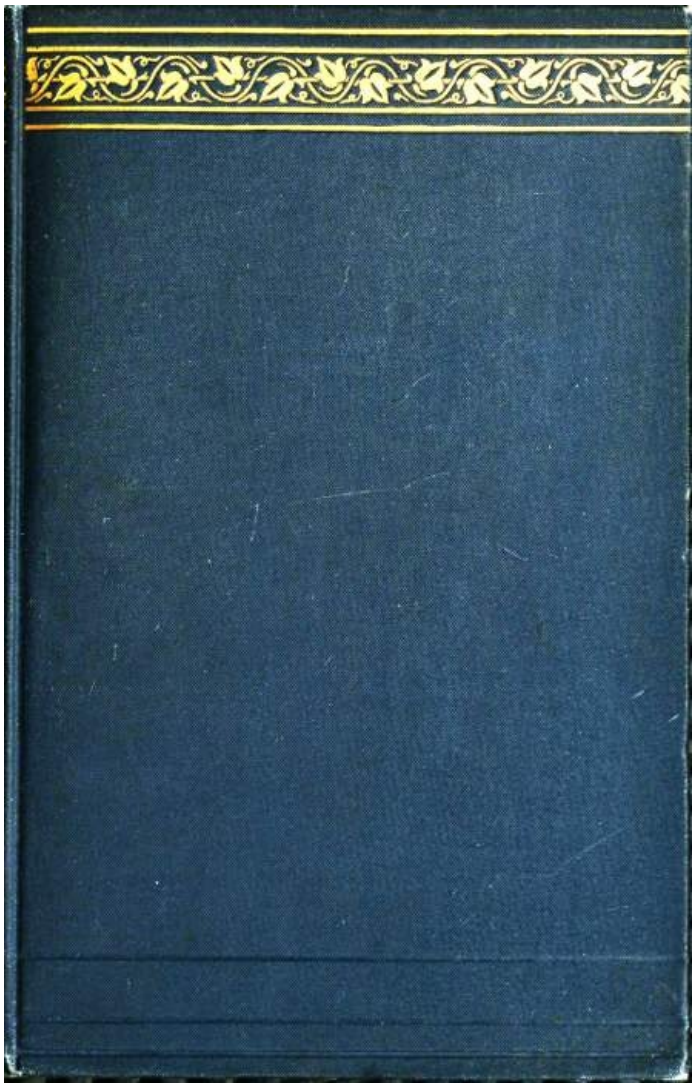

KOPHETUA THE THIRTEENTH

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KOPHETUA
THE THIRTEENTH

BY

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London
MACMILLAN & CO.
AND NEW YORK
1889

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CHAPTER I.
ONEIRIA.

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"I read that once in Affrica
A princely wight did raine,
Who had to name Kophetua,
As poets they did faine."

The outburst of political speculation which followed the Renaissance is well known to us by its remarkable literature. True it is that the greater part of it is long since dead and sleeps in peace, save where every now and then its ghosts are scared by a literary historian. But this obscurity only adds to its interest, and increases at once the charm, the safety, and the credit we may enjoy in discussing it. For the ordinary Englishman perhaps the only work of the class which is still really alive is the delightful political romance of Sir Thomas More. Yet to those who love the dustier shelves of libraries long ranks of its comrades will be not unfamiliar, standing guard as it were over the memory of an intellectual movement as vigorous and creative as any the world has seen.

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It is to the more daring and fantastic of these works that this chapter in the history of philosophy owes its charm and freshness. So entrancing indeed are they that those double traitors to humanity, who not only write books, but write books about books, have led us to look upon these ponderous folios as the only mark the movement has left on history, and we are apt to forget that it also had its practical side. Yet that side not only had an existence, but it was even more romantic and fanciful than the other.

For many of the pregnant seeds from the tree of political knowledge, which the strong breath of the Renaissance was wafting over Europe, fell on good ground, where pedantry did not spring up and choke them. There were many cultivated earnest gentlemen of that time in whose chivalrous hearts they alighted, and whose imagination was so stirred with the new ideas, that they actually attempted to carry them into practice.

Coming as the movement did contemporaneously with the dayspring of colonial enterprise, it naturally suggested itself to these high-souled scholars to leave the corruption and oppression of the old countries which it was hopeless to reform, and sailing away with a little community of kindred souls in whom the new spirit breathed, to found in some distant land a colony, where a

polity established in pure reason should grow to be a model to the world.

Many of these attempts were complete failures at once, nearly all were more or less short-lived, and by the end of the last century there was not one so prosperous as the African colony of Oneiria. [Pg 3]

Lying as it did in that remote and little-known corner of the world which is watered by the Drâa and its tributaries, and is intersected by the spurs of the Anti-Atlas, it had been able to enjoy after its first struggle for existence the repose of a well-earned obscurity. There was no one who envied it anything, and consequently it had no enemy, nor even an importunate friend to seek its alliance and lead it into scrapes. The half savage Shelluhs, who sparsely occupied the country, were soon content to remain as tributaries under their own chiefs, in the more inaccessible parts of the mountains, and to leave the teeming valleys and table-lands to the newcomers.

Through the Canary Islands the colony kept up a small but regular trade with Western Europe. The exports were of a very mixed nature, but chiefly consisted of dates. As the country was practically self-supporting, the imports were comparatively simple. They were confined to books, works of art, and clothes of the latest mode.

For it was the pride of Oneiria, as with most other colonies of the time, that, notwithstanding its remote position, it floated on the surface of European opinion; and so freely did it indulge in this delicious conviction, that it is to be feared it grew but too often to an actual intemperance, and at the time of which I speak there is no doubt that Oneiria sometimes caricatured the fantasies of a fantastic age. [Pg 4]

Internally Oneiria was almost as unruffled as in its foreign relations. The elaborate constitution of the original founder worked so smoothly and effectively that crime and even discontent seemed almost unknown. The most ingenious and conscientious politicians had long ago abandoned the hopeless struggle to extract a difference of opinion out of questions of the interior. This dearth of disagreement led to a serious famine in the political world, that had it not been for one recurrent topic, of which I shall have to speak more fully hereafter, politics must have completely perished of starvation.

It is not clear who the founder of the fortunate colony was. From an exaggerated niceness of honour, so characteristic of the age we call Elizabethan, he seems to have taken most ingenious precautions that his very name should be forgotten, lest it might appear that his experiment was a device to feed his personal vanity rather than the disinterested sacrifice it really was.

That he was an Englishman, who had considerably modified his national characteristics by extensive and sagacious travel, is almost certain. His followers were believed to have been recruited from amongst the hardy seafaring population of the coasts of Bohemia, though more recent conjecture points to the fact that London was the real parent of the colony, and it is suggested that by "Bohemia" the "Alsatia" of Whitefriars is really intended. However, as the whole of the evidence on the subject is contained in the following pages, it will be an advantage to allow the reader to judge for himself upon the whole case, and so avoid a tedious and possibly unfruitful discussion. [Pg 5]

The fact in the early history of the colony most interesting for us is fortunately beyond dispute. Oneiria was, without a shadow of doubt, founded on the ruins of the kingdom of that Kophetua whose romantic love-story, probably a good deal perverted, is so familiar to us from the beautiful ballads of the "King and the Beggar-Maid." It was this which must have suggested to the founder his first steps towards oblivion when he ascended his new throne under the style of Kophetua II.

Were this fact not established from other sources, beyond all question there is ample evidence in the present story to support it. The ancient kingdom must have been dying, and not dead, at the time. We shall meet with constant traces of an older, ruder, and more Oriental civilisation underlying the scientific superstructure of the English knight.

The results were extremely curious, but perhaps the most interesting phenomenon to which this peculiar fact gave rise, was the extraordinary organisation and privileges of the beggar class, though it is possible that some of their wilder laws and customs were a direct importation from "Whitefriars." [Pg 6]

It is a pity that no more is known on these points, but further inquiry is almost hopeless. The colony was entirely destroyed soon after the happy reign of Kophetua XIII. and his beloved Queen came peacefully to an end. There was but a day between their deaths, and so prostrated were the people by the sudden loss of both their idolised sovereigns, that they seem to have been able to offer no adequate resistance to a *Jehad* which, for some unknown cause, was preached against them amongst the neighbouring Mussulman tribes. It is probable that they had made some attempts to intervene for the protection of the last of the Berber Christians. A few of these highly interesting survivals are believed to have been still in existence at the end of the last century, in the remoter parts of the Atlas, and some may possibly have continued even later.

All, however, which we know for certain is that in one of those strange restless upheavals, so characteristic of the north of Africa, the Mussulman Berbers rose and flowed like a flood over what was once Oneiria. As suddenly as the colony had appeared, it disappeared from history; the country is now impenetrable to Europeans, and has not been visited since the destruction of the colony. Rohlfs, indeed, tells us that somewhere in the basin of the Drâa he saw amongst the distant hills what looked like the nave and tower of a church, and he further noticed that in this [Pg 7]

region the people had a much higher style of architecture, and otherwise seemed distinctly more civilised, than the tribes he was already familiar with. But no other traces of the colony have been met with, and its destruction must have been as complete as it was sudden.

Beyond what has already been related, all that is known or likely to be known of Oneiria is contained in the following pages, which deal with a romantic episode in the life of King Kophetua XIII. We must congratulate ourselves that even so much was preserved by the taste of a gentleman who visited the colony at the beginning of this century, and brought back with him the notes from which the present romance is taken. For romance it certainly is, and there seems no reason why we should deprive it of that title simply because it is also a record of historical occurrences.

CHAPTER II.
HIS MAJESTY.

[Pg 8]

"From nature's lawes he did decline,
For sure he was not of my mind:
He cared not for women-kinde,
But did them all disdaine."

Kophetua was undoubtedly the handsomest man in his kingdom. The slightest suspicion of Moorish blood, incurred from a Spanish ancestress, had only added, as it were, a tropical richness to the beauty which he had inherited from the founder, and that was no small inheritance. It was part of the constitution that every king of Oneiria should be known by the name of Kophetua, but a grateful and imaginative people had been dissatisfied with the bald arithmetical distinctions which this law entailed. In the old fashion they had begun to speak of their sovereigns by surnames, till an unforeseen difficulty arose. After the death of the founder, his splendid sons succeeded him one after another with an alarming rapidity, due to the reckless exposure of their persons to the early Berber enemies of the State. Every brother was handsomer than the last, and obviously demanded a surname expressive of personal beauty. It was a [Pg 9] characteristic so dazzling that the popular mind could not fix itself on any other of the family qualities, brilliant as they were. To a humorous people the monotony soon became ridiculous, and every one was relieved when, before two generations had passed away, it was found that every word in the Oneirian vocabulary in any way synonymous with "handsome" was already exhausted, and by tacit agreement the country fell back restfully upon the limitless resources of the ordinal numbers.

So our Kophetua was simply known as "Thirteenth." Yet it made a pretty name when you got used to it. It is a soft-sounding one as it stands, and was still prettier in the popular dialect. As the trade of the country was almost entirely with the Canaries, the common people counted in Spanish, and so by a diminutive of affection their King was known to them as "Trecenito."

Yet of all the line of Kophetuas he most deserved a more distinctive surname. Any one must have so agreed who could have seen him as he sat to-day in his library with a copy of Rousseau's *Origin of Inequality* dropped listlessly on his knees. It was an ideal book-room, in the style of the early French Renaissance. The whole palace indeed was designed in the same manner. It was the most eclectic style the founder could light upon, and everything in Oneiria was eclectic. [Pg 10]

Ten panels opposite the ten windows were occupied by fine portraits of the ten successors of the founder. Trecenito's own had to hang on a screen. At either end of the long chamber was a magnificent fireplace reaching to the panelled ceiling. Not that a fireplace was ever necessary in the balmy air of Oneiria, but still, where the capital was situated, amongst the hills facing the Atlantic, it enjoyed a temperate climate, and with considerable discomfort fires could be endured on the coldest days. This discomfort every one was glad to undergo for the sake of the European atmosphere generated by the blazing logs. It was hot but refined, and that was everything to a well-bred Oneirian.

In a smaller panel above one of these sacred hearths was a picture of the first King Kophetua placing with love-lorn gesture the wondering beggar-maid upon his jewelled throne. It was a beautiful work, obviously by a dreamy and backward pupil of Perugino. By his childish colour, naïve composition, and vague expression of sentiment, the painter had unconsciously given a charm to the subject which the greatest of his contemporaries could never have achieved.

You turned from it with a sympathetic smile to look in vain down the long vista of books for the [Pg 11] founder's portrait over the other hearth. Picture there was none. Even his features were forgotten, but where the painting should have been hung a splendid suit of armour of the later sixteenth century fashion. Morion, corselet, tassets, all were richly chased. Below hung a great pair of Cordovan boots armed with heavy gilded spurs. One gauntlet seemed to grasp a five-foot rapier with a great cup-guard and hilt-points of extravagant length, while in the other was placed a shell-dagger of the same design.

It was the very suit in which the heroic founder had stepped from his pinnace upon the burning sand, and claimed that land for his company "by right divine of inheritance from Adam," and

somehow that trophy of arms always gave to Trecenito a vivid sense of the old knight's presence in the room, which no dead portrait could have conveyed. Indeed, it was not hard to fancy a grim face beneath the shadow of the peaked morion, as the gloom of evening fell and the firelight flickered. It was on this the king was gazing with his Rousseau on his knees. Surfeited with philosophy, he fell to musing on his ancestor till he saw beneath the morion the stern, burnt features, as he pictured them, with grey pointed beard and bristling moustache. He could not help contrasting the fancy with his own smooth, shaven face, and the old adventurous life with his own colourless existence. [Pg 12]

"Turbo!" he cried, as, stung with the unhappy contrast, he started up and half unconsciously tore off a black patch which, after the custom of the time, adorned his cheek—"Turbo! I am a miserable man."

"So your majesty is continually hinting. May I die if I know why!"

With an air of well-feigned interest in his monarch's state of mind, the speaker rose from an elegant buhl writing-table, which would have been covered with official papers had there been any business for the King to transact with his Chancellor; but as usual there was none, and the table bore nothing weightier than a half-finished copy of Latin verses, perhaps quite heavy enough for its slender proportions, for the Chancellor was a poet by conviction rather than birth.

Indeed poetry could hardly have dwelt in a form so revolting. His face was distorted by two livid scars. One stretched across the lower part of his nose up to his right eye, which in healing it had drawn down so that it looked like a bloodhound's. The other ran across his mouth in such a way that it exposed his teeth on one side and gave to his face a snarling expression that was acutely unprepossessing. His shoulders, too, seemed in some way ill-matched, and he joined Kophetua at the founder's hearth with an ungainly limp which completed the picture of deformity he presented. [Pg 13]

"No! may I die if I know why," repeated Turbo.

"Ah, you will not understand," said the King. "How can I be happy, how can I live according to nature, leading the life I do, without an annoyance, literally without an annoyance? How can I ever rival the knight," he went on, "with nothing to overcome, with nothing to stand in my way? I tell you I am a miserable man."

"If your majesty will have it so," answered Turbo, "I must of course agree."

"And why should you not in any case?" asked Kophetua a little testily. "Look at me. Here before you is practically the only sovereign in the civilised world who at this moment has not a revolution more or less developed in his dominions, while my disgracefully contented subjects will not—why, they will not even read the Jacobin paper we have been at the pains surreptitiously to start for them."

"No," said the Chancellor gravely, "I believe that only six copies were sold this week. There were two copies for you and me, one for the Queen-mother, and one for General Dolabella, who I am sure only lights his pipe with it. There was one went to the beggars for decorative purposes, it is said; and the sixth—let me see," he continued as he limped to his desk and took out a small memorandum on large official paper. "The sixth—ah! yes, that was a presentation copy to the Museum which I paid for myself." [Pg 14]

"It is heart-breaking, absolutely heart-breaking," cried the King. "To what end have I spent all these years in the study of politics? To what end have you lavished your inestimable instruction on me, and sacrificed what should have been the most brilliant career in Europe in order to educate me for a throne? Is there a single writer on statecraft, from Plato to More, from Machiavelli to Voltaire, that I have not mastered from end to end, to say nothing of the knight's manuscript?"

"Indeed, sire," answered the Chancellor, "you have made yourself a most consummate statesman."

"No, Turbo," said the King, "be just. It is you that have made me so. Without you these books would have said not a word to me for all their wisdom. But to what end is it all, I say? Here I stand disgraced before the knight's armour, not because I will not or cannot do anything, but because there is nothing to do. I tell you, Turbo, I shrink with shame when I see his grave face look out at me from under the morion, and yet,"—he went on, pacing the room, with a noble look on his handsome face,—"he has no right to scorn me. I know that were there wrongs to right, I have will and power to right them, or at least the courage to die fighting for the same end to which his heroic life was sacrificed." [Pg 15]

"Well, be comforted," said Turbo; "to-morrow you will have an annoyance. For to-morrow, I would remind you, comes your mother's last choice for you; at least, I imagine that is the intention. It will be very serious this time. Remember you have entered your thirtieth year, and if at the end of it you are not married——"

"By the constitution," broke in the King, "I shall cease to reign. I know it, and then they will elect you. I cannot help it. I shall dislike and despise this woman, as I do every other. Thank God, I have learnt your lesson well. How I should have been deceived had it not been for the wise misogyny which you, my dear instructor, were at such pains to teach me!"

