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Author: Paul Bourget

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COSMOPOLIS

By PAUL BOURGET

BOOK 4.

CHAPTER IX

LUCID ALBA

The doctor had diagnosed the case correctly. Dorsenne's ball had struck Gorke below the wrist. Two centimetres more to the right or to the left, and undoubtedly Boleslas would have been killed. He escaped with a fracture of the forearm, which would confine him for a few days to his room, and which would force him to submit for several weeks to the annoyance of a sling. When he was taken home and his personal physician, hastily summoned, made him a bandage and prescribed for the first few days bed and rest, he experienced a new access of rage, which exceeded the paroxysms of the day before and of that morning. All parts of his soul, the noblest as well as the meanest, bled at once and caused him to suffer with another agony than that occasioned by his wounded arm. Was he satisfied in the desire, almost morbid, to figure in the eyes of those who knew him as an extraordinary personage? He had hastened from Poland through Europe as an avenger of his betrayed love, and he had begun by missing his rival. Instead of provoking him immediately in the salon of Villa Steno, he had waited, and another had had time to substitute himself for the one he had wished to chastise. The other, whose

death would at least have given a tragical issue to the adventure, Boleslas had scarcely touched. He had hoped in striking Dorsenne to execute at least one traitor whom he considered as having trifled with the most sacred of confidences. He had simply succeeded in giving that false friend occasion to humiliate him bitterly, leaving out of the question that he had rendered it impossible to fight again for many days. None of the persons who had wronged him would be punished for some time, neither his coarse and cowardly rival, nor his perfidious mistress, nor monstrous Lydia Maitland, whose infamy he had just discovered. They were all happy and triumphant, on that lovely, radiant May day, while he tossed on a bed of pain, and it was proven too clearly to him that very afternoon by his two seconds, the only visitors whom he had not denied admission, and who came to see him about five o'clock. They came from the races of Tor di Quinto, which had taken place that day.

All is well," began Cibo, "I will guarantee that no one has talked.... I have told you before, I am sure of my innkeeper, and we have paid the witnesses and the coachman.

"Were Madame Steno and her daughter at the races?" interrupted Boleslas.

"Yes," replied the Roman, whom the abruptness of the question surprised too much for him to evade it with his habitual diplomacy.

"With whom?" asked the wounded man.

"Alone, that time," replied Cibo, with an eagerness in which Boleslas distinguished an intention to deceive him.

"And Madame Maitland?"

"She was there, too, with her husband," said Pietrapertosa, heedless of Cibo's warning glances, "and all Rome besides," adding: "Do you know the engagement of Ardea and little Hafner is public? They were all three there, the betrothed and the father, and so happy! I vow, it was fine. Cardinal Guerillot baptized pretty Fanny."

"And Dorsenne?" again questioned the invalid.

"He was there," said Cibo. "You will be vexed when I tell you of the reply he dared to make us. We asked him how he had managed—nervous as he is—to aim at you as he aimed, without trembling. For he did not tremble. And guess what he replied? That he thought of a recipe of Stendhal's—to recite from memory four Latin verses, before firing. 'And might one know what you chose?' I asked of him. Thereupon he repeated: 'Tityre, tu patulae recubens!'"

"It is a case which recalls the word of Casal," interrupted Pietrapertosa, "when that snob of a Figon recommended to us at the club his varnish manufactured from a recipe of a valet of the Prince of Wales. If the young man is not settled by us, I shall be sorry for him."

Although the two 'confreres' had repeated that mediocre pleasantry a hundred times, they laughed at the top of their sonorous voices and succeeded in entirely unnerving the injured man. He gave as a pretext his need of rest to dismiss the fine fellows, of whose sympathy he was assured, whom he had just found loyal and devoted, but who caused him pain in conjuring up, in answer to his question, the images of all his enemies. When one is suffering from a certain sort of pain, remarks like those naively exchanged between the two Roman imitators of Casal are intolerable to the hearer. One desires to be alone to feed upon, at least in peace, the bitter food, the exasperating and inefficacious rancor against people and against fate, with which Gorka at that moment felt his heart to be so full. The presence of his former mistress at the races, and on that afternoon, wounded him more cruelly than the rest. He did not doubt that she knew through Maitland, himself, certainly informed by Chapron, of the two duels and of his injury. It was on her account that he had fought, and that very day she appeared in public, smiling, coquetting, as if two years of passion had not united their lives, as if he were to her merely a social acquaintance, a guest at her dinners and her soirees. He knew her habits so well, and how eagerly, when she loved, she drank in the presence of him she loved. No doubt she had an appointment on the race-course with Maitland, as she had formerly had with him, and the painter had gone thither when he should have cared for his courageous, his noble brother-in-law, whom he had allowed to fight for him! What a worthy lover the selfish and brutal American was of that vile creature! The image of the happy couple tortured Boleslas with the bitterest jealousy intermingled with disgust, and, by contrast, he thought of his own wife, the proud and tender Maud whom he had lost.

He pictured to himself other illnesses when he had seen that beautiful nurse by his bedside. He saw again the true glance with which that wife, so shamefully betrayed, looked at him, the movements of her loyal hands, which yielded to no one the care of waiting upon him. To-day she had allowed him to go to a duel without seeing him. He had returned. She had not even inquired as to his wound. The

doctor had dressed it without her presence, and all that he knew of her was what he learned from their child. For he sent for Luc. He explained to him his broken arm, as had been agreed upon with his friends, by a fall on the staircase, and little Luc replied:

"When will you join us, then? Mamma says we leave for England this evening or in the morning. All the trunks are almost ready."

That evening or to-morrow? So Maud was going to execute her threat. She was going away forever, and without an explanation. He could not even plead his cause once more to the woman who certainly would not respond to another appeal, since she had found, in her outraged pride, the strength to be severe, when he was in danger of death. In the face of that evidence of the desertion of all connected with him, Boleslas suffered one of those accesses of discouragement, deep, absolute, irremediable, in which one longs to sleep forever. He asked himself: "Were I to try one more step?" and he replied: "She will not!" when his valet entered with word that the Countess desired to speak with him. His agitation was so extreme that, for a second, he fancied it was with regard to Madame Steno, and he was almost afraid to see his wife enter.

Without any doubt, the emotions undergone during the past few days had been very great. He had, however, experienced none more violent, even beneath the pistol raised by Dorsenne, than that of seeing advance to his bed the embodiment of his remorse. Maud's face, in which ordinarily glowed the beauty of a blood quickened by the English habits of fresh air and daily exercise, showed undeniable traces of tears, of sadness, and of insomnia. The pallor of the cheeks, the dark circles beneath the eyes, the dryness of the lips and their bitter expression, the feverish glitter, above all, in the eyes, related more eloquently than words the terrible agony of which she was the victim. The past twenty-four hours had acted upon her like certain long illnesses, in which it seems that the very essence of the organism is altered. She was another person. The rapid metamorphosis, so tragical and so striking, caused Boleslas to forget his own anguish. He experienced nothing but one great regret when the woman, so visibly bowed down by grief, was seated, and when he saw in her eyes the look of implacable coldness, even through the fever, before which he had recoiled the day before. But she was there, and her unhopd-for presence was to the young man, even under the circumstances, an infinite consolation. He, therefore, said, with an almost childish grace, which he could assume when he desired to please:

"You recognized the fact that it would be too cruel of you to go away without seeing me again. I should not have dared to ask it of you, and yet it was the only pleasure I could have.... I thank you for having given it to me."

"Do not thank me," replied Maud, shaking her head, "it is not on your account that I am here. It is from duty.... Let me speak," she continued, stopping by a gesture her husband's reply, "you can answer me afterward.... Had it only been a question of you and of me, I repeat, I should not have seen you again.... But, as I told you yesterday, we have a son."

"Ah!" exclaimed Boleslas, sadly. "It is to make me still more wretched that you have come.... You should remember, however, that I am in no condition to discuss with you so cruel a question.... I thought I had already said that I would not disregard your rights on condition that you did not disregard mine."

"It is not of my rights that I wish to speak, nor of yours," interrupted Maud, "but of his, the only ones of importance. When I left you yesterday, I was suffering too severely to feel anything but my pain. It was then that, in my mental agony, I recalled words repeated to me by my father: 'When one suffers, he should look his grief in the face, and it will always teach him something.' I was ashamed of my weakness, and I looked my grief in the face. It taught me, first, to accept it as a just punishment for having married against the advice and wishes of my father."

"Ah, do not abjure our past!" cried the young man; "the past which has remained so dear to me through all."

"No, I do not abjure it," replied Maud, "for it was on recurring to it— it was on returning to my early impressions—that I could find not an excuse, but an explanation of your conduct. I remembered what you related to me of the misfortunes of your childhood and of your youth, and how you had grown up between your father and your mother, passing six months with one, six months with the other—not caring for, not being able to judge either of them—forced to hide from one your feelings for the other. I saw for the first time that your parents' separation had the effect of saddening your heart at that epoch. It is that which perverted your character.... And I read in advance Luc's history in yours.... Listen, Boleslas! I speak to you as I would speak before God! My first feeling when that thought presented itself to my mind was not to resume life with you; such a life would be henceforth too bitter. No, it was to say to myself, I will have my son to myself. He shall feel my influence alone. I saw you set out this morning—set out to insult me once more, to sacrifice me once more! If you had been truly repentant

would you have offered me that last affront? And when you returned—when they informed me that you had a broken arm—I wished to tell the little one myself that you were ill.... I saw how much he loved you, I discovered what a place you already occupied in his heart, and I comprehended that, even if the law gave him to me, as I know it would, his childhood would be like yours, his youth like your youth."

"Then," she went on, with an accent in which emotion struggled through her pride, "I did not feel justified in destroying the respect so deep, the love so true, he bears you, and I have come to say to you: You have wronged me greatly. You have killed within me something that will never come to life again. I feel that for years I shall carry a weight on my mind and on my heart at the thought that you could have betrayed me as you have. But I feel that for our boy this separation on which I had resolved is too perilous. I feel that I shall find in the certainty of avoiding a moral danger for him the strength to continue a common existence, and I will continue it. But human nature is human nature, and that strength I can have only on one condition."

"And that is?" asked Boleslas. Maud's speech, for it was a speech carefully reflected upon, every phrase of which had been weighed by that scrupulous conscience, contrasted strongly in its lucid reasoning with the state of nervous excitement in which he had lived for several days. He had been more pained by it than he would have been by passionate reproaches. At the same time he had been moved by the reference to his son's love for him, and he felt that if he did not become reconciled with Maud at that moment his future domestic life would be ended. There was a little of each sentiment in the few words he added to the anxiety of his question. "Although you have spoken to me very severely, and although you might have said the same thing in other terms, although, above all, it is very painful to me to have you condemn my entire character on one single error, I love you, I love my son, and I agree in advance to your conditions. I esteem your character too much to doubt that they will be reconcilable with my dignity. As for the duel of this morning," he added, "you know very well that it was too late to withdraw without dishonor."

"I should like your promise, first of all," replied Madame Gorka, who did not answer his last remark, "that during the time in which you are obliged to keep your room no one shall be admitted.... I could not bear that creature in my house, nor any one who would speak to me or to you of her."

"I promise," said the young man, who felt a flood of warmth enter his soul at the first proof that the jealousy of the loving woman still existed beneath the indignation of the wife. And he added, with a smile, "That will not be a great sacrifice. And then?"

"Then?.... That the doctor will permit us to go to England. We will leave orders for the management of things during our absence. We will go this winter wherever you like, but not to this house; never again to this city."

"That is a promise, too," said Boleslas, "and that will be no great sacrifice either; and then?"

"And then," said she in a low voice, as if ashamed of herself. "You must never write to her, you must never try to find out what has become of her."

"I give you my word," replied Boleslas, taking her hand, and adding: "And then?"

