do *you*?"

"Decidedly not. Do you?"

"Have I not just termed it a preposterous fancy?"

"Ay, you have so *termed* it. Words cost nothing, and the breath required to utter them less."

"Can you mean that I believe in the theory of the transmigration of souls?" she exclaimed.

"You have volunteered that you feel 'almost intimate' with these celebrated ladies. Were not these your words?"

"They were idly uttered. I was jesting."

"A jest's prosperity lies in the ear of him that

hears it, never in the tongue of him that makes it.' ”

“ Then you take me seriously ? ”

“ I take you for a very singular young lady, mademoiselle. . . . But there is Floris calling. I came to awake you from your dream of—shall I say the past?—and to tell you that he is ready for a walk.”

No one in his senses ever thought of taking offense at the *badinage* of the Reverend Aubrey Clavering. A more genial, thoroughly engaging, and, at the same time, soundly sensible man one might travel far and wide to find. The half-brother of Lady Lockroy and at least fifteen years her senior, he had been father, brother, friend, and mentor, all in one, to her; his wisdom she prized above rubies; to his counsel and advice she lent an ever-ready ear, while in his disinterested love she intuitively felt that she possessed a shelter not even second to the affection of her husband. This may be said without disparagement to Sir Ashton, who had amply proved himself a model husband. Unquestionably he was far more of the earth earthy than his brother-in-law, despite the unclerical *savoir-faire* of the latter, but this fact would naturally find explanation in the relative positions in life of the pair. With ample wealth at his command, Sir Ashton Lockroy had attained to the fame of being a discriminating *bon-viveur*, a cross-country rider of address, a man of

refined tastes and unimpeachable honor, a husband whose fidelity was second to none, and "a downright good fellow." Possibly, had he possessed such a woman for a mother as was the one who bore his name, the world, beyond the limited circle of his acquaintance, might have had cause to revere the day that gave him birth; but these are reflections upon the late Lady Lockroy which are ungenerous, since, were she in the flesh, she would still be too feeble of mind to rebut them.

Be it granted, then, that Lady Constance possessed a husband to be proud of, and a brother who was a paragon of filial devotion and gentle manhood.

Small wonder that she was in haste to welcome this beloved relative back to England after a sojourn of years in India. And now he had been a guest at Lockroy Lodge some six weeks, and had not even been permitted to hint at his return to the East.

Upon this particular September morning, having seen his nephew depart in company with Mademoiselle De Barthe for their customary stroll along the road that fringes the river-bank in the direction of old Kingston, famed for its ancient coronation-stone, the Reverend Aubrey Clavering sauntered leisurely through the house, passing out upon the sunny terrace. Here, evidently much to his surprise, he encountered his sister reclining upon a bamboo chair beneath an awning, languidly

and under certain difficulties examining a copy of the "Times," which she was pleased to hold upside down.

"Oh, Aubrey," she murmured, as his slender shadow fell between her and the garish prospect, "what good spirit sent you this way? I am actually so debilitated by the heat that I can not read."

"Evidently."

"But I shall be glad to talk."

"Intelligibly?"

"Why not?"

"If you propose to talk as you have been reading, I fancy I shall gather about as much information concerning the ideas in your pretty noddle as you must have regarding the topics of the day."

"How *can* you be so vigorous in such weather?"

"How can you be so languid? . . . I thought you were going up to town with Ashton?"

"I thought to go, but, when I considered Regent Street toasting, frying, seething beneath such a sun as this, my courage oozed—"

"And Ashton offered to do your errands."

"Only two or three."

"He spoils you!"

"Have I not enough to contend with in this heat," laughed her ladyship, "without being forced to hear you admit that I am capable of being spoiled? . . . Do come out of the sun, or I

shall go wild! I hope I have not lived all these years to discover that I am allied to a salamander. . . . Yes, let Ruskin rest for a while on the grasses of England, he will find them cooler than the stones of Venice to-day, and draw that chair into the shade. Now, what have you been doing with yourself since breakfast?"

"Oh, prowling about as usual. By-the-bye, I have just started your young hopeful and his duenna off for their constitutional."

"A constitutional on such a day as this!" sighed Lady Constance, and then the expression of raillery gave place to one of maternal solicitude. "I did my best to persuade Floris not to go out this morning, but he had made up his mind to patronize some pastry-cook shop in Kingston, and was not to be restrained."

"He is wise to inure himself to solar heat, if he proposes to carry his threat into execution, and return with me to my bungalow one of these fine days."

"My dear Aubrey, the very mention of India is hideous to me, and you are well aware the question of your return thither is put under taboo. I refuse to consider the subject of a cool day; this morning I prohibit it *in toto*. . . . But think of poor Hortense sweltering under a sun-shade! How utterly devoted she is to Floris!"

"Was she not engaged with the understanding that she should be devoted to her charge?"

inquired Clavering, picking up the unseated volume of Ruskin and listlessly turning its pages.

“What a cold-blooded way of putting it!” exclaimed the lady; “we all know what she was engaged for, but we are none the less grateful for her disinterested affection and unselfishness. . . . Aubrey, you do not fancy Hortense de Barthe.”

“She interests me vastly.”

“Ay, it could not well be otherwise; but you do not like her. Now what *is* your candid opinion of her?”

“You forestall my candid opinion by stating that I do not like her. To a certain extent this is true, though I am not prepared to admit it without restriction even to myself. I met Mademoiselle de Barthe as an entire stranger scarcely six weeks ago, during which time our meetings have been of the most sporadic nature; nevertheless, I must confess that she interests me in the highest degree since she both attracts and repels me.”

Lady Constance unfurled her forgotten fan and began to sway it to and fro.

“Dear me!” she said, “I can’t attempt to understand what you mean, so you must explain.”

“Well,” replied the gentleman, leaning back in his chair and knitting his fingers into a species of flying-arch above his breast, “if Don Quixote had had a granddaughter, I can imagine that she would have been much such a young woman as your Hortense.”

“Pray, how do you mean?”

“Oh, in the visionary, Utopian way. Since she has had access to your library here, she has plunged heels over head into the romance of chivalry, to the exclusion of all other topics of interest. Only yesterday I discovered her in a corner of the library buried in some ridiculous old mediæval story; and, when I inquired whether her ideal cavalier was enjoying good health, she promptly replied that he did not concern himself with such trivial details—it was sufficient for her that he possessed an exalted soul which had prompted him to seek a shepherdess in marriage instead of a princess.”

“How poetic!”

“How absurd! Divining *my* view of the case, she inquired whether I would prefer her to be more matter-of-fact. I answered frankly that I would, and informed her that I considered her life passed in a fools’ paradise, in an unwholesome sphere peopled with chimeras.”

“I’ll be bound that she had a retort ready for you!”

“Naturally. She replied, ‘My good Mr. Clavering, we poor girls have no choice—either the clouds or the mire for us. *I* have elected the clouds.’”

“Capital!”

“Oh, I grant you she has a ready wit, but, all the same, there is something unusual, something

perplexing about her. We have no word to express her peculiar personality like the French *bizarre*. I know not why it is, but at times those fathomless black eyes of hers oppress me with a sense of impending evil."

"Aubrey! what nonsense!"

"Nonsense it may be. Perhaps she is moody. At all events, she is intelligent, and highly, *too* highly, cultivated. She is remarkably beautiful; she keeps herself to herself, and discharges her duties to perfection."

"Yes, she is a model governess; and, being poor and an orphan, I think it just a trifle ungenerous in my very Christian brother to pass too severe judgment upon her."

Whatever defense Clavering would have opposed to this amiable sally was suddenly quashed by a hubbub of an alarming nature which at that moment arose within the house.

"Hark! what is that?" exclaimed her ladyship, starting to her feet; "what can have happened?"

As if in reply to the anxious query, the maid, Kirby, suddenly darted out of one of the open casements in pallid disarray.

"Oh, my lady, my lady!" she panted; "they've been brought home in a cab, and Master Floris is that white he looks like *dead*!"

"Merciful Heaven, my darling boy!" cried Lady Lockroy. "Aubrey, come . . . quick!"

In the gloomy entrance-hall that occupied the front ground-floor of the house they found the little fellow extended upon a divan, surrounded by the excited household, while at his side knelt Hortense, loosening his garments with trembling fingers, and in a low, excited voice giving orders for various restoratives in the shape of water, cologne, and brandy.

Wild with apprehension, Lady Lockroy flung herself beside her unconscious son, and gave way to a scene not unusual in the case of a sensitive woman and adoring mother. And such was the hopeless confusion that, but for the presence of mind of Aubrey Clavering, the little sufferer might long have lain in need of reasonable treatment.

“In Heaven’s name, compose yourself, Constance!” he interposed firmly; “I will carry him up to his room, and mademoiselle will come with me. Go for the doctor, Faxon; and do you, Kirby, stop wringing your hands and bring me a quantity of broken ice. He is suffering from a sun-stroke!”

The hasty diagnosis was correct as far as it went; the difficulty was that it did not go far enough.

Inured as he was by reason of his long residence in southern latitudes to siriasis in its most malignant forms, Clavering may be pardoned for not regarding the case of his little nephew with

a more serious eye. The arrival of the neighboring physician put a different face upon the matter.

Having made a minute examination of his patient, he turned to Lady Lockroy, who stood at the foot of the bed in speechless suspense that was pitiful to witness.

"Shall I provide remedies and proceed with the case according to my impressions, my lady?" he inquired.

"Certainly, doctor; why not?" faltered the anxious mother.

"I thought, perhaps, you might be better satisfied were I to hold a consultation with some other physician first."

"Is the case so serious, then?"

"Most serious, my lady. I feel it my duty to inform you that, to the best of my knowledge, the child has developed malignant scarlet-fever. And . . . pardon me if I suggest the propriety of your engaging a professional nurse, as the malady is highly infectious."

With an expression of unutterable anguish upon her pallid face, Lady Lockroy turned to her brother.

"Aubrey," she said, "may I beg you to take the first train up to London? You will find Ash-ton at one o'clock at the Junior Carlton Club. Tell him all, and advise his bringing Sir William Maxcey down with him. You need not mention

a professional nurse, since I shall not leave Floris under any circumstances."

"But, my lady," interposed the doctor, "permit me to warn you that you can not watch night and day, setting aside the danger to your life."

"I am here to relieve Lady Lockroy."

It was Hortense who spoke in her firm, low voice.

"I will watch for the next twelve hours," she added, "and I beg you, madame, to retire and keep yourself as calm as may be in case you are needed."

Later, when the doctor had retired, and Mr. Clavering had gone up to London, Lady Lockroy stole back to the silent chamber where Hortense held her vigil. There, at the bedside of the little sufferer, they met as woman meets woman, the barriers of caste leveled by their mutual solicitude. Taking the governess in her arms, the lady wept as if her heart would break.

"Dear Hortense," she sobbed, comforted as she felt a sympathetic kiss pressed upon her brow, "let me beg you, ere it is too late, to leave this house. Remember, I am his mother, and as such am in duty bound to give up my life for my child. But you—"

"Oh, my lady," breathed the girl, "do not add to my misery by reminding me that I am less to him than you. Believe me, to save his precious life, I would yield up mine this moment. I would

face eternity without a murmur if by the means I could purchase you one hour of peace and comfort. I am but a poor hireling, but Heaven has blessed me with a grateful heart, and a soul capable of a deathless devotion. Floris is only my pupil, but his welfare is as inestimably precious in my eyes as though I were his mother. Therefore, rest in peace, and never again think to deprive me of an office which affords me consolation unspeakable."