As he spoke he stretched out his hand as though to lay it affectionately on his old governor's shoulder, when there was a sudden clash of steel overhead. With a start he looked up in time to catch the founder's long rapier as it fell, and in a moment he was standing with its great hilt in his outstretched hand and its point straight at the heart of Turbo, who started back in alarm.

Kophetua turned deadly pale, hardly daring to think what this ghostly warning might mean. As he felt the dusty hilt between his fingers it was as though the dead, war-worn hand of his ancestor were stretched up out of the grave to grasp his own: he stood almost expecting to hear a hollow [Pg 16] voice from under the morion, and Turbo watched him with restless eyes.

Even as he held it the King knew the heavy weapon was tiring his arm. It was the last touch to his misery, and he dropped the point with a little nervous laugh.

"One would think," he said, in a voice that sounded very strange in the dead silence which followed the clash of steel,—"One would think the old knight discerned in you an enemy instead of my best and only friend."

The Chancellor laughed loud and hoarsely at the King's humour, but did not touch the weapon which his monarch laid down sorrowfully.

"The wire must have rusted away till it broke," said he.

"Exactly," said the King. "Yet it is a most remarkable occurrence." A short but awkward silence followed, till fortunately the chamberlain entered the room to inquire if the King desired to prepare for supper. So the colloquy of the two friends ended, and Turbo was left alone, gazing absently out of the window at the beggars before the palace gate, as one by one they rose from their crouching postures, stretched their cramped limbs, and wandered slowly away to their dens with the air of men conscientiously satisfied with a long day's work.

CHAPTER III. [Pg 17]
THE MARRIAGE QUESTION.

"The Lords they tooke it grievously,
The Commons cryed pitiously."

It has already been mentioned that there was one recurrent subject of discussion which saved Oneirian politics from entire extinction. This was the great marriage question.

The wise founder, anxious no doubt to perpetuate his race to the ends for which he had lived, and fully aware of the jeopardy to which his descendants would be exposed in the midst of savage Berber tribes, had made it an intrinsic part of the constitution that every king of Oneiria, before he reached the age of thirty, must marry the woman chosen for him by his people.

Formerly the Parliament had taken the greatest interest in its legislative work. Each proposal was debated at length, and with considerable intelligence. In process of time, however, all this changed. The founder had elaborated a system of taxation, something on the lines of that afterwards described by Harrington in his *Oceana*, whereby it was made by a natural development self-extinguishing. An unhappy result of the contrivance was perhaps unforeseen by [Pg 18] the founder, but it soon appeared that as the central fund increased and the annual taxes dwindled, it was more and more difficult to get members to attend the sessions.

Before the colony was a hundred years old taxes were declared unnecessary, and at an end for ever. By an inherent elasticity the central fund grew with the growth of the people, and even began to afford a surplus to be distributed amongst the beggars. There was no need any longer to vote money. No reform of the perfected laws was possible. Parliament became an agreeable club, to which the members when once elected belonged by tacit consent for life. Sessions were, however, still held, where the more imaginative deputies debated the sublime and eternal principles of government, and pointed out to each other, with never fading satisfaction, how divinely the Oneirian statute-book embodied that quintessential spirit of justice which their heated rhapsodies had distilled.

As for their business, it was almost entirely formal, consisting chiefly in the periodical endorsement of the King's choice from among their own number of the great state officers. It will then be easily understood how jealously they valued their last live prerogative of choosing the King's bride. As a matter of fact, of course, she was always selected by the high officers of state, [Pg 19] and the Parliament ratified the choice; but this ratification could not be said to be a mere form, for as late as the beginning of the century the House had absolutely refused to endorse the ministers' choice, because the lady presented to them was not sufficiently beautiful.

Since then greater care had been exercised in the preliminary selection, and the attendant ceremonial considerably elaborated. The bride-elect was now presented to the full House, dressed with every care and splendour which was in any way calculated to enhance her attractions, and after question put and carried, the decision of the House was sealed by the Speaker imprinting a kiss upon the lips of the chosen beauty as she knelt before the chair.

Thereupon he raised her up, and pronounced her election in this poetic form, "Reign, beautiful princess, crowned with a people's kiss."

Since the introduction of the new coronation ceremony the office of Speaker had become extremely popular. He was elected annually by virtue of the original constitution and party feeling on the marriage question, began once more to run very high, as the election was always decided on strictly party lines in relation to this single topic.

It will be easy, then, to picture the condition of political circles at the time of which we are now speaking. For some eight years the King had been seen to reject beauty after beauty without [Pg 20] reason given, to the acute disappointment of successive Speakers. But now the period had arrived when he must absolutely marry within the year and the excitement over the approaching election to the chair had reached an almost alarming intensity.

The body politic was divided into two main parties, the *Kallists*, who professed that beauty should be the sole ground on which the queen should be chosen, and the *Agathists*, who would have the selection determined by moral worth alone. Such at least was said to be the distinction when intelligent foreigners asked for information. Possibly it was actually so once, but now the principles of the two parties so overlapped that the only real question between them was who should elect the Speaker.

It should perhaps be mentioned that there was a third party styling themselves the *Kallikagathists*. They were a well-meaning offshoot of the Agathists, who, fondly believing that two distinct policies still existed, thought to produce unity by adopting both. So far it had been a failure, and though the party had the names of many superior persons upon it, it was little regarded.

The Court was divided into corresponding groups, and what further complicated political relations was that the heads of the separate palace circles were regarded as the leaders of the [Pg 21] Parliamentary parties, although of course their aims were widely different. In the House the occupation of the chair filled the whole political horizon. In the palace that was a matter of complete indifference, and the whole struggle was to see whose introduction would eventually be made acceptable to the King. Thus between the leaders and their followers there existed no more real connection than there did between the professed opinions of the respective parties and their actual aims, and it may be doubted whether any country in Europe had been so entirely successful in elaborating a party system by which it was impossible for any question to be decided on its merits.

The system can only be described as chaotic. Every trace of the original landmarks had disappeared, and yet a good Kallist would rather be called anything than an Agathist, unless perhaps it were a Kallikagathist. An Agathist regarded a Kallist as a frivolous person of low moral tone, while, in the eyes of a Kallist, an Agathist was a detestable outcome of the Puritan taint in the old settlers, a shallow pretender to an impossible standard of virtue. A Kallist who could invent a new way of saying an Agathist was a prig became a marked personality in the House, while a young Agathist who succeeded in inventing a fresh figure to express his contempt for a cynic might at once pose as a coming man.

Cynicism was certainly the prevailing tone of the Kallist salons. There you might hear of a young [Pg 22] girl who had hurried for an hour's relaxation from the sickbed of a brother, or a genial old gentleman who had spent his day in extricating a poor relation from a debtor's prison, giving it as their perfected conviction that no excellence could be credited with existence which you could not see. On the other hand, the atmosphere of Agathist gatherings was decidedly one of moral platitude, where elaborately dressed men and daintily rouged women prattled in polished phrase of the nothingness of exteriors, and the all-sufficiency of truth and goodness. It is certainly remarkable that a similar condition of society has appeared nowhere else, and it is these unique politico-social phenomena which constitute Oneiria's chief claim to find an adequate historian.

At present the Kallists were in the ascendant. With Turbo at their head they were naturally more than a match for the opposition, whose fortunes at court were intrusted to the Queen-mother. The Chancellor was certainly the strongest statesman who had appeared in the colony since its foundation, while the Queen Margaret was fitted for her position rather by disposition than political ability. She was the daughter of a German officer of noble birth who, having entered the service of Spain, rose to be Governor of the Canaries. From him she inherited all the homely [Pg 23] simplicity so characteristic of the family relations of his nation. Otherwise she was not without shrewdness and a certain power of resistance, which enabled her to oppose the splendid abilities of the Chancellor as well, perhaps, as any one in the kingdom. It was whispered that there were other reasons why these two naturally found themselves in opposite camps, reasons that were known to none but themselves.

There would have been little doubt that the report was well founded in the mind of any one who could have seen the Chancellor as he stood at the window watching the beggars. Ten minutes after the King had left there was a sound on his ear of a woman's tread in the ante-chamber, and a gentle rustle of a silk dress upon the polished boards. Turbo started and looked towards the door. It began to open, and as quickly he turned to the window again.

"That will do," said a soft voice full of quiet dignity. "You need not stay. I wish to be alone, and shall remain here till suppertime. Attend me then."

The heavy door closed, and the Chancellor looked round to see the Queen-mother advancing into

the room. She was a handsome woman of not more than fifty, with a spare, stately figure. In her powder and rouge and the modish gown she had just assumed for the evening she looked little more than half her age. At least so thought the Chancellor; and, as the fitful firelight lit up her queenly form, she looked to him almost as beautiful as though a quarter of a century had not passed since first they met. [Pg 24]

"If your majesty would be alone," said Turbo, with a profound bow, "I pray your leave to retire."

"I would be alone with you, Chancellor," the Queen answered. "I wish to speak with you."

"And your majesty denied me the pleasure of waiting on you?" said the Chancellor, with a smile that made his snarl more hideously apparent.

"Yes," the Queen replied; "because I have that to say which I would have no one hear; and, besides, there are other reasons why none should know of our interview."

"Your majesty interests me strangely," said the Chancellor.

"I wish to speak to you about my son," said the Queen, with a slight tremor in her voice. She drew towards the founder's hearth, and sat down in a great chair that was almost a throne, and, at the same time, motioned the Chancellor to a seat opposite to her.

"Be seated," she said, with the same hesitation as before; "I want to converse with you as an old friend."

She looked at Turbo wistfully, as though to see some softening of his snarl, but he avoided her glance with another profound bow in acknowledgment of her condescension; and the Queen's heart sank as she felt her mission was almost hopeless. [Pg 25]

CHAPTER IV.
THE QUEEN-MOTHER.

[Pg 26]

"Disdaine no whit, O lady deere,
But pity now thy servant here."

For a while they sat in silence looking into the fire. Indeed it was hard for the Queen-mother to know how to begin. Let it be said at once frankly, she and Turbo had loved each other. It was long ago now, and far away—in fair Castile,—when he was the brilliant and accomplished young secretary of her father. He was no mere clerk, but a youth of noble family, an aspirant to the great offices of the state, who had taken the post to learn the business of administration.

Thus there was no reason why he should not openly show his adoration for his chief's beautiful daughter, or why she should seek to hide her love for him. Daily they met, and daily his passion grew. He loved her with all the ardour of which his hot Spanish blood was capable, so that it maddened him to see how cold and calm was her northern heart, loving as it was, beside the fever that consumed him.

Yet he was happy in the knowledge of her love, and all went well till one night her father entertained an officer to whom he had taken a liking. He was a man of brilliant wit, but known as a greedy duellist. Yet Margaret was amused, and laughed and talked gaily with him till he departed. Turbo accompanied him to a tavern hard by for a parting cup. The place was full of gentlemen, many of whom the officer knew. They fell to talking, then to boasting, till in an evil hour the man vaunted his new conquest, and let fall a little light word with Margaret's name. In a moment he had the lie and a stinging blow on the mouth from Turbo's glove. [Pg 27]

All efforts of the young secretary's friends to save him from his quixotic folly were in vain. He would listen to no explanation. He would receive no apology. The least he could do, it seemed to him, to show himself worthy of his treasured love, was to chastise the man who had breathed ever so faintly on his mistress's name.

They fought on horseback, with pistols and swords. It was all the youth's friends could do in order to equalise the chances. Yet the affair was little better than murder. The first shot hit Turbo in the knee, the second tore across his lips. Half choking with blood he fell on with his sword; but no sooner were they engaged than a fearful gash across the face blinded him. In the agony of the moment he checked his rearing horse sharply, and the frantic animal fell over on the top of him. [Pg 28]

For months he lay in the hospital almost between life and death. Every day came flowers and a little loving note from Margaret, overflowing with pity and gratitude. It made him bear his terrible suffering with a gay heart to see how much his courage had won him. His chief came constantly to his bedside, and spoke to him as a son-in-law; but ere he was fully recovered, and clear of the pestilential air of the hospital, he was taken with the small-pox. Another terrible period of waiting and suffering ensued, and by the time he was able to leave the hospital, Margaret and her father had sailed for the Canaries.

Without a moment's delay he followed them, and at length the longed-for moment was to come,

when he should hold his love in his arms once more. She burst into the room with a glad cry when they told her he was come, but no sooner did she set eyes on his mangled form than she stopped transfixed with horror, and with a terrible scream fell to the ground.

The shock threw her into a dangerous illness, and when she recovered nothing more was said of a marriage. Turbo accepted his fate, but with a bitterness that poisoned his whole nature. His love was no less than before, and it was only by the nursing of a bitter contempt for its object, [Pg 29] and all the daughters of Eve, that he could make his life endurable.

And yet he could not tear himself from her side. The months went by, and still he remained at his old post, and when Margaret left to become Queen of Oneiria, he accepted the place which Kophetua XII.—the present king's father—offered him out of admiration for his abilities, and pity for his miserable story.

When the young prince was born, so great was the esteem in which Turbo was held, that he was appointed his governor; and as soon as the boy was old enough to be out of the nurse's hands, Turbo began to win a surprising influence over him. So great was the affection that grew up between the ill-assorted pair, that when the king died it was found that Turbo was named guardian in the will, and it was from this post that he had been elevated to the chancellorship as soon as the boy came of age.

With such a pricking memory in her mind it is not to be wondered at that the poor Queen sat looking long into the fire before she spoke; especially as all her own, and, what was more, all her son's happiness seemed to hang on the result of the interview.

"Do you mean to thwart me again, Chancellor?" she said at last abruptly.

"I trust I have never willingly thwarted your majesty in anything," he answered.

"Nay, I cry a truce on courtly fictions," said the Queen, a little impatiently. "Let us be frank for once." [Pg 30]

"As your majesty pleases," answered the Chancellor, without the least unbending.

"To-morrow the Marquis de Tricotrin will arrive with his daughter. You know?" began the unhappy Queen.

"I have heard so unofficially."

"And you know why she is coming?"

"I have permitted myself to hazard a guess."

"Then what do you mean to do?"

"Like your majesty, my duty, modified by circumstances."

"What do you mean?"

"Merely that as heretofore I shall advise his majesty on the whole circumstances of the case, if and when I am consulted."

"Chancellor," cried the Queen impatiently, "I have urged you to be frank. To what end is all this? I have come a long way to you, will you not make one step to meet me? Well," she continued, as the Chancellor made no reply, "I at least can be open. I ask you, do you mean to make my son refuse again?"

"Really your majesty flatters me. The King will use his own discretion."

"No, he will use yours. Do you think I do not know why it is that girl after girl has come hither in vain. In every way they were fitted to be his queen, and he refused even to be kind to one. It was [Pg 31] you that made him do it. He gives not a thought to me. It is you that are all in all to him. His whole soul is but a little bit of yours. You have absorbed him, you have taken him all from me."

"I assure your majesty," said the Chancellor imperturbably, "we do not ever discuss the subject together. It is entirely his own inclination that guides him."

"You say that," said the Queen, with increasing agitation. "You say that, and if it is true it is worse than I thought. You have taught him, like yourself, to hate women. That is why he speaks of them as he does. But still you can undo your work. If not for my sake or for his, at least for the country's you should administer the antidote. If you have poisoned, it is you alone who can cure. See the pass we have come to. What will happen if he is not married this year? He will lose his kingdom; but that is a little thing to what I am losing. Cannot you understand what it is for me to see the ruin of my one son's life, to see his soul starving for want of a woman's love, to long unsatisfied to see his great nature ripened with a husband's and a father's joys, to hold his children on my knee, and know once more the holiest love a woman ever feels? Think, think what you do, and hold your hand before it is too late. You cannot be all stone. If you have one tender spot left give him back to me. Turbo, in the name of our old love, give him back to me!" [Pg 32]

She leaned forward towards him, her hands outstretched with a pleading gesture that was inexpressibly touching and tender. But Turbo remained immovable, save that his snarl grew more cruel. It was more than she could bear. She felt her eyes filling with tears, and she bowed her head in her hands. There was a silence between them for a minute, and then Turbo's cold voice

spoke unchanged.

"By what right," said he, "do you conjure me by our old love? You, who threw me away like a soiled glove."

"I have no right," she murmured, without looking up. "It was a great sin, and none can know how I have suffered for it. But the crime was not his. At least you may have mercy on him."