"There is no then," said she, withdrawing her hand, but gently. And she began to realize herself her promise of pardon, for she rearranged the pillows under the wounded man's head, while he resumed:

"Yes, my noble Maud, there is a then. It is that I shall prove to you how much truth there was in my words of yesterday, in my assurance that I love you in spite of my faults. It is the mother who returns to me today. But I want my wife, my dear wife, and I shall win her back."

She made no reply. She experienced, on hearing him pronounce those last words with a transfigured face, an emotion which did not vanish. She had acquired, beneath the shock of her great sorrow, an intuition too deep of her husband's nature, and that facility, which formerly charmed her by rendering her anxious, now inspired her with horror. That man with the mobile and complaisant conscience had already forgiven himself. It sufficed him to conceive the plan of a reparation of years, and to respect himself for it—as if that was really sufficient—for the difficult task. At least during the eight days which lapsed between that conversation and their departure he strictly observed the promise he had given his wife. In vain did Cibo, Pietrapertosa, Hafner, Ardea try to see him. When the train which bore them away steamed out he asked his wife, with a pride that time justified by deeds:

"Are you satisfied with me?"

"I am satisfied that we have left Rome," said she, evasively, and it was true in two senses of the word:

First of all, because she did not delude herself with regard to the return of the moral energy of which

Boleslas was so proud. She knew that his variable will was at the mercy of the first sensation. Then, what she had not confessed to her husband, the sorrow of a broken friendship was joined in her to the sorrows of a betrayed wife. The sudden discovery of the infamy of Alba's mother had not destroyed her strong affection for the young girl, and during the entire week, busy with her preparations for a final departure, she had not ceased to wonder anxiously: "What will she think of my silence?... What has her mother told her?... What has she divined?"

She had loved the "poor little soul," as she called the Contessina in her pretty English term. She had devoted to her the friendship peculiar to young women for young girls—a sentiment—very strong and yet very delicate, which resembles, in its tenderness, the devotion of an elder sister for a younger. There is in it a little naive protection and also a little romantic and gracious melancholy. The elder friend is severe and critical. She tries to assuage, while envying them, the excessive enthusiasms of the younger. She receives, she provokes her confidence with the touching gravity of a counsellor. The younger friend is curious and admiring. She shows herself in all the truth of that graceful awakening of thoughts and emotions which precede her own period before marriage. And when there is, as was the case with Alba Steno, a certain discord of soul between that younger friend and her mother, the affection for the sister chosen becomes so deep that it can not be broken without wounds on both sides. It was for that reason that, on leaving Rome, faithful and noble Maud experienced at once a sense of relief and of pain—of relief, because she was no longer exposed to the danger of an explanation with Alba; of pain, because it was so bitter a thought for her that she could never justify her heart to her friend, could never aid her in emerging from the difficulties of her life, could, finally, never love her openly as she had loved her secretly. She said to herself as she saw the city disappear in the night with its curves and its lights:

"If she thinks badly of me, may she divine nothing! Who will now prevent her from yielding herself up to her sentiment for that dangerous and perfidious Dorsenne? Who will console her when she is sad? Who will defend her against her mother? I was perhaps wrong in writing to the woman, as I did, the letter, which might have been delivered to her in her daughter's presence.... Ah, poor little soul!.... May God watch over her!"

She turned, then, toward her son, whose hair she stroked, as if to exorcise, by the evidence of present duty, the nostalgia which possessed her at the thought of an affection sacrificed forever. Hers was a nature too active, too habituated to the British virtue of self-control to submit to the languor of vain emotions.

The two persons of whom her friendship, now impotent, had thought, were, for various reasons, the two fatal instruments of the fate of the "poor little soul," and the vague remorse which Maud herself felt with regard to the terrible note sent to Madame Steno in the presence of the young girl, was only too true. When the servant had given that letter to the Countess, saying that Madame Gorka excused herself on account of indisposition, Alba Steno's first impulse had been to enter her friend's room.

"I will go to embrace her and to see if she has need of anything," she said.

"Madame has forbidden any one to enter her room," replied the footman, with embarrassment, and, at the same moment, Madame Steno, who had just opened the note, said, in a voice which struck the young girl by its change:

"Let us go; I do not feel well, either."

The woman, so haughty, so accustomed to bend all to her will, was indeed trembling in a very pitiful manner beneath the insult of those phrases which drove her, Caterina Steno, away with such ignominy. She paled to the roots of her fair hair, her face was distorted, and for the first and last time Alba saw her form tremble. It was only for a few moments. At the foot of the staircase energy gained the mastery in that courageous character, created for the shock of strong emotions and for instantaneous action. But rapid as had been that passage, it had sufficed to disconcert the young girl. For not a moment did she doubt that the note was the cause of that extraordinary metamorphosis in the Countess's aspect and attitude. The fact that Maud would not receive her, her friend, in her room was not less strange. What was happening? What did the letter contain? What were they hiding from her? If she had, the day before, felt the "needle in the heart" only on divining a scene of violent explanation between her mother and Boleslas Gorka, how would she have been agonized to ascertain the state into which the few lines of Boleslas's wife had cast that mother! The anonymous denunciation recurred to her, and with it all the suspicion she had in vain rejected. The mother was unaware that for months there was taking place in her daughter a moral drama of which that scene formed a decisive episode, she was too shrewd not to understand that her emotion had been very imprudent, and that she must explain it. Moreover, the rupture with Maud was irreparable, and it was necessary that Alba should be included in it.

The mother, at once so guilty and so loving, so blind and so considerate, had no sooner foreseen the

necessity than her decision was made, and a false explanation invented:

"Guess what Maud has just written me?" said she, brusquely, to her daughter, when they were seated side by side in their carriage. God, what balm the simple phrase introduced into Alba's heart! Her mother was about to show her the note! Her joy was short-lived! The note remained where the Countess had slipped it, after having nervously folded it, in the opening in her glove. And she continued: "She accuses me of being the cause of a duel between her husband and Florent Chapron, and she quarrels with me by letter, without seeing me, without speaking to me!"

"Boleslas Gorka has fought a duel with Florent Chapron?" repeated the young girl.

"Yes," replied her mother. "I knew that through Hafner. I did not speak of it to you in order not to worry you with regard to Maud, and I have only awaited her so long to cheer her up in case I should have found her uneasy, and this is how she rewards me for my friendship! It seems that Gorka took offence at some remark of Chapron's about Poles, one of those innocent remarks made daily on any nation—the Italians, the French, the English, the Germans, the Jews—and which mean nothing.... I repeated the remark in jest to Gorka!.... I leave you to judge.... Is it my fault if, instead of laughing at it, he insulted poor Florent, and if the absurd encounter resulted from it? And Maud, who writes me that she will never pardon me, that I am a false friend, that I did it expressly to exasperate her husband.... Ah, let her watch her husband, let her lock him up, if he is mad! And I, who have received them as I have, I, who have made their position for them in Rome, I, who had no other thought than for her just now!.... You hear," she added, pressing her daughter's hand with a fervor which was at least sincere, if her words were untruthful, "I forbid you seeing her again or writing to her. If she does not offer me an apology for her insulting note, I no longer wish to know her. One is foolish to be so kind!"

For the first time, while listening to that speech, Alba was convinced that her mother was deceiving her. Since suspicion had entered her heart with regard to her mother, the object until then of such admiration and affection, she had passed through many stages of mistrust. To talk with the Countess was always to dissipate them. That was because Madame Steno, apart from her amorous immorality, was of a frank and truthful nature.

It was indeed a customary and known weakness of Florent's to repeat those witticisms which abound in national epigrams, as mediocre as they are iniquitous. Alba could recall at least twenty circumstances when the excellent man had uttered such jests at which a sensitive person might take offence. She would not have thought it utterly impossible that a duel between Gorka and Chapron might have been provoked by an incident of that order. But Chapron was the brother-in-law of Maitland, of the new friend with whom Madame Steno had become infatuated during the absence of the Polish Count, and what a brother-in-law! He of whom Dorsenne said: "He would set Rome on fire to cook an egg for his sister's husband." When Madame Steno announced that duel to her daughter, an invincible and immediate deduction possessed the poor child—Florent was fighting for his brother-in-law. And on account of whom, if not of Madame Steno? The thought would not, however, have possessed her a second in the face of the very plausible explanation made by the Countess, if Alba had not had in her heart a certain proof that her mother was not telling the truth. The young girl loved Maud as much as she was loved by her. She knew the sensibility of her faithful and, delicate friend, as that friend knew hers. For Maud to write her mother a letter which produced an immediate rupture, there must have been some grave reason.

Another material proof was soon joined to that moral proof. Granted the character and the habits of the Countess, since she had not shown Maud's letter to her daughter there and then, it was because the letter was not fit to be shown. But she heard on the following day only the description of the duel, related by Maitland to Madame Steno, the savage aggression of Gorka against Dorsenne, the composure of the latter and the issue, relatively harmless, of the two duels.

"You see," said her mother to her, "I was right in saying that Gorka is mad!.... It seems he has had a fit of insanity since the duel, and that they prevent him from seeing any one.... Can you now comprehend how Maud could blame me for what is hereditary in the Gorka family?"

Such was indeed the story which the Venetian and her friends, Hafner, Ardea, and others, circulated throughout Rome in order to diminish the scandal. The accusation of madness is very common to women who have goaded to excess man's passion, and who then wish to avoid all blame for the deeds or words of that man. In this case, Boleslas's fury and his two incomprehensible duels, fifteen minutes apart, justified the story. When it became known in the city that the Palazzetto Doria was strictly closed, that Maud Gorka received no one, and finally that she was taking away her husband in the manner which resembled a flight, no doubt remained of the young man's wrecked reason.

Two persons profited very handsomely by the gossiping, the origin of which was a mystery. One was

the innkeeper of the 'Tempo Perso', whose simple 'bettola' became, during those few days, a veritable place of pilgrimage, and who sold a quantity of wine and numbers of fresh eggs. The other was Dorsenne's publisher, of whom the Roman booksellers ordered several hundred volumes.

"If I had had that duel in Paris," said the novelist to Mademoiselle Steno, relating to her the unforeseen result, "I should perhaps have at length known the intoxication of the thirtieth edition."

It was a few days after the departure of the Gorkas that he jested thus, at a large dinner of twenty-four covers, given at Villa Steno in honor of Peppino Ardea and Fanny Hafner. Reestablished in the Countess's favor since his duel, he had again become a frequenter of her house, so much the more assiduous as the increasing melancholy of Alba interested him greatly. The enigma of the young girl's character redoubled that interest at each visit in such a degree that, notwithstanding the heat, already beginning, of the dangerous Roman summer, he constantly deferred his return to Paris until the morrow. What had she guessed in consequence of the encounter, the details of which she had asked of him with an emotion scarcely hidden in her eyes of a blue as clear, as transparent, as impenetrable at the same time, as the water of certain Alpine lakes at the foot of the glaciers. He thought he was doing right in corroborating the story of Boleslas Gorka's madness, which he knew better than any one else to be false. But was it not the surest means of exempting Madame Steno from connection with the affair? Why had he seen Alba's beautiful eyes veiled with a sadness inexplicable, as if he had just given her another blow? He did not know that since the day on which the word insanity had been uttered before her relative to Maud's husband, the Contessina was the victim of a reasoning as simple as irrefutable.

"If Boleslas be mad, as they say," said Alba, "why does Maud, whom I know to be so just and who loves me so dearly, attribute to my mother the responsibility of this duel, to the point of breaking with me thus, and of leaving without a line of explanation?.... No.... There is something else.".... The nature of the "something else" the young girl comprehended, on recalling her mother's face during the perusal of Maud's letter. During the ten days following that scene, she saw constantly before her that face, and the fear imprinted upon those features ordinarily so calm, so haughty! Ah, poor little soul, indeed, who could not succeed in banishing this fixed idea "My mother is not a good woman."