How is it possible to be insensible to such self-abnegation as this? How often in this selfish world do we find one capable of such perfect consecration to our interests?

Constance Lockroy was far removed from insensibility; in point of fact, she was too susceptible, too genuine, too true of heart; consequently, if Hortense de Barthe willingly placed her life in jeopardy, she enjoyed the solace of knowing that her sacrifice was appreciated in the fullest degree.

But, despite the prayers and sleepless vigils of these two whole-souled women, despite the combined skill of physicians who owned no peers in their profession, the tender life yielded to its menace, and, as a delicate flower fades, though we shield it, tend it, almost infuse our eager life into it, so little Floris wilted hour by hour until one evening, as the sun sank to rest at the open gates of heaven, his spotless spirit floated forth, recalled to paradise.

“Ere sin could blight or sorrow fade,
Death came with friendly care;
The opening bud to heaven conveyed,
And bade it blossom there.”

The dark angel was no stranger to Lockroy Lodge. Parents and children had followed at his beck. Loves of every degree had been shattered at his dread summons. Every chamber beneath its roof had resounded to lamentation and woe, while between its portals many a well-known form had been carried forth to seek the eternal silence of the tomb; but never before in the annals of Lockroy Lodge had Death set so indelible a seal.

The sun still shone upon the terraces, a myriad of flowers exhaled their perfumes in the garden, the songs of errant birds floated in at the open casements, but the effulgence, sweetness, music of life appealed in vain to senses dulled by irreparable loss. No childish form sported in the sun, no tiny hands came to offer their burden of fragrant bloom, no merry voice caroled back the notes of the feathered songsters.

Not that the stricken hearts were impatient of grief, but simply that, in all Christian faith, they had learned—

“The desire of the moth for the star, of the night for the
morrow,
The devotion to something afar from the sphere of our
sorrow.”

While her ladyship bore her bereavement with a resignation as heroic as it was pathetic, the grief of Hortense was passionate, stormy, terrible to behold. For days together she immured herself in her room, refusing all nourishment, praying only to be left alone. Finally, as a natural consequence, she fell acutely ill, which fact aroused her from the apathy of her despair to a realizing sense of the burden of anxiety she was adding to her already overwrought benefactress and friend.

One afternoon during her convalescence, upon awakening from profound slumber, she discovered Lady Constance seated at her bedside, her gentle, patient face brightened by a welcoming smile.

"You are better, Hortense dear," she murmured, raising the heavy mass of raven-black hair, and imprinting a kiss upon the low brow.

"Yes, I am better, God bless you, my sweet lady," replied the girl; "I am so far recovered that I shall soon be able to travel."

"Travel! Where?"

"Back to Paris—to the only home that I can claim—back to the House of Our Lady of Compassion."

"But your home is with us. Why do you wish to leave it?"

"My duties are at an end here."

"Your duty to love and comfort will never be at an end while I live."

"I shall never cease to love you, darling friend,

but I feel it to be beyond my power to offer you comfort. I believe that I am ill-starred—that I bring calamity upon those I love best. Oh, my lady, I know not what fatality it is that possesses me, but, as Heaven is my judge, I *know* that I am born to work involuntary ill!”

“There, there,” whispered her ladyship, as one would soothe a sick child, “you are nervous and weak. As soon as you are strong enough, we will all go to the south of France or Italy to pass the autumn. There you will recuperate, and, as the pleasant days go by, it shall be my happy duty to prove to you how I love you, how dependent I am upon you, how lost I should be without you. . . . Not a word! Excitement retards your recovery, and so defers our departure for a change of scene which we all so sorely need.”

Later in the day, as they sat together, Lady Lockroy mentioned Hortense’s whimsical fancies concerning herself to her brother.

“Always fantastic, always *bizarre*,” he remarked. “I sincerely regret to say it, but I believe it to be an intervention of Providence that your association with Mademoiselle de Barthe is so soon to cease.”

“Cease!” exclaimed her ladyship; “far from it, Aubrey. Think you I would dismiss *her* as I would a servant who is no longer useful to me, after she has risked her life in unexampled devotion to my child? Tell me, should I not have

mourned her had she fallen a victim to that fatal malady; and shall I not love and cherish her with equal fervor now that she has been spared?"

"You need not attach her to your person."

"What would she be to me were she to leave me and return to France?"

"What will she be if she remains with you?"

"My devoted friend and companion."

"Does Ashton approve the arrangement?"

"He always seconds me in my charities."

"Then you regard your attitude in this case in the light of a charity?"

"Partially so. Were Hortense to enter the service of some other family, she might be wretchedly unhappy. By retaining her at my side, I insure, at least, her comfort and peace of mind."

Clavering's gentle eyes grew humid, and he took his sister's hands in his and pressed them to his lips.

"God bless you, Constance!" he said, fervently; "*you* should have been the man of God, not I, for you are noble with the nobility of a perfect Christian soul! And I pray the good Lord that he will shield you from all disappointment of your hopes, all desolation of your faith in man. Forgive me, sister, for I am an old stager compared with you; and, though I deplore the fact, I am compelled to confess with Antonio that 'I hold the world but as the world.'"

III.

THE BURDEN OF DISHONOR.

A BRIEF half-century ago an English gentleman would have been accounted demented had he done as he does to-day—when he packs up his household gods, and, taking his wife and children, decamps to pass a holiday in some out-of-the-way place, anywhere from one to five hundred miles away from his native land. Yet, so true is the adage that *tempora mutantur, et nos mutamur in illis*, that, while one British family goes to pass its vacation at a German spa, another secretes itself in some Scandinavian fastness, a third whiles away its leisure among the Italian vintagers, a fourth expatriates itself among the olive-groves of Spain, and so on *ad infinitum*.

The Lockroys elected to pass the early autumn in the heart of the Hautes Pyrénées, at the picturesque little village of Luz, within easy reach of the salubrious baths of St. Sauveur—those healing waters of which a certain bishop of Tarbes is said to have remarked in commendation, "*Vos haurietis aquas de fontibus Salvatoris.*" Here, just at the foot of the lofty Pic de Bergons, with acre upon acre of rill-fed meadow spreading its emerald carpet away to the stately portals of the Pierrefitte defile, a commodious villa had been secured—a prim mansion, flanked by serried poplars, that cast

their tremulous shadows upon the whitewashed walls the livelong day, and gay with *parterres* of of late-summer bloom.

Thither, with pleasurable anticipation, journeyed Sir Ashton and Lady Lockroy, Mademoiselle de Barthe, and the Reverend Aubrey Clavering, Kirby the maid, and Faxon the butler, not to mention the usual under-servants—as goodly a retinue as had been seen since the days when the ex-empress founded the *chapelle Eugénie* upon the knoll behind the town, and otherwise set the seal of her favor upon the neighborhood.

In going to Luz, the family sought seclusion and a change of scene and air. Social distractions they avoided, being in the deepest and most genuine mourning; moreover, her recent sad experience and bereavement had told seriously upon the Lady Constance, though her bright, trusting spirit was as cheery as ever.

As for Hortense de Barthe, she was slow to recover from a shock that had well-nigh cost her her life. Her grief was of the violent, unconquerable type; it was omnipresent, and would not be reasoned away. She looked pale and ill, but the change served to enhance her wonderful beauty, imparting to it a touch of spirituality. Aubrey Clavering suffered for his sister, in whose behavior he discerned the undeniable traits of an heroic soul; while, manlike, Sir Ashton had wept copiously, and thereupon regained his wonted balmy com-

posure. He was not ignorant of the fact that there was some sport to be found still in the Pyrenees in the shape of stalking the izard, and trout-ing in the more secluded Gaves. Should the time hang heavily upon his hands, he could amuse himself with rod and gun, relegating to his brother-in-law the office of reading to the ladies, initiating them into the mysteries of the quaint eleventh century church, with its door and chapel set apart for the pariahs of the day, the proscribed race of *Cagots*, and of guiding them to the summit of the Pic, whence, of a fine day, looking toward Spain, one descries the Cirque de Gavarnie, the Brèche de Roland, the Tours de Marboré, and the imposing crest of Mont Perdu; to the west, the Vignemale; to the east, the desert of Barèges and the Pic du Midi; to the north, the Vale of Lavedan, with its maize-fields yellowing to the harvest—a prospect of matchless grandeur in these matchless mountains.

Since the death of his child, the attention of the young baronet had been attracted to Hortense by reason of his wife's pronounced interest in and affection for the girl.

Having ceased to regard her as a mere necessity in his household, Sir Ashton found himself confronted by the obligation of treating her as a companion and friend. Lacking the acute insight of Clavering, he speedily reconciled himself to the existing state of affairs, and forthwith set himself

to work to see how far he could oblige his wife by forming an attachment for "mademoiselle." With his inborn susceptibility to feminine charms, this proved no difficult task, and the result was that, far from finding himself forced to seek the izard and the trout in order to kill time, he found himself only too happy to join the little excursions to the Church of the Templars and the Pic de Bergons.

Thus harmoniously the autumn days fled "nodding o'er the yellow plain."

The apartment assigned to Hortense was situated upon the ground-floor of the house, and communicated with the pretty drawing-room by a door which was its sole means of ingress and egress. With the natural timidity of her sex, the girl had experienced a certain nervousness at having to sleep in apparently so unprotected a position, but as the weeks wore on she became reconciled, finding no occasion to lodge a complaint.

Upon one memorable night of storm she had retired to her chamber, but, finding herself wide awake, she very sensibly made herself comfortable in *peignoir* and slippers; and, placing the candle upon the table at her bedside, she lay down to court the drowsy god by reading.

Beyond the shuttered casements the elements held high carnival with lurid flare and deafening detonation. Down from the leafy mountain-sides rushed the boisterous wind, falling upon the plain

with rending fury; and all the while the rain,
with slanting lances in rest, besieged the land.

“O night, and storm, and darkness! ye are wondrous
strong,
Yet lovely in your strength, as is the light
Of a dark eye in woman!”

Hortense read on and on, at first intelligently,
at last mechanically. Finally she laid the book
aside with a dispirited sigh and clasped her hands.

“Poor Lady Constance! how anxious she must
be!” she murmured; “if I thought that she were
waking, I would go and comfort her.”

A howl of the mad wind and a roll of thun-
der that echoed from Pic to Pic!

“Heavens!” she thought with a shudder, “how
imprudent of Sir Ashton to have attempted
the ascent of the Mont Perdu in the teeth of such
a storm! He can scarcely have reached the deso-
late Cabane de Gaulis, and, even if he has, the
place is unfit to shelter a stray goat. Oh, I am
sure her ladyship must be awake; she could not
sleep in such anxiety, and yet she is too consider-
ate to disturb me. Yes, I will go to her.”

As she rose, a clock chimed the midnight-hour;
but it was not its lonely bell that startled her, im-
pelling her to pause and hold her breath.

Beneath the rumble of the tempest her quick
ear had detected the sound of a foot-fall in the ad-
joining apartment, and simultaneously the click of

the latch of the communicating door as a hand was laid upon it.

The girl's first thought was that Lady Lockroy, having overcome her generous scruples, had come to seek companionship. She advanced a step, a welcoming smile upon her lips ; but the smile gave place to an expression of amazed alarm as the door was noiselessly thrust inward—to admit Sir Ashton Lockroy attired in the becoming dress of a Pyrenean mountaineer!

“*You!*” gasped the astonished girl.

“Yes, I, Hortense,” was the amused reply; “though you look at me as if I were some prowling *cagot*.”

“What has happened?” she demanded apprehensively.