"And what right have you," he continued as coldly as ever, "to crave mercy for him? Did you show any to me? What is he to you that I was not a thousandfold? When did he ever love you more than his dogs? and I have burned for you like a fire! What devotion has he ever shown you? and I crawled to you like a slave! What has he ever sacrificed for you? and I gave more than my life for a little piece of your honour. How will you find reward for me, if to him you would give so much?"

"You know not," she answered piteously, "you cannot know, what he is to me. All you say is true, [Pg 33] yet God has made him more to me than all the world. Turbo, he is my son, my only child, and you will not understand."

"Nor will you understand what I have felt," answered Turbo. "Yet I will tell you, Gretchen; try and conceive it. Think what I was when I crawled hither in your train to be a thing of loathing to every woman in the Court, and all because I had been too jealous of your honour. Think what a sweet reward of chivalry it was to lick up the crumbs you threw me to ease your tormenting conscience. I know what it cost you to invite me here. I know how you detested the sight of me. You did it as a penance, and I saw you saying, as you shuddered by me, 'God will forgive my sin, because I cast my broken meats to this Lazarus, and suffer my dogs to lick his sores.'"

He paused a little, looking down on the crouching form without pity, while she shrank and sobbed with her hands before her face.

"And whose silent voice was this?" he pursued. "It was my love that spoke. It was she who once had met me with a blush of mantling delight; it was she whose soft form I had clasped unresisting in my arms; it was her heart that had beaten warm and fast against mine; it was her lips that had [Pg 34] drunk my kisses like sweet wine. You—you, who knew best how my heart could feel, what think you was in it then? But I bore it all uncomplaining, because I could not conceive of life away from you. I bore it and waited for some solace to come."

"But why do you say all this?" the Queen broke in as he stopped again. "What good can it do to gall your wounds and mine like this?"

"Listen, Gretchen. I will tell you all now you have driven me to begin. I say I waited for a solace to come. It was weary, hopeless work, but the solace came at last. I had won your husband's esteem. He believed the fine sentiments I always had ready for his ear. I believed them once myself. He did not see I was changed, and gave me his boy to make a man of. Then I saw in my grasp a thing to sweeten the bitterness of my life. I used to look at my charge, and see him beautiful as the daylight. I knew he would grow up a man that women would look on and love helplessly; and it was I—I, who was to make him worthy of their love! Can you not see what sweet solace there was for me there? 'They shall love him,' I said, 'they shall love him, but he shall never return their love. I will show him what they are. He shall know from his childhood what I learnt too late.' I swore they should never rejoice in the love of such a man as I would make him. I pictured them longing for him and eating their hearts. Was it not a gentle solace?" [Pg 35]

"It was revenge!" she cried bitterly; "it was unmanly revenge!"

"Call it what you will," he continued; "perhaps you are right, I do not pretend to be anything but what I am. Yet I had another motive for what I did, and perhaps I am not wholly bad."

"No, no, Turbo," she said eagerly, as though his words gave her a hope to clutch at. "God knows you are not that."

"And yet," he went on, without interruption, "I think I am as bad as a man can be; perhaps a woman might be worse. You try to think as well of me as you can. It is only natural. I owe you no thanks for it; for it was you alone that made me what I am. It has been wisely said that no one can act from a wholly bad motive. That is all I mean. I loved the boy a little—as much indeed as I can love anything again—and perhaps I thought to save him from what I had suffered. To love a woman was my curse. Perhaps I strove a little to bless him with such a wisdom as would save him from that. That is what I have done for your son, Gretchen; and now, when I turn over the pages of my miserable life, there is at least one pleasant chapter where I may linger."

She saw it was hopeless now, and rose to her feet. The one ray of light was gone again, but [Pg 36] before she dismissed him she longed to know one thing. So she drew up her stately figure and faced him with the courage of a woman who felt she was being punished beyond her crime. He was a coward to her now.

"Is that all you have to say to me, Chancellor?" she said, looking straight in his face.

"It was your majesty who sought the interview," he replied. "It can end when you wish."

"Is there nothing you have kept back? Have you not one blow in reserve?" He did not answer, so she went on, "I ask because you tell me that you have taught my son to look on women as the basest creatures of God. I, his mother, am the type in your eyes. Have you told him this too?"

"Does your majesty insist on an answer?"

"I insist on nothing. I am powerless to do so. I only thought you would not be coward enough to add this new torment to my punishment."

"I am only what your majesty has made me."

"Then God help us both," she said, checking an angry outburst that was on her lips. "You may retire."

Her attempt had failed. It was her first thought when he was gone, as she sank into her chair again. She had failed, and only added to her load the terrible uncertainty whether her son had [Pg 37] been told of her crime. Yet she knew she had gained something which she least expected to find. Till now she had pitied her old lover, and that had prevented her giving way to open hostility. She had stood in awe of him, too, but now it seemed different. He was a pitiless and craven bully. Why should she feel for him, who had no spark of sympathy for her? He was a thing to despise and not to fear. So when they entered to announce the supper-hour, she rose up calmly, knowing she had found a new courage for the struggle before her.

CHAPTER V.
MADEMOISELLE DE TRICOTRIN.

[Pg 38]

"The ladies took it heavily."

The excitement produced by the arrival of the Marquis de Tricotrin and his daughter at the Court of Oneiria was only to be expected. It was perfectly understood that the King must marry within the year, and it would hardly describe the situation to say that the chances of Mademoiselle de Tricotrin were discussed with greater animation than those of any previous candidate for the "crown of kisses." For her case was regarded as a certainty. But that only made the excitement to see her more intense, and, perhaps, no royal ball in Oneiria was ever so brilliantly attended as that at which the lady was to make her *début* the day following her arrival at the capital.

It was a scene that it is difficult for us even to imagine. Costume in Oneiria was as yet entirely untainted by revolutionary ideas. Rumours of the new fashions had indeed reached the country, but they had been ignored as the ridiculous affectations of low-bred fanatics. The fantastic modes [Pg 39] of the century were in the heyday of their glory, and indeed had reached a degree of extravagance which it was natural to look for in so advanced and elegant a court as that of Kophetua XIII. In no other spot on earth perhaps could you have seen the vulgar handiwork of Nature so completely effaced as in his ballroom to-night.

Under mountains of powdered curls, and forests of ribbons, in which crouched large tropical birds, the women limped on tiny, high-heeled shoes, as though their exquisite refinement could not endure the comparatively crude ideas of their Creator; every characteristic of their humanity was distorted or obliterated past all recognition with yard-long stomachers, high-peaked stays, and hoops that mocked at Heaven; and the men pursued them in every extravagance, with patch and powder and paint, with stiff full skirts and grotesque headgear, as though refinement were only to be found in effeminacy. It was a living garden of artificial flowers, where the natural blossoms on figured satins seemed to deride the unnatural bloom on disfigured faces.

Still it was a brilliant kaleidoscopic scene as the rooms filled up, and coteries fell into groups to chat till the King appeared. For there was an immense deal of gossip to be got through. On the question of the hour nobody knew anything, and every one had something to tell. General [Pg 40] Dolabella was completely invested the moment he entered the rooms, and a lisping fire was at once opened on him to compel him to surrender his authoritative information.

For of course the General knew all about it. He was a minister, uniting in his own person the offices of Commander-in-chief and Director of Public Worship. It was said to have been the last act of the founder to bring together these two portfolios. He looked upon the standing army and the Church as the two great enemies of personal liberty, and it is supposed his idea was that no one man would ever be able to develop both to a dangerous degree of efficiency; or, as others conjectured, he hoped by drawing the two departments into close proximity to increase the chance of friction between them. In this the arrangement was very successful, though it certainly led to some extraordinary results.

General Dolabella had held his place for many years, and was regarded successful administrator. He was a man of two sides, as he often said himself, and perhaps his success was due to that. It was undoubtedly this gift which had won him the confidence of the Kallikagathist party and placed him at its head. It had procured him, besides, advantages such as few enjoy. Though a married man, with a growing family, he was a professed misogynist. It was the tone which the King gave to the Court, and the General was nothing if not fashionable. He spoke of his marriage [Pg 41] as an imprudence of his youth. But it did not stand in his way. His wife, of whom it must be said he stood a little in awe, was so entirely deceived by the tone of his conversation, that she never interfered with his little flirtations, and it must be confessed he had not a few. There was hardly a

woman at Court whom he had not loved in his time. To an ordinary man it would have been difficult to reconcile such tastes with the character of a professed misogynist, but the dually constituted General was not an ordinary man. He from the first made it his mission to convert the women of the Court to the creed professed by the men, beginning with the prettiest as being probably the most dangerous heretics. If he had not as yet made many converts, he had succeeded in vastly amusing himself and his little friends, and it was with the satisfied smile of a popular cavalier that the General received the broadside of questions his fair besiegers delivered.

"I protest, you should have declared war in proper form," said the gallant warrior, as he balanced himself on his tight satin shoes, with his elbows squeezed closely in to his pinched waist, and his white hands, half hidden in lace, toying mincingly before him with his cane. "This procedure is extremely uncanonical. Had you sent me a trumpet to blow a formal citation I should have been [Pg 42] prepared for you. But where was ever a woman," he added, with the sweetest smile, "who would not take a mean advantage if she could?"

"You are a vastly provoking man, General," said one of his oldest experiments. "You know all about them, and could tell us if you chose."

"May I die," answered the Minister, "if I know more than yourselves."

"But we know nothing," they cried, in excited chorus.

"Well, then," said Dolabella, with an air of pity, "I suppose I must tell you what I have heard, or your poor little hearts will ache with curiosity."

"Dear General!" they responded, like a choir.

"You must know then, to begin with," he said, "the Marquis is an *émigré*. Some two or three years past, having imbibed the principles without the practice of the Revolution, he was obliged to leave his country. At first, it is said, he went to England, and then, on the advice of the doctors, he came to the Canaries."

"But what about the daughter?" asked the ladies. "Is she a Girondist or a Jacobin, or whatever they are?"

"I know no more," answered the General; "except that a long correspondence between the Queen-mother and the Spanish Governor has resulted in an invitation."

"Then it is an Agathist nomination," said the ladies, prepared to make up their minds accordingly. [Pg 43]

"I really cannot say," replied the Minister, "without breach of confidence. But see, here comes his majesty. How well he looks!"

Everybody turned to see the King enter the ballroom with his mother. As they passed down the room people remarked that she seemed pale and weary, but that the King never looked better. It was always an excitement to both girls and mothers to try and get a bow all to themselves on these occasions. There was a saying amongst them in Oneiria that where there is a bachelor there is hope. And, besides, whatever may have been his motives, Turbo had been entirely successful in his education of the Prince. He had grown to have a manner with women which, combined with his personal beauty and the additional advantage of a crown, was irresistible. In public it was one of extreme deference and courtesy, which, as he was never tired of hinting in the most delicately chosen phrases, arose from the duty he owed to himself, and not because the objects of his attentions in any way deserved them. But it was when alone with a woman that he shone the brightest. Then his deferential manner was spiced with a charming effrontery. It never went as far as disrespect, and yet it was so unlike his ordinary demeanour, that each delighted [Pg 44] victim thought he reserved it for herself alone. So it came about as Turbo had promised himself, and many a girl looked eagerly that night for one kind glance before her new rival should appear.

It was the subject of considerable remark that the guests of the evening had not yet arrived. The women put it down to an elaborate toilet, and consoled themselves with the prospect of something really fine, and possibly new; though there was very little chance of that, seeing how advanced and instructed the Court of Oneiria considered itself. The men said it was a mere woman's trick to make a sensation.

It was not till the King had taken his seat on the daïs, and the Chamberlain had cleared before him a wide space in the rustling throng for the opening dance, that a loud voice from the top of the broad oak steps, which descended to the ballroom, announced: "The Marquis and Mademoiselle de Tricotrin."

Every eye was turned to them in a moment as they came down the steps, and in another the whole assembly, oblivious of etiquette, was frankly staring at them. Such a sensation had never been known at Court before within the memory of the oldest Chamberlain. They had looked for a woman like themselves, with hoops wider, waist longer, and head-dress more extravagant, [Pg 45] perhaps, than their own. That would not have surprised them considering that she was fresh from Europe, although they seriously doubted whether even a Frenchwoman could go further than themselves. But for this they were quite unprepared. It took away their breath. Above a beautiful face, unrouged, and without a single patch, they saw, instead of a powdered and feathered mountain, a soft mass of flowing, almost dishevelled, warm brown hair. But her dress! That was stranger still. Whatever they might have thought of the rest, this was intolerable. It was nothing but a simple robe of the softest primrose silk, which clung about her perfect figure voluptuously,

and frankly expressed every graceful movement of her limbs. Close beneath her breast it was girdled by a golden cord, leaving her arms and shoulders bare. Otherwise it was unconfined, and yet so fashioned as to drape her closely in simple, natural folds. It was, in a word, the beautiful but extravagantly classic costume of the Revolution.

When she saw the ordeal before her, her colour heightened, and she shrank closer to her father's arm, but she recovered directly, and advanced down the lane they instinctively made for her, with the easy complacency of one who knows she is the best dressed woman in the room. Her father looked as proud as his daughter to see their wonder. He was a tall, spare man, with an [Pg 46] affectation of Spartan austerity in his face and dress, and he smiled contemptuously on the rouged and bepatched men about him, as with his lovely daughter on his arm he advanced towards the King.

There was certainly a titter as they passed, for the wits were not to be easily cowed, and whispered smart things to their fair neighbours. The ladies, who had no wits to whisper to them, passed judgment for themselves, without, of course, forgetting that they were in the presence of a political event.

"La! what a ridiculous object," said a Kallist lady, with a golden pheasant perching on her wig.

"I protest it is not decent," sniffed a widow of Agathist views and a damaged reputation.

"It is vastly too pronounced to be either elegant or seemly," was the opinion of a superior person's lady, with a turn for aphorism, and a Kallikagathist salon.

But the only question after all was, What would the King think? On tiptoe they watched her reach the daïs, and with a perfect grace salute his hand. A few words passed between them; the King smiled as though thoroughly amused; then, to the utter confusion of the cavillers, they saw him give her his hand to open the ball, and many a sinking heart was compelled to confess to itself that Mademoiselle de Tricotrin, in her first stride, had come nearer the throne than any previous [Pg 47] candidate in her whole course.

The King was certainly delighted, and he still wore a smile of complete amusement as he took his place with her for the minuet. As the dance proceeded his delight only became more obvious. And no wonder. There are many beautiful sights under heaven, but none more beautiful than the vision which filled the eyes of the enchanted King. He had never seen a thing like that before. It was as though the very spirit of Nature had taken shape before him. In her the formal bric-à-brac postures, to which he had been accustomed, became transformed with the grace of a poising bird. From one bewitching attitude to another she seemed to float like a soft bright feather playing in a summer wind. Every movement was living with the freedom which her yielding costume allowed. With the grace of the wind-bent reeds her white arms moved in ever-flowing harmony. Now it was to draw the soft silken folds across her daintily, as with one tiny foot advanced she paused in the fitful measures of the dance; and now to raise her little hand to meet the King's with a magic motion, which seemed to waft her towards him. With each new figure the enchantment increased. In the voluptuous movement and the throb of the tinkling music she grew excited, and seemed to forget herself like a child at play. Her ripe lips were parted, her [Pg 48] cheeks softly flushed, and her wide blue eyes were filled with an artless look of baby delight.

The whole patched and powdered throng crowded round to see, as close as the hoops would allow. Soon each man and woman was as fascinated as the King. Even the voice of envy was hushed, and some one said afterwards that more than one gentleman who was regarded as a likely nomination for the Parliamentary chair was distinctly seen to smack his lips, a report perhaps which was quite unfounded, and arose merely out of the undisguised admiration depicted on every face.

Yes, on every face, both of man and woman, except the one which the Marquis de Tricotrin alone in all the room was scanning narrowly. Behind the King's empty chair Turbo supported himself, watching the scene uneasily. The Marquis marked with concern and quiet determination the horrible snarl he wore.

"She is dancing, step by step, step by step, right into his heart," said Turbo to himself, his words falling unconsciously in time with the fiddlers, "and the fools made a lane for her to come to the throne—like a queen. It was ominous, but I hardly thought him so unstable. The simpleton is actually taking pains with his dancing."

His lips moved. M. de Tricotrin could hear nothing, but somehow he smiled quietly to himself. It [Pg 49] was at that moment that Turbo looked up to see what the Marquis thought of it. Their eyes met, and with the readiness of old diplomatists they advanced frankly to each other.

"Permit me, Marquis," said Turbo, smiling as nearly as he could, "to trespass so far on really sacred grounds as to observe that your daughter is charming."

"You must positively allow me, Chancellor," said the Marquis, "to tell her what you say, at the risk of turning her head. It will be of inestimable help to her. She really knows nothing, and is quite afraid of her *gaucheries*."

"Indeed," answered Turbo, "and she seemed so instructed! It only shows how rich an inheritance it is of itself to be the child of a man like you, who knows everything."