Idea! So much the more terrible, as Alba had no longer the ignorance of a young girl, if she had the innocence. Accustomed to the conversations, at times very bold, of the Countess's salon, enlightened by the reading of novels chanced upon, the words lover and mistress had for her a signification of physical intimacy such that it was an almost intolerable torture for her to associate them with the relations of her mother, first toward Gorka, then toward Maitland. That torture she had undergone during the entire dinner, at the conclusion of which Dorsenne essayed to chat gayly with her. She sat beside the painter, and the man's very breath, his gestures, the sound of his voice, his manner of eating and of drinking, the knowledge of his very proximity, had caused her such keen suffering that it was impossible for her to take anything but large glasses of iced water. Several times during that dinner, prolonged amid the sparkle of magnificent silver and Venetian crystal, amid the perfume of flowers and the gleam of jewels, she had seen Maitland's eyes fixed upon the Countess with an expression which almost caused her to cry out, so clearly did her instinct divine its impassioned sensuality, and once she thought she saw her mother respond to it.

She felt with appalling clearness that which before she had uncertainly experienced, the immodest character of that mother's beauty. With the pearls in her fair hair, with neck and arms bare in a corsage the delicate green tint of which showed to advantage the incomparable splendor of her skin, with her dewy lips, with her voluptuous eyes shaded by their long lashes, the dogaresse looked in the centre of that table like an empress and like a courtesan. She resembled the Caterina Cornaro, the gallant queen of the island of Cypress, painted by Titian, and whose name she worthily bore. For years Alba had been so proud of the ray of seduction cast forth by the Countess, so proud of those statuesque arms, of the superb carriage, of the face which defied the passage of time, of the bloom of opulent life the glorious creature displayed. During that dinner she was almost ashamed of it.

She had been pained to see Madame Maitland seated a few paces farther on, with brow and lips contracted as if by thoughts of bitterness. She wondered: Does Lydia suspect them, too? But was it possible that her mother, whom she knew to be so generous, so magnanimous, so kind, could have that smile of sovereign tranquillity with such secrets in her heart? Was it possible that she could have betrayed Maud for months and months with the same light of joy in her eyes?

"Come," said Julien, stopping himself suddenly in the midst of a speech, in which he had related two or three literary anecdotes. "Instead of listening to your friend Dorsenne, little Countess, you are following several blue devils flying through the room."

"They would fly, in any case," replied Alba, who, pointing to Fanny Hafner and Prince d'Ardea seated on a couch, continued: "Has what I told you a few weeks since been realized? You do not know all the irony of it. You have not assisted, as I did the day before yesterday, at the poor girl's baptism."

"It is true," replied Julien, "you were godmother. I dreamed of Leo Thirteenth as godfather, with a princess of the house of Bourbon as godmother. Hafner's triumph would have been complete!"

"He had to content himself with his ambassador and your servant," replied Alba with a faint smile, which was speedily converted into an expression of bitterness. "Are you satisfied with your pupil?" she added. "I am progressing.... I laugh—when I wish to weep.... But you yourself would not have laughed had you seen the fervor of charming Fanny. She was the picture of blissful faith. Do not scoff at her."

"And where did the ceremony take place?" asked Dorsenne, obeying the almost suppliant injunction.

"In the chapel of the Dames du Cenacle."

"I know the place," replied the novelist, "one of the most beautiful corners of Rome! It is in the old Palais Piancini, a large mansion almost opposite the 'Calcographie Royale', where they sell those fantastic etchings of the great Piranese, those dungeons and those ruins of so intense a poesy! It is the Gaya of stone. There is a garden on the terrace. And to ascend to the chapel one follows a winding staircase, an incline without steps, and one meets nuns in violet gowns, with faces so delicate in the white framework of their bonnets. In short, an ideal retreat for one of my heroines. My old friend Montfanon took me there. As we ascended to that tower, six weeks ago, we heard the shrill voices of ten little girls, singing: 'Questo cuor tu la vedrai'. It was a procession of catechists, going in the opposite direction, with tapers which flickered dimly in the remnant of daylight.... It was exquisite.... But, now permit me to laugh at the thought of Montfanon's choler when I relate to him this baptism. If I knew where to find the old leaguer! But he has been hiding since our duel. He is in some retreat doing penance. As I have already told you, the world for him has not stirred since Francois de Guise. He only admits the alms of the Protestants and the Jews. When Monseigneur Guerillot tells him of Fanny's religious aspirations, he raves immoderately. Were she to cast herself to the lions, like Saint Blandine, he would still cry out 'sacrilege.'"

"He did not see her the day before yesterday," said Alba, "nor the expression upon her face when she recited the Credo. I do not believe in mysticism, you know, and I have moments of doubt. There are times when I can no longer believe in anything, life seems to me so wretched and sad.... But I shall never forget that expression. She saw God!.... Several women were present with very touching faces, and there were many devotees.... The Cardinal is very venerable.... All were by Fanny's side, like saints around the Madonna in the early paintings which you have taught me to like, and when the baptism had been gone through, guess what she said to me: 'Come, let us pray for my dear father, and for his conversion.' Is not such blindness melancholy?"

"The fact is," said Dorsenne again, jocosely, "that in the father's dictionary the word has another meaning: Conversion, feminine substantive, means to him income.... But let us reason a little, Countess. Why do you think it sad that the daughter should see her father's character in her own light?.... You should, on the contrary, rejoice at it.... And why do you find it melancholy that this adorable saint should be the daughter of a thief?.... How I wish that you were really my pupil, and that it would not be too absurd to give you here, in this corner of the hall, a lesson in intellectuality!.... I would say to you, when you see one of those anomalies which renders you indignant, think of the causes. It is so easy. Although Protestant, Fanny is of Jewish origin—that is to say, the descendant of a persecuted race—which in consequence has developed by the side of the inherent defects of a proscribed people the corresponding virtues, the devotion, the abnegation of the woman who feels that she is the grace of a threatened hearth, the sweet flower which perfumes the sombre prison."

"It is all beautiful and true," replied Alba, very seriously. She had hung upon Dorsenne's lips while he spoke, with the instinctive taste for ideas of that order which proved her veritable origin. "But you do not mention the sorrow. This is what one can not do—look upon as a tapestry, as a picture, as an object; the creature who has not asked to live and who suffers. You, who have feeling, what is your theory when you weep?"

"I can very clearly foresee the day on which Fanny will feel her misfortune," continued the young girl. "I do not know when she will begin to judge her father, but that she already begins to judge Ardea, alas, I am only too sure.... Watch her at this moment, I pray you."

Dorsenne indeed looked at the couple. Fanny was listening to the Prince, but with a trace of suffering upon her beautiful face, so pure in outline that the nobleness in it was ideal.

He was laughing at some anecdote which he thought excellent, and which clashed with the sense of delicacy of the person to whom he was addressing himself. They were no longer the couple who, in the early days of their betrothal, had given to Julien the sentiment of a complete illusion on the part of the young girl for her future husband.

"You are right, Contessina," said he, "the decrystallization has commenced. It is a little too soon."

"Yes, it is too soon," replied Alba. "And yet it is too late. Would you believe that there are times when I ask myself if it would not be my duty to tell her the truth about her marriage, such as I know it, with the story of the weak man, the forced sale, and of the bargaining of Ardea?"

"You will not do it," said Dorsenne. "Moreover, why? This one or another, the man who marries her will only want her money, rest assured. It is necessary that the millions be paid for here below, it is one of their ransoms.... But I shall cause you to be scolded by your mother, for I am monopolizing you, and I have still two calls to pay this evening."

"Well, postpone them," said Alba. "I beseech you, do not go."

"I must," replied Julien. "It is the last Wednesday of old Duchess Pietrapertosa, and after her grandson's recent kindness—"

"She is so ugly," said Alba, "will you sacrifice me to her?"

"Then there is my compatriot, who goes away tomorrow and of whom I must take leave this evening, Madame de Sauve, with whom you met me at the museum You will not say she is ugly, will you?"

"No," responded Alba, dreamily, "she is very pretty.".... She had another prayer upon her lips, which she did not formulate. Then, with a beseeching glance: "Return, at least. Promise me that you will return after your two visits. They will be over in an hour and a half. It will not be midnight. You know some do not ever come before one and sometimes two o'clock. You will return?"

"If possible, yes. But at any rate, we shall meet to-morrow, at the studio, to see the portrait."

"Then, adieu," said the young girl, in a low voice.

CHAPTER X

COMMON MISERY

The Contessina's disposition was too different from her mother's for the mother to comprehend that heart, the more contracted in proportion as it was touched, while emotion was synonymous with expansion in the opulent and impulsive Venetian. That evening she had not even observed Alba's dreaminess, Dorsenne once gone, and it required that Hafner should call her attention to it. To the scheming Baron, if the novelist was attentive to the young girl it was certainly with the object of capturing a considerable dowry. Julien's income of twenty-five thousand francs meant independence. The two hundred and fifty thousand francs which Alba would have at her mother's death was a very large fortune. So Hafner thought he would deserve the name of "old friend," by taking Madame Steno aside and saying to her:

"Do you not think Alba has been a little strange for several days!"

"She has always been so," replied the Countess. "Young people are like that nowadays; there is no more youth."

"Do you not think," continued the Baron, "that perhaps there is another cause for that sadness—some interest in some one, for example?"

"Alba?" exclaimed the mother. "For whom?"

"For Dorsenne," returned Hafner, lowering his voice; "he just left five minutes ago, and you see she is no longer interested in anything nor in any one."

"Ah, I should be very much pleased," said Madame Steno, laughing. "He is a handsome fellow; he has talent, fortune. He is the grand-nephew of a hero, which is equivalent to nobility, in my opinion. But Alba has no thought of it, I assure you. She would have told me; she tells me everything. We are two friends, almost two comrades, and she knows I shall leave her perfectly free to choose.... No, my old friend, I understand my daughter. Neither Dorsenne nor any one else interests her, unfortunately. I sometimes fear she will go into a decline, like her cousin Andryana Navagero, whom she resembles.... But I must cheer her up. It will not take long."

"A Dorsenne for a son-in-law!" said Hafner to himself, as he watched the Countess walk toward Alba through the scattered groups of her guests, and he shook his head, turning his eyes with satisfaction upon his future son-in-law. "That is what comes of not watching one's children closely. One fancies one understands them until some folly opens one's eyes!.... And, it is too late!.... Well, I have warned her, and it is no affair of mine!"

In spite of Fanny's observed and increasing vexation Ardea amused himself by relating to her anecdotes, more or less true, of the goings-on in the Vatican. He thus attempted to abate a Catholic enthusiasm at which he was already offended. His sense of the ridiculous and that of his social interest made him perceive how absurd it would be to go into clerical society after having taken for a wife a millionaire converted the day before. To be just, it must be added that the Countess's dry champagne was not altogether irresponsible for the persistency with which he teased his betrothed. It was not the first time he had indulged in the semi-intoxication which had been one of the sins of his youth, a sin less rare in the southern climates than the modesty of the North imagines.

"You come opportunely, Contessina," said he, when Mademoiselle Steno had seated herself upon the couch beside them. "Your friend is scandalized by a little story I have just told her.... The one of the noble guard who used the telephone of the Vatican this winter to appoint rendezvous with Guilia Rezzonico without awakening the jealousy of Ugolino.... But it is nothing. I have almost quarrelled with Fanny for having revealed to her that the Holy Father repeated his benediction in Chapel Sixtine, with a singing master, like a prima donna...."

"I have already told you that I do not like those jests," said Fanny, with visible irritation, which her patience, however, governed. "If you desire to continue them, I will leave you to converse with Alba."

"Since you see that you annoy her," said the latter to the Prince, "change the subject."