“Nothing more important than that I have returned, routed by the storm. We got as far as Gavarnie, where, seeing the utter futility of attempting to push our way through the *Porte* in such weather, we adopted the better part of valor and—”

“But why are you *here*—here in my chamber?” she interposed uneasily. “Is Lady Lockroy ill?”

“Not that I know. I saw your light through the chinks in the shutters; and, being the only one in the house, I thought to—”

“To find your wife with me? . . . You see she is not here.”

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now would necessarily lead to explanations which could not fail to cast an unworthy light upon me. . . . Hortense, let me beg of you not to entertain the thought."

"I shall act according to the dictates of my conscience!"

"Promise me, at least, that you will not go."

"I will promise—nothing! Furthermore, I refuse to listen to another word. . . . I have requested you to leave my room—I now *command* you!"

Her attitude was imperious in the extreme.

Thus summarily dismissed, Sir Ashton Lockroy most humbly took his leave, thoroughly convinced that he could take nothing from the object of his vagrant fancy that she would "more willingly part withal."

Close beside the wall with the bell-cord in her hand, Hortense stood as he had left her, stood there until his retreating footsteps had ceased to echo along the uncarpeted floor of the adjacent drawing-room.

Thereupon she let the cord and tassel fall from her nerveless grasp, and, staggering to her bedside, she sank upon her knees.

"Oh, Heavenly Father!" she moaned, in a voice of ineffable woe, "what have I done that this new cross should be laid upon me—that this fresh calamity should rear its grisly head to mock me in my hard-earned peace and happiness? Am

“ You do yourself an injustice if you suppose my wife to be my sole thought in life,” he remarked, silently closing the door.

She recoiled a step, keeping her dark eyes fixed upon the intruder in a resolute glare.

“ I can not pretend to understand you,” she breathed, “ nor should I care to if I could.”

He smiled in admiring surprise.

“ Are you not inclined to make a mountain out of a mole-hill ? ” he inquired.

“ Sir Ashton Lockroy,” she exclaimed indignantly, “ leave my room *this instant!*—or I ring the bell and arouse the house ! ”

The bell-cord was in her hand, her attitude vibrant with menace.

He smiled discomfitedly, shrugging his shoulders, as he replied :

“ When you come to your senses, I think you will agree with me that you have behaved both quixotically and ill-advisedly.”

“ Should such be my conviction, I have only to resign from my position in your wife’s employ. Under the circumstances, perhaps it is the wisest step that I can take.”

For the first time the baronet started, started seriously.

“ Let me beseech you to do nothing rash,” he said. “ I frankly admit that I have intruded here under a misapprehension, but I retire at your request. The very fact of your wishing to leave us

now would necessarily lead to explanations which could not fail to cast an unworthy light upon me. . . . Hortense, let me beg of you not to entertain the thought."

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I a doomed spirit—an outcast of Heaven?—a pariah among my fellow-men? Have I at some time committed crimes for which I am now suffering the penalty?” Her hands clasped with increased fervor and her tone rose until it sounded like the wail of a lost soul, “Oh, my God, have mercy upon me! pity me for my suffering soul’s sake, and raise the ban of thy displeasure! Hear me, dear Lord!”

“Good-morning, Faxon; am I to breakfast alone? Pray, where are the people?”

An autumn day of unexampled splendor had succeeded the night of storm, and the casements of the pretty breakfast-room stood wide to admit a flood of mellow sunshine that still embodied something of “summer’s ripening breath.” A mass of glistening mignonette occupied the center of the table, daintily laid for four, exhaling an appetizing fragrance upon the air. The clock had already struck nine, yet the four chairs remained unoccupied. Beside the *buffet* Faxon posed with powdered hair, and a sprig of wild thyme decorating his liveried breast.

At last, evidently to the relief of Faxon, the Reverend Aubrey Clavering appeared, fresh from a stroll up the mountain-side.

“You look like ‘Patience on a monument smiling at grief,’” he added, cheerily, “for I am well aware that we are late, and that your breakfast must be spoiling.”

“Mr. Clavering will please breakfast alone this morning,” replied the butler.

“Alone? How does that happen?”

“Her ladyship has ordered coffee and rolls in her room, mademoiselle has a severe headache, and Sir Ashton—”

“Sir Ashton!” exclaimed the gentleman; “I imagined him at the top of Mont Perdu this morning.”

“Sir Ashton returned during the night, but started at daybreak to make the ascent of the Pic de Monné with some gentlemen friends who are staying at the Hotel de l’Univers in the village. They all return here for dinner at seven this evening.”

“That will be pleasant,” remarked Clavering, busily preparing an egg; “who are the gentlemen?”

“Here are their cards, sir. Sir Ashton wished me to hand them to her ladyship when she came down to breakfast; perhaps Mr. Clavering will see her before I shall.”

“Very likely. . . . Ah!” he added, introspectively, as he glanced at the bits of pasteboard, “Colonel Stapelford I have met at Surbiton—a charming fellow! But Lieutenant Léon d’Arneville I think I have not met; however, French officers are certain to be agreeable.”

Thus, in the best of spirits, the reverend gentleman did ample justice to the breakfast, and at

its conclusion sauntered out into the sun-lit garden. In all probability he promised himself the discussion of his matutinal cigar, since he had produced his *étui*, when his attention was attracted to the fluttering of a white muslin gown garnished with black ribbons in the poplar walk leading down to the meadows. In the next instant he recognized his sister, and, promptly foregoing the pleasure of a smoke, he joined her ere she was half a dozen rods from the house.

“Whither away, truant?” he cried, buoyantly.

Lady Lockroy paused, and presented her cheek for his salute.

“I am going in search of fresh air,” she answered in a tone of unwonted restraint. “What a delightful day!”

Without heeding the remark, Clavering’s eyes took on a serious look as he remarked:

“You look ill, Constance dear.”

“I am not ill, Aubrey.”

“But you are deathly pale, and you have been weeping!”

“No, no! I have simply passed a wretchedly sleepless night; perhaps my mind was not exactly at rest.”

“I thought so! Something troubles you, and that something is serious. . . . Nay, nay, do not deny it, my dear child! Remember for how many years I have been both father and mother to you.

Believe me, my affection is too profound not to be clairvoyant. Therefore, since you are distressed, confide in me."

He had taken her hand, cold as ice, in his as he spoke, but she averted her face as she replied:

"Why should I burden you with my troubles?"

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "you admit the existence of troubles. Now, what do they amount to? A tiff with Ashton?"

"No, brother; I assure you it is nothing."

"But I wish to know."

"I beseech you, do not insist!"

"Constance, I insist upon an explanation! What is it? You startle me! You make me fancy that there is misfortune in the very air!"

"Ay, an irreparable misfortune!" she cried in a voice so dissonant that the very brightness of nature seemed shadowed. "Aubrey, I am a widow!"

"You poor child!" responded Clavering with a relieved laugh that he was powerless to repress; "I see it all. That terrific storm has unnerved you. Supposing that Ashton was exposed to its fury, you have fancied—perhaps dreamed—that he has fallen a victim. But know, dear heart, that your husband returned safe and sound at midnight, and was off at daybreak upon some excursion with a couple of gentlemen who dine with us this evening."

"I know all," she answered, moodily, "but the fact remains that I am no longer his wife. . . . He loves another!"

"Constance! . . . Am I dreaming?"

"I thought that I was dreaming last night until I found myself awake—wide, wide awake!"

"Last night?"

"Yes. Disturbed by the raging of the storm, and too anxious about . . . about Ashton to sleep, I threw a wrapper about me, and crept down to the drawing-room in the hope of finding . . . Hortense awake. She *was* awake; I saw the twinkle of her candle beneath the door; but, as I was about to enter, the door opened, and *my husband appeared!*"

"Sister! Are you *sure* of what you say?"

"Only *too* sure. I shrank behind the *portière*, and waited there until he had reached his chamber; then I crept back to mine, a sadder, but—Heaven be praised!—a wiser woman. What say you *now*, Aubrey?"

"I dare not trust myself to speak," he murmured, "until I have thought the matter over."

"And this girl I have saved perhaps from a life of ignominy," pursued the Lady Constance in a tearless voice, as though communing with herself; "a pensioner upon the charity of her church, she came to me with some pretty little romance which secured my interest. Later, when my darling Floris died, I might have dismissed her, but

I kept her by me out of pure pity. And this . . . *this* is my recompense!"

"Do you recall what I said at the time?"

"Alas! only too well!"

"I prayed the good Lord that he would shield you from all disappointment of your hopes, all desolation of your faith in man."

"Would that I had accepted the warning of that prayer!"

"You would not have been your trusting, faithful self if you had. I might have held my peace. Would that you had less of the divine in your nature!"

Apparently she did not heed him. They had reached the end of the lane, and were obliged to pause beside a quaint gateway that shut off the expanse of shining meadow.

"She wished to leave me when Floris died," Lady Lockroy remarked after a thoughtful pause, during which her brother watched her downcast face with affectionate solicitude, "but the case was *so* exceptional."

"It is true; she displayed a certain attachment for the boy."

"Attachment!" she echoed, with a sudden raising and brightening of her lovely face, "it was devotion—devotion unparalleled, Aubrey!"

"Even so, your gratitude has exceeded the service rendered. You must see that you might have discharged your obligation at a lower rate.

Instead of which, you have conceived an admiration for a character at once as energetic as it is enigmatical. You have assured her that you would never part with her; you have made her a member of your family circle, promising to be responsible for—nay, assuming the responsibility of her future. You must appreciate the imprudence you have committed.”

“How could I foresee what might happen? Why should I have doubted either a devoted friend or the man whose name I bear?”

“For the reason, my dear Constance,” he said, taking her hand in his again, and fondling it, “that you have not learned to ‘hold the world but as the world.’ . . . However, I nourish a tremulous hope that perhaps you exaggerate the situation.”

“Exaggerate it!” she cried, “when these eyes of mine saw him leave her chamber?”

“Why did you not intercept him?”

“And create a scandal? Oh, brother, I have burden enough to bear without that.”

“You might, at least, have summoned me.”

“I had hoped to bear my burden in silence and alone.”

“But, since I share it, it is my duty to have a serious reckoning with Lockroy.”

She quickly withdrew her hand from his clasp, and there was a resolute light in her blue eyes as she replied:

“No, Aubrey, that must never be!”

For an instant he regarded her in amazement.

"What do you propose to do, then?" he asked.

"Listen. I have reflected, have prayed for guidance, and have arrived at a decision. I have chosen between three courses of action—between an amicable separation, open rupture, and dumb tolerance."

"Oh, you need not tell me that you have chosen the latter course!"

"Yes, I have resolved that it is best that I suffer in silence."

"You are mad! Ah! pardon me, my poor child, but my feeling is stronger than I. It is one thing for a person to cultivate virtue and piety in view of another world, but it is quite another thing for that person to be foolishly short-sighted in this one. . . . Have you the faintest idea what an existence you are mapping out for yourself? Oh, I refuse to entertain the thought! Leave Lockroy, and come to live in peace under my protection. If he accepts his fate, all well and good; if he resists, I will take his case in hand. No shadow of reproach attaches to you; consequently, divorce will be pronounced against him."

"And how is my position bettered?" she responded with a mirthless smile; "what signifies this law of divorce? Estrangement and the forfeiture of worldly possessions. Oh, I am but a woman with no ability, no wish to discuss or reform the law. I have merely to submit to it."

However, it is still in my power to remain a wife or vacate the position. Of the two evils, I elect the lesser. I am a wife, and such I propose to remain. Stay, hear me out! . . . The civil law grants me the right to live with my husband; it is all I demand of it. But there is another law quite as rigorous in its logic—every whit as potent in its application. It is the law of God, the law of right, the law of duty!”