"Nay, Chancellor," said the Marquis, with a bow, "you flatter me monstrously. My knowledge is

not what you think, but since you so frankly declare yourself my friend, I will confess to a pretty trick of guessing many things I have no means of knowing."

The dance ended, and with it their conversation. It had not been long, but for those two it was enough to bring about a mutual understanding. Each took it as a declaration of war, and began at once to look for vantage-points.

Before the end of the evening the King had danced another minuet with Mademoiselle de Tricotrin. She performed with even greater grace and *abandon* than before, and her success was complete. The ball of course was a failure. It had promised exceedingly well, but then a great misfortune had befallen it. There had been one woman present who far outshone the rest. Nothing can be much more disastrous to a ball than that. The nice women could not help feeling humbled, the others were full of envy. As for the men, they were inattentive, preoccupied, and discontented. For them it was an evening of disillusionment. Mademoiselle de Tricotrin's radiance killed the prettiest face in the room. It was impossible for them to disguise, even by the most desperate attempts at gallantry, that the whole time they were thinking of the new beauty. The women were pardonably resentful. Under these circumstances gallantry is apt to lose much of its flavour, and the number of silent couples was phenomenal. [Pg 50]

Mademoiselle de Tricotrin left early, pleading fatigue. The King followed almost immediately, and then the ball collapsed. Every one was glad to get away. For the women life was a blank till they had a gown like Mademoiselle de Tricotrin's. They had no interest in anything but how to procure one with the utmost speed. No one seemed to doubt for a moment that a complete change was to come over the Court, and the De Tricotrins were to lead the fashion. Every man with any pretensions to style went away registering a determination to suborn the Marquis's valet; and as the two strangers were carried to their lodging in the neighbourhood of the palace, perhaps there was no Oneirian so happy as the Queen-mother. [Pg 51]

"Well, my child?" said the Marquis interrogatively to his daughter, as soon as they were alone.

"He is just the kind of man I expected to find," answered Mademoiselle de Tricotrin dreamily, as she leant back in her chair and clasped her hands behind her head.

"Then you will manage it?"

"I cannot tell, sir."

"But why not? Let me tell you, my child, I am pleased with you. You never looked prettier. I am certain we shall succeed. Why, the King was simply fascinated."

"Yes," she answered, a little wearily, "I know he was, but that goes a very little way with a man like him."

[Pg 52]

CHAPTER VI.
THE KING'S COUNCILLORS.

"And now he seeks which way to proove,
How he his fancie might remoove."

Monsieur de Tricotrin was right. The King had been fascinated. That was clear. It was the talk of every breakfast-table in Oneiria. And Mlle de Tricotrin was right too. It made very little difference to the King, except to amuse him; but this was not so clear to the breakfast-tables.

Amused Kophetua certainly was. It was highly entertaining to see how clever the little woman was. He quite laughed to himself to think how great an impression she had made on him, and he looked forward with a fresh pleasure to playing with a toy of such exquisite ingenuity, without giving a thought to the danger of the pastime. The mere fact that he was charmed he considered quite a sufficient safeguard. It was only a proof that she was a deeper cheat than the rest, and therefore more contemptible. And yet, somehow, this morning the wiles of women did not appear quite so detestable; he found himself wondering if there were not something to be said for them, when they could produce so delightful a result. He was sitting in the library pretending to transact business with Turbo and Dolabella, when his train of thought brought him for the twentieth time that morning to this same point, and with a half-unconscious desire for protection against what he knew to be a dangerous heresy, he addressed himself to his friends. [Pg 53]

"What a charming woman Mlle de Tricotrin would be," he said, "to any one who could not see through her!"

The general started. He happened to have a piece of business that morning, but he was absent, and had made little progress: and now Kophetua's voice suddenly awoke him to the mortifying fact that, with a view of ascertaining the value of a living which was under his consideration, he was unconsciously looking out "Tricotrin" in the army list. Turbo did not start at all. He had been watching the King, and expecting the remark for the last hour.

"Yes, she is certainly very pretty," said the General, with a confusion which was not bettered by

his feeling immediately that he ought to have said something else.

"That is assuredly the case, sire," said Turbo, looking hard at the disconcerted General. "It is very fortunate we can all see through women so easily."

"But she is clever, isn't she, General?" said the King, with a smile of amusement.

"Well, your majesty," replied the General, regaining his composure, "she might deceive more [Pg 54]
than a tiro, but to us it was evident from the first."

"Ah!" said Turbo, with more than his ordinary sneer, "I knew what the General would be thinking when she shrank on her father's arm. It was very clumsy."

"Positively disgusting," cried the General, with great relief.

At this moment a chamberlain announced that the Marquis de Tricotrin was at the palace, and awaited General Dolabella's leisure.

"I ventured last night," explained Dolabella hurriedly, "to ask him to see the gardens; we were discussing a little question of tactics which I thought we might elucidate there at our leisure."

"And was his daughter coming with him?" asked the King, with affected unconcern.

"That is what is so annoying," the General answered. "You see he asked if he might bring her, and what could I say? It will be hopeless to settle the point this morning."

"Not at all, General," said Turbo maliciously; "you could not have a better master in tactics than Mlle de Tricotrin."

"Yes," laughed the King, "you had better go at once. I excuse your further attendance."

"What a child our General is!" said the King when he was gone. "Now tell me what you thought of [Pg 55]
her, Turbo. It always amuses me."

So Turbo told the King what he wanted the King to think. He was never more trenchant or merciless; but the more he reviled, the more clearly there came before the King's eyes the beautiful face and the baby look it wore when she seemed to forget herself in the dance. Whether it was this, or whether it was that Turbo was more brutal than usual, it matters little, but the King was not amused. The Chancellor's coarse satire seemed particularly distasteful. He began to wish he had not started the subject. At last as he listened he noticed the founder's rapier was still lying on the table between them. That increased his discomfort. He looked up into the shadows under the morion, and then at his watch. It was time for his morning walk, and he descended by his private stair into the gardens.

There was a long and trim grass alley where he was accustomed to take the air, and, plunged as he was in thought, he turned into it mechanically almost before he knew. The sound of women's voices aroused him, and he looked up to see a sight which convinced him that General Dolabella's point in tactics was likely to be thoroughly discussed that morning after all. For from the end of the alley he saw his mother and Mlle de Tricotrin approaching. They were talking, but were too far for him to hear what they said, yet not so far but that he could see that the beauty looked if [Pg 56]
possible more beautiful than last night.

She was dressed in the same kind of soft high-girdled gown, in strange contrast with the Queen-mother's stiff brocades. Her face glowed with freshness like a flower, and she seemed in the King's eyes more natural than Nature itself, or at least than it was permitted to be in the gardens of the Palace. For there Nature was generously assisted, not merely with the trim clipping and rectilinear planting of our old English gardens. In Oneiria they had advanced a long way beyond the ideas which the old knight brought with him: the inorganic kingdoms had been called in to supply the poverty of the organic, and vases and statues were there without number. As though to show Nature what a mistake she had committed, the vases were made to look like shrubs and the shrubs like vases, and the long-legged statues seemed always in a gale of wind, while the trees looked as though a hurricane could not stir their rigidity. It is then little to be wondered at that Mlle de Tricotrin, in the midst of such surroundings, sustained the impression she had originally produced in the King's mind.

She greeted him charmingly, so charmingly indeed, that he a little lost his presence of mind, and in trying to recover his composure he found himself kissing the Queen-mother affectionately. It [Pg 57]
was difficult to say how it happened, unless it was that she looked so happy and motherly that morning. When it was over he was sufficiently himself again to notice that Mlle de Tricotrin was gazing at him with a look of admiration he had not noticed before; and it disturbed his balance once more that she did not lower her blue eyes when he caught her looking at him, but continued to watch him from under her long dark lashes while he made her his compliments.

"It is fortunate we met," said the Queen-mother, when the first few words were over. "I wanted to go in. It is too hot for me here. We were trying to find Monsieur de Tricotrin; but you can take my place now, Kophetua."

Kophetua did not think it at all fortunate. In fact he was getting a little afraid of Mlle de Tricotrin. She had a disturbing effect upon him, but he could hardly refuse, especially since the Queen-mother withdrew as she spoke and left them in the alley alone.

They were some time in finding the Marquis. In fact the Marquis had seen everything from a

terrace behind the trees, and had no intention of allowing himself to be found too soon. So the poor General, with rueful countenance, had to listen at painful length to certain invaluable military opinions which the Marquis had acquired at second-hand. The King's conversation was certainly more pleasant. He soon regained his composure as they strolled along, and began to talk. [Pg 58]

"I am sure, sire," she said, after they had admired the garden a little, "you must be the one perfectly happy man in the world. Till yesterday," she added, with something like a sigh, "I thought there was not even one."

"And why do you think I am that one, mademoiselle?" asked the King.

"Because you have everything, sire."

"But you forget I am a King."

"No, sire. I remember it. I know kings should be the unhappiest men in the world while those they govern are so unhappy. In France a prince like you would be miserable, but it is different here where every one is so happy and none are oppressed, or poor, or wicked."

"And do you think that should make me happy, mademoiselle?"

"Yes, sire, I know it must. Had my ancestors handed me down a kingdom like yours, which they had purged of every evil, I should worship them every day."

"And do you think that nothing more is needed—that it is enough to contemplate the happiness of my subjects?"

"Yes, sire, it is the highest happiness."

"Can you not think there may be something else a man may crave for, something still higher?"

"Is there something else?" she said looking up at him sympathetically.

He paused before he answered. He did not like the way she was drawing him immediately to tell her his inmost thoughts; yet it was so pleasant—this strange, sympathetic power of the beautiful woman at his side, who was so frank and unaffected. It was somehow like talking to a man, and yet so widely different. He knew his next reply would place them on closer terms than he had ever been with a woman before. He hesitated, and then took the plunge. [Pg 59]

"I will tell you," he said, speaking with an earnestness which surprised him, and which he could not prevent. "That something else which is highest of all is to contemplate happiness, which you have wrought yourself. What is it to me that my people are contented, rich, and unoppressed? It is not my work. I could not even make them otherwise if I tried. It is my ancestors who have done it all. Without a thought for those who were to come after they laid law to law, and ordinance to ordinance, till the whole was perfect. They tore up every weed, they smoothed down every roughness in their unthinking greed of well-doing. They strove unceasing to perfect their own nobility and gave no heed to me. See in what fetters they have bound my soul. All my life I have striven and denied myself that I might grow up a statesman in fact as well as name; that I might be a physician to my people, to detect and cure the most secret maladies that seize on nations, and stretch out my arm in such wide-reaching strokes as men see wondering, and say, 'There is a king of men.' But you are a woman," he said, suddenly dropping his inspired tone to one of no little bitterness, "and cannot understand what it is for a man to feel thus." [Pg 60]

"Indeed, indeed, I understand," she cried, "and from my heart I pity you. I know what you would say. You who rise up and feel your strength to make a garden of the wilderness and see the work is done. I know all you mean. It was what the great voice of the wind said to me, when it had borne our galleon into port so bravely and roared out through the naked spars as we lay at anchor: 'See what a power is in me, but my work is done. You give no heed to the might that is going by, and I must pass on and consume my strength without an end.'"

The King looked at her in wonder. It was a woman that spoke, but they were the words of more than a man. She understood all that he meant; nay, much that he had hardly grasped before. He was more disturbed than ever, and it was with difficulty he steadied his voice to speak.

"Then you can understand, mademoiselle," he said quite softly, "that I am perfectly miserable rather than perfectly happy?"

"Yes, sire," she said; "but such sorrow as yours is a better thing than other men's happiness."

"Yet it is none the less hard to bear." [Pg 61]

"True; but it is also the easier to change to gladness."

"I do not understand; what do you mean?"

"There is a remedy so simple that I hardly dare to tell your majesty. I have presumed too far in all this—yet forgive me, sire, if when I heard such words as yours, I forgot that I spoke with a king."

"Nay, tell me all. I desire to know."

"It is then, sire," she said, looking down almost shyly, and speaking with some hesitation,—"it is, when the great things are done, to do the little things that are left undone. It is not given to all to

do deeds that sound to the ends of the earth, but there are little things that a great man may do greatly so that they shall ring in the furthest heights of heaven."

"What things are those? I do not understand."

"Perhaps I speak foolishly, yet I feel so strongly, that a man like you would be sure to find them if you sought."

"But where—where am I to seek?"

"Amongst your people. If you were to go down to them so that they might not know you, you would find wrongs to right, wrongs that are little in the eyes of man but great before Heaven. Then you would know in your heart that the greatest acts are those which are done with the [Pg 62] loftiest purpose and by the greatest soul."

"You would have me a very Haroun-al-Raschid," he said, with a laugh, for he felt that their talk was getting dangerously elevated, and he was ashamed of his weakness in letting it go so far.

"And why not?" she answered, smiling, as though her mood had changed with his. "What monarch had a happier life or left a happier memory behind him? and it is for the little things that he is remembered. But I see my father," she added, "I need detain your majesty no longer."

With the prettiest curtsey in the world she left him, and Kophetua returned to his apartments with his peace of mind considerably disturbed. The whole day he was the prey of the most conflicting thoughts, but above all to the humiliating conviction that he had been saying to this bewitching Frenchwoman things which he had never breathed in his life to any one but Turbo, his bosom friend. The idea she had suggested was fascinating enough. It would be very pleasant to try, and to tell her of his success afterwards; and at all events an excitement of any kind would be good for him, and serve to get her out of his mind a little.

Which of these considerations weighed most with him perhaps he hardly knew himself. He made and unmade his mind fifty times before nightfall; but still it is certain that as the moon rose [Pg 63] Trecenito found himself stealing out of the private entrance of his gardens with his hair dishevelled and unpowdered, and his person concealed with a wide slouch hat, and a voluminous cloak or burnouse which he used on his hunting expeditions.

CHAPTER VII.
THE LIBERTIES OF ST. LAZARUS.

[Pg 64]

"He saw a beggar all in gray."

It has been said already that the beggar class in Oneiria enjoyed peculiar and extensive privileges. It was a factor in the Oneirian polity, that one would hardly have expected to find, and its existence would be hard to explain were it not for a passage in a memoir, which the founder left behind him, as an exposition of the motives which led him to adopt some of the more unusual provisions of the constitution. The style is no less crabbed and tortuous than it is usual to find at the time, but it is none the less interesting as giving us a glimpse into the old knight's habit of thought.

"Forasmuch," it runs, "as the riches of this world have been bestowed on us, not for each man's ease and delight, which is the seedbed of sloth and gluttony, but rather for the perfecting of our natures by charity and almsgiving, whereby we are made partakers of all Christian virtue; so at the first I was shrewdly exercised how this medicine should be furnished for men's souls in a [Pg 65] state where none should want. The [missing word] which fears at last brought me to draw into one body all the useless and most outlandish of my people, to whom all manner of work should be forbidden, that a guild of beggars might be made, to be a receptacle for all that was imperfectable in the community, whereby, as it appeared to me, I could make such men, as were otherwise useless and noxious to the state, useful citizens in respect that they would serve as a whetstone to the virtue of the rest, and, as it were, lay up for my garden a dung-heap or midden, which though itself is stinking and full of corruption, yet being dug in in season, bringeth up a plenteous growth of most sweet flowers and wholesome herbs."

The dung-heap commenced on these philosophical lines grew amazingly, and on the whole to the general health and cleanliness. Everything that had gone bad in the state drained into it by a natural process, and the resulting mass of human garbage which had collected at the time of which we are speaking thoroughly deserved the evil reputation it had earned. Yet no one thought of interfering with it. A quarter of the city and a secluded valley into which it sloped away had been assigned to the guild by the founder, and as long as it did not exceed its boundaries it was allowed to go on gathering, festering and growing. A certain number of the beggars were [Pg 66] permitted to exercise their profession at the palace gates, otherwise it was all kept out of sight. Private people congratulated themselves on the excellent social drainage it afforded, and lived as if they did not know of its existence. They avoided the subject, gave their annual alms, and enjoyed the virtue so purchased till the time came round for laying in another stock. As for the government, it behaved in much the same way as the citizens. Every year it handed its donation

from the central fund to the "Emperor" of the guild, as he was called, and suffered him to make and administer his own laws within the liberties without any inquiry or interference. It was whispered that some of these laws were of the most barbarous kind, and when people remembered what a conglomeration of nationalities, both savage and civilised, the guild represented, they, as a rule, changed the conversation, as if they were afraid to think what loathsome poisons might have been produced by the fermenting together of so much heterogeneous matter.