"Ah, Contessina," replied Peppino, shaking his head, "you support her already. What will it be later? Well, I apologize for my innocent epigrams on His Holiness in his dressing-gown. And," he continued, laughing, "it is a pity, for I have still two or three entertaining stories, notably one about a coffer filled with gold pieces, which a faithful bequeathed to the Pope. And that poor, dear man was about to count them when the coffer slipped from his hand, and there was the entire treasure on the floor, and the Pope and a cardinal on all fours were scrambling for the napoleons, when a servant entered.... Tableau! ...I assure you that good Pius IX would be the first to laugh with us at all the Vatican jokes. He is not so much 'alla mano'. But he is a holy man just the same. Do not think I do not render him justice. Only, the holy man is a man, and a good old man. That is what you do not wish to see."

"Where are you going?" said Alba to Fanny, who had risen as she had threatened to do.

"To talk with my father, to whom I have several words to say."

"I warned you to change the subject," said Alba, when she and the Prince were alone. Ardea, somewhat abashed, shrugged his shoulders and laughed:

"You will confess that the situation is quite piquant, little Countess.... You will see she will forbid me to go to the Quirinal.... Only one thing will be lacking, and it is that Papa Hafner should discover religious scruples which would prevent him from greeting the King.... But Fanny must be appeased!"

"My God!" said Alba to herself, seeing the young man rise in his turn. "I believe he is intoxicated. What a pity!"

As have almost all revolutions of that order, the work of Christianity, accomplished for years, in Fanny had for its principle an example.

The death of a friend, the sublime death of a true believer, ended by determining her faith. She saw the dying woman receive the sacrament, and the ineffable joy of the benediction upon the face of the sufferer of twenty lighted up by ecstasy. She heard her say, with a smile of conviction:

"I go to ask you of Our Lord, Jesus Christ."

How could she have resisted such a cry and such a sight?

The very day after that death she asked of her father permission to be baptized, which request drew from the Baron a reply too significant not to be repeated here:

"Undoubtedly," had replied the surprising man, who instead of a heart, had a Bourse list on which all was tariffed, even God, "undoubtedly I am touched, very deeply touched, and very happy to see that

religious matters preoccupy you to such a degree. To the people it is a necessary curb, and to us it accords with a certain rank, a certain society, a certain deportment. I think that a person called like you to live in Austria and in Italy should be a Catholic. However, it is necessary to remember that you might marry some one of another faith. Do not object. I am your father. I can foresee all. I know you will marry only according to the dictates of your heart. Wait then until it has spoken, to settle the question.... If you love a Catholic, you will then have occasion to pay a compliment to your betrothed by adopting his faith, of which he will be very sensible.... From now until then, I shall not prevent you from following ceremonies which please you. Those of the Roman liturgy are, assuredly, among the best; I myself attended Saint Peter's at the time of the pontifical government.... The taste, the magnificence, the music, all moved me.... But to take a definite, irreparable step, I repeat, you must wait. Your actual condition of a Protestant has the grand sentiment of being more neutral, less defined."

What words to listen to by a heart already touched by the attraction of 'grace and by the nostalgia of eternal life! But the heart was that of a young girl very pure and very tender. To judge her father was to her impossible, and the Baron's firmness had convinced her that she must obey his wishes and pray that he be enlightened. She therefore waited, hoping, sustained and directed meanwhile by Cardinal Guerillot, who later on was to baptize her and to obtain for her the favor of approaching the holy table for the first time at the Pope's mass. That prelate, one of the noblest figures of which the French bishopric has had cause to be proud, since Monseigneur Pie, was one of those grand Christians for whom the hand of God is as visible in the direction of human beings as it is invisible to doubtful souls. When Fanny, already devoted to her charities, confided in him the serious troubles of her mind and the discord which had arisen between her and her father on the so essential point of her baptism, the Cardinal replied:

"Have faith in God. He will give you a sign when your time has come." And he uttered those words with an accent whose conviction had filled the young girl with a certainty which had never left her.

In spite of his seventy years, and of the experiences of the confession, in spite of the disenchanting struggle with the freemasonry of his French diocese, which had caused his exile to Rome, the venerable man looked at Fanny's marriage from a supernatural standpoint. Many priests are thus capable of a naivete which, on careful analysis, is often in the right. But at the moment the antithesis between the authentic reality and that which they believe, constitutes an irony almost absurd. When he had baptized Fanny, the old Bishop of Clermont was possessed by a joy so deep that he said to her, to express to her the more delicately the tender respect of his friendship:

"I can now say as did Saint Monica after the baptism of Saint Augustine: 'Cur hic sim, nescio; jam consumpta spe hujus saeculi'. I do not know why I remain here below. All my hope of the age is consummated. And like her I can add—the only thing which made me desire to remain awhile was to see you a Catholic before dying. The traveller, who has tarried, has now nothing to do but to go. He has gathered the last and the prettiest flower."....

Noble and faithful apostle, who was indeed to go so shortly after, meriting what they said of him, that which the African bishop said of his mother: "That religious soul was at length absolved from her body.".... He did not anticipate that he would pay dearly for that realization of his last wish! He did not foresee that she whom he ingenuously termed his most beautiful flower was to become to him the principal cause of bitter sorrow. Poor, grand Cardinal! It was the final trial of his life, the supremely bitter drop in his chalice, to assist at the disenchantment which followed so closely upon the blissful intoxication of his gentle neophyte's first initiation. To whom, if not to him, should she have gone to ask counsel, in all the tormenting doubts which she at once began to have in her feelings with regard to her fiance?

It was, therefore, that on the day following the evening on which imprudent Ardea had jested so persistently upon a subject sacred to her that she rang at the door of the apartment which Monseigneur Guerillot occupied in the large mansion on Rue des Quatre-Fontaines. There was no question of incriminating the spirit of those pleasantries, nor of relating her humiliating observations on the Prince's intoxication. No. She wished to ease her mind, on which rested a shade of sorrow. At the time of her betrothal, she had fancied she loved Ardea, for the emotion of her religious life at length freed had inspired her with gratitude for him who was, however, only the pretext of that exemption. She trembled to-day, not only at not loving him any more, but at hating him, and above all she felt herself a prey to that repugnance for the useless cares of the world, to that lassitude of transitory hopes, to that nostalgia of repose in God, undeniable signs of true vocations.

At the thought that she might, if she survived her father and she remained free, retire to the 'Dames du Cenacle,' she felt at her approaching marriage an inward repugnance, which augmented still more the proof of her future husband's deplorable character. Had she the right to form such bonds with such feelings? Would it be honorable to break, without further developments, the betrothal which had been

between her and her father the condition of her baptism? She was already there, after so few days! And her wound was deeper after the night on which the Prince had, uttered his careless jests.

"It is permitted you to withdraw," replied Monsieur Guerillot, "but you are not permitted to lack charity in your judgment."

There was within Fanny too much sincerity, her faith was too simple and too deep for her not to follow out that advice to the letter, and she conformed to it in deeds as well as in intentions. For, before taking a walk in the afternoon with Alba, she took the greatest care to remove all traces which the little scene of the day before could have left in her friend's mind. Her efforts went very far. She would ask pardon of her fiance.... Pardon! For what? For having been wounded by him, wounded to the depths of her sensibility? She felt that the charity of judgment recommended by the pious Cardinal was a difficult virtue. It exercises a discipline of the entire heart, sometimes irreconcilable with the clearness of the intelligence. Alba looked at her friend with a glance full of an astonishment, almost sorrowful, and she embraced her, saying:

"Peppino is not worthy even to kiss the ground on which you tread, that is my opinion, and if he does not spend his entire life in trying to be worthy of you, it will be a crime."

As for the Prince himself, the impulses which dictated to his fiancee words of apology when he was in the wrong, were not unintelligible to him, as they would have been to Hafner. He thought that the latter had lectured his daughter, and he congratulated himself on having cut short at once that little comedy of exaggerated religious feeling.

"Never mind that," said he, with condescension, "it is I who have failed in form. For at heart you have always found me respectful of that which my fathers respected. But times have changed, and certain fanaticisms are no longer admissible. That is what I have wished to say to you in such a manner that you could take no offence."

And he gallantly kissed Fanny's tiny hand, not divining that he had redoubled the melancholy of that too-generous child. The discord continued to be excessive between the world of ideas in which she moved and that in which the ruined Prince existed. As the mystics say with so much depth, they were not of the same heaven.

Of all the chimeras which had lasted hours, God alone remained. It sufficed the noble creature to say: "My father is so happy, I will not mar his joy."

"I will do my duty toward my husband. I will be so good a wife that I will transform him. He has religion. He has heart. It will be my role to make of him a true Christian. And then I shall have my children and the poor." Such were the thoughts which filled the mind of the envied betrothed. For her the journals began to describe the dresses already prepared, for her a staff of tailors, dressmakers, needlewomen and jewellers were working; she would have on her contract the same signature as a princess of the blood, who would be a princess herself and related to one of the most glorious aristocracies in the world. Such were the thoughts she would no doubt have through life, as she walked in the garden of the Palais Castagna, that historical garden in which is still to be seen a row of pear-trees, in the place where Sixte-Quint, near death, gathered some fruit. He tasted it, and he said to Cardinal Castagna—playing on their two names, his being Peretti—"The pears are spoiled. The Romans have had enough. They will soon eat chestnuts." That family anecdote enchanted Justus Hafner. It seemed to him full of the most delightful humor. He repeated it to his colleagues at the club, to his tradesmen, to it mattered not whom. He did not even mistrust Dorsenne's irony.

"I met Hafner this morning on the Corso," said the latter to Alba at one of the soirees at the end of the month, "and I had my third edition of the pleasantry on the pears and chestnuts. And then, as we took a few steps in the same direction, he pointed out to me the Palais Bonaparte, saying, 'We are also related to them.'... Which means that a grand-nephew of the Emperor married a cousin of Peppino.... I swear he thinks he is related to Napoleon!.... He is not even proud of it. The Bonapartes are nowhere when it is a question of nobility!.... I await the time when he will blush."

"And I the time when he will be punished as he deserves," interrupted Alba Steno, in a mournful voice. "He is insolently triumphant. But no.He will succeed.... If it be true that his fortune is one immense theft, think of those he has ruined. In what can they believe in the face of his infamous happiness?"

"If they are philosophers," replied Dorsenne, laughing still more gayly, "this spectacle will cause them to meditate on the words uttered by one of my friends: 'One can not doubt the hand of God, for it created the world.' Do you remember a certain prayer-book of Montluc's?"

"The one which your friend Montfanon bought to vex the poor little thing?"

"Precisely. The old-leaguer has returned it to Ribalta; the latter told me so yesterday; no doubt in a spirit of mortification. I say no doubt for I have not seen the poor, dear man since the duel, which his impatience toward Ardea and Hafner rendered inevitable. He retired, I know not for how many days, to the convent of Mount Olivet, near Sienna, where he has a friend, one Abbe de Negro, of whom he always speaks as of a saint. I learned, through Ribalta, that he has returned, but is invisible. I tried to force an entrance. In short, the volume is again in the shop of the curiosity-seeker in the Rue Borgognona, if Mademoiselle Hafner still wants it!"

"What good fortune!" exclaimed Fanny, with a sparkle of delight in her eyes. "I did not know what present to offer my dear Cardinal. Shall we make the purchase at once?"

"Montluc's prayer-book?" repeated old Ribalta, when the two young ladies had alighted from the carriage before his small book-shop, more dusty, more littered than ever with pamphlets, in which he still was, with his face more wrinkled, more wan and more proud, peering from beneath his broad-brimmed hat, which he did not raise. "How do you know it is here? Who has told you? Are there spies everywhere?"

"It was Monsieur Dorsenne, one of Monsieur de Montfanon's friends," said Fanny, in her gentle voice.