“Oh, sister, have your eyes the faith remaining to discern the statutes of that law?”

“Is it not in time of tribulation that we turn instinctively to Heaven? Is it not a comfort to find its law that applies to our condition explicit, precise, admitting no incomplete solution, no counterfeit adjustment? Does it not expressly charge the wedded pair to love, cherish, and obey each other till death, according to God’s holy ordinance? Does it not require and charge that those whom God hath joined together no man shall put asunder? The bond may be light for the one and heavy for the other, but there shall be no rending of it. We are duly warned of our responsibility before our destiny is irrevocably sealed. Therefore, we are obliged to march through life side by side, united in the bonds of love or shackled like convicts. Whether we will or no, neither shall move hand or foot without the cognizance of the other. Consequently, when one of these allies plays the coward or the traitor in this dual contest against life,

the other shall come to the front, shall fight and suffer for and through his comrade until peace or a truce is imposed, permitting forgiveness to begin her holy work, forgetfulness to further it, and death to complete it!"

"Amen, amen, most noble sister! How is it possible for me to refute such heaven-given convictions? I have no counsel to offer; and yet what is your hope? A miracle?"

"I do not consider hope. My duty is confined within rigid lines. Come what may, I submit to it."

As she spoke she turned from the shining prospect, and began to retrace her steps toward the house, passing into the semi-gloom of the shadowed *allée*. They had advanced some distance ere Clavering broke the silence.

"And Mademoiselle de Barthe?" he queried; "shall you dismiss her?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because directly she leaves me she will become an avowed rival, whom my husband will be at liberty to see without my knowledge, if she retains her fascination for him; for whom he will desert me, if she has inspired him with love. Because, since I have entered upon the struggle, I desire my antagonist to be loyal, noble, worthy of me, of my principles, and of my aim in life. Because, if I reconquer my husband, I wish to re-

conquer him in fair and open combat, without having recourse to the means which the law, my circumstances, and my social superiority place at my disposal. In a word, because I—”

“ Well ? Because ? ”

“ No, no ! You would not understand me ; you would consider me a fanatic.”

“ As you will. Now, my dear Constance, you have to prepare to face the enemy. Your husband has invited two gentlemen to dine with us this evening.”

They had reached the foot of the steps that led up to the terrace environing the house.

“ And who are the gentlemen, Aubrey ? ” inquired Lady Constance, stooping to gather a cluster of heliotrope.

“ Colonel Stapelford of the Twenty-seventh Dragoons, and a Frenchman, Lieutenant Léon d’Arneville.”

“ Colonel Stapelford is an old and valued friend. I have never met his companion ; but, as he is a friend of Stapelford, I am satisfied that he is a gentleman.”

“ How shall you receive them, Constance ? ”

“ What do you mean, dear ? ”

“ I mean, . . . do you think you feel sufficiently confident of yourself to face the ordeal—so soon ? ” he replied, slightly hesitating.

If he feared lest he were treading upon delicate ground, her smile, bright with something of

her own gentle fascination, must have speedily reassured him.

“The ordeal, as you are pleased to regard the resumption of my duties as hostess in my own house, can not come too soon to suit my impatient spirit,” she said; “therefore, be of good cheer, dear brother. I am a genuine woman with some pretensions to being a woman of the world. But, mind you, not a word! Understand that war has been declared. You have played the spy upon me and I have not enforced my rights; but I will not promise to be so lenient should you play the traitor!”

IV.

“The Lady Constance speaks not from her faith, but from her need.”

To the unqualified surprise and admiration of her brother, Lady Lockroy proved herself to be a tactician of no mean ability. During the remainder of that trying day she fulfilled each and every duty of her station with the precision of a veritable martinet, and that, be it understood, without the slightest suspicion of exaggeration.

She visited Hortense in her chamber and prescribed for her passing ailment; she went among her servants and personally interested herself in

the *menu* for the evening's repast; she ordered such viands and wines as were the favorites of her husband, and even arranged the flowers upon the table and about the various apartments with her own hands; finally, as the sinking sun dropped behind the hill that separates St. Sauveur from the plain, she retired to her chamber, cheerily bidding the faithful Kirby make her as resplendent as the limits of her mourning would allow.

Granting Sir Ashton to have been in a somewhat perturbed frame of mind (which the support of his friends could scarcely have alleviated) as he turned his face homeward, it may be affirmed that the sight of his wife and Mademoiselle de Barthe standing side by side in the twilight upon the terrace can not have failed to have afforded him decided relief.

Surely there would be small profit in attempting to inquire into the baronet's cogitations during the day. Suffice it to state that whatever the nature of his communings with conscience may have been, he was put entirely at his case to find Constance radiant and Hortense still an inmate of his house.

Thus it happened that with the utmost suavity he was able to officiate at the presentation of his guests.

"Hence, babbling dreams; you threaten here in vain;
Conscience, avaunt; Richard's himself again!"

Yes, Lockroy was himself again; and quite as much may be said to the credit of the ladies.

Perhaps never since the beginning of their association had their individual beauty stood forth in more effective contrast. Swathed in an evening dress of diaphanous black gauze with a mass of heliotrope at her bosom, her cherubic features wreathed in smiles and crowned with crisp *boucles* of sunny hair, Lady Constance looked to perfection the gentle heroine that she was. In startling opposition Mademoiselle Hortense's statuesque figure was veiled in some soft, snow-white material, whose clinging folds were gracefully disposed, but unrelieved by jewel or flower. Her splendid black hair simply drawn back and coiled at the back of her perfect head harmonized with the calm of her faultless features. Only such queenly beauty as she possessed could have suffered such rigid attire.

The dinner passed off with *élan*, as how should it have been otherwise, with the humorous old British war-dog on one side of the table and the truly fascinating young scion of *la belle France* on the other?

Still, there was an indescribable tension in the atmosphere, which was not relieved until the ladies retired, leaving their companions to their wine and cigars.

"How are you feeling, Hortense?" inquired her ladyship when they had reached the drawing-room.

"My head still aches," was the murmured response.

"Then I am going to play something soothing," and, seating herself at the piano, Lady Lockroy rendered with exquisite delicacy one of Moschowski's poetic little fancies. She did not pause for word of comment from her auditor, sitting in the mellow radiance of the shaded lamps, but played on, linking the various compositions with dainty improvisations; and she was still playing when the gentlemen entered.

Noting their approach, Hortense silently rose and glided out of one of the open casements upon the moon-lit terrace. The enchanting country slept, mist-veiled, beneath the silvered wing of night. A balmy breeze fluttered the foliage of the serried poplars, and bore upon its bosom the meadow's breath redolent of the harvest. All was silence, all but "the wakeful nightingale" singing her amorous descant.

Hortense drew a deep sigh—a sigh that changed to a sharp gasp ere it had left her lips.

Between her and the moon a shadow had fallen, and simultaneously the familiar voice of Sir Ashton Lockroy smote her startled ear.

"So you have decided to keep me at a distance?" he observed.

She turned quickly and faced him defiantly.

"I have," she answered.

"One word, then. . . . Tell me that you grant forgiveness."

"Merit it, first."

"The fact that I love you should plead for me."

"There can be no love in my eyes without respect."

"Had I forgotten this respect, your attitude last night would have eternally enforced it upon me."

She glanced apprehensively in at the open casement to discover Lady Constance in animated conversation with Clavering and her guests.

"If such is the case," she replied, "do me the favor to profit by the example."

"But what harm can there be," he persisted, "in our meeting upon the same ground as formerly?"

"I can not trust you."

"Are you so sure of yourself?"

"Your question is an insult! . . . Sir Ashton Lockroy, I have respected your wish and have remained in your house; but, mark me! if by *ruse* or violence you force yourself upon me, I warn you that I will dismiss you as I dismissed you last night; moreover, within the hour, be it day or night, I will leave the house. You understand!"

His eyes flashed, and his lips trembled as he retorted:

"Though you may drive me to desperation, you can not strangle the love you have created!"

She offered no response, but quickly turned and crossed the terrace. Just as she was about to

enter the house, in the embrasure of the open case-ment she found herself confronted by the guest of the evening, Lieutenant Léon d'Arneville.

"I have been impatiently awaiting the opportunity for a chat in our native tongue, mademoiselle," hé remarked, suavely.

"I am quite at your service, monsieur," the girl replied, gnawing her lip with vexation.

"Oh, pray do not put it in such a light!" exclaimed the young officer with a laugh; "I would not have you regard our acquaintance as an obligation."

"But you understand that I am in duty bound to assist Lady Lockroy in the entertainment of her guests. I am her *demoiselle de compagnie*."

"Oh! Then you fill the same post here as you did in the house of Madame Rochlembert!"

"You know Madame Rochlembert, monsieur?"

"Very well, indeed. I believe that I have had the pleasure of meeting you at Fontainebleau several times. Can it be that you do not remember me?"

"Pardon me, monsieur, if I confess that I do not."

"Are you quite sure?"

"I have no more reason to remember you now," she answered with dignity, "than I had to remark you at that time."

"Ah! but I was invariably present at their little evening companies."

"At which I rarely assisted. I never have cared for society, and I had only to request the favor of Madame Rochlembert to be permitted to retire to my apartment."

"What self-denial! And, pray, how could you kill time in your apartment?"

The face of the girl had grown very white and rigid beneath the flout of such inexplicable impertinence, but, deriving a certain composure from a swift glance at her benefactress, she replied:

"I busied myself with my sewing, or prepared the course of reading for the morrow, as became my position."

"And where was Paul in the mean time?" pursued the vexing interlocutor.

"You can not be ignorant of the fact that Monsieur Paul Rochlembert is dead."

"Naturally not, since he was one of my most intimate friends. Paul Rochlembert was *victim-ized!* I believe you quitted Fontainebleau about that time."

"I did."

"His death must have caused you poignant regret."

"It caused me hopeless grief," she retorted, boldly.

"You must have loved Paul Rochlembert?"

"As I shall never love another!"

"And your love was requited?"

"I have every reason to believe—nay, I am

positive that he regarded me with esteem and affection."

"Such being the case, your grief can not be quite free of remorse."

"Why so?"

"Since report says that his love for you so alarmed his mother that, in order to separate him from you, she was forced to send him into Africa."

"In that case the remorse must rest upon the head of his mother, who opposed our marriage."

"Madame Rochlembert has succumbed to her grief, and lies in the tomb beside her husband."

Hortense started at this piece of information, but speedily commanded herself.

"Does she not lie beside the body of her son as well?" she asked.

"No. We have been obliged to be satisfied with a cenotaph. The body of Paul Rochlembert never returned to France."

An eloquent pause ensued, during which, at the instance of Stapelford, Lady Lockroy seated herself at the piano, and sang with infinite pathos:

"Had we never loved sae kindly,
Had we never loved sae blindly,
Never met or never parted,
We had ne'er been broken-hearted."

"Madame Rochlembert's consent would have averted the calamity—would have rendered two beings supremely happy," murmured Hortense, her low tone mingling with the plaintive ballad

like a melodious *obbligato*; "her opposition has doomed one to misery, the other to death!"

D'Arneville eyed the beautiful, downcast face with keen scrutiny, not unmixed with malevolence.

"What surprises me most," he remarked, "is that, having loved you as you represent, Paul should not have foreseen this misery, and taken measures to preclude it."

She glanced up sharply into his face.

"What could he have done?" she demanded.

"He was wealthy in his own right; I need not inform you that one is at liberty to bequeath at least a portion of his fortune to the object of his heart's desire."