It was only natural then that Kophetua should wend his way to the beggars' quarter. It had been instituted by the founder for the increase of virtue, and he determined to seek in the reeking dung-heap for the elements to make fertile the soul he felt so barren within him. Moreover, as soon as the idea suggested itself, he began to see very clearly that the dung-heap had grown to a [Pg 67] great wrong that was worthy of his best efforts to put right. He even confessed to himself that he had been aware of this for a long time, but either from cowardice or indolence he had refused to allow his dreaming to stiffen into a purpose. He always dismissed the idea almost before it was conceived, and fell back again into his old colourless life with its never-changing round of banalities and affectation. With each relapse his selfishness and cynicism grew more hard. It only wanted one great effort to stir his barren soul, and one brave grapple with sin and hideousness, to make all his heroism spring up in a harvest of golden grain. He knew that well enough in his better moments, yet he dreamed the dream and awoke, and was selfish and cynical and indolent still.

But now he was aroused at last. He was ashamed to think whose voice it was that had awakened him. He wished it had been any other. Still, he strode on under the shadow of the houses with a lighter heart than he had known for many years. And yet it was not without misgiving that he plunged into the liberties of St. Lazarus, as the beggars' quarter was called. It had an evil name, and his life had been so smooth that except in the chase he had never known what danger was. Strange tales were told of what had befallen men who had unwarily entered the quarter, and it was with a beating heart that he passed the great "Beggars' Gate." [Pg 68]

He was no sooner past the barrier, however, than he saw before him a sight which drove everything else from his mind. Hurrying up the street in front of him was an ungainly, limping figure, which it was impossible to mistake. That gait could be none but Turbo's. What could it mean? Where could he be going? Kophetua drew closer under the shadow of the houses and followed.

Turn after turn the Chancellor took till he seemed to be seeking the very bowels of the liberty, and Kophetua began to feel it would be hard to find his way out again. Every now and then they passed a beggar, but the King only drew his hat more closely down and hurried on. At last Turbo stopped at a little door in what seemed the wall of a court or garden, and after looking round stealthily to see if he were followed he entered. Kophetua walked quickly to the door, which the Chancellor had carefully closed after him. Once there, he knew he had made no mistake, and understood at last the strange interest his Chancellor always took in the beggars at the palace gate.

"Nay, my pretty lump of foulness, do not avoid me," he heard Turbo's mocking voice say; "I have found you alone this time, and you must come perforce."

"Stand back! stand back!" gasped a woman's voice; "I will cry out and alarm them." [Pg 69]

"You dare not, foul sweetheart," said Turbo; "you know too well the penalty when one of you is found with one of us. Nay, do not struggle so. There's no escape to-night."

There was a low choking cry of horror, and Kophetua burst open the door. At first he saw no one. He found himself in a little court behind a dilapidated house. Across the end where he stood ran a verandah in deep shadow. The noise of his entrance had hushed every sound. He could see nothing nor hear anything but his beating heart, when suddenly he was aware that a dark shadow had glided out of the verandah and had slipped by him through the door. Then in the far end he heard a low moan, and saw as he approached what seemed a heap of dirty rags lying in a corner, but he knew directly it was the lifeless form of a woman.

She did not move when he touched her, so he carried her out and laid her down in the bright moonlight to see what ailed her. Very tenderly he rested her head on his knee and bent over the motionless form to feel for life in it.

It was not without disgust that he did so, for it was only a beggar-girl he could see now, and she was no cleaner than her kind. Her face and hands were covered with dirt, her thick dark hair was [Pg 70] matted and unkempt, and the rags that covered her were filthy beyond description. Yet her face looked so pale and careworn and delicate that he forgot all her foulness in his pity, and tried his best to revive her.

At last she sighed deeply, and opened her eyes. They were large and dark and trustful, and they looked straight up into his with a strange wonder; so long and earnestly did she gaze at him with her far-off look, that he felt a sort of fascination coming over him, and began to think how every one said the beggars were half of them witches. It was a great relief to see a dreamy smile lighting up her wan face. She stretched up her hands to him, and then dropped them as though she was too weak or too happy for anything but to lie as she was.

"Are you the great God?" she whispered, "or only an angel?"

"Lie still, child, a little," he said tenderly; "I am only human like yourself."

"Only a man!" she whispered with increasing wonder in her great dark eyes. "I thought I was dead and lay in God's lap. They say I shall, some day when my misery is done; but if you are a man, He will be too beautiful for me. Let me lie here a little where I am and dream again."

She closed her eyes, but they seemed still to look at him. He could not forget them. It was like a spell. He could not think of anything but them, and he let her lie while he gathered his straying thoughts. [Pg 71]

"Are you better?" he asked, when she moved again. "Try and sit up. I cannot stay here long."

"Ah! I remember," she said, with a shudder. "It was you who came in when he seized me, and I prayed for help, and then,—then I forget. Yes, you must go away and leave me."

"But I must see you in the house first."

"No, no; I cannot go in to-night. Father was angry and beat me when I came in, and said I must stay on the stones all night because I had brought nothing home. I could not help it. They pushed me when Trecenito scattered the alms at the gate, and I could get none. And yet if I stay here, perhaps the man will come back."

"Do you know who it was?"

"Yes, the ugly man that I saw at the palace window. He followed me here once before and tried to make me go with him. But father came out, and he ran away. Oh, he is very wicked," she said, with another shudder. "He is not like you." She lay back again peacefully on Kophetua's knee, and closed her eyes as if she would swoon again, but a noise in the house disturbed her almost directly. "It is father. Fly, fly for your life!" she cried, starting up.

As she spoke, a tall beggar rushed out from the verandah with a long knife in his hand and made straight at Kophetua. The girl with a wild cry threw herself before the man and clasped his knees, crying again, "Fly, fly for your life!" and ere he well knew what he was doing, Kophetua had availed himself of the respite and was running down the street. He had not gone far, however, before he began to think what a bad beginning he was making to run away just as the danger commenced. Then those trusting eyes seemed to be looking at him again and calling him back. So he stopped, determined to return and rescue her from her father's fury. But now he was aware he had entirely lost his way. Still he would not give up his purpose, and cursing himself for his cowardice, wandered through street after street, it seemed for hours, and was then as far as ever from finding what he sought. Exhausted with his efforts, from time to time he sat down to rest and think which direction could be right. Many beggars passed him, but he dared not speak to one. Again and again he started up and walked on once more. His blood was up, and he was determined not to leave the girl to her fate. He knew life would be unendurable if he returned without redeeming his cowardice. [Pg 72]

At last, at the end of a narrow lane, he emerged into a square where was a building larger than any he had seen before, and all ablaze with light. Many beggars were going into it, and, hardly knowing why, he joined himself to one of the tattered groups and went in too. [Pg 73]

He found himself directly in a great hall surrounded by a filthy crowd. At first he could see nothing but the smoke-blackened roof and the torches that flared all round. But presently in an eddy of the throng he was carried beside a rough wooden table on which men were standing. One of them looked down, and holding out a grimy hand invited him to get up beside him. Once there, he could see all over the great chamber. All round the walls was a mass of beggars packed close on floor and forms and tables, and dressed in every tattered costume under heaven, from east to west. Arab and Jew, Frank and Berber, all were there and every hybrid between, and the lurid torchlight lit up a pile of faces as evil as sin itself.

At the further end was a raised platform, supporting a great high-backed chair which was ablaze with gilding and colour lately renewed. It formed the strangest contrast to the dirt and gloom and rottenness with which it was surrounded, but even stranger was the incongruity of its occupant. For upon it sat a little brown wizened man, so old that he hardly seemed alive, except in his restless eyes. His long white hair and beard straggled thinly over him and formed his only covering, except for a filthy waist-cloth, and a chaplet of gold-pieces which served for a crown. He was not sitting in the European manner, but had drawn up his skinny brown legs on to the gilded seat, and was squatting like an Oriental. Indeed, the whole scene savoured rather of the East than the West. The architecture was Moorish, and the tawdry throne was framed in a horseshoe arch. Turbans were more numerous than any other head-dress, and the front rows of the throng squatted on the dirty floor watching unmoved the scene that was being enacted before them. [Pg 74]

Yet it was moving enough. In the midst before the throne was an open grave, newly dug in the mud floor. Beside it two men were stripping as though for a fight. As soon as they were ready they stood up knife in hand and salaamed to the Emperor, for such Kophetua knew he must be. Then came a shrill sound from the throne, like the voice of a heron, and every murmur was hushed.

"Know all men," it cried, "why the High Court of St. Lazarus sits to-night. It sits for treason to the ancient guild; it sits on one who is unchaste with the Gentiles. It sits on Penelophon, daughter of Ramlak. To-night she was found in the arms of her lover who came from the city. It is sin worthy

of death. It is worthy the worst of deaths. Yet Dannok her brother maintains the charge is false, and will do battle for his sister with him on whom the lot of blood has fallen, the champion of St. Lazarus."

Kophetua's heart sank within him as the monotonous words fell slowly on his ear. Something told him that Penelophon must be the girl he had come to rescue; but how to do it now! With terrible anxiety he watched the combatants take their places opposite each other. Behind each of them were two others, each armed, like the champions, with long knives. It was an awful scene to one who had lived the life of Kophetua, where all that was ugly or painful had long been refined away. The heat and stench made him feel sick and weak, so that the open grave and the knives, and the brown old Emperor crouching in the gilded throne, seemed to weigh him down like a horrible dream. [Pg 75]

"Let Penelophon be brought forth to stand her trial!"

The shrill voice died away again. A door opened by the daïs, there was a movement in the throng, and breathless with dread Kophetua watched to see what would come. The crowd opened, and his life seemed to freeze up with horror. He tried to cry out, but no sound came. He shut his eyes to keep out the sight; but it was useless, he could not choose but look. There, between two hideous hags, walked what seemed the corpse of the girl he had tried to save. He knew her again though she was so changed. They had washed her clean as the body that is laid out for burial; they had wrapped her in grave-clothes, and her luxuriant dark hair hung down, combed and silky, over the white shroud like a pall. Yet he knew her. That wan face, the dark, trusting eyes he could never forget. It was she whom he had tried to befriend. It was she whom he had deserted. This was the end of his first attempt. She was to die the worst of deaths. She was to be buried alive! [Pg 76]

And all depended on the skill of the stripling who was already sparring before the champion of St. Lazarus. They were long before they closed, and Kophetua watched breathlessly. Suddenly they were together and there was a flash and clink of steel, and the lad sprang back. On his shoulder was a streak of blood; but before the King had well seen it, the two men behind leaped upon the wounded boy and plunged their knives into his back. Such was the fierce law of combat in the liberties of St. Lazarus. The first blood showed the right, and death was the portion of him who fought for the wrong.

It was over, and Penelophon must die. Without ceremony the seconds seized her brother's naked body and threw it into the open grave. Then the two hags began to drag their charge to it in her turn. She looked round wildly, her eyes staring with terror. Kophetua, in his intense anxiety, had worked himself to the front; and their eyes met. She started, and her horror changed to the look of wonder he had seen when first her eyes opened and gazed into his. He knew she was thinking her guardian angel was come again. It was more than he could bear. Forgetting everything, he leaped down into the open space, tore her from the hags, and stood with the shroud-clad figure in his arms, bidding her fear nothing. [Pg 77]

"It is the Gentile lover," proclaimed the same monotonous cry of the shrivelled Emperor. "He has come to lie in the same grave with his shameless love. Seize him, and make ready!"

"You dare not!" cried Kophetua, as he threw back his cloak and hat. "Stand back! See! It is I, Kophetua the King."

There was a murmur of "Trecenito" through the throng, and the men who were come to obey the Emperor's orders fell back.

"We know no king in the liberties but the Emperor," droned the old man, quite undisturbed. "Seize him, and prepare him for the grave!"

"Stand back!" cried poor Kophetua, "you dare not lay hands on me. Think what your fates will be when my people hear of it."

"They will never hear of it," chanted the Emperor. "No one saw you come hither."

"Yes, Turbo, my Chancellor, saw me," cried the King, growing alarmed.

"And he wishes your death, that he may reign in your stead," the voice droned on without a change of note. "Seize them, and put them together in Limbo for a foretaste of the narrower chamber that is to come, while the grave-clothes are prepared and another grave is dug; for now the dead shall lie alone. Away with them now, and fear not. The Emperor is greater than the King, and Sultan Death than both." [Pg 78]

He ended in a shrill scream of mocking laughter, while Kophetua was seized and hurried along, powerless to resist. While the devilish merriment still rang out they thrust him in at the door whence the beggar-maid had been brought. Her they pushed in after him, and the door closed with a hollow clang.

As soon as Kophetua could collect his thoughts sufficiently to look about him, he found himself shut in a narrow chamber, in every way adapted for a prison. One small window, about his own height from the ground, was the only outlet to the open air, and it was heavily barred. The moonlight streamed through it and poured a flood of silvery light about a stone bench in a recess on the opposite side. There his eyes rested at last immovably; for there sat the beggar-maid swathed in her shroud, and shining so white and ghostly in the moonbeams that she seemed no

living thing. She sat upright, gazing before her with her wondering eyes as though she only half understood what had happened.

And Kophetua wondered too—wondered to see how beautiful she was now her foulness was washed away. He knew the face well; where had he seen it? It must have been in his dreams. So he stood in the deep shadow watching and wondering and listening to the click of the spade and mattock, as the beggars dug the grave he was to share with the living corpse before him. It was indeed, as the Emperor had said, a foretaste of the tomb. [Pg 79]

Presently she turned her dark gaze on him. It was terrible to see the death-like thing looking at him, and he shuddered, but her soft voice reassured him.

"I knew my angel would come down and save me again," she murmured. "When will you take me away? I am ready to go now; Dannok is dead, and I have no one left."

Poor child! he dared not speak and break her dream. He only watched her still, and then it flashed on him what face it was. It was in the old picture in his library he had seen it, the same wan delicate features, the same black hair waving so smooth and even over the snowy forehead. He had often wondered how a painter could have chosen such a face to fascinate a king. Now he saw it in the flesh he wondered no longer, but gazed his fill, and listened to the click of the grave-diggers.

"Must we wait very long?" murmured the beggar-maid again. "I am very weary, and crave for rest." [Pg 80]

"My child, my child!" cried Kophetua, unable any longer to restrain himself, "I cannot save you. It is I that have ruined you, and we are going to lie side by side in the same dark grave."

As he spoke he went to her, and in spite of his half-superstitious awe of the ghostly figure he took her in his arms, as though he would kiss away the new horror from her face; but he started back immediately, pale as herself. The click of spade and mattock had ceased, heavy footsteps sounded at the door, and the key rattled in the lock.

CHAPTER VIII. [Pg 81]
ESCAPE, BUT NOT LIBERTY.

"The which did cause his paine."

The door did not open at once, and Kophetua stood with his arm about his ghostly companion listening to the muttered curses of the men without. There seemed to be something amiss with the lock. Fiercely they rattled the key, and every moment the prisoners expected to hear the bolt fly back.

"See, see," whispered Penelophon, suddenly pointing to the window, "I knew you would save me; why did you frighten me so?"

Kophetua looked up, and saw a stout pole had been thrust in between the bars of the window-grating, and that some one was using it as a lever to try and tear them out.

"Leap out both," cried a low disguised voice outside, "the moment it gives."

The pole strained again and the key grated; and now the shrill voice of the shrivelled Emperor could be heard screaming from his gilded throne and bidding his men make haste. The bars groaned and bent, but they were still tough, and would not give. The lock rattled each moment more savagely; the scream of the Emperor grew more angry; the suspense was becoming almost unendurable, when, with a sudden crash, the whole window-grating fell outwards. There was a sound of feet hurrying away, and then all was silent without. [Pg 82]

But now a heavy hammer was clanging with deafening noise upon the broken lock, and between each stroke rose the scream of the frenzied monarch, so piercing that it seemed to Kophetua to half paralyse him, as he grasped the window-sill and strove to draw himself up. It was a desperate struggle, for he was unused to such exercise; but it was done at last, and he sat astride the stone sill, and held out his hands to Penelophon. She seemed quite calm, and looked up in his face trustfully, as he in a fever of excitement began to pull her up. Two hammers were now banging rhythmically on the door, and the din of their ponderous blows was almost incessant, and yet the awful scream of anger was not drowned. But the tough old lock still held; and it was not till Kophetua, more dead than alive, had dropped to the ground, and had caught the beggar-maid in his arms, that the clangour ceased in a deafening crash, and they knew that the door was burst.

They did not stop to hear more. As soon as the gaolers dare tell their frantic monarch of the escape the pursuit would begin. No sooner indeed did her feet touch the ground than Penelophon seized the King's hand, and began running down a labyrinth of tortuous passages as fast as the clinging grave-clothes would allow. The King was hardly less agitated than before. They could hear the shout of the beggars as the pursuit began; but in five minutes all was over, and the King [Pg 83]

and the beggar-maid ran out hand-in-hand through the great gate by which he had entered.

Still they did not stop. Kophetua could not feel sure after what he had seen of their power and numbers that the beggars would not carry the pursuit beyond the limits of the liberty. So he hurried on still without resting till he had let himself in at the private entrance to the palace gardens. Once inside he threw himself on a bench, exhausted with fatigue and excitement, and the beggar-maid sank at his feet. The adventure was over, and he would think quietly what was next to be done.