"Sara sara," replied the merchant with his habitual insolence, and, opening the drawer of the chest in which he kept the most incongruous treasures, he drew from it the precious volume, which he held toward them, without giving it up. Then he began a speech, which reproduced the details given by Montfanon himself. "Ah, it is very authentic. There is an indistinct but undeniable signature. I have compared it with that which is preserved in the archives of Sienna. It is Montluc's writing, and there is his escutcheon with the turtles.... Here, too, are the half-moons of the Piccolomini.... This book has a history...."

"The Marshal gave it, after the famous siege, to one of the members of that illustrious family. And it was for one of the descendants that I was commissioned to buy it.... They will not give it up for less than two thousand francs."

"What a cheat!" said Alba to her companion, in English. "Dorsenne told me that Monsieur de Montfanon bought it for four hundred."

"Are you sure?" asked Fanny, who, on receiving a reply in the affirmative, addressed the bookseller, with the same gentleness, but with reproach in her accent: "Two thousand francs, Monsieur Ribalta? But it is not a just price, since you sold it to Monsieur de Montfanon for one-fifth of that sum."

"Then I am a liar and a thief," roughly replied the old man; "a thief and a liar," he repeated. "Four hundred francs! You wish to have this book for four hundred francs? I wish Monsieur de Montfanon was here to tell you how much I asked him for it."

The old bookseller smiled cruelly as he replaced the prayerbook in the drawer, the key of which he turned, and turning toward the two young girls, whose delicate beauty, heightened by their fine toilettes, contrasted so delightfully with the sordid surroundings, he enveloped them with a glance so malicious that they shuddered and instinctively drew nearer one another. Then the bookseller resumed, in a voice hoarser and deeper than ever: "If you wish to spend four hundred francs I have a volume which is worth it, and which I propose to take to the Palais Savorelli one of these days.... Ha, ha! It must be one of the very last, for the Baron has bought them all." In uttering those enigmatical words, he opened the cupboard which formed the lower part of the chest, and took from one of the shelves a book wrapped in a newspaper. He then unfolded the journal, and, holding the volume in his enormous hand with his dirty nails, he disclosed the title to the two young girls: 'Hafner and His Band; Some Reflections on the Scandalous Acquittal. By a Shareholder.' It was a pamphlet, at that date forgotten, but which created much excitement at one time in the financial circles of Paris, of London and of Berlin, having been printed at once in three languages—in French, in German and in English—on the day after the suit of the 'Credit Austro Dalmate.' The dealer's chestnut-colored eyes twinkled with a truly ferocious joy as he held out the volume and repeated:

"It is worth four hundred francs."

"Do not read that book, Fanny," said Alba quickly, after having read the title of the work, and again speaking in English; "it is one of those books with which one should not even pollute one's thoughts."

"You may keep the book, sir," she continued, "since you have made yourself the accomplice of those who have written it, by speculating on the fear you hoped it would inspire. Mademoiselle Hafner has known of it long, and neither she nor her father will give a centime."

"Very well! So much the better, so much the better," said Ribalta, wrapping up his volume again; "tell your father I will keep it at his service."

"Ah, the miserable man!" said Alba, when Fanny and she had left the shop and reentered the carriage. "To dare to show you that!"

"You saw," replied Fanny, "I was so surprised I could not utter a word. That the man should offer me that infamous work is very impertinent. My father?... You do not know his scrupulousness in business. It is the honor of his profession. There is not a sovereign in Europe who has not given him a testimonial."

That impassioned protestation was so touching, the generous child's illusion was so sincere, that Alba pressed her hand with a deeper tenderness. When Alba found herself that evening with her friend Dorsenne, who again dined at Madame Steno's, she took him aside to relate to him the tragical scene, and to ask him: "Have you seen that pamphlet?"

"To-day," said the writer. "Montfanon, whom I have found at length, has just bought one of the two copies which Ribalta received lately. The old leaguer believes everything, you know, when a Hafner is in the question.... I am more skeptical in the bad as well as in the good. It was only the account given by the trial which produced any impression on me, for that is truth."

"But he was acquitted."

"Yes," replied Dorsenne, "though it is none the less true that he ruined hundreds and hundreds of persons."

"Then, by the account given you of the case, it is clear to you that he is dishonest," interrupted Alba,

"As clear as that you are here, Contessina," replied Dorsenne, "if to steal means to plunder one's neighbors and to escape justice. But that would be nothing. The sinister corner in this affair is the suicide of one Schroeder, a brave citizen of Vienna, who knew our Baron intimately, and who invested, on the advice of his excellent friend, his entire fortune, three hundred thousand florins, in the scheme. He lost them, and, in despair, killed himself, his wife, and their three children."

"My God!" cried Alba, clasping her hands. "And Fanny might have read that letter in the book."

"Yes," continued Julien, "and all the rest with proof in support of it. But rest assured, she shall not have the volume. I will go to that anarchist of a Ribalta to-morrow and I will buy the last copy, if Hafner has not already bought it."

Notwithstanding his constant affectation of irony, and, notwithstanding, his assumption of intellectual egotism, Julien was obliging. He never hesitated to render any one a service. He had not told his little friend an untruth when he promised her to buy the dangerous work, and the following morning he turned toward the Rue Borgognona, furnished with the twenty louis demanded by the bookseller. Imagine his feelings when the latter said to him:

"It is too late, Monsieur Dorsenne. The young lady was here last night. She pretended not to prefer one volume to the other. It was to bargain, no doubt. Ha, ha! But she had to pay the price. I would have asked the father more. One owes some consideration to a young girl."

"Wretch!" exclaimed the novelist. "And you can jest after having committed that Judas-like act! To inform a child of her father's misdeeds, when she is ignorant of them!.... Never, do you hear, never any more will Monsieur de Montfanon and I set foot in your shop, nor Monseigneur Guerillot, nor any of the persons of my acquaintance. I will tell the whole world of your infamy. I will write it, and it shall appear in all the journals of Rome. I will ruin you, I will force you to close this dusty old shop."

During the entire day, Dorsenne vainly tried to shake off the weight of melancholy which that visit to the brigand of the Rue Borgognona had left upon his heart.

On crossing, at nine o'clock, the threshold of the Villa Steno to give an account of his mission to the Contessina, he was singularly moved. There was no one there but the Maitlands, two tourists and two English diplomatists, on their way to posts in the East.

"I was awaiting you," said Alba to her friend, as soon as she could speak with him in a corner of the salon. "I need your advice. Last night a tragical incident took place at the Hafner's."

"Probably," replied Dorsenne. "Fanny has bought Ribalta's book."

"She has bought the book!" said Alba, changing color and trembling.

"Ah, the unhappy girl; the other thing was not sufficient!"

"What other thing?" questioned Julien.

"You remember," said the young girl, "that I told you of that Noe Ancona, the agent who served Hafner as a tool in selling up Ardea, and in thus forcing the marriage. Well, it seems this personage did not think himself sufficiently well-paid for his complicity. He demanded of the Baron a large sum, with which to found some large swindling scheme, which the latter refused point-blank. The other threatened to relate their little dealing to Ardea, and he did so."

"And Peppino was angry?" asked Dorsenne, shaking his head. "That is not like him."

"Indignant or not," continued Alba, "last night he went to the Palais Savorelli to make a terrible scene with his future father-in-law."

"And to obtain an increase of dowry," said Julian.

"He was not by any means tactful, then," replied Alba, "for even in the presence of Fanny, who entered in the midst of their conversation, he did not pause. Perhaps he had drunk a little more than he could stand, which has of late become common with him. But, you see, the poor child was initiated into the abominable bargain with regard to her future, to her happiness, and if she has read the book, too! It is too dreadful!"

"What a violent scene!" exclaimed Dorsenne. "So the engagement has been broken off?"

"Not officially. Fanny is ill in bed from the excitement. Ardea came this morning to see my mother, who has also seen Hafner. She has reconciled them by proving to them, which she thinks true, that they have a common interest in avoiding all scandal, and arranging matters. But it rests with the poor little one. Mamma wished me to go, this afternoon, to beseech her to reconsider her resolution. For she has told her father she never wishes to hear the Prince's voice again. I have refused. Mamma insists. Am I not right?"

"Who knows?" replied Julien. "What would be her life alone with her father, now that her illusions with regard to him have been swept away?"

The touching scene had indeed taken place, and less than twenty-four hours after the novelist had thus expressed to himself the regret of not assisting at it. Only he was mistaken as to the tenor of the dialogue, in a manner which proved that the subtlety of intelligence will never divine the simplicity of the heart. The most dolorous of all moral tragedies knit and unknit the most often in silence. It was in the afternoon, toward six o'clock, that a servant came to announce Mademoiselle Hafner's visit to the Contessina, busy at that moment reading for the tenth time the 'Eglogue Mondaine,' that delicate story by Dorsenne. When Fanny entered the room, Alba could see what a trial her charming god-daughter of the past week had sustained, by the surprising and rapid alteration in that expressive and noble visage. She took her hand at first without speaking to her, as if she was entirely ignorant of the cause of her friend's real indisposition. She then said:

"How pleased I am to see you! Are you better?"

"I have never been ill," replied Fanny, who did not know how to tell an untruth. "I have had pain, that is all." Looking at Alba, as if to beg her to ask no question, she added:

"I have come to bid you adieu."

"You are going away?" asked the Contessina. "Yes," said Fanny, "I am going to spend the summer at one of our estates in Styria. "And, in a low voice: "Has your mother told you that my engagement is broken?" "Yes," replied Alba, and both were again silent. After several moments Fanny was the first to ask: "And how shall you spend your summer?"—"We shall go to Piove, as usual," was Alba's answer. "Perhaps Dorsenne will be there, and the Maitlands will surely be." A third pause ensued. They gazed at one another, and, without uttering another word, they distinctly read one another's hearts. The martyrdom they suffered was so similar, they both knew it to be so like, that they felt the same pity possess them at the same moment. Forced to condemn with the most irrevocable condemnation, the one her father, the other, her mother, each felt attracted toward the friend, like her, unhappy, and, falling into one another's arms, they both sobbed.

CHAPTER XI

THE LAKE DI PORTO

Her friend's tears had relieved sad Alba's heart while she held that friend in her arms, quivering with sorrow and pity; but when she was gone, and Madame Steno's daughter was alone, face to face with her thoughts, a greater distress seized her. The pity which her companion in misery had shown for her—was it not one more proof that she was right in mistrusting her mother? Alas! The miserable child did not know that while she was plunged in despair, there was in Rome and in her immediate vicinity a creature bent upon realizing a mad vow. And that creature was the same who had not recoiled before the infamy of an anonymous letter, pretty and sinister Lydia Maitland—that delicate, that silent young woman with the large brown eyes, always smiling, always impenetrable in the midst of that dull complexion which no emotion, it seemed, had ever tinged. The failure of her first attempt had exasperated her hatred against her husband and against the Countess to the verge of fury, but a concentrated fury, which was waiting for another occasion to strike, for weeks, patiently, obscurely. She had thought to wreak her vengeance by the return of Gorka, and in what had it ended? In freeing Lincoln from a dangerous rival and in imperilling the life of the only being for whom she cared!

The sojourn at the country-seat of her husband's mistress exasperated Lydia's hidden anger. She suffered so that she cried aloud, like an imprisoned animal beating against the bars, when she pictured to herself the happiness which the two lovers would enjoy in the intimacy of the villa, with the beauties of the Venetian scenery surrounding them. No doubt the wife could provoke a scandal and obtain a divorce, thanks to proofs as indisputable as those with which she had overwhelmed Maud. It would be sufficient to carry to a lawyer the correspondence in the Spanish escritoire. But of what use? She would not be avenged on her husband, to whom a divorce would be a matter of indifference now that he earned as much money as he required, and she would lose her brother. In vain Lydia told herself that, warned as Alba had been by her letter, her doubt of Madame Steno's misconduct would no longer be impossible. She was convinced by innumerable trifling signs that the Contessina still doubted, and then she concluded:

"It is there that the blow must be struck. But how?"