"There are remembrances which one can accept only from one's husband!"

"Or from one's lover."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Paul Rochlembert's fate has wounded me in a vulnerable spot; I mean that I know the facts in the case. Madame Rochlembert has hinted in my presence that she had reason to believe that you were—"

"Merciful Heaven! You dare to insinuate that . . . Lieutenant d'Arneville, leave this house!"

Fairly driven to the wall, smarting beneath the injustice of his taunts, poor Hortense had so far forgotten herself as to treat her unworthy countryman as he richly deserved.

The ringing tones of her voice disturbed the group at the piano; the music ceased abruptly; even Sir Ashton hastily entered the drawing-room by one of the casements.

But the Frenchman stood his ground, though it quaked beneath him.

"It is the mistress of this house who possesses the sole right to issue such a command," he retorted.

Livid with indignation, Hortense swept past her tormentor, and paused in the center of the apartment.

"Lady Lockroy," she cried, "I am beneath your roof, under your protection. This gentleman has grossly insulted me!"

Pallid as death, her ladyship advanced a step and stopped, grasping at the back of a chair for support.

"Hortense!" she breathed, "in heaven's name, what has happened?"

"This gentleman has vilely aspersed my character," came the firm response. "If you believe him, madame, dismiss me; if you do not believe him, command him to leave your house!"

A moment of ominous silence.

Lady Lockroy appeared to be undergoing a fearful struggle. At last, in a voice that was scarcely audible, she faltered:

"Lieutenant d'Arneville, may I beg you to retire?"

D'Arneville bowed profoundly.

"I obey your command, madame," he said; and, turning to Sir Ashton, who stood with the upraised drapery in his hand, he added, "Am I to understand that you sanction this command, monsieur?"

"Lady Lockroy's will is my will, monsieur," answered the baronet, steadily.

"So be it! . . . Being in France, monsieur, I take it for granted that you will respect the customs of the country. My representatives will call upon you within the hour."

"They will be welcome, monsieur," was the calm reply.

With a graceful salute that included the assembled company, d'Arneville retired in good order. Directly he vanished, Sir Ashton turned abruptly, and returned to the moon-lit terrace, to be closely followed by Stapelford and Clavering in a state of indescribable perturbation, while poor Lady Lockroy, *au comble de faiblesse*, sank upon the nearest chair.

Firm as a fair-visaged Nemesis graven in marble, to which fancy the pallor of her face and draperies lent a startling semblance, Hortense occupied the center of the apartment, environed by an-almost sepulchral silence.

She waited until the excited voices of the gentlemen upon the terrace had expired in the distance as they betook themselves to consultation in

the smoking-room. Then she advanced a few steps toward her benefactress, and paused.

"How shall I thank you, my lady?" she demanded in a voice from whose tones the firmness of injured dignity had not quite died out.

Lady Lockroy started as one starts from a painful reverie.

"Pray do not mention it," she faltered; "I have merely done my duty as became the mistress of the house."

"With admirable simplicity and dignity!"

"I thank you. But, admirable as my simplicity and dignity may have seemed to you, in *my* eyes they are in no way comparable to your audacity!"

Had a thunderbolt fallen out of a clear heaven, Hortense could not have been more stupefied.

"What audacity can there be in my demanding your protection against a stranger who has insulted me in your house?" she cried, in pained wonderment.

"You must have been well aware that, in appealing for protection, you appealed not only to me, but to my husband as well."

"I did not think of that, madame; believe me, my only thought was to defend myself."

"All the same, mademoiselle, I must request you to leave my house."

"Leave your house!" echoed Hortense in dismay; "why?"

"Because I have no relish for scandal."

"Madame! . . ."

"Enough! You may retire."

Heedless of the command, which embodied more of threat in the words than in the manner of their delivery, the girl remained rooted to the spot.

"Then I should have been wiser to have held my peace and suffered insult," she exclaimed. "Yes, I see! You would have been rid of me, and your husband saved from exposure!"

It was with upraised, haggard eyes that Lady Lockroy replied:

"While you are an inmate of my house it is my duty to protect your honor. None the less it was my duty to have dismissed you long ago, as I should have done had I heeded wise counsel. Now—"

"Now," interposed Hortense bitterly, "now you show me the door, you dishonor me publicly, you condemn me to unspeakable wretchedness! You can not be ignorant of the fact that, branded by such a disgrace, every respectable house will henceforth be closed upon me. The position that I occupy here, once lost and under *such* conditions, opens the gate to penury, starvation, and death at short shrift. And all because I insist upon being respected in your house! . . . Very well, madame, I can go to meet my fate, but I go imbued with a strange fancy concerning the Christian duty of woman to woman!"

Lady Lockroy's white hands griped the arms of her chair with nervous vigor.

"You appear to have been imbued with a strange fancy concerning the Christian duty of woman to woman for some time past," she retorted.

Hortense had taken some steps toward the door of her chamber, but, as her ladyship ceased speaking, she paused and turned sharply.

"I do not understand you," she said.

"Perhaps it is not necessary that you should, since you understand my husband sufficiently well to make him your confidant!"

"It is not true, madame!"

"You received him in your chamber last night, to my certain knowledge."

"You are mistaken; I expelled him!"

"Expelled him!"

"Yes, as he deserved to be expelled. He entered my chamber without my consent; he left it by my command. Since you are aware of the fact, madame, permit me to inform you that you would have been wiser had you first addressed your husband. He would have told you what I now tell you, for it is the truth. If you wish to summon him here before me, I will repeat in his presence what I have just said."

"Why did you not come to me at once and demand that protection from my husband which you have sought against another?"

"Because he was your husband ; because I had no wish to cause you pain when of myself I was able to enforce my dignity. But *two* insults within twenty-four hours surpass my powers of endurance."

Her ladyship stirred uneasily, pressing her handkerchief to her lips.

"Then it was no rendezvous?" she faltered.

"No, madame."

"You . . . are you prepared to swear that what you say is true?"

"I swear it upon my honor. I was as powerless to foresee as to prevent the unfortunate visit."

"Why was your door not locked?"

"Examine it for yourself, madame ; you will see that it has never possessed a lock, a fact that has caused me constant uneasiness ; but the room was assigned me, and I hesitated to make complaints."

A pause ensued, during which Lady Lockroy rose from her chair, and crossing her apartment to one of the casements looked blindly out upon the moon-lit night. After inhaling the freshness of the breeze that stirred the draperies, she turned slowly and with a bitter weariness in her mien.

"So, then, my husband loves you, does he?" she asked.

"He professes to."

"And how is it with you?"

"If I loved your husband, Lady Lockroy,"

came the steady response, "I should quit your house."

Clasping her hands convulsively and leaning heavily upon the casement-frame for support, her ladyship wailed:

"Oh, unhappy woman that I am! What shame, what degradation are mine!"

"Yes, and *I* am the cause of your misery!" cried Hortense, the woful tears, unshed, infiltrating her tone; "I have wrecked your peace of mind but, God is my judge, involuntarily! You have suffered but a few hours, and you are already weary of distress. It appeared so natural to you yesterday to be happy that it seemed as if you must always be so. It is in my heart, callous as it is, to pity you; but, if you had suffered as I have from infancy, *what* would you say? But it matters not; you would have borne your inexorable fate as I have had to bear mine—in silence. Rest assured of one thing, however: so long as I remain an inmate of your house, so long as you shall see me seated at your fireside, you need fear that no voluntary evil will proceed from me. When I sink so low as to commit a wrong, I shall commit it before your eyes. I have a horror of hypocrisy. In all my life long I have loved but one man. His family preferred to see him dead rather than misallied. It was a strange way of proving one's affection for one's child! And I was dismissed, though I had committed no wrong. It was in

that dark day that you took me to your heart and home. God bless you, I never shall forget! Well, I tried hard to requite you for your beneficence. When your precious boy fell ill of that deadly fever, I nursed him as I would have nursed the child of my own bosom. And last night, when disaster far worse than death threatened your happy days, I enforced the respect due you as a bereaved mother and loyal wife. Whether I have won or failed in my attempts to serve you, when to-morrow your husband exposes his life in defense of the honor of the woman whom yesterday he insulted, some justice will have been done me! However you may choose to view the event, you must admit that I have done my duty, that I have but taken advantage of my rights. Perhaps, after all, you have acted wisely in dismissing me, as did that other family. I do not blame you, madame, but may God pardon you the wretchedness that is certain to be the result!"

She ceased speaking, and once more turned toward the door of her chamber.

With a violent effort which displayed desperate will-power over the sure advance of unconsciousness, Lady Lockroy started forward and barred her progress. A deadly pallor overspread her face, her dilated eyes glared vacantly, while the soft tendrils of hair upon her forehead were damp and matted with the dews of an unspeakable agony.

She flung out her hands, and Hortense obeyed the eloquent mandate.

“No, no!” gasped her ladyship with faltering accent; “you seem frank and sincere. God help you if you are deceiving me; but . . . but it shall never be said that a woman who professes to be a Christian can so far close her ears to the voice of her conscience as . . . as to run the risk of condemning an innocent soul. I believe you. Remain!”

Here the overwrought organism gave way, and with a hollow moan Constance Lockroy staggered forward and sank insensible in the arms of the rival to whom her last words had granted the inestimable boon of—hope.

V.

PROCUL A JOVE, PROCUL A FULMINE.

THE duel took place promptly at sunrise of the following day at a *carrefour* among the maize-fields which a clump of poplars jealously guarded, and proved as genuine a *combat-à-outrance* as the most punctilious and sanguinary Gaul could exact.

The detestable code which obtains in all so-called *affaires d'honneur* having been complied with, Monsieur d'Arneville made good his escape,

via the Brèche de Roland, over the frontier into Spain, there to remain until the unsavory odor of his deed should evaporate, while the inanimate body of the baronet was conveyed in haste back to the villa, attended by his seconds, Colonel Stapelford and another Englishman recruited from among the tourists at the hotel in the village.

Naturally the affair created the most profound sensation, more especially as a vagrant rumor took wing that Sir Ashton Lockroy had been fatally wounded and was *in extremis*, to the insupportable despair of his young wife. Like all reports of the kind, the actual truth was but dimly shadowed forth.

It was true that Sir Ashton had been wounded, seriously wounded in the encounter, but not fatally. He was unconscious, and as a matter of course presented a ghastly appearance which his incoherent muttering and stertorous breathing served to intensify; but, far from being in a collapse of despair, his young wife had bravely stationed herself at his bedside prepared to minister to his wants.

At the urgent request of Lady Lockroy, Hortense nerved herself to preside at the breakfast-table, having Colonel Stapelford and Clavering as her companions during the somewhat trying meal. Later she was permitted to seek the congenial seclusion of her own chamber, while the gentlemen retired to the smoking-room to await the

advent of bulletins from the silent chamber above-stairs.

"I say, Clavering," observed the colonel, selecting a cigar and thoughtfully inhaling its fragrance before lighting it, "do you fancy I shall be permitted to see Ashton during the day?"

Aubrey Clavering had gone into the embrasure of one of the windows that commanded an enchanting view of hill and dale, bristling mountain-side and peaceful meadow. He did not turn from his absent-minded contemplation of the prospect as his companion spoke; he merely answered:

"I fear not, my dear colonel. The doctor's orders are peremptory. No one is allowed to approach the sufferer save his wife and a Sister of Mercy from the mission in the village, who promptly offered her services as assistant nurse."

Stapelford ignited his cigar and flung himself at full length into the nearest reclining-chair.

"What an unfortunate *finale* to a delightful trip!" he said.