The thought seemed hardly framed when Kophetua awoke to the consciousness that he had been asleep. How long he knew not. The dawn was just beginning to glimmer as he opened his eyes, and he started up terror-stricken to see a corpse stretched at his feet. Then he remembered it all, and began to realise his position. It was certainly sufficiently embarrassing. He, the King of [Pg 84] Oneiria, was sitting in his own garden with a beggar-maid, dressed like a corpse, in his charge. What was he to do with her? She too had fallen asleep, and was lying outstretched upon her back like an effigy on a tomb. Her arms lay listlessly, with palms upturned, just as they had dropped on either side of her. Her head was resting on the roots of a tree, and was turned gently towards him. Out of the dark masses of her hair, which lay littered over the white grave-clothes, her face glimmered wan and pale in the ashen light. So still and peaceful and deathlike was the picture that, save for the gentle breathing, it might indeed have been the sleep that knows no waking.

He sat with his chin in his hand looking at her. Yes, she was very beautiful. Those features were cast in the same exquisite mould which in the picture had seemed to him to tell of nothing but inanity, but now he saw it in the flesh it spoke of that divine purity, strength, and tenderness which the angels are given. It was a beauty of holiness that seemed to sanctify him as he gazed. He felt himself ennobled that he could distinguish it. But where could he take her? Assuredly most men would call that face from which all sensuality and the earthly parts of beauty had been refined away inane. They were too gross to see what real beauty was. General Dolabella would certainly call it inane.

General Dolabella! that was an idea. General Dolabella was certainly the only person of his [Pg 85] acquaintance to whom he felt it was possible for him to bring a young girl dressed in grave-clothes, the first thing in the morning, and ask him to take care of her. In the reaction which his rest had brought about he began to feel ashamed of his quixotic enterprise, and to see his position in the ridiculous light. He fancied what the wits would say if they heard of it, what smart things would be current at his expense; and he laughed cynically at himself that he of all men should have been deluded into an attempt to resuscitate so dead and false a thing as chivalry. Just then Penelophon cried out in her sleep, and awoke with a restless start. Her eyes opened, she seized the shroud convulsively in her hands to look closely at it, and then, with a choking cry of horror, covered her face and fell back. Kophetua was on his knees at her side in a moment. He took her hands from her eyes, and tried to comfort her.

"Look up, Penelophon," said he, very tenderly. "It was only a dream."

"Where am I?" she cried wildly. "It was so dark and cold in the grave when they covered me up. Ah!" she went on, with the same trusting look coming back as at first, "I remember, they did not bury me. You saved me. Shall I go with you now?"

She stretched her arms to him, and he lifted her up. She was very cold, and so was he; but he [Pg 86] took off his cloak and tried to repress a shiver as he wrapped it about her and drew the hood over her head.

"Yes, if you can," he said; "I want to put you where kind people will keep you safe."

She staggered when she tried to walk, being still weak with the shock she had had, and stiff with cold; so he put his arm about her, and supported her towards the gate which led from the opposite side of the gardens into General Dolabella's official residence. The servants were just astir, and there was little difficulty in getting in, when Kophetua explained that he must see the Minister at once on urgent business of state. It is true they hardly knew what to make of the King's sudden appearance, with his haggard face and dishevelled and unpowdered hair; but his manner was so sharp and peremptory that they were too glad to show him and his charge to the Minister's private room with all possible speed, and it was not many minutes more before the General himself hurried in in his nightcap and flowered dressing-gown.

"God preserve us, sire!" said he, starting back to see the haggard spectacle the King presented after the horrors he had gone through, "what has happened? It is most alarming. Let me send at once for the Adjutant-General or the Archbishop! Which department is it?"

"Calm yourself, my dear General," said the King a little nervously; "it is nothing of any [Pg 87] consequence—at least, that is, not at present. Later in the day I will see you with the Adjutant-General. Now I merely wish you to take charge of a person, whom I have saved—it matters not how—from a very awkward position. I wished for secrecy and fidelity, and, above all, no idle curiosity, so I came to you."

"Your majesty does me a great honour," said the General, with a profound bow. "I presume this is the gentleman beside you. I need hardly say I shall be proud to offer him an asylum as long as it can be of any service to him or your majesty."

Penelophon was still wrapped in the burnouse, and in the dim morning light it was impossible to

see her plainly. The mistake only made the King more nervous still. He had hoped the explanation was over, and now he had to begin again.

"That is like your kind heart," he answered, with some hesitation. "But it is only right to tell you, you are mistaken in thinking this is a gentleman."

"Oh!" said the General, with a very wise nodding of his head, "it is a lady we have rescued. Now I understand the case."

"Pardon me, General," said the King testily, "but you understand nothing of the kind. It is not a lady at all. It is a beggar-maid."

"Forgive me, sire," answered the General, with some dignity. "I could hardly have been expected [Pg 88] to have grasped the situation. It is a delicate office for a married man; but your majesty knows my devotion, and of course I will conceal her, as well as I can, till you can otherwise bestow her."

"But that is not what I want," said the King, growing more and more vexed. "Don't you see? It is an unfortunate girl I have rescued from the most atrocious cruelty. She needs protection, and I desire that your wife shall take her into her service."

"Really, your majesty," cried the General, in great perturbation, "it is—well, not impossible; that is a word I will not allow myself to use in a question of serving your majesty. But consider what my wife—I mean, consider what it is to request the Director of Public Worship to introduce such a person into the bosom of his family."

"General Dolabella," replied the King coldly, "you do not believe me. You permit yourself to doubt the word of your sovereign. Very well, I will convince you that what I say is true, and that this poor girl is without reproach."

With a vague idea that he would at once make the General grasp the whole case, he stepped to Penelophon and drew off the burnouse that covered her, leaving her standing motionless and deathlike in her clinging grave-clothes and dark pall of hair, a pale and ghastly figure in the [Pg 89] sickly morning light. The effect upon the Minister was startling. He sank back thunderstruck into the chair behind him. His jaw dropped, his eyes stared wildly, and beads of perspiration came out on his forehead.

"Excuse me, sire," he said faintly, when he was a little recovered. "You see I am a little shocked. I was not prepared to see the lady in fancy dress. It is very pretty; but I confess I was not quite prepared for it. I shall be better directly."

"I am sorry to alarm you," said the King, "but pray oblige me by not referring to this poor girl as a lady again. You see the story I have told you is obviously true. It is strange, but I cannot just now go into details of how she came to be in this costume, which I admit is unusual. At present all I ask from you is very simple. Procure her a suitable dress from one of your own women servants, introduce her to your wife as a young person who has been highly recommended to you as a desirable maid for her, of course without mentioning my name. She cannot refuse, and all I ask is done."

"But, your majesty," pleaded the poor General, "you hardly appreciate—my wife—I mean our domestic relations, particularly at this moment,—I assure your majesty it is a most delicate application you ask me to make, and one capable of painful misinterpretation."

"Very well," said the King sharply; "I understand you to refuse my request. I regret my confidence [Pg 90] was so misplaced. Hitherto I had not doubted your devotion."

"But, your majesty——" began Dolabella.

"Silence, sir," said Kophetua sharply. "Enough has been said. With pain—with considerable pain I must put you to the trouble of receiving my orders as High Constable of the kingdom."

It was a sinecure office the General enjoyed as Commander-in-chief. He stood up at once and saluted, trying to look in his night-cap and flowered dressing-gown as constable-like as under the circumstances was attainable.

"I place this woman under arrest to you," continued the King. "You will keep her in solitary confinement, so far as is consistent with her kind treatment. Above all, you will let no one see her, and you will produce her person when called upon. Kindly draft a warrant, and I will sign it at once. I believe my orders are plain?" he added, as the High Constable hesitated.

"Perfectly," moaned Dolabella lugubriously, and sat down to write. Meanwhile Penelophon, who at last was beginning dimly to grasp that her angel was really Trecenito himself, was gazing from one to the other in hopeless wonder without speaking. The warrant was done. Kophetua signed it, drew his burnouse about him, and left the room without another word. Penelophon looked after [Pg 91] him wistfully, and then sat down and began to cry.

"I am very sorry, sir," she said, "to be here, if you do not want me."

"There, there! my dear," said the soft-hearted General petulantly. "There is no need to cry. It is no fault of yours. Only you place me in a very painful position. You cannot understand, because you do not know Madame Dolabella. She is a most charming motherly person, but unhappily a woman to whom it will be an extremely delicate task to explain why I, a father of a family, am holding a *tête-à-tête* in my study the first thing in the morning with a corpse—or what is a corpse

to all intents and purposes, only worse. She is not so used to that kind of thing as some people. I must get you a more decent dress at once, and some breakfast. You look very hungry." And therewith the General gathered the skirts of his flowered dressing-gown around him and shuffled off in his slippers, carefully locking the door behind him.

Kophetua reached his apartments in no enviable frame of mind. He was angry with the General and angry with himself. He felt it was a piece of cowardice to compel his Minister to undertake a duty he was afraid of himself. He was determined to provide for Penelophon elsewhere as soon as possible. But how was it to be done? If General Dolabella would not accept his assurance of the [Pg 92] girl's innocence and danger, who would? It was impossible to explain the case to any one. To begin with, he was heartily ashamed of the whole adventure, and then such heavy considerations of state were involved in it. It must entail, in the first place, the unpleasant confession that he was not King in his own dominions. The beggars had been suffered to grow into an uncontrollable power; and, until he could concert measures with the general staff for the concentration of a considerable force in the capital, it was clear that the subject must not be mentioned, especially as there was the further complication of Turbo, and the extraordinary part he had played in the matter. It was absolutely necessary to know what position the Chancellor would take before any move could be made; and how he was to arrive at that Kophetua could not for the life of him think.

It was certainly a situation, and one which would require all his statesmanship to deal with. At last, he admitted, he was face to face with a difficulty of the kind he had longed for all his life. He was aware of a great danger, a great wrong in the state which must be remedied; yet, so he argued to himself, it was impossible to enjoy the position because it was so mixed up with ridiculous personal considerations. Had it only been a plain question of politics, he felt he would [Pg 93] have been equal to it, and would have rejoiced in grappling with its difficulties. As it was, he would have given anything if he had only stayed at home that night; and as he cast himself exhausted on his bed for a little rest, there was no one he hated so much as beautiful Mlle de Tricotrin, who had been clever enough to wheedle him into making such a fool of himself for the mere pleasure of winning her good opinion. Whatever happened, he determined she should not know he had been weak enough to act on the advice he had allowed her to give, and so afford her a still better hold on him than she had already obtained by his stupid confidences.

CHAPTER IX. [Pg 94]
IN THE QUEEN'S GARDEN.

"What sudden chance is this? quoth he,
That I to love must subject be,
* * * *
But still did it defie."

In the afternoon following the morning of Kophetua's adventure the Queen-mother was sitting in her little garden pavilion, and at her feet was curled Mlle de Tricotrin reading to her in the prettiest of soft white gowns, and the prettiest of natural attitudes. It was a strange little building, which the Queen had christened the Temple of Sensibility. It was perhaps more like a Greek temple than most things, but more strictly speaking it belonged to that style of architecture which reached its culmination in the valentines and burial cards of fifty years ago. The Queen was very fond of it. It stood in a quiet corner of that part of the palace gardens which was set apart for her private use, and she had lavished considerable thought and taste in the interior decoration. The walls were covered with vast architectural perspectives produced almost [Pg 95] to infinity, so that the little place seemed to be the focus on which all the draughts of a vast and airy hall were concentrated, and at various points fat little Cupids were apparently trying to anchor themselves to the columns by wreaths of roses, as though in fear of being blown out of the composition. The effect was cool, but not cosy; yet the Queen was very fond of it, and had brought Mlle de Tricotrin thither with the air of one who has a great favour to bestow.

They were already fast friends. The Queen-mother was of an affectionate nature, and was starving for an object on which her affection could feed. As has been said, she was thoroughly German, and shared the characteristics of the educated and refined German lady of her time. It was a mixture we seldom see nowadays. On one side she was homely and practical, on the other highly imaginative and dreamy. She cannot perhaps be better expressed than in terms of her tastes. The Queen-mother had a passion for needlework and transcendental philosophy. Oddly enough, Mlle de Tricotrin had quite a pretty taste in them too.

At her new friend's first entry into the ballroom the Queen had certainly been a little shocked. It was impossible not to regard her costume as a little immodest; but when she began to dance, and Margaret saw how pretty and childish and unaffected she was, and how, above all, she seemed to [Pg 96] charm the stony heart of the King, she began to recognise in Mlle de Tricotrin the simple, well-brought-up, and beautiful girl of whom she had heard so hopefully from the Governor of the Canaries. A very few words which passed between the two women the night of the ball and on the following morning had been enough to bring the heart-sick woman under the spell as much as

anybody else. The result was an invitation and the present visit to the Temple of Sensibility. Mlle de Tricotrin admired the embroidery, and asked if she could help. Beside the Queen-mother's chair stood a large grinning monster from China, blue and hideous. He was a great pet of Margaret's, and she showed her affection by using him as a book-rest. Mlle de Tricotrin saw a volume of German philosophy resting on his paws, and began to express her admiration of the author in terms that would be for our ears a little high-flown and sentimental. Thus in a very few minutes the impression she had already created was more than confirmed. With new-born happiness the Queen accepted her offer to read, and now as she worked and listened to the musical voice, she was entranced as much by the sound as the sense that filled her ears.

"Ah," said the Queen, as the reader paused after a passage of great beauty, "why must material bodies so clog our spirit that it cannot rise to the places which these great men point out to us?" [Pg 97]

"But indeed it can, madam," said the beauty. "I do not remember my soul's prison when I read such words as these. I forget all that is tainted with matter, and seem to float up and down in the highest empyrean, with the bright spirits that are wafted by on the breath of the song the angels sing."

"Then indeed you are blessed," the Queen answered; "but such freedom can never be mine. I am chained by a sin to the body of death, and may not melt into the eternal till my fetters are broken. But you have never lost the freedom which purity alone can give. And yet," she continued, smiling sadly, and laying her hand on the girl's soft heap of hair, "I wonder your soul likes to leave the dwelling-place which God has made so fair for it. You are very, very pretty, my child!"

Mlle de Tricotrin looked up in the Queen's face. The sad eyes were moist with tears, and were looking down at her so lovingly that she could not help taking in hers the thin hand that had been caressing her, and kissing it reverently.

"Ah! madam," she said, so earnestly and sadly that the Queen was quite surprised at the change of her tones, "what might I have been if I had had a mother like you to guide me! but my mother died before I can remember."

"That is a hard thing for a girl," answered the Queen, "and you have fought your way alone bravely. Yes, it is hard, but is not my lot harder still? What might my lonely life have been with a daughter like you to warm and brighten it? But I have no child—I have no child." [Pg 98]

"But you have the King!"

"No, he is not mine. He is hard and cold, and thinks of nothing but himself."

"Indeed your majesty does him wrong," cried Mlle de Tricotrin eagerly. "He is not what you say. He spoke so differently to me when—when we were alone in the garden."

The last words she said with some hesitation and in a low sweet voice, and, looking down, pretended to arrange the folds of her soft gown with the prettiest embarrassment as she went on, "He told me of his lofty aspirations, how he longed to do some great thing for his people, how miserable he was at the hollow life he led—O madam! believe me, he has a noble heart."

"And he told all this to you?" said the Queen, between surprise and delight.

"Yes, and much more," answered her companion, looking up with a frank, innocent look which seemed ignorant of how much her words meant. So frank and innocent indeed were her eyes, that for a moment Margaret doubted. She put her hands on the soft hair once more, and gazed steadfastly upon the lovely face that was upturned to her; it was a look which searched deep, it was a look hard to be borne, till the sad eyes of the widow grew dim with tears. Then the Queen-mother bent down and kissed Mlle de Tricotrin very, very tenderly. [Pg 99]

Their further conversation was interrupted by an attendant announcing that the King was without, and desired to know whether the Queen could receive him. It was a very long time since the poor mother had had such a request made to her by her son. So great a coldness had gradually grown up between them that they hardly ever met except on public occasions. They had come so entirely to misunderstand each other that private interviews between them at last became so constrained as to be quite painful to both. It was then with a flush of surprise and pleasure that she ordered him to be admitted at once, and some impulse or other which she did not stop to analyse prompted her to press Mlle de Tricotrin's hand affectionately as they rose to receive the visitor.

"Good day, madam," said Kophetua, with a shade of annoyance passing over his handsome face at the sight of Mlle de Tricotrin. "I had thought to find you alone!"

"Shall Mlle de Tricotrin retire?" asked the Queen. It was impossible to hesitate. He would have liked to say "Yes," but that would seem to give a mystery to his errand, which was exactly what he wanted to avoid. Besides, it would seem rude, and then she really looked very sweet in her soft white gown and tangled brown hair. So he bowed profoundly, and begged that Mlle de Tricotrin would do him the honour of remaining. [Pg 100]

"Are you not well, Kophetua?" asked the Queen anxiously. "You look pale and tired; have you not slept?"