Yes. How? There was at the service of hatred in that delicate woman, in appearance oblivious of worldliness, that masculine energy in decision which is to be found in all families of truly military origin. The blood of Colonel Chapron stirred within her and gave her the desire to act. By dint of pondering upon those reasonings, Lydia ended by elaborating one of those plans of a simplicity really infernal, in which she revealed what must be called the genius of evil, for there was so much clearness in the conception and of villainy in the execution. She assured herself that it was unnecessary to seek any other stage than the studio for the scene she meditated. She knew too well the fury of passion by which Madame Steno was possessed to doubt that, as soon as she was alone with Lincoln, she did not refuse him those kisses of which their correspondence spoke. The snare to be laid was very simple. It required that Alba and Lydia should be in some post of observation while the lovers believed themselves alone, were it only for a moment. The position of the places furnished the formidable woman with the means of obtaining the place of espionage in all security. Situated on the second floor, the studio occupied most of the depth of the house. The wall, which separated it from the side of the apartments, ended in a partition formed of colored glass, through which it was impossible to see. That glass lighted a dark corridor adjoining the linen-room. Lydia employed several hours of several nights in cutting with a diamond a hole, the size of a fifty centime-piece, in one of those unpolished squares.

Her preparations had been completed several days when, notwithstanding her absence of scruple in the satiating of her hatred, she still hesitated to employ that mode of vengeance, so much atrocious cruelty was there in causing a daughter to spy upon her mother. It was Alba herself who kindled the last spark of humanity with which that dark conscience was lighted up, and that by the most innocent of conversations. It was the very evening of the afternoon on which she had exchanged that sad adieu with Fanny Hafner. She was more unnerved than usual, and she was conversing with Dorsenne in that corner of the long hall. They did not heed the fact that Lydia drew near them, by a simple change of seat which permitted her, while herself conversing with some guest, to lend an ear to the words uttered by the Contessina.

It was Florent who was the subject of their conversation, and she said to Dorsenne, who was praising him:

"What would you have? It is true I almost feel repulsion toward him. He is to me like a being of another species. His friendship for his brother-in-law? Yes. It is very beautiful, very touching; but it does not touch me. It is a devotion which is not human. It is too instinctive and too blind. Indeed, I

know that I am wrong. There is that prejudice of race which I can never entirely overcome."

Dorsenne touched her fingers at that moment, under the pretext of taking from her her fan, in reality to warn her, and he said, in a very low voice that time:

"Let us go a little farther on. Lydia Maitland is too near."

He fancied he surprised a start on the part of Florent's sister, at whom he accidentally glanced, while his too-sensible interlocutor no longer watched her! But as the pretty, clear laugh of Lydia rang out at the same moment, imprudent Alba replied:

"Fortunately, she has heard nothing. And see how one can speak of trouble without mistrusting it.... I have just been wicked," she continued, "for it is not their fault, neither Florent's nor hers, if there is a little negro blood in their veins, so much the more so as it is connected by the blood of a hero, and they are both perfectly educated, and what is better, perfectly good, and then I know very well that if there is a grand thought in this age it is to have proclaimed that truly all men are brothers."

She had spoken in a lower voice, but too late. Moreover, even if Florent's sister could have heard those words, they would not have sufficed to heal the wound which the first ones had made in the most sensitive part of her 'amour propre'!

"And I hesitated," said she to herself, "I thought of sparing her!"

The following morning, toward noon, she found herself at the atelier, seated beside Madame Steno, while Lincoln gave to the portrait the last touches, and while Alba posed in the large armchair, absent and pale as usual. Florent Chapron, after having assisted at part of the sitting, left the room, leaning upon the crutch, which he still used. His withdrawal seemed so propitious to Lydia that she resolved immediately not to allow such an opportunity to escape, and as if fatality interfered to render her work of infamy more easy, Madame Steno aided her by suddenly interrupting the work of the painter who, after hard working without speaking for half an hour, paused to wipe his forehead, on which were large drops of perspiration, so great was his excitement.

"Come, my little Linco," said she, with the affectionate solicitude of an old mistress, "you must rest. For two hours you have not ceased painting, and such minute details.... It tires me merely to watch you."

"I am not at all tired," replied Maitland, who, however, laid down his palette and brush, and rolling a cigarette, lighted it, continuing, with a proud smile: "We have only that one superiority, we Americans, but we have it—it is a power to apply ourselves which the Old World no longer knows.... It is for that reason that there are professions in which we have no rivals."

"But see!" replied Lydia, "you have taken Alba for a Bostonian or a New Yorker, and you have made her pose so long that she is pale. She must have a change. Come with me, dear, I will show you the costume they have sent me from Paris, and which I shall wear this afternoon to the garden party at the English embassy."

She forced Alba Steno to rise from the armchair as she uttered those words, then she entwined her arms about her waist to draw her away and kissed her. Ah, if ever a caress merited being compared to the hideous flattery of Iscariot, it was that, and the young girl might have replied with the sublime words: "Friend, why hast thou betrayed me by a kiss?" Alas! She believed in it, in the sincerity of that proof of affection, and she returned her false friend's kiss with a gratitude which did not soften that heart saturated with hatred, for five minutes had not passed ere Lydia had put into execution her hideous project. Under the pretext of reaching the linen-room more quickly, she took a servant's staircase, which led to that lobby with the glass partition, in which was the opening through which to look into the atelier.

"This is very strange," said she, pausing suddenly. And, pointing out to her innocent companion the round spot, she said: "Probably some servant who has wished to eavesdrop.—But what for? You, who are tall, look and see how it has been done and what it looks on. If it is a hole cut purposely, I shall discover the culprit and he shall go."

Alba obeyed the perfidious request absently, and applied her eye to the aperture. The author of the anonymous letters had chosen her moment only too well. As soon as the door of the studio was closed, the Countess rose to approach Lincoln. She entwined around the young man's neck her arms, which gleamed through the transparent sleeves of her summer gown, and she kissed with greedy lips his eyes and mouth. Lydia, who had retained one of the girl's hands in hers, felt that hand tremble convulsively. A hunter who hears rustle the foliage of the thicket through which should pass the game he is awaiting, does not experience a joy more complete. Her snare was successful. She said to her unhappy victim:

"What ails you? How you tremble!"

And she essayed to push her away in order to put herself in her place. Alba, whom the sight of her mother embracing Lincoln with those passionate kisses inspired at that moment with an inexplicable horror, had, however, enough presence of mind in the midst of her suffering to understand the danger of that mother whom she had surprised thus, clasping in the arms of a guilty mistress—whom?—the husband of the very woman speaking to her, who asked her why she trembled with fear, who would look through that same hole to see that same tableau!.... In order to prevent what she believed would be to Lydia a terrible revelation, the courageous child had one of those desperate thoughts such as immediate peril inspires. With her free hand she struck the glass so violently that it was shattered into atoms, cutting her fingers and her wrist.

Lydia exclaimed, angrily:

"Miserable girl, you did that purposely!"

The fierce creature as she uttered these words, rushed toward the large hole now made in the panel—too late!

She only saw Lincoln erect in the centre of the studio, looking toward the broken window, while the Countess, standing a few paces from him, exclaimed:

"My daughter! What has happened to my daughter? I recognized her voice."

"Do not alarm yourself," replied Lydia, with atrocious sarcasm. "Alba broke the pane to give you a warning."

"But, is she hurt?" asked the mother.

"Very slightly," replied the implacable woman with the same accent of irony, and she turned again toward the Contessina with a glance of such rancor that, even in the state of confusion in which the latter was plunged by that which she had surprised, that glance paralyzed her with fear. She felt the same shudder which had possessed her dear friend Maud, in that same studio, in the face of the sinister depths of that dark soul, suddenly exposed. She had not time to precisely define her feelings, for already her mother was beside her, pressing her in her arms—in those very arms which Alba had just seen twined around the neck of a lover—while that same mouth showered kisses upon him. The moral shock was so great that the young girl fainted. She regained consciousness and almost at once. She saw her mother as mad with anxiety as she had just seen her trembling with joy and love. She again saw Lydia Maitland's eyes fixed upon them both with an expression too significant now. And, as she had had the presence of mind to save that guilty mother, she found in her tenderness the strength to smile at her, to lie to her, to blind her forever as to the truth of that hideous scene which had just been enacted in that lobby.

"I was frightened at the sight of my own blood," said she, "and I believe it is only a small cut.... See! I can move my hand without pain."

When the doctor, hastily summoned, had confirmed that no particles of glass had remained in the cuts, the Countess felt so reassured that her gayety returned. Never had she been in a mood more charming than in the carriage which took them to the Villa Steno.

To a person obliged by proof to condemn another without ceasing to love her, there is no greater sorrow than to perceive the absolute unconsciousness of that other person and her serenity in her fault. Poor Alba, felt overwhelmed by a sadness greater, more depressing still, and which became materially insupportable, when, toward half-past two, her mother bade her farewell, although the fete at the English embassy did not begin until five o'clock.

"I promised poor Hafner to go to see him to-day. I know he is bowed down with grief. I would like to try to arrange all.... I will send back the carriage if you wish to go out awhile. I have telephoned Lydia to expect me at four o'clock.... She will take me."

She had, on detailing the employment so natural of her afternoon, eyes too brilliant, a smile too happy. She looked too youthful in her light toilette. Her feet trembled with too nervous an impatience. How could Alba not have felt that she was telling her an untruth? The undeceived child had the intuition that the visit to Fanny's father was only a pretext. It was not the first time that the Countess employed it to free herself from inconvenient surveillance, the act of sending back the carriage, which, in Rome as in Paris, is always the probable sign of clandestine meetings with women of their rank. It was not the first time that Alba was possessed by suspicion on certain mysterious disappearances of her mother. That mother did not mistrust that poor Alba—her Alba, the child so tenderly loved in spite

of all—was suffering at that very moment and on her account the most terrible of temptations.... When the carriage had disappeared the fixed gaze of the young girl was turned upon the pavement, and then she felt arise in her a sudden, instinctive, almost irresistible idea to end the moral suffering by which she was devoured. It was so simple!.... It was sufficient to end life. One movement which she could make, one single movement—she could lean over the balustrade, against which her arm rested, in a certain manner—so, a little more forward, a little more—and that suffering would be terminated. Yes, it would be so very simple. She saw herself lying upon the pavement, her limbs broken, her head crushed, dead—dead—freed! She leaned forward and was about to leap, when her eyes fell upon a person who was walking below, the sight of whom suddenly aroused her from the folly, the strange charm of which had just laid hold so powerfully upon her. She drew back. She rubbed her eyes with her hands, and she, who was accustomed to mystical enthusiasm, said aloud:

"My God! You send him to me! I am saved." And she summoned the footman to tell him that if M. Dorsenne asked for her, he should be shown into Madame Steno's small salon. "I am not at home to any one else," she added.

It was indeed Julien, whom she had seen approach the house at the very instant when she was only separated from the abyss by that last tremor of animal repugnance, which is found even in suicide of the most ardent kind. Do not madmen themselves choose to die in one manner rather than in another? She paused several moments in order to collect herself.

"Yes," said she at length, to herself, "it is the only solution. I will find out if he loves me truly. And if he does not?"

She again looked toward the window, in order to assure herself that, in case that conversation did not end as she desired, the tragical and simple means remained at her service by which to free herself from that infamous life which she surely could not bear.

Julien began the conversation in his tone of sentimental raillery, so speedily to be transformed into one of drama! He knew very well, on arriving at Villa Steno, that he was to have his last tete-a-tete with his pretty and interesting little friend. For he had at length decided to go away, and, to be more sure of not failing, he had engaged his sleeping-berth for that night. He had jested so much with love that he entered upon that conversation with a jest; when, having tried to take Alba's hand to press a kiss upon it, he saw that it was bandaged.