"Deplorable!"

"Understand, my dear friend, that I respect the secrets of your household, but at the same time I can not but severely blame Lieutenant d'Arneville for his unwarrantable interference here last night."

Clavering turned sharply and faced the gentleman.

"Though you may respect our secrets," he

said a trifle bitterly, "they can not but be patent to you."

The colonel emitted a wreath of pale-blue smoke.

"I'm an old soldier, Clavering, you know. What surprises me beyond measure, however, is that the young woman in the case still remains here."

"Is it not incredible?" exclaimed Clavering; "my sister absolutely forbids me to dismiss her."

"I think she makes a mistake. It would vastly simplify matters were Mademoiselle de Barthe to seek a situation elsewhere."

"Of course! I have decided, when the proper moment arrives, to take the affair into my own hands and oblige Constance to listen to reason."

"How glad I should be to repair the involuntary wrong I committed in introducing D'Arneville. I might almost promise to find the young woman a position elsewhere, if I were sure I were not interfering."

"Indeed!—where?" asked Clavering, eagerly.

"At the antipodes."

"That is none too far away; but in all probability she would not accept the post."

"After what has occurred she certainly ought to feel disposed to raise the siege," retorted the colonel.

"Heaven knows she ought, but you know, 'if a woman will, she will, you may depend on't;

and if she won't, she won't, so there's an end on't.' ”

“Rubbish! I'll undertake to prove that I can manage the most obdurate fair that ever set her knowing face against diplomacy.”

“I should glory in your success; but, I warn you, whatever you do must be done without my sister's knowledge!”

“What is her ladyship's attitude in the affair?”

“Well, though she is thoroughly assured of her husband's infidelity, she is not yet convinced of mademoiselle's culpability. And she makes it a case of conscience not to dismiss the girl until she is better informed.”

“A genuine Lacedemonian!”

“A genuine Christian, say I!”

“Amen! I salute her exaltedness, infidel that I am!”

“You always were a sad skeptic,” remarked Clavering, with a laugh.

“Granted. It is simply because I am such a thorough-going agnostic that I don't quarrel with the world over its dogmas. I pretend to be something of a philosopher, but I frankly admit that there are times when I find myself all at sea. The present is one of my moments of inundation. I find my footing slipping away from me, cracking, crumbling, going to the devil. Consequently, when I see a woman bravely struggling with a desperate situation, like the Roman matrons upon

the ramparts of a besieged city, I am overwhelmed with admiration. Great Scott! instead of striving, changing, reforming, inventing, why not adapt old solutions to modern crises? simple, acknowledged means are invariably best. We do not discover new truths and improved justice every morning, scarcely in every age of the world. If we are satisfied once, why not keep quiet? Look at Lady Lockroy for instance. She does not go beating about the bush. She suffers without complaint, without discussion, simply because she believes she is obeying an ancient law which commands her to suffer, and I'll stake my life she derives a secret satisfaction in her sacrifice. I tell you, Clavering, if the fashion of flinging Christians to the beasts were to be revived to-day (and there's no knowing what we may come to), there would be no end to the martyrs in petticoats! Say what you will, as many actual victims die praying and chanting in this age of the world as ever bedewed the sands of the arena with their innocent blood!"

"Fortunately there are no beasts in these days," replied Clavering, with a grave smile.

"You think not," retorted Stapelford, "because sheep's pelts are in vogue. You must admit, however, that the fools are not all dead yet! God bless my soul, how ever these exalted beings can . . . But there! here I am preaching to deaf ears! You wouldn't be moved if I possessed the eloquence that impresses the very stones!"

He rose as he spoke, and flung his half-consumed cigar into the grate.

"I can't but admire your sincerity, my dear colonel," laughed Clavering; "there is no denying that you enjoy the courage of your convictions. I am going to send Constance to you; perhaps your eloquence may prevail with her."

"Meanwhile I will tackle our sphinx. There she goes across the terrace. She interests me; *elle m'intrigue!*"

The gentlemen parted abruptly, Clavering mounting the staircase silently, while Stapelford hurried after Hortense to join her midway down the terrace-steps.

"You are going for a walk, mademoiselle?" he inquired, gallantly.

"Only into the garden, monsieur," was the quiet reply.

"Shall I intrude if I bear you company?"

"If you please to join me it will be no intrusion."

"I shall be charmed. I was just reciting a panegyric in your honor as you passed the windows."

She dealt him a level, unfathomable glance.

"Is not the honor somewhat premature, monsieur?" she asked, "since you scarcely know me?"

"Ah, but consider the circumstances under which I have had the opportunity of judging of you!"

"The circumstances are seriously against me."

"On the contrary! I congratulate you upon the lesson you gave my companion last evening. Rest assured he will profit by it."

She glanced away uneasily over the glowing *parterres*.

"I trust you appreciate the fact that I was obliged to act as I did," she said after a slight pause; "and I think you must see that my position in this house has become very false."

The colonel's keen eye brightened, as it was wont to do when he discovered that he held the trump-card. But he masked his thrill of triumph beneath an assumption of surprise.

"Can it be that you wish to quit the house?" he inquired.

"From the depths of my heart, if I could secure another situation."

"And would you really accept another post?"

"With gratitude, and I should not be difficult to please."

The colonel stooped and plucked a carnation, whose fragrance he proceeded to inhale.

"That's rather fortunate," he remarked; "I believe I can offer you quite an advantageous position."

"Indeed!—where?"

"Not in France, that I can tell you."

"I prefer to leave France."

"Nor in England either."

“So much the better! What would my duties be?”

“To accompany my sisters, two elderly ladies, to Australia. Does that startle you?”

“Far from it!” exclaimed the girl, brightening into something of her former self; “it seems like the realization of my most earnest prayer. All that I ask is to go far, *far* away; to find myself surrounded by strangers, movement, space, . . . perhaps repose! Oh, what ineffable joy and peace!”

“Very well, I will telegraph to London at once, as soon as I return to the hotel. The ladies start in a week’s time.”

“I shall be ready.”

“It is agreed, then?”

“Agreed.”

“So be it. I shall see you later in the day. Just at present I have an engagement with Lady Lockroy. *Au revoir.*”

The apparition of her ladyship upon the terrace at that instant lent color to this innocent fiction.

Stapelford touched his hat and hastily retraced his steps to the villa, leaving Hortense alone there among the flowers.

Constance Lockroy was visibly changed. Stapelford saw the pathetic alteration in the wan smile with which she received him, the nerveless grasp of her hand, and the listless tone in which she said :

"My brother tells me that you wish to hear particularly from my husband. Will you come into the drawing-room? I find the light a little garish for me out here."

They entered the cool shadows of the house and seated themselves side by side upon a sofa.

"Your husband is more comfortable, is he not?" Stapelford inquired gently.

"Yes," she answered, "but the wound is serious."

"And the delirium?"

"Has yielded to opiates. He is sleeping heavily, which is undoubtedly a favorable sign."

A pause ensued, of awkward duration for the colonel; apparently of supreme indifference for her ladyship.

At last he said, breaking the oppressive silence:

"What an unhappy affair! Indeed, I scarcely dare to show my face."

"Why so?" she asked absently.

"Good mercy, my dear lady, if I hadn't brought that giddy fellow here, all—"

"Giddy!" she interposed, with something in her voice akin to weary scorn; "you view the matter with an indulgent eye, colonel."

"D'Arneville did not stop to consider the consequences. But he has learned a lesson, and a salutary one, I'll warrant you. Rest assured, he's not the first one whom Mademoiselle de Barthe—"

“Mademoiselle de Barthe,” remarked Lady Lockroy with suspicious promptness, “is worthy of inspiring the utmost respect in all who approach her.”

“Decidedly, my lady! no one would dream of calling that point in question; least of all, myself, since you consider Mademoiselle de Barthe—as Cæsar’s wife should be—above suspicion. But sometimes a wrong is done involuntarily, and I venture to say that I consider Mademoiselle de Barthe one of those beings who, without malice prepense, create evil by some mysterious power over which they have no control. I grant you, she is no more malevolent than you are; her intents are strictly honorable, consequently she can not be held accountable; yet the fact remains that an unjust fate makes her her own greatest enemy. I fear it is our duty to shun such people, to mount guard against them when we recognize them.”

With a smile that pictured the dauntless soul within, her ladyship replied:

“Ah, but, my dear friend, what duty can be more replete with noble emotions, fuller of a triumphing joy than to try to conquer, to persuade, to guide, to utilize such mischievous beings? Where will you find a more exalted enterprise than the salvation of a soul?”

Stapelford looked profoundly vexed, and stroked his grizzled mustache impetuously.

“That’s all very well in theory!” he exclaimed;

“but, if in trying to save one soul you’re going to eternally damn two or three, I call it false tactics. But I suppose you are endowed with just that sort of heroism. Now, seriously, was it quite the correct thing for you to expose your husband?”

“Colonel!” . . .

“I ask your pardon for arraigning you before your own conscience, but I’m an old friend and I do it for your own good. Accept the word of a man of experience, and the most devout of your well-wishers, when I say that you have done all that you can for Mademoiselle de Barthe, and a thousand times more than you ought to have done. There are no two ways about it, she *must* quit your house! She understands the situation perfectly. I have found her a place and offered it to her.”

Lady Lockroy started, but her movement was entirely non-committal.

“And she accepted your offer?” she asked, steadily.

“Certainly.”

“Quite of her own free will?”

“Entirely so.”

“Where is she going?”

“To my sisters, Margaret and Katharine. Having attained the ripe age of three score years, they are not likely to discover a rival in their fair companion.”

Whatever else might have been said was here

summarily punctuated by the sudden and unexpected appearance of the *religieuse*, her somber robes and patient face striking a startling note amid the brilliance of the sun-lit room.

Lady Lockroy was upon her feet in an instant.

"I have been away too long," she murmured.

"I beg your pardon, madame," began the nun in her native tongue; "but—"

"What is it?" demanded her ladyship.

"Monsieur your husband has awakened, and appears to have recovered his reason."

"Has he asked for me?"

"No, madame; not for you."

"For whom, then? my brother?"

"No, madame, he calls for Mademoiselle de Barthe in a tone of pitiful entreaty. Madame will remember the doctor's orders; the least opposition, the slightest agitation may prove fatal."

Lady Lockroy turned a shade more pallid, if such a thing were possible, and her colorless lips set in a rigid line.

"Yes, yes, I understand," she breathed; "be good enough to return to my husband." And turning to Stapelford, who had considerably betaken himself into the embrasure of one of the windows, she added, "Colonel, if I am not mistaken, you left Mademoiselle de Barthe in the garden. Will you do me the favor to ask her to come to me? She will find me here."

Left alone, she sank back upon the seat from

which she had risen and covered her tearless eyes with her hands, as though the brilliant day dazzled and pained her.

“So *this* is the reward for my vigilance, anxiety, tears, humility, devotion, and resignation!” she moaned, dwelling upon each word with ineffable pathos; “I count as nothing in his memory, in his heart, in our home! Ah! the flood-gates are loosened and I am submerged. First infidelity, then scandal; insult crowds upon scandal, unpremeditated insult, it is true, but open affront will follow soon enough, and then—the supreme rupture! What shape will it take? flight, or crime here beneath our very roof? Oh, it is quite time I looked to my rescue. I can not permit myself to be passively engulfed in this miry quicksand!” She started to her feet, her pain-dulled eyes flashing with sudden resolution. “No, no! he shall not see her! She shall not go to him. She shall leave here at once; there remains no other course. Stapelford is right; the danger menaces not only me but—”

An inky shadow mingled with the flood of sunshine that fell in at the open casement.