"I thank you, madam, I am in perfect health," answered the King shortly. It was always the poor Queen's fate to say the very thing that of all others was calculated to irritate him, and, anxious as

he was to hide all traces of his last night's exploit, he on this occasion had great difficulty in not showing his annoyance. In order to succeed, he found himself making a more elaborate compliment to Mlle de Tricotrin than was necessary, and the bright look of pleasure she gave him in return only increased his vexation.

"Mlle de Tricotrin has been reading some beautiful things to me," said the Queen, with a well-meant attempt to turn the conversation into a channel which she believed was agreeable to both. "I find her quite a profound philosopher."

"Indeed," answered the King in no better humour, as the conviction forced itself upon him that Mlle de Tricotrin was besieging his mother as an outwork of the throne. "Ladies so arm themselves with wisdom nowadays that men are driven to the end of their wits to know how to [Pg 101] resist them, and you make me fear, madam, that I come in a very high-flown hour to prefer a humble request I have."

"Nay, Kophetua," replied the Queen, "you know I consider no hour ill-timed for a mother to help her son. What is it I shall do for you?"

"It is a very little matter, madam," the King began, with some nervousness. "It is only that I wish you to take into your household an unfortunate girl who has been highly commended to my care. It matters not how low the office."

He could not help glancing at Mlle de Tricotrin to see how she took the words. He found her looking at him with a look of entranced admiration, which at that moment was peculiarly annoying. For an instant he thought she had taken in the whole situation at once.

"That is very easily done," said the Queen. "What can she do? Where did she come from?"

"That I cannot tell you," answered the King.

"But do you not know?"

"Yes, madam; but there are reasons why I cannot tell you," said the King, for he was now more determined than ever that Mlle de Tricotrin should not know how he had been influenced by her conversation.

"It is a strange request to make," said the Queen, a little coldly. "May I know nothing before I [Pg 102] grant it?"

"She is a beggar-maid, madam, whom I have undertaken to protect; I beg you to ask no more."

"It is well, sir, perhaps, that I should not," returned the Queen, drawing herself up with all the pride of her ancient family. "It is a long time since a daughter of our house was served by beggars."

"But why not, madam, why not?" said the King warmly. "Where will you find truer nature, and, therefore, truer nobility, than there? It is they whom the noonday burns and who shiver in the night; it is they who hunger and thirst and want; it is they who know the only true joys, the joys that have risen out of misery; it is they who alone are pure, who have touched pitch and are not defiled. What are we beside them, with our empty, easy, untried lives? How can nobility grow out of such pettinesses as are our highest employments? No! there, out of doors, where men and women that groan and suffer, and shout for joy when it is done, that hate and love like the strong beasts of the desert, that curse when they are angered and smile only when they are pleased, there where these are ground together in the roaring mill of good and evil, there you shall seek and find the little nobleness that is left in our effete humanity."

"And is it the white flour you bring me from your dusty mill?" said the Queen haughtily. "How am [Pg 103] I to tell it is not the husk that is only fit for swine?"

"Madam," cried the King loftily, "I swear to you—is that not enough?—I swear to you she is pure as snow; I swear that of all women——"

"Stay, sir," said the Queen, with suppressed anger. "'Tis only as I thought; but I beg you to remember where you are and to whom you speak. A mighty fine thing, sir, a vastly fine thing for a son to ask of the mother he hardly deigns to own. You have reasons, have you, why you may not say who this lady is? There is no need. I know them well enough. It is vastly fine, sir. Kophetua the King, Kophetua, the thirteenth of his name, shall go and rake in any filthy hole for his toys, and bring them to his father's wife to hide in her bosom. It is vastly fine, sir, but you know not my father's daughter, and have forgotten yourself."

"Madam, you do me wrong!" cried Kophetua passionately. "Before Heaven, you do me wrong!"

"Peace! peace!" cried the Queen, "lest Heaven blast you. I know you well. It is useless to speak so fine. I know you for the son you are. See what it is you do, and pray forgiveness of Heaven. That were the best. You, my son, my one son, who have been my only thought, while I grew grey with [Pg 104] thinking; you who have cast me off to be the puppet of a man your father raised from the very ground; it is you who sat and took your pleasure while I grew grey and grieved for the love you had denied me! But I waited through the long years alone, saying, 'Surely when my punishment is ended, God will send him back, and in his arms the sweet fruits of love and repentance!' and now, to-day, you came at last, and I thought the days of my mourning were over. I held out my hands for the rich gift of your love that should sweeten the last bitter drops in my cup—weary and sick

with longing I hold them out, and you would put into them your—your——" she sank in her chair, unable to say the word, and, burying her head in her arms upon the grinning monster, sobbed out hysterically, "'Tis vastly fine, 'tis vastly fine!"

But Kophetua neither heard nor saw. At the climax of her speech he had turned on his heel and left the room, lest he should be tempted to return her anger with anger. His pride was as high as his mother's, and it came to his aid, just as it had come to hers in her interview with Turbo. So he drew himself up and slowly left the pavilion, proud that with all his temptations his life was yet without the reproach his mother had flung at him, and proud that, deep as the insult was, he was too chivalrous even to resent it, seeing that it came from a woman. But he was cut to the heart [Pg 105] nevertheless. With a great effort he had resolved to come to his mother for sympathy and help in his trouble. It was she, he felt, who alone would understand, or if she would not, then it was hopeless, and he knew not which way to turn. It had cost him much to make up his mind to try and fill the gulf that was between them, but he had humbled himself at last. He had come to her feet, and she had cast him off with insults. She had utterly misunderstood him. The breach, instead of being mended, was widened tenfold, and for ever he must be alone.

With such thoughts he strode from the pavilion, and took his way out of the garden, with the noble and resolute look which came over him in his better moments, and which became him so well. As he turned from the main alley into a sidewalk thickly edged with grotesque cactus, the soft sound of a voice stopped his measured stride. He looked to see Mlle de Tricotrin before him in the way, kneeling in her soft white dress.

"Pardon!" she said very softly, "I crave your majesty's pardon." At that moment, of all others, he would have avoided her if it had been possible, but she was straight in his path, and then as she rested on one knee and looked imploringly upon his face, her beauty was such that in any case he could hardly have passed her by.

"It was not my fault," she continued, "that I heard what I did. You desired me to remain, and I left [Pg 106] as soon as I saw the mistake her majesty made."

"It is a little fault," answered he, "to crave pardon for on your knees."

"But it is not all I ask," she cried; "I am here to beg a greater favour. O sire! I cannot but say it, my heart bleeds for you. I understand it all. It is a terrible thing to be judged so falsely by those we have striven hardest to please. It is a poor reward for what you have done. I understand it all, and beg you will let me take care of her."

"But, mademoiselle, how can I claim such a service at your hands? It is impossible."

"It is not a service I do you," she answered. "I have no chamber-woman. She feared to follow me here. So let me have this girl whom you have saved, and I will treat her as a sister."

It was perhaps the last escape that he would have wished from his difficulty. It was really too vexatious that he should be forced to let this woman add an obligation to the other snares she was weaving round him. Yet it was the only way he could see, and he could not deny he was touched by her kindness. So he gave her his hand and raised her from where she kneeled.

"You have a kind heart, mademoiselle," he said. "She shall come to you to-night."

It was impossible not to put to his lips the little hand he held. Mere courtesy demanded it. He was [Pg 107] conscious of a strange thrill as he did so, and passed on to his apartments in the perilous state of an injured man who recognises that a certain beautiful woman is the only person in the world who understands him.

CHAPTER X. [Pg 108]
THE FALL OF TURBO.

"The blinded boy, that shootes so trim,
From heaven downe did hie;
He drew a dart and shot at him,
In place where he did lye."

Kophetua may have been in many respects a weak man, but he was not a man to sit down tamely under the affront which the beggars had put upon him. As he told General Dolabella, it had been his intention to summon the head-quarter staff that very afternoon in order to concert measures for the forcible punishment of his treasonable subjects. In the course of the morning, however, his ardour had a little cooled. His sleep had removed his excitement, and the more he contemplated his adventure, the more ashamed he was of it, and he made up his mind to defer broaching the subject for a few days.

Not that he abandoned his determination to cleanse his Augean stables. It was only that he was resolved to let no one know of his adventure. He feared that the display of a sudden anxiety to consider the question could only lead to unpleasant inquiries and surmises. He did not therefore [Pg 109]

summon the staff. He made up his mind it would be better to approach the subject as an ordinary question of the interior, and give notice that the condition of the Liberties of St. Lazarus would be considered at the next monthly council, which would be held in about ten days' time in ordinary course.

But even this plain way was not without its embarrassment, and it was a particularly painful one for Kophetua. In a word, the obstacle was Turbo. Turbo was Chancellor, and, as Chancellor, was President of the Council. It was through him that all summonses and notices had to go. If the King wished to have the Liberties of St. Lazarus placed upon the orders of the day, it was Turbo whom he must tell to do it, and Turbo was the very last person in the world that he wanted to address on the subject. So acutely did he feel the difficulty of his position, and so carefully did Turbo avoid him, that two days had passed since Penelophon was installed in Mlle de Tricotrin's service before the question was mentioned between them. When the dreaded interview did take place, it was in no way due to Kophetua's resolution.

It was now the third day since his adventure, and the last on which notices of business were usually sent to the Council. Kophetua was in no pleasant frame of mind, for he knew that Turbo would come that very morning for instructions as to the orders of the day. In vain he tried to [Pg 110] forget his trouble. In vain he adopted his usual expedient, which, till recently, had been so successful with him. He deliberately sat and tried to conjure up the prettiest face he knew. Of course it was Mlle de Tricotrin's. It was a pleasant amusement to picture before his eyes her lovely form and face, with its ripe beauty, the glowing carnation that mantled so soft and pure in her rounded cheeks like life made visible, the rich purple that gleamed like a gem under the long dark eyelashes, the tempting lips that seemed made as a playground for kisses, and the tangled setting of gold and bronze that softened and enriched the whole.

Yes, it was a sport pleasant enough to make a man forget the ugliest things. Many times in the last two days had Kophetua set himself to it, but it brought him little comfort. The pretty phantom would no longer come at his light call. It wanted a serious effort of will to conjure it, and then when he knew it had risen, and he set himself to enjoy a quiet contemplation of it, lo! it was changed, and in its place stood a spectre, wan and pale and of delicate mould, with a robe of thick dark hair, and eyes darker still. Sometimes it was foul and ragged, and sometimes it was like a corpse, but always it had the same trusting dog-like look he knew so well, and always with a sense of strange distress he exorcised it. It was the spirit of the woman who had risked her life [Pg 111] for his, of the woman whom he had saved from a horrible death. It was the ghost of his better self that was haunting him in the shape of that lowly child of nature. It would never do to think of it so. It must be crushed and smothered and forgotten. So each time it rose he cried his *Apagé* against it, and fell to his trouble again. It was thus he was sitting now, when Turbo was announced for his usual audience.

"I am merely here with the Council summonses," said Turbo carelessly, after he had been admitted and had made his formal civilities. "I presume your majesty has nothing to put on the orders of the day?"

"Yes, Chancellor, I have," answered the King, as carelessly as he could. "There is a matter of importance which I have for some time wished to consider, and which cannot be deferred much longer with safety to the state."

"Indeed!" said the Chancellor, with affected surprise. "I was not aware of anything so serious and sudden."

"It is not sudden," replied the King, with some sharpness, "I have told you that. It is a matter that has been long in my mind, and in every one else's, but no one has had the courage to speak the first word. Sit down, and be at the pains of writing, while I dictate the form of my notice."

"Shall I bring my papers to this end of the room?" asked the Chancellor maliciously.

"No," cried the King in great vexation, "I will go to my usual place." He had hardly been aware of [Pg 112] it, but now he was highly annoyed to find that instead of taking his chair before the founder's hearth, he had been sitting at the other end of the library under the picture of the King and the Beggar-Maid, and all he could do to conceal his annoyance was to dictate his notice with unusual severity as follows:—

"His Majesty.—To call attention to the growing power and lawlessness of the beggars within the Liberties of St. Lazarus, and to lay certain considerations before the Council for the necessity of immediate steps being taken in regard thereto."

The Chancellor wrote as he was told, placed the order in his portfolio without a word, and then stood up waiting to be dismissed. Kophetua looked at his snarling face for a moment, as though to detect what was passing there, and then, turning on his heel with a shrug, waved dismissal to his Minister. Turbo went straight to the door in silence, but before he reached it the King's voice stopped him.

"Turbo!" said he frankly, "stay! What ridiculous farce is this we are playing?"

It was always an understood signal between them, that when the King called the Chancellor by his name they were to be on their old footing of governor and pupil. It was no longer a monarch who spoke to his Minister, but two old friends who chatted together. So Turbo limped back and [Pg 113] sat down carelessly by the hearth.

"I really cannot tell," he answered coolly; "I was taking my cue from you."

"Let us understand one another," said Kophetua. "Do you mean to allow a silly freak, in which we were both engaged, to sever our lifelong friendship?"

"That depends upon what you intend to do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you intend to give me back the girl you stole from me?"

"Certainly not," replied the King, with great decision.

"Then," said the Chancellor calmly, as he rose from his seat, "I am afraid the silly freak will have the effect you were contemplating."

"Sit down, Turbo. This is absurd. What can you want with the child?"

"No matter. I want her."

"It is impossible. I have passed my word to protect her; and, besides, I do not believe you want her."

"I am in love with her," said Turbo, as coldly as though he were made of stone.

"My dear Turbo," answered the King, "pray be serious while we discuss this matter."

"I am serious. I tell you I love her."

"But don't you see it is impossible for me to believe you after all you have taught me of your philosophy of women!" [Pg 114]

"It is because you have not learned your lesson that you cannot believe I may love. You have not understood what I taught you. You can chatter the words finely enough, but you have never conceived the spirit."

"And may it not be the teacher who was at fault?"

"No! I have told you plainly enough, but you are too soft and weak to hold the truth. Still I will tell you again what my woman-philosophy is. It is simply this: they have no resistance, no solid principles. Their natural understanding is as a pool of water lying in a shallow bed, beyond which no conviction can sink. A woman's moral ideas are but bubbles that float on the surface of her unstable soul, and burst into impalpable spray whenever they come in contact with the little they meet that is firm and fixed. For women are all and utterly unstable, except where they have shut in their souls with the stony rocks of self-love and personal interest. These are things which are solid enough in the daughters of Eve; it is against these that the empty bubbles of their morality are burst and dissipated."

"But you have told me this many times," interrupted the King. "I cannot see how it explains the paradox you want me to believe: it is only the conceit of Diderot you quote again." [Pg 115]

"I know," pursued the Chancellor, "it is the conceit of Diderot; and Diderot was right, except that he pitied where he should only have despised. And he was right when he said that, though outwardly more civilised than ourselves, women have yet remained the true savages. It is they who have kept the passions and instincts of the beasts. We have changed them. They have only covered them over with civilisation. That is why Diderot called the deceivers 'fair as the seraphin of Klopstock, terrible as the fiends of Milton.' It was a wise saying, yet he could not see it was the poison of civilisation that transformed the seraphin into fiends. When did I ever say a word against the material part of women? It was their minds I bade you know and shun. Find me a woman where the seraphic matter is unpoisoned with the spirit of Eve, and why should I not love her? Such a one, I tell you, is the girl you stole. She is the pure clay, fresh from the hand of the potter. She is not smeared with the smooth and glittering glaze; she is not stained with the enticing colours; Art the arch-liar has not found her out to make her as fair and false as the rest. She is foul and ragged and ignorant. She knows no art to entice. She has no skill to deceive, and I love her for her foulness and her rags and her stupidity, and know her for a lump of the pure seraphic clay." [Pg 116]

"I hear what you say," said the King thoughtfully; "but I cannot understand. It is all wild talk, empty philosophy. This cannot make a man love."

"You *will* not understand!" cried Turbo, with sudden warmth. "That is it; you will not listen, because you know it is this that makes a man love. You know it, because you love her yourself!"

"Turbo," answered Kophetua hotly, "what folly is this? You forget yourself."

"Perhaps," cried Turbo, rising from his chair and speaking with ever-increasing vehemence. "But it is better to understand each other now. I say you love her. You and I have talked for years like fools on all this. We thought as one man, and thought we were wise and strong in our unity. But now we have both seen this girl—curse the fate that brought you to her—we have seen her, and we know we have been blind fools that could not tell the gold from the dross. She has come to us, and we both love her. You and I, I say, we both love her, but it is I that will have her! Do you hear? It is I, I that will have our love, though you stole her. Were you twice a king I will have her, though I tear her from your very arms."