"What has happened to you, little Countess? Have my laurels or those of Florent Chapron prevented you from sleeping, that you are here with the classical wrist of a duellist?.... Seriously, how have you hurt yourself?"

"I leaned against a window, which broke and the pieces of glass cut my fingers somewhat," replied the young girl with a faint smile, adding: "It is nothing."

"What an imprudent child you are!" said Dorsenne in his tone of friendly scolding. "Do you know that you might have severed an artery and have caused a very serious, perhaps a fatal, hemorrhage?"

"That would not have been such a great misfortune," replied Alba, shaking her pretty head with an expression so bitter about her mouth that the young man, too, ceased smiling.

"Do not speak in that tone," said he, "or I shall think you did it purposely."

"Purposely?" repeated the young girl. "Purposely? Why should I have done it purposely?"

And she blushed and laughed in the same nervous way she had laughed fifteen minutes before, when she looked down into the street. Dorsenne felt that she was suffering, and his heart contracted. The trouble against which he had struggled for several days with all the energy of an independent artist, and which for some time systematized his celibacy, again oppressed him. He thought it time to put between "folly" and him the irreparability of his categorical resolution. So he replied to his little friend with his habitual gentleness, but in a tone of firmness, which already announced his determination:

"I have again vexed you, Contessina, and you are looking at me with the glance of our hours of dispute. You will later regret having been unkind to-day."

As he pronounced those enigmatical words, she saw that he had in his eyes and in his smile something different and indefinable. It must have been that she loved him still more than she herself believed as for a second she forgot both her pain and her resolution, and she asked him, quickly:

"You have some trouble? You are suffering? What is it?"

"Nothing," replied Dorsenne. "But time is flying, the minutes are going by, and not only the minutes."

There is an old and charming. French ode, which you do not know and which begins:

'Le temps s'en va, le temps s'en va, Madame.
Las, le temps? Non. Mais nous nous en allons.'

"Which means, little Countess, in simple prose, that this is no doubt the last conversation we shall have together this season, and that it would be cruel to mar for me this last visit."

"Do I understand you aright?" said Alba. She, too, knew too well Julien's way of speaking not to know that that mannerism, half-mocking, half-sentimental, always served him to prepare phrases more grave, and against the emotion of which her fear of appearing a dupe rose in advance. She crossed her arms upon her breast, and after a pause she continued, in a grave voice: "You are going away?"

"Yes," he replied, and from his coat-pocket he partly drew his ticket. "You see I have acted like the poltroons who cast themselves into the water. My ticket is bought, and I shall no longer hold that little discourse which I have held for months, that, 'Sir executioner, one moment.... Du Barry'."

"You are going away?" repeated the young girl, who did not seem to have heeded the jest by which Julien had concealed his own confusion at the effect of his so abruptly announced departure. "I shall not see you any more!.... And if I ask you not to go yet? You have spoken to me of our friendship.... If I pray you, if I beseech you, in the name of that friendship, not to deprive me of it at this instant, when I have no one, when I am so alone, so horribly alone, will you answer no? You have often told me that you were my friend, my true friend? If it be true, you will not go. I repeat, I am alone, and I am afraid."

"Come, little Countess," replied Dorsenne, who began to be terrified by the young girl's sudden excitement, "it is not reasonable to agitate yourself thus, because yesterday you had a very sad conversation with Fanny Hafner! First, it is altogether impossible for me to defer my departure. You force me to give you coarse, almost commercial reasons. But my book is about to appear, and I must be there for the launching of the sale, of which I have already told you. And then you are going away, too. You will have all the diversions of the country, of your Venetian friends and charming Lydia Maitland!"

"Do not mention that name," interrupted Alba, whose face became discomposed at the allusion to the sojourn at Piove. "You do not know how you pain me, nor what that woman is, what a monster of cruelty and of perfidy! Ask me no more. I shall tell you nothing. But," the Contessina that time clasping her hands, her poor, thin hands, which trembled with the anguish of the words she dared to utter, "do you not comprehend that if I speak to you as I do, it is because I have need of you in order to live?" Then in a low voice, choked by emotion: "It is because I love you!" All the modesty natural to a child of twenty mounted to her pale face in a flood of purple, when she had uttered that avowal. "Yes, I love you!" she repeated, in an accent as deep, but more firm. "It is not, however, so common a thing to find real devotion, a being who only asks to serve you, to be useful to you, to live in your shadow. And you will understand that to have the right of giving you my life, to bear your name, to be your wife, to follow you, I felt very vividly in your presence at the moment I was about to lose you. You will pardon my lack of modesty for the first, for the last time. I have suffered too much."

She ceased. Never had the absolute purity of the charming creature, born and bred in an atmosphere of corruption, and remaining in the same so intact, so noble, so frank, flashed out as at that moment. All that virgin and unhappy soul was in her eyes which implored Julien, on her lips which trembled at having spoken thus, on her brow around which floated, like an aureole, the fair hair stirred by the breeze which entered the open window. She had found the means of daring that prodigious step, the boldest a woman can permit herself, still more so a young girl, with so chaste a simplicity that at that moment Dorsenne would not have dared to touch even the hand of that child who confided herself to him so madly, so loyally.

Dorsenne was undoubtedly greatly interested in her, with a curiosity, without enthusiasm, and against which a reaction had already set in. That touching speech, in which trembled a distress so tender and each word of which later on made him weep with regret, produced upon him at that moment an impression of fear rather than love or pity. When at length he broke the cruel silence, the sound of his voice revealed to the unhappy girl the uselessness of that supreme appeal addressed by her to life.

She had only kept, to exorcise the demon of suicide, her hope in the heart of that man, and that heart, toward which she turned in so immoderate a transport, drew back instead of responding.

"Calm yourself, I beseech you," said he to her. "You can understand that I am very much moved, very much surprised, at what I have heard! I did not suspect it. My God! How troubled you are. And yet," he continued with more firmness, "I should despise myself were I to lie to you. You have been so loyal toward me.... To marry you? Ah, it would be the most delightful dream of happiness if that dream were

not prevented by honesty. Poor child," and his voice sounded almost bitter, "you do not know me. You do not know what a writer of my order is, and that to unite your destiny to mine would be for you martyrdom more severe than your moral solitude of to-day. You see, I came to your home with so much joy, because I was free, because each time I could say to myself that I need not return again. Such a confession is not romantic. But it is thus. If that relation became a bond, an obligation, a fixed framework in which to move, a circle of habits in which to imprison me, I should only have one thought—flight. An engagement for my entire life? No, no, I could not bear it. There are souls of passage as well as birds of passage, and I am one. You will understand it tomorrow, now, and you will remember that I have spoken to you as a man of honor, who would be miserable if he thought he had augmented, involuntarily, the sorrows of your life when his only desire was to assuage them. My God! What is to be done?" he cried, on seeing, as he spoke, tears gush from the young girl's eyes, which she did not wipe away.

"Go away," she replied, "leave me. I do not want you. I am grateful to you for not having deceived me."

"But your presence is too cruel. I am ashamed of having spoken to you, now that I know you do not love me. I have been mad, do not punish me by remaining longer. After the conversation we have just had, my honor will not permit us to talk longer."

"You are right," said Julien, after another pause. He took his hat, which he had placed upon a table at the beginning of that visit, so rapidly and abruptly terminated by a confession of sentiments so strange. He said:

"Then, farewell." She inclined her fair head without replying.

The door was closed. Alba Steno was again alone. Half an hour later, when the footman entered to ask for orders relative to the carriage sent back by the Countess, he found her standing motionless at the window from which she had watched Dorsenne depart. There she had once more been seized by the temptation of suicide. She had again felt with an irresistible force the magnetic attraction of death. Life appeared to her once more as something too vile, too useless, too insupportable to be borne. The carriage was at her disposal. By way of the Portese gate and along the Tiber, with the Countess's horses, it would take an hour and a half to reach the Lake di Porto. She had, too, this pretext, to avoid the curiosity of the servants: one of the Roman noblewomen of her acquaintance, Princess Torlonia, owned an isolated villa on the border of that lake.... She ascended hastily to don her hat. And without writing a word of farewell to any one, without even casting a glance at the objects among which she had lived and suffered, she descended the staircase and gave the coachman the name of the villa, adding "Drive quickly; I am late now."

The Lake di Porto is only, as its name indicates, the port of the ancient Tiber. The road which leads from Transtevere runs along the river, which rolls through a plain strewn with ruins and indented with barren hills, its brackish water discolored from the sand and mud of the Apennines.

Here groups of eucalyptus, there groups of pine parasols above some ruined walls, were all the vegetation which met Alba Steno's eye. But the scene accorded so well with the moral devastation she bore within her that the barrenness around her in her last walk was pleasant to her.

The feeling that she was nearing eternal peace, final sleep in which she should suffer no more, augmented when she alighted from the carriage, and, having passed the garden of Villa Torlonia, she found herself facing the small lake, so grandiose in its smallness by the wildness of its surroundings, and motionless, surprised in even that supreme moment by the magic of that hidden sight, she paused amid the reeds with their red tufts to look at that pond which was to become her tomb, and she murmured:

"How beautiful it is!"

There was in the humid atmosphere which gradually penetrated her a charm of mortal rest, to which she abandoned herself dreamily, almost with physical voluptuousness, drinking into her being the feverish fumes of that place—one of the most fatal at that season and at that hour of all that dangerous coast—until she shuddered in her light summer gown. Her shoulders contracted, her teeth chattered, and that feeling of discomfort was to her as a signal for action. She took another allee of rose-bushes in flower to reach a point on the bank barren of vegetation, where was outlined the form of a boat. She soon detached it, and, managing the heavy oars with her delicate hands, she advanced toward the middle of the lake.

When she was in the spot which she thought the deepest and the most suitable for her design, she ceased rowing. Then, by a delicate care, which made her smile herself, so much did it betray instinctive

and childish order at such a solemn moment, she put her hat, her umbrella and her gloves on one of the transversal boards of the boat. She had made effort to move the heavy oars, so that she was perspiring. A second shudder seized her as she was arranging the trifling objects, so keen, so chilly, so that time that she paused. She lay there motionless, her eyes fixed upon the water, whose undulations lapped the boat. At the last moment she felt reenter her heart, not love of life, but love for her mother. All the details of the events which would follow her suicide were presented to her mind.

She saw herself plunging into the deep water which would close over her head. Her suffering would be ended, but Madame Steno? She saw the coachman growing uneasy over her absence, ringing at the door of Villa Torlonia, the servants in search. The loosened boat would relate enough. Would the Countess know that she had killed herself? Would she know the cause of that desperate end? The terrible face of Lydia Maitland appeared to the young girl. She comprehended that the woman hated her enemy too much not to enlighten her with regard to the circumstances which had preceded that suicide. The cry so simple and of a significance so terrible: "You did it purposely!" returned to Alba's memory. She saw her mother learning that her daughter had seen all. She had loved her so much, that mother, she loved her so dearly still!

Then, as a third violent chill shook her from head to foot, Alba began to think of another mode, and one as sure, of death without any one in the world being able to suspect that it was voluntary. She recalled the fact that she was in one of the most dreaded corners of the Roman Campagna; that she had known persons carried off in a few days by the pernicious fevers contracted in similar places, at that hour and in that season, notably one of her friends, one of the Bonapartes living in Rome, who came thither to hunt when overheated. If she were to try to catch that same disease?... And she took up the oars. When she felt her brow moist with the second effort, she opened her bodice and her chemise, she exposed her neck, her breast, her throat, and she lay down in the boat, allowing the damp air to envelop, to caress, to chill her, inviting the entrance into her blood of the fatal germs. How long did she remain thus, half-unconscious, in the atmosphere more and more laden with miasma in proportion as the sun sank? A cry made her rise and again take up the oars. It was the coachman, who, not seeing her return, had descended from the box and was hailing the boat at all hazards. When she stepped upon the bank and when he saw her so pale, the man, who had been in the Countess's service for years, could not help saying to her, with the familiarity of an Italian servant:

"You have taken cold, Mademoiselle, and this place is so dangerous."