Hortense de Barthe stood before her.

Commanding herself with a mighty effort, her ladyship faltered:

“Colonel Stapelford informs me that it is your intention to leave us?”

“Yes, madame,” came the reply, in an unsteady voice.

“And why do you go?”

“Because, having found employment elsewhere, I believe it to be best for all concerned that I accept it.”

“When do you leave?”

“As soon as possible; that is, . . . when I am sure that I am no longer of service here.”

“Ah! then you are aware that my husband has asked for you! That his first thought upon regaining his reason has been to see you, as his sole instinct during his delirium was to call upon your name?”

“I was not aware of the fact, madame.”

“Then I can inform you that such is the case. It is I who have watched, it is I who have wept, but it is *you*, you alone, whom he would see at his bedside!”

“I am not surprised.”

“Why not?”

“Was it not in defense of my honor that he risked his life?”

“No, mademoiselle! he fought for the honor of his house.”

“But it was I who placed his life in jeopardy. Having given me so supreme a proof of his . . . his consideration, you can not expect me to remain insensible, ungrateful.”

“Yesterday you did not speak in this tone!”

“I had not seen him in a dying condition then.”

“And to-day?” . . .

“To-day, madame, I announce my immediate departure.”

“You are frank, mademoiselle!”

“Why should I not be? Can you not understand that this is the second time death has come to me unbidden? One victim I was unable to save, but I was spared the anguish of seeing him die. And I have said to myself that, if *this* sufferer dies, he shall be the last who ever dies for me! Be assured, madame, that my resolution is irrevocable. If your husband dies, I die.”

“And if he recovers?”

“I leave you.”

“What if he should follow you?”

Hortense paused, hesitatingly.

“I did not think of that,” she faltered.

“Alas, I have!” exclaimed Lady Lockroy; “there is but one means of shunning such a catastrophe.”

“And that is?” . . .

“For you to depart at once!”

“I agree with all my heart!”

“And never hint to him where you have gone.”

“But I would like *you* to know, madame.”

“To what purpose?”

“In case you should wish to recall me, should my presence here become actually indispensable.”

Her ladyship started like some hunted creat-

ure that is driven to bay and turns upon its pursuer.

“Why should your presence become indispensable?” she demanded.

“Perhaps the doctor may declare that the slightest emotion may prove fatal to your husband, and the news of my departure may agitate him, . . . if, as you say, he calls incessantly upon my name. Believe me, dear madame, I would not have you accuse yourself, perhaps for all eternity, of having hastened his death.”

Heaven alone is the judge of the terrific tempest that fell upon the soul of that loyal wife, as these words, each unintentionally barbed and envenomed, forced their way to her suffering intelligence.

Noting the mysterious effect she had produced, Hortense ventured to say :

“I will at once pack my effects and take my leave, madame.”

To which Lady Lockroy replied, with feverish imperiousness :

“Not yet, mademoiselle! My husband is awake and has sent for you. You will oblige me by going to him at once.” And, as Hortense hesitated in wide-eyed amazement, she added: “The doctor has warned us that the least opposition, the slightest agitation may prove fatal!”

At the foot of the staircase Hortense found herself confronted by Clavering.

"Where are you going, mademoiselle?" he inquired, in a tone wholly at variance with his usually genial manner.

"I am going to Sir Ashton Lockroy," replied the girl, with swift defiance; "he has sent for me."

"Sir Ashton Lockroy is not master of himself for the time being."

"He is at all times master of his wishes, living or dying."

"His wife is to be considered."

"I am acting with her authority."

"Which proves that she is temporarily insane! As my brother-in-law is ill and my sister not accountable for herself, I am master here. Mademoiselle, you shall *not* ascend these stairs!"

Hortense recoiled a step, her dark eyes aflame.

"Are you aware of what you are doing, sir?" she cried.

"I am, thank God!"

"Have you heard the doctor's commands?"

"I prefer to listen to the voice of duty. If my brother-in-law persists in demanding you instead of the woman who so nobly bears his name, and who will loyally follow him even into the valley of the shadow of death, I am astute enough to know that he must be delirious and not responsible for what he may say. If on the other hand he is in his right mind, it were wiser to run the risk that the doctor predicts than the danger that I foresee!"

A hot flush mantled the girl's pallid face and tears of wounded dignity suffused her eyes.

"I assure you, Mr. Clavering," she faltered, "that I am going to him against my will, but I go in order to avoid serious consequences."

"The consequences, however serious, *I* will assume," retorted the gentleman.

"You are courageous."

"I will not deny that; therefore I beg you to retire."

"Where?"

"Wherever you will; even if you leave this house for the place that has been offered you. At all events, I forbid you to mount these stairs."

"And I refuse to obey! Stand aside, and let me pass! . . . You have adopted a mistaken method with me, Mr. Clavering; your sister has pursued the wiser course. God knows it is better to appeal to the good that is in me rather than to arouse the latent evil! You have declared war and stirred instincts which I have struggled to suppress. You do not know me, sir!"

And with the majesty of an indignant queen she passed him, swiftly mounting the stairs.

VI.

THE LAST LINK BROKEN.

No more considerate, generous-hearted man ever drew the breath of life than the Reverend Aubrey Clavering. His noble, self-sacrificing labors in the benighted East amply attest this fact; but he was a man endowed with stout, virile instincts, and he may be forgiven for, perhaps blindly, resenting the anguish which had come to his idolized sister. In the first flush of his indignation he was morally incapable of separating the grain from the chaff which the inexorable hand of Fate had swept to his door. In Hortense de Barthe he fancied that he recognized the source of all the evil that had befallen the house of Lockroy. He refused to acknowledge her a victim, refused to divorce her from the responsibility for what had occurred. Had a similar case been brought to his notice, a case in which he was not personally interested, it is not too much to affirm that he would have viewed it impartially, charitably, and unerringly attached the blame to the fortuitous circumstances, where it belonged. But Constance was his sister, the very apple of his eye, his beau ideal of perfect womanhood, and his sympathy for her led him astray from the path of discreet judgment. In a word, his ruling passion conquered his reason.

As he stood there at the foot of the staircase he was forced to acknowledge, with a vague prescience of his injustice, that, though his authority had been flouted with rare high-handedness, the very act of insubordination bore upon its face the mark of an overwhelming self-respect.

Still, his commands had been scorned, and the consciousness of the fact stung him more sharply than he would have cared to admit. Moreover, he dreaded to go to his sister, whom he knew to be suffering in the adjoining apartment, and inform her that her rival had won the day.

"Any port in a storm" may be applicable upon occasion to the most high-minded of us, consequently the sudden appearance of the Sister of Mercy upon the stairs presented a welcome opportunity to temporize.

"You have left your patient?" he inquired, as the *religieuse* paused beside him.

"Yes, monsieur," was the calm reply; "Madoiselle de Barthe is with him now. In fact, the gentleman is so far recovered that I am about to take my leave."

"You mean to leave for good!"

"Yes, monsieur; I am no longer needed here, and I have urgent duties calling me elsewhere."

"We had hoped to entertain you as a guest and friend," he said, gently; "you look as if you needed rest."

"Ah, monsieur," she replied with a sweet

smile, "you are very kind, but *we* are no respecters of our own feelings."

"Yes, yes, of course! I understand. You must have found my sister one after your own heart?"

"She is a saint, monsieur!"

"Unfortunately, too saintly for this world!"

"How—unfortunately?"

"Pardon me, I am not quite myself. . . . So, then, you wish to leave us to-day?"

"To-day, if possible, monsieur. I ought to be in Paris to-morrow."

"Very well; I will order the carriage to be ready immediately after lunch; but, believe me, we shall regret your departure."

Meanwhile Hortense had entered the shadowed chamber and paused near the door to accustom her eyes to the sudden gloom. But, despite the twilight that prevailed, there was something in the attitude of the silent form upon the bed that assured her that the sufferer was awake. Indeed, as she glided to the foot of the bed, the fine gray eyes unclosed in a smile of welcome.

"How glad I am to see you!" he murmured in the hushed tone of physical weakness; "do you know, I have been dreaming that you had left us? Oh, what a fearful nightmare it was!"

"I have not gone yet," she answered softly but firmly; "I waited until you were out of danger."

"Then you are going away?"

"Very soon."

"Where?"

"It matters not."

"Shall you remain some time?"

"Forever."

"Then you wish to escape me! . . . Oh, Hortense, do you leave me without regret?"

"No, Sir Ashton, but I leave you without remorse."

A smile of indomitable scorn flitted over the pallid features.

"I suppose," he said, "that you are satisfied your pride has not been abused!"

"Not so much my pride as my self-respect," she replied imperturbably.

"How about my love; does that not appeal to your sense of mercy?"

"Your love has been a fevered dream; you will find yourself rid of it when I am gone. I go of my own free will. I have informed your wife that it is better so."

"My wife!" . . .

"Yes, your loyal and devoted wife; the mother of your child, the little angel who longs to welcome you both to heaven."

The handsome face grew whiter than the snowy pillows upon which it rested, but the defiant light still burned in the feverish eyes.

"And *you*?" he faltered, "what is to become of you, Hortense?"

"I?" she answered with a disdainful curving

of her perfect lips, "thank God I am free to go where I will, whither my destiny calls me! There is not a creature in all the wide world dependent upon me, no living being upon whom I depend."

"Tell me, at least, whither you are going!" he pleaded; "I will not answer for my life were I sure that I should never see you again!"

"Can you mean that you would follow me?"

"To the ends of the earth!"

"Then you refuse to struggle against this lamentable infatuation?"

"The power is not in me."

"Suppose I were to acquaint you with my place of refuge?" she said; "suppose I were to encourage you to follow me? How long think you this love of yours would last?"

"For all eternity!"

"Oh!—perhaps a month or two."

"Hortense, I swear" . . .

"By what?"

"By my sacred oath!"

"That has already been given to another."

"I am satisfied to live for that other one, but I would *die* for you!"

An expression of weary vexation flitted over the beautiful face, to be instantly displaced by that look of resolution that had become habitual to it of late.

"Listen to me, Sir Ashton Lockroy," she said; "understand that, if ever I give myself away, it

will be for life; and in exchange for mine I shall demand a life entire, complete, all my own! Between such a companion and myself I shall suffer no previous attachment to cast its umbrage or counterbalance my perfect empire. I shall exact the sacrifice of all affections, all independence, all liberty. Do you believe that *you* are the man to fill such conditions? Reflect before you reply, for know that such an engagement would be, not for a day, but forever and forever!"

There was an indescribable ghastliness in the promptitude with which the enfeebled voice replied:

"I love you, Hortense, as you wish to be loved. Were I free, you should be my wife—so help me, Heaven! Had I met you earlier in life, you would now be the sharer of my name. Only tell me that you love me, and as soon as I am able I will join you. We will go abroad, you shall bear my name, and we shall be as truly united as though the—"

"Stay! You have heard the conditions under which I would agree to give myself away. Do they also fit your case? Do you exact the same sacrifice, the same perfect fealty and love?"

"Of course," he faltered wonderingly.

"Then know, whatever may be the consequences to you, that such fidelity, such love are not mine to give. I love another, have loved him before I crossed your path, shall love him to all eternity! It matters not to me whether he be

alive or dead, my devotion to him remains inviolate, unchecked even by the abyss of the grave. You will forget me now and live only for her whose happiness and life lie in the hollow of your hand. Farewell! May mutual pardon and oblivion hallow our separation."