His ghastly scars grew more livid in his anger, and his pitted face turned pale with rage. He seemed as one possessed, and sank in helpless fury at the end of his insane outburst, as though exhausted with the prolonged struggle to control himself. Kophetua turned from him and began to pace the room. Turbo had gone too far. He had been insolent, and the King's pride was kindled into anger. Yet Kophetua would not speak till he was cool enough to control his words. [Pg 117]

For, strange as it may seem, he loved this man—in the same way, perhaps, as a man will love his cross-grained ugly cur that snarls and snaps at every one but his master. So he paced the long room to cool his anger and try and understand what his old governor's madness meant. Had he known his whole story, the task might have been easier. Had he known how that passionate nature had been chained down in long imprisonment, he might have wondered less to see it burst its bonds. But he knew not what passion could be in a man like Turbo. Its durance had been long and hard, and now the time was at hand when it must die, worn out with age and suffering. Yet even as the death throes were upon it, it had blazed up in one last ungovernable fit, and Kophetua, to his wonder, saw the man of ice burning like a furnace. At the last moment, when the struggle was so near its end, the strong man's strength had failed him. He was overwhelmed, as it were, and swept resistlessly onward by the gathering flood he had so long dammed up. [Pg 118]

But Kophetua could understand nothing of this as he paced the dark oak floor, and the more he thought of the Chancellor's threats and insolence, the less able he felt to continue the conversation. It was impossible to forgive his insinuations about Penelophon. So at last all Kophetua could do was to control himself sufficiently to inform the Chancellor in his coldest official tone that he should not require his further attendance that day.

For Kophetua the Chancellor's departure did little to clear the air. The storm within him continued to growl and mutter. He felt himself a martyr, or if he ceased for a moment to think that, it was only to call himself a fool, and that was worse. The other view of the case was preferable. He certainly was a martyr. He had made one honest effort to escape from the banalities that were freezing his soul, and do something worthy of his name. The only result so far was that he had dangerously entangled himself with a siren who had been thrust in his way for that very purpose; he had allowed his name to be connected with a beggar-girl in a way that would have been still more annoying were it not so ridiculous; and, finally, on the eve of a fierce political struggle to which the same siren was sure to give rise, he had managed to quarrel with [Pg 119] all three of the party leaders, including his best friend, and the only relation he had in the world. It is hardly to be wondered at under the circumstances that he found himself constantly recurring to thoughts which had often framed themselves before in the course of his reading in political philosophy. They were to the effect that kings were a mistake, and even a crime, and that his plain duty after all was to form a republic and abdicate.

CHAPTER XI. [Pg 120]
OPENING THE CAMPAIGN.

"And, as he musing thus did lye,
He thought for to devise
How he might have her companye,
That so did 'maze his eyes."

The next morning Turbo appeared at his usual hour. He was quite calm. So was the King. They greeted each other with cold civility, and Kophetua at once put his formal question, as to what business there was to be done.

"There is business," said Turbo, "which perhaps will not be so painful to your majesty as it is to me!"

"Yes?" replied the King unfeelingly.

"Yesterday," the Chancellor continued, "a scene took place between your majesty and myself which cannot but interrupt the cordial relations that have hitherto existed between us. I regret and am heartily ashamed of the part I permitted to myself, and after what has occurred I feel my only course is to tender to your majesty my resignation."

"Permit me to say, Chancellor," the King replied, for he was touched by this strong man's [Pg 121] dignified humility and self-control, "permit me to say that your conduct appears to me entirely worthy of the high place you have won in your sovereign's estimation. You will understand that I desire no unwilling service, but, at the same time, I feel it is impossible to meet your magnanimity otherwise than by a request that you will reconsider your determination."

"Sire, I fear it is useless," answered Turbo. "Your majesty can hardly appreciate the extent of the breach between us."

"I appreciate it," said the King, "but I do not exaggerate it. We have differed on a private matter of absurd triviality. I recall nothing which an apology cannot heal, and that you have already amply given. Of course," he added, with some nervousness, "it is unnecessary to observe that I

am assuming the abandonment of the intentions you expressed yesterday."

"Perfectly unnecessary," said the Chancellor gravely.

"You will see," went on Kophetua, almost apologetically, "I am compelled to insist on this. My royal word is passed. It is impossible not to feel a strong interest in a person whom one has saved from a horrible death."

"I understand perfectly, sire," replied Turbo, interrupting the King, who was about to explain the circumstances which compelled him to take Penelophon under his care. "It is precisely that [Pg 122] feeling which carried me into such excesses yesterday when this person was referred to, and which now prompts me to embrace cordially the offer of forgiveness and reconciliation which your majesty so magnanimously offers."

"I hardly comprehend," said the King. "You have not saved my life or Pen—— or that of this young person."

"I would crave your majesty's permission to pursue this subject no further," said Turbo.

"Nay, I insist on knowing what you mean," answered the King.

"Then I am forced to tell your majesty," said the Chancellor, with slow and distinct utterance, "that I was present at the Court of St. Lazarus during the whole of the ghastly tragedy at which your majesty assisted. I went thither in order to rescue, if possible, this unhappy young person from what I knew must be the result of the mistaken generosity with which your majesty had treated her. I found, with my crippled frame, I could do nothing. I witnessed your majesty's heroic intervention at the last moment, and saw at once a possibility of escape. Unseen by any one I forced pebbles into the lock which had turned upon you, and having thus secured the necessary delay, I was able to fetch two of my own servants with the simple means of effecting your majesty's escape through the prison window."

"But why did you not tell me this?" asked the King, overwhelmed with surprise. "Why did you run [Pg 123] away?"

"I thought it would be only consistent with your majesty's wishes," said Turbo, "that no one should be, or even appear to be, cognisant of your adventure."

For a moment Kophetua was overcome with annoyance and humiliation to think how, all through the piece of knight-errantry on which he had prided himself so much, Turbo had been watching over and humouring him as though he were a child. But his better feelings took possession of him directly.

"Turbo, my dear Turbo," he said with effusion, as he advanced to the Chancellor and took his hand, "why could you not have told me this before, and saved me the injustice I have done you? How shall I ever be able to return your devotion?"

"I beg your majesty will forget the whole affair," answered Turbo. "No one can know better than yourself how unpleasant is the exposure of the good we do by stealth."

"My dear Turbo," said the King, "I can never forget it."

So King and Chancellor were at one again, and Penelophon remained in peace under the protection of Mlle de Tricotrin, happy in the occasional glimpses she had of Trecenito, and happy in the affection which her mistress lavished upon her. For Mlle de Tricotrin had taken a real [Pg 124] liking to her gentle handmaid. She had gone through life with hardly a single friend of her own sex, and Penelophon's simple devotion touched her not a little. For, to the beggar-maid, her delivery from the squalor, misery, and cruelty in which she had been brought up was like being lifted out of hell into heaven; and she adored her beautiful mistress almost as much as she did her deliverer. So the days went by in supreme happiness for those two women, and their serenity was in strange contrast to the storm which was brewing around them. The political barometer was beginning to show signs of considerable agitation, and it was clear to the experienced observer that these two women were forming the centre of an important disturbance, which bade fair to develop a dangerous energy.

As has been previously explained, a storm in the troubled waters of politics was a normal event in Oneiria during crises like the present; but never before had there been one which seemed to promise such violence. The cause was not far to seek. The Marquis de Tricotrin had been to England. His stay had not been a short one, and he was not a man to throw away his opportunities. He liked the country and appreciated its peculiar blessings. It was not long before his sagacity detected the secret of our amazing political success, and he determined to lose no [Pg 125] time in studying the palladium he had discovered. Fortunately, during the period of his observations the palladium exhibited itself in violent action; it therefore seems almost superfluous to add that the Marquis left the country with quite an uncommon mastery of party tactics and something approaching to genius in the manufacture and manipulation of majorities.

All he required was a field. It is said he attempted something during his sojourn in the Canaries, but his praiseworthy endeavours were disliked and at once suppressed by the Spanish governor. It was then, thirsting for an opportunity for the display of his talents, that the Marquis arrived in Oneiria. Not a day had passed before he recognised the excellence of his fortune. He found himself in the midst of three strongly divided parties, practically without experience of modern

methods, and himself and his daughter the bone of contention between them. It was a moment of pardonable enthusiasm. With a hastiness excusable in a foreigner he hurried to the conclusion that as there were three parties there must be three policies, and, what is more, in three days he was persuaded that he clearly understood what they were. Neither conviction was entirely justified, but of this the Marquis was naturally unaware.

To a man of his experience the whole matter was comparatively simple, and, with a decision [Pg 126] which would not have disgraced the oldest parliamentary hand, he adopted a plan of campaign. There were three parties, each requiring a policy. All he had to do, then, was to make each party adopt his daughter as its particular programme. That was the obvious objective, and the lines of strategy towards it were no less plain to his penetration. One of the first things he had learned in England was that simple rule which reiterated success has hallowed into a dogma: "When it is impossible to find fault with your adversaries' policy, it is lawful to steal it."

As a policy his daughter was irreproachable. He felt therefore that little more than a mere suggestion of the stratagem to the party leaders was necessary in order to ensure its adoption. The conquest which Mlle de Tricotrin had already made of the Queen was enough to secure the Agathist party, even had it not been that they had already accepted the nomination. As for the Kallikagathists, he felt they were at least half won by the impression his daughter's beauty had made on the soft heart of their gallant leader. In fact, it is not too much to say that General Dolabella was quite unhinged. It was a long time since his admiration for a woman had got so beyond his control as to lead him into melancholy. But this was certainly his case now, and the Marquis saw it. As we have said, he was a man of decisive action who did not lose opportunities, [Pg 127] and he determined to occupy the position which the General's weakness exposed to him before that gallant officer could recover himself.

The Marquis found it a more difficult task than he had expected. The General, he confessed, was very stupid, and offered all kinds of objections. He even went so far as to say that he doubted whether the suggested stratagem was quite soldierly, but he was at once pooh-poohed into recantation by the Marquis's English precedents. Still he held out with confused obstinacy, which the Marquis put down to the General's denseness, but which was, in fact, due to his own mistaken estimate of the situation. His hasty and erroneous conclusions as to the real relations between the respective parties had caused him, as has been already hinted, to entirely misunderstand Dolabella's position, and he was adopting a false method of attack.

"But pardon me for saying," said the General, retreating to this point for the tenth time, "that I cannot see what I or my party is to gain by adopting the course you propose." The General always distinguished between himself and his party. It was no doubt entirely due to that unique and complex condition of Oneirian politics, which was the precise element in the question, that the Marquis in his haste had failed to grasp. The shrewd Frenchman began to perceive he was at [Pg 128] fault somewhere, and determined to fathom the mystery.

"I perceive," said he, "that you have more than once spoken of yourself as something distinct from the party you lead. May I venture to ask whether the usual procedure in this country is to deal with the two things separately?"

"God forbid!" cried the General in alarm. "To hint of such a thing would smell of disloyalty in any but a foreigner who does not understand us."

"Forgive my ignorance, General," said the Marquis, "and show your pity for it so far as to explain your unintelligible position."

"With great pleasure, my dear Marquis," answered the General, with a look of painful worry at the almost impossible feat demanded of him. "It is a little complicated, but I think I can show you how things lie. You see, although I lead the Kallikagathist party, it does not follow me."

"That *is* a little difficult," answered the Marquis gravely. "You mean that I should arrange with your party which way it means to go, that you may be in a position to know how to lead it?"

"Not at all," said the General. "We are entirely at one. Our lines of thought are identical. It is only in our lines of action that we differ."

"Which is, of course," replied the Marquis, "a mere detail." [Pg 129]

"Precisely," said Dolabella, in a somewhat relieved tone. "You see, my practical policy is to elect the Queen, theirs to elect the Speaker, but both elections are governed by the same principles."

"Your explanation is really masterly," said the Marquis. "I wonder I was so stupid; I see your point now quite clearly. You mean that you cannot make your party responsible for a policy which will not tend to improve the chances of their candidate for the chair."

"Yes," said the General, a little doubtfully, "that does seem to be what I mean."

"Very well," continued De Tricotrin; "then if I could ensure them the support of the Agathist party for their candidate, they would be prepared to accept my daughter at your nomination?"

"But, unfortunately," objected the General, "we have no candidate of sufficient weight to bring about such a coalition."

"Then why don't you stand yourself?" said the Marquis.

"My dear Marquis!" cried the General, completely taken aback. "Such a thing was never heard of."

"So much the better," replied the tempter. "The more unexpected our moves, the better chance we have of success. The idea seems to me to meet every difficulty. What you yourself gain it [Pg 130] would not become me to point out. I need only remark that your election would be highly pleasing to my daughter. It is no breach of confidence to say that the poor girl has been more than touched by the chivalrous admiration of a distinguished officer and statesman like yourself. The speakership in this country is an office which bears a peculiar and delicate relation to the Queen. It would be a source of greater pleasure to my daughter than perhaps I ought to reveal, to know that you were to occupy the chair at her coronation, and I am sure that her influence with the Queen-mother and the leaders of the Agathist party is sufficient to ensure their adhesion to her favoured candidate. At the last moment the nominal candidate of their party shall be withdrawn and the coast left clear for your certain return. Say now, my dear General, will you give my daughter this one last satisfaction before her marriage?"

During the beginning of this speech the General had been staring at the Frenchman, with eyes wide with amazement, but as he proceeded, the blissful picture which was artfully called up before him was too much for his susceptible nature. To kiss those lovely lips, and embrace that bewitching form! It was a rapture of which he had not dared to dream. He closed his eyes as he listened, and a foolish smile of complacent and inexpressible satisfaction overspread his rouged [Pg 131] and powdered face. When the Marquis ceased he collected himself with a sudden effort to a more dignified expression. He rose with the air of a statesman who is resolved to pursue a policy worthy of his magnanimity, and took the Marquis solemnly by the hand.

"Marquis!" said he, "you are a great man. Your generalship will ensure the election of this lady, whose beauty, virtue, and intelligence make it the duty of every loyal subject of the King's to espouse her cause. Your admirably conceived plan demands of me and my party a sacrifice. Monsieur le Marquis, we will make that sacrifice!"

Thereupon Monsieur de Tricotrin embraced the gallant martyr, told him he had a noble heart, and assured him with effusion that courage, devotion, intelligence, and sensibility would be carved in highest relief upon the imperishable fabric of his memory. And so he took his departure, leaving the General to wonder whether Madame Dolabella would view his conduct in the same light.

The Agathist and Kallikagathist parties were practically won. There remained still the most difficult task. The Marquis was perfectly aware of the King's antipathy to matrimony, and was fully convinced that there was still a great chance of failure, unless Turbo's support could be gained. To achieve this he felt was a task of the greatest delicacy and difficulty, and one worthy of his skill as a politician. There was clearly but one way in which it could be done. To approach [Pg 132] the Chancellor directly was out of the question. Pressure must be put on him through his party.

With a light heart, which confidence in his abilities can alone give a man, the Marquis set about his task, little imagining the extraordinary result his ingenious manœuvres were to have.

CHAPTER XII. [Pg 133]
A DECISIVE ACTION.

"But Cupid had him so in snare,
That this poor beggar must prepare
A salve to cure him of his care."

The activity of M. de Tricotrin soon began to make itself felt. There was something so delightfully cynical about the political maxim upon which he was working, that most of the prominent Kallists, whom he sounded, embraced his idea with enthusiasm. The result was a marked and sudden acrimony in the conduct of the campaign.

The situation was entirely new, and was discussed with all the fire and recklessness which is the attribute of new situations everywhere. Before, the question had always lain between the claims of the ladies whom the respective parties supported; now it was between the claims of the respective parties upon a lady whom they all supported. There was something particularly invigorating in the freshness of the political atmosphere.

As each party gradually recognised the discreditable tactics of its opponents, feeling began to run very high. For of course the Speaker was not chosen on his merits. It has been explained [Pg 134] how, in this unique country, nothing was ever done or omitted on its merits. The Speaker was chosen on the merits of the candidate for the "Crown of Kisses." Hence the interest which politicians of every grade displayed in her and her relation to the principles which were supposed to guide the different parties.

The progress of the discussion, which each day grew more heated, only serves to show us what unprincipled politicians the Oneirians were. Instead of attacking the real views of their

opponents, as we always do, no matter how great the danger of defeat, they were accustomed to attribute to them views which they knew, or might easily have known, they did not possess, and emptied their artillery furiously at the monsters they had thus themselves created. It was a method that had something to commend it. It was often successful. The *débris* of these paper giants not unfrequently smothered the hosts which were the real object of attack, and gave the victors an ill-gotten peace till the enemy could repeat the manœuvre to their own advantage.

All parties were now busy on the old lines. As soon as the Agathists recovered from the shock which the attempt on their candidate gave them, they raised an angry scream that the whole thing was immoral, shameful, and ridiculous. That the Kallists, who objected to virtue and only [Pg 135] admired beauty, should pretend to support an angel like Mlle de Tricotrin was a piece of duplicity and presumption which no words would adequately