"Indeed," she replied, "I have had a chill. It will be nothing. Let us return quickly. Above all, do not say that I was in the boat. You will cause me to be scolded."

CHAPTER XII

EPILOGUE

"And it was directly after that conversation that the poor child left for the lake, where she caught the pernicious fever?" asked Montfanon.

"Directly," replied Dorsenne, "and what troubles me the most is that I can not doubt but that she went there purposely. I was so troubled by our conversation that I had not the strength to leave Rome the same evening, as I told her I should. After much hesitation—you understand why, now that I have told you all—I returned to the Villa Steno at six o'clock. To speak to her, but of what? Did I know? It was madness. For her avowal only allowed of two replies, either that which I made her or an offer of marriage. Ah, I did not reason so much. I was afraid.... Of what?... I do not know. I reached the villa, where I found the Countess, gay and radiant, as was her custom, and tete-a-tete with her American. 'Only think, there is my child,' said she to me, 'who has refused to go to the English embassy, where she would enjoy herself, and who has gone out for a drive alone.... Will you await her?'"

"At length she began to grow uneasy, and I, seeing that no one returned, took my leave, my heart oppressed by presentiments.... Alba's carriage stopped at the door just as I was going out. She was pale, of a greenish pallor, which caused me to say on approaching her: 'Whence have you come?' as if I had the right. Her lips, already discolored, trembled as they replied. When I learned where she had spent that hour of sunset, and near what lake, the most deadly in the neighborhood, I said to her: 'What imprudence!' I shall all my life see the glance she gave me at the moment, as she replied: 'Say, rather, how wise, and pray that I may have taken the fever and that I die of it.' You know the rest, and how her

wish has been realized. She indeed contracted the fever, and so severely that she died in less than six days. I have no doubt, since her last words, that it was a suicide."

"And the mother," asked Montfanon, "did she not comprehend finally?"

"Absolutely nothing," replied Dorsenne. "It is inconceivable, but it is thus. Ah! she is truly the worthy friend of that knave Hafner, whom his daughter's broken engagement has not grieved, in spite of his discomfiture. I forgot to tell you that he had just sold Palais Castagna to a joint-stock company to convert it into a hotel. I laugh," he continued with singular acrimony, "in order not to weep, for I am arriving at the most heartrending part. Do you know where I saw poor Alba Steno's face for the last time? It was three days ago, the day after her death, at this hour. I called to inquire for the Countess! She was receiving! 'Do you wish to bid her adieu?' she asked me. 'Good Lincoln is just molding her face for me.' And I entered the chamber of death. Her eyes were closed, her cheeks were sunken, her pretty nose was pinched, and upon her brow and in the corners of her mouth was a mixture of bitterness and of repose which I can not describe to you. I thought: 'If you had liked, she would be alive, she would smile, she would love you!' The American was beside the bed, while Florent Chapron, always faithful, was preparing the oil to put upon the face of the corpse, and sinister Lydia Maitland was watching the scene with eyes which made me shudder, reminding me of what I had divined at the time of my last conversation with Alba. If she does not undertake to play the part of a Nemesis and to tell all to the Countess, I am mistaken in faces! For the moment she was silent, and guess the only words the mother uttered when her lover, he on whose account her daughter had suffered so much, approached their common victim: 'Above all, do not injure her lovely lashes!' What horrible irony, was it not? Horrible!"

The young man sank upon a bench as he uttered that cry of distress and of remorse, which Montfanon mechanically repeated, as if startled by the tragical confidence he had just received.

Montfanon shook his gray head several times as if deliberating; then forced Dorsenne to rise, chiding him thus:

"Come, Julien, we can not remain here all the afternoon dreaming and sighing like young women! The child is dead. We can not restore her to life, you in despairing, I in deploring. We should do better to look in the face our responsibility in that sinister adventure, to repent of it and to expiate it."

"Our responsibility?" interrogated Julien. "I see mine, although I can truly not see yours."

"Yours and mine," replied Montfanon. "I am no sophist, and I am not in the habit of shifting my conscience. Yes or no," he insisted, with a return of his usual excitement, "did I leave the catacombs to arrange that unfortunate duel? Yes or no, did I yield to the paroxysm of cholera which possessed me on hearing of the engagement of Ardea and on finding that I was in the presence of that equivocal Hafner? Yes or no, did that duel help to enlighten Madame Gorka as to her husband's doings, and, in consequence, Mademoiselle Steno as to her mother's? Did you not relate to me the progress of her anguish since that scandal, there just now?.... And if I have been startled, as I have been, by the news of that suicide, know it has been for this reason especially, because a voice has said to me: 'A few of the tears of that dead girl are laid to your account.'"

"But, my poor friend," interrupted Dorsenne, "whence such reasoning? According to that, we could not live any more. There enters into our lives, by indirect means, a collection of actions which in no way concerns us, and in admitting that we have a debt of responsibility to pay, that debt commences and ends in that which we have wished directly, sincerely, clearly."

"It would be very convenient," replied the Marquis, with still more vivacity, "but the proof that it is not true is that you yourself are filled with remorse at not having saved the soul so weak of that defenseless child. Ah, I do not mince the truth to myself, and I shall not do so to you. You remember the morning when you were so gay, and when you gave me the theory of your cosmopolitanism? It amused you, as a perfect dilettante, so you said, to assist in one of those dramas of race which bring into play the personages from all points of the earth and of history, and you then traced to me a programme very true, my faith, and which events have almost brought about. Madame Steno has indeed conducted herself toward her two lovers as a Venetian of the time of Aretin; Chapron, with all the blind devotion of a descendant of an oppressed race; his sister with the villainous ferocity of a rebel who at length shakes off the yoke, since you think she wrote those anonymous letters. Hafner and Ardea have laid bare two detestable souls, the one of an infamous usurer, half German, half Dutch; the other of a degraded nobleman, in whom is revived some ancient 'condottiere'. Gorka has been brave and mad, like entire Poland; his wife implacable and loyal, like all of England. Maitland continues to be positive, insensible, and wilful in the midst of it all, as all America. And poor Alba ended as did her father. I do not speak to you of Baron Hafner's daughter," and he raised his hat. Then, in an altered voice:

"She is a saint, in whom I was deceived. But she has Jewish blood in her veins, blood which was that

of the people of God. I should have remembered it and the beautiful saying of the Middle Ages: 'The Jewish women shall be saved because they have wept for our Lord in secret.'.... You outlined for me in advance the scene of the drama in which we have been mixed up.... And do you remember what I said: 'Is there not among them a soul which you might aid in doing better?' You laughed in my face at that moment. You would have treated me, had you been less polite, as a Philistine and a cabotin. You wished to be only a spectator, the gentleman in the balcony who wipes the glasses of his lorgnette in order to lose none of the comedy. Well, you could not do so. That role is not permitted a man. He must act, and he acts always, even when he thinks he is looking on, even when he washes his hands as Pontius Pilate, that dilettante, too, who uttered the words of your masters and of yourself. What is truth? Truth is that there is always and everywhere a duty to fulfil. Mine was to prevent that criminal encounter. Yours was not to pay attention to that young girl if you did not love her, and if you loved her, to marry her and to take her from her abominable surroundings. We have both failed, and at what a price!"

"You are very severe," said the young man; "but if you were right would not Alba be dead? Of what use is it for me to know what I should have done when it is too late?"

"First, never to do so again," said the Marquis; "then to judge yourself and your life."

"There is truth in what you say," replied Dorsenne, "but you are mistaken if you think that the most intellectual men of our age have not suffered, too, from that abuse of thought. What is to be done? Ah, it is the disease of a century too cultivated, and there is no cure."

"There is one," interrupted Montfanon, "which you do not wish to see.... You will not deny that Balzac was the boldest of our modern writers. Is it necessary for me, an ignorant man, to recite to you the phrase which governs his work: 'Thought, principle of evil and of good can only be prepared, subdued, directed by religion.' See?" he continued, suddenly taking his companion by the arm and forcing him to look into a transversal alley through the copse, "there he is, the doctor who holds the remedy for that malady of the soul as for all the others. Do not show yourself. They will have forgotten our presence. But, look, look!Ah, what a meeting!"

The personage who appeared suddenly in that melancholy, deserted garden, and in a manner almost supernatural, so much did his presence form a living commentary to the discourse of the impassioned nobleman, was no other than the Holy Father himself, on the point of entering his carriage for his usual drive. Dorsenne, who only knew Leo XIII from his portraits, saw an old man, bent, bowed, whose white cassock gleamed beneath the red mantle, and who leaned on one side upon a prelate of his court, on the other upon one of his officers. In drawing back, as Montfanon had advised, in order not to bring a reprimand upon the keepers, he could study at his leisure the delicate face of the Sovereign Pontiff, who paused at a bed of roses to converse familiarly with a kneeling gardener. He saw the infinitely indulgent smile of that spirituelle mouth. He saw the light of those eyes which seemed to justify by their brightness the 'lumen in coelo' applied to the successor of Pie IX by a celebrated prophecy. He saw the venerable hand, that white, transparent hand, which was raised to give the solemn benediction with so much majesty, turn toward a fine yellow rose, and the fingers bend the flower without plucking it, as if not to harm the frail creation of God. The old Pope for a second inhaled its perfume and then resumed his walk toward the carriage, vaguely to be seen between the trunks of the green oaks. The black horses set off at a trot, and Dorsenne, turning again toward Montfanon, perceived large tears upon the lashes of the former zouave, who, forgetting the rest of their conversation, said, with a sigh: "And that is the only pleasure allowed him, who is, however, the successor of the first apostle, to inhale his flowers and drive in a carriage as rapidly as his horses can go! They have procured four paltry kilometers of road at the foot of the terrace where we were half an hour since. And he goes on, he goes on, thus deluding himself with regard to the vast space which is forbidden him. I have seen many tragical sights in my life. I have been to the war, and I have spent one entire night wounded on a battlefield covered with snow, among the dead, grazed by the wheels of the artillery of the conquerors, who defiled singing. Nothing has moved me like that drive of the old man, who has never uttered a complaint and who has for himself only that acre of land in which to move freely. But these are grand words which the holy man wrote one day at the foot of his portrait for a missionary. The words explain his life: 'Debitricem martyrii fidem'—Faith is bound to martyrdom."

"'Debitricem martyrii fidem'," repeated Dorsenne, "that is beautiful, indeed. And," he added, in a low voice, "you just now abused very rudely the dilettantes and the sceptic. But do you think there would be one of them who would refuse martyrdom if he could have at the same time faith?"

Never had Montfanon heard the young man utter a similar phrase and in such an accent. The image returned to him, by way of contrast, of Dorsenne, alert and foppish, the dandy of literature, so gayly a scoffer and a sophist, to whom antique and venerable Rome was only a city of pleasure, a cosmopolis more paradoxical than Florence, Nice, Biarritz, St. Moritz, than such and such other cities of international winter and summer. He felt that for the first time that soul was strained to its depths, the

tragic death of poor Alba had become in the mind of the writer the point of remorse around which revolved the moral life of the superior and incomplete being, exiled from simple humanity by the most invincible pride of mind. Montfanon comprehended that every additional word would pain the wounded heart. He was afraid of having already lectured Dorsenne too severely. He took within his arm the arm of the young man, and he pressed it silently, putting into that manly caress all the warm and discreet pity of an elder brother.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Mobile and complaisant conscience had already forgiven himself
Not an excuse, but an explanation of your conduct
Sufficed him to conceive the plan of a reparation
There is always and everywhere a duty to fulfil

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