She was vaguely conscious that a moan of pain and impotent dismay followed in her wake as she fled from the room, but she had passed the Rubicon, and she would not have turned back, though hell itself had yawned before her. Outside the closed door, upon the landing of the stairs, she paused to regain her composure.

- "At last the decisive step is taken!" she mentally ejaculated; "oh, I have had enough of this life of constraint and falsity! I am stifling here! The suffocation of dissolution could not be harder to bear! But at last I am free, free to escape, free to feel that no longer is my very existence a menace to those about me! I will return to Paris this very day, go back to the old home in the Rue du Champ d'Asile, and there await my summons to go abroad again among strangers."

At the foot of the staircase she encountered the *religieuse*, standing patiently in the sunny doorway.

"Sister," she said hurriedly, "may I beg you to return at once to your patient? I have been obliged to give him some information which I fear has agitated him."

"I trust not, mademoiselle," was the quiet reply, "for I should dread to leave him suffering, yet I must leave here for Paris to-day."

"For Paris—to-day!" echoed Hortense; "oh, sister, may I travel with you?"

"Willingly."

"And how soon do you start?"

"I find that I must leave here at noon in order to take the train. I fear you can not make your preparations in half an hour."

"Depend upon me, I shall not keep you waiting. My preparations will be simplicity itself."

As she crossed the dusky drawing-room on the way to her chamber she once more encountered Clavering.

"Have you made up your mind, mademoiselle?" he inquired.

"Yes, I leave for Paris with Sister Françoise. Shall I be permitted to bid Lady Lockroy farewell?"

"My sister has retired to her chamber; she has commissioned me to bid you farewell and to beg you to accept this *souvenir*."

He offered her an envelope, the plethoric distention of which suggested its contents.

"I am Lady Lockroy's debtor," Hortense said, waving the proffered gift away; "she owes me nothing."

"You owe her the consideration to accept her remembrance; besides, you may need it."

Recognizing the obvious wisdom of these final words, Hortense accepted the envelope and hastened into her chamber. With a feverish dispatch that seemed to indicate the dread of some unforeseen interruption, she packed her effects, and in an incredibly brief space stood *in omnia parata*.

As she emerged into the drawing-room, Lady Lockroy arose from a chair and confronted her.

"You have concluded your preparations?" she inquired, in a tone that betrayed the violent suppression of her emotions.

"Yes, madame," replied the girl, "but I thought I was to be denied the pleasure of seeing you before I went."

"Perhaps you would not have been the sufferer had I remained in my chamber."

"I am glad to have the opportunity of thanking you for your gift, however."

"That is of no consequence; I owe you so much and more. That which you rob me of is another matter."

"Madame! . . . what do you mean?"

"I mean my husband's love!"

"Ah! you have seen him since I left him."

"I have."

"He told you what I said to him?"

"What matters it what you may have said if your words carry no weight, no conviction with them?"

"Having uttered them," retorted Hortense proudly, "my responsibility ceases."

"And my misery continues."

"I am sorry for you, madame, but I am going away; I can do no more."

"Go, but bear in mind that there are widows whose husbands are not in their graves. He may follow you; I shall not detain him. He loves you as well as he can love any one. You will know my fate sooner or later, but with the difference that it will prove your ruin."

"If you sorrow for me, madame, I thank you," came the scornful retort.

"On the contrary, I trust you; I believe you were born for good rather than evil. Your nature seeks, craves, struggles for some sort of love, something that will raise you to that blessed heaven of happy existence of which love is the brightest ray; that haven of rest you yearn for at any price."

"Alas! yes, madame."

"And to gain it you would venture anything?"

"Anything consistent with my sense of honor."

"Well, I am going to help you to it."

"Help me to it! What do you mean?"

"You do not believe that happiness ought to be acquired at the expense of honor. So be it; you have my hearty concurrence in that view. I am the sole obstacle to your perfect happiness. If I were no longer here, if I were dead, and

he were free, you would become his wife. . . . Well, any obstacle may be suppressed."

Recoiling in horror, Hortense exclaimed :

"Oh, my dear lady, can it be that you too are suffering the same unjust misconception?"

"Hear me out!" commanded her ladyship; "it is too late now to try to decipher misconceptions. Believe me, I have no wish to take my life; my religion forbids such sacrilege; but I can die a natural death. Whenever the release comes, I shall consider it God-sent. Can you not understand that life has lost its savor for me? I have lost my parents, lost my child, and, if you take my husband from me, what will remain? There, there, hear me to the end. Had you taken my life instead of my love, you would have done me a favor."

"My God! are you aware of what you are saying? Lady Lockroy, you must have gone mad!"

There was a wan smile upon the haggard face of her ladyship as she answered :

"Ah! you recoil from the bloody deed, while you do not blench before the murder which is bloodless, which is committed without a weapon!"

"Stop where you are! I will hear no more! You insult me, outrage me, humble me to the dust about your feet when I am as honorable, as worthy to raise my head as you! Have you forgotten that I informed you, as I have informed

your husband within this very hour, that my love is faithful to the memory of the dead, that it will remain faithful to all eternity? I have no cause to hate your husband, but I would not marry him were he the last man and I the last woman upon the face of the earth!"

"But you have told him where to find you!"

"You are mistaken. He knows no more than you concerning my future; that is *my* secret, and I think I have just cause to keep it."

"Hortense!"

There were tears now, tears in the tremulous voice, tears in the lovely, haggard eyes.

"Hortense, can you forgive me?"

"It is for you to forgive me, dear lady, not I to forgive you."

"How strong I thought I was, Hortense," sobbed the poor little woman, creeping into that fond embrace, "but how weak I am compared with you. God grant me forgiveness for all the suffering I have caused you, and graciously send upon you the peace of soul you so richly deserve."

"Amen, my lady! I am the victim of some adverse destiny; but God is just, and I believe that, having resisted temptation, and having held myself unsullied from the world, the hour of my deliverance from probation is at hand. Farewell, dear madame."

"No, no, Hortense! . . . *Au revoir!*"

The voice failed, trembled, and expired.

The burden in Hortense's arms weighed heavily, and she had scarcely placed the insensible form upon a sofa with tender solicitude when the Sister of Mercy entered, equipped for the journey.

"All is ready for our departure, mademoiselle," she said; "the carriage is at the door; we must not delay. . . . Ah, what has happened here?"

"Hush!" breathed Hortense; "she is worn out and ill, but she is recovering. Oh, sister, in your prayers commend her to Almighty God, for she is a saintly martyr. Would that there were more like her." Here she knelt and raised one of the little nerveless hands to her lips.

"Adieu, dear friend," she breathed; "may the blessing of God rest upon you! Adieu, forever!"

She tenderly replaced the hand within the clasp of its fellow and rose to her feet.

"Come, sister," she whispered in a tone of hallowed calm.

And, passing out into the brightness of the day, Hortense de Barthe went forth to turn a fresh—God grant a brighter—page in the Book of Fate.

EPILOGUE.

Letter to Lady Ashton Lockroy, Lockroy Lodge, Surbiton-on-Thames, Surrey, England:

DARJEELING, INDIA, *October 15, 18—.*

MY VERY DEAR LADY AND FRIEND: I pray you, do not start in horror when you recognize the hand that pens these lines, nor yet consign this missive to the flames unread. If your anxious heart misgives you, glance upward at the date, and be assured that I am leagues upon leagues too far away to work you ill, even involuntary ill. Just one year to a day has elapsed since with a breaking heart in my bosom I left you in your pretty drawing-room at Luz, just struggling back to the consciousness of the fact that I had left you, gone out of your life forever—in this world. I can not conjecture what your feelings may have been upon the occasion, and yet somehow I feel certain you sent a generous thought after me, though wafted upon a sigh of relief. Beloved friend, it could not have been otherwise. I was an obstacle in your happy path, and, though I would have gladly died for you, the devotion of my existence was a standing menace to your welfare. I am no philosopher, and,

even if I were, I doubt whether I should ever be able to offer a solution of my strange experience in your house. It was not alone that I possessed a baleful attraction, infinitely more disastrous than the fascination of the Lorelei; I seemed to exhale misfortune despite my prayerful, agonized endeavors to counteract my own influence. As I look back, I ask myself with a shudder whether hell itself contains such tortures as I endured. And what had I done? how sinned? what crime had I committed? My conscience answers that I was innocent. Ah, I have dwelt upon these mysterious dispensations of Providence until thought has become anguish, and I have fallen upon my knees crying, Thy will be done! Latterly a species of clairvoyance has come to me, the outgrowth of peace and brighter days; but I do not propose to burden you with a narration of my occult discoveries, which, I doubt not, in your simple faith, you would denounce as fantastic, if not impious. Suffice it to say that I am satisfied that I have faithfully suffered some inscrutable penance, and have come forth purified and henceforth liberated. Whatever the change in me has been, I am now an unhaunted, happy woman. As I write, the words of your immortal Wordsworth come aptly to my mind:

“ He spoke of love, such love as spirits feel
In worlds whose course is equable and pure;
No fears to beat away—no strife to heal—
The past unsighed for, and the future sure.”

Rejoice with me, my dear lady, when I say that I have bidden the dead past bury its dead.

And now a cheery word to comfort your noble heart if it still pities and mourns for me. Upon leaving you I returned to my good foster-mother of Notre Dame de Compassion. Ah, how many of us waifs and strays have reason to bless that holy name! She received me with almost ecstatic fervor, assuring me that for weeks she had striven to learn my address. And when I asked her in wonder whether she would have recalled me to her fold, she answered: "To-morrow at sunrise go into the chapel, pray fervently to thy all-merciful Creator, and be answered!" Did my prophetic soul speak to me in the still watches of that endless night? Was some hint vouchsafed me of the reparation in store for all my sufferings? Ah, I know not; but, when I saw *him* in the gray light of the dawn, standing in the shadow of the high altar, saw the man whom I had mourned as dead, to whose memory I had vowed eternal fealty and love, I cried "Paul!" and fell upon his bosom, assured that no specter-bridegroom had come to claim me in the eleventh hour of my desolation.

It is a long story—a story lurid with the horrors of war, stained with the injustice of ignoble foes, and shadowed even by the wing of death itself. But he has outlived the brutality of imprisonment and the anguish of death in life; he has returned to find me out, and I am his wife. I

believe *you* have known the blessedness of heaven upon earth ; that sacred knowledge is mine now ! The poor, wretched, contaminating outcast has found her haven of rest at last and is at peace with all the world.

We, Paul and I, are sojourning in the lovely hill-country of India. From here we go to China and Japan, *en route* for America, where, it is probable, we shall permanently pitch our tents. Both alike orphans now, why should we not go whithersoever we will, since the smile of heaven is upon us even in the wilderness ? And *à propos* of the wilderness, we have recently passed an enchanting day with your brother, Mr. Clavering, at his bungalow. You sweet saint, how have you ever succeeded in prejudicing him so thoroughly in my favor ? He cordially detested me, and with reason, for he is a man, constitutionally lacking that ineffable instinct which prompted *you* "to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them." Whatever it is that I owe to your angelic mediation, he was charming to us, and filled my heart to overflowing with joy at the accounts he gave of you. He assured me that the sun shines brightly again at Lockroy Lodge, that the flowers are as fragrant as ever, the birds as tuneful, and that the tiny voice of another Floris—hallowed pledge of renewed love—fills all the lovely rooms with its music. Oh, my beloved, treasured friend, I can no longer see to write for the glad tears that fill my eyes.

Surely our prayers have been heard, and yet I pray unceasingly that the blessing of God which passeth understanding may abide with you evermore.

Devotedly your friend to all eternity,

HORTENSE ROCHLEMBERT.

THE END.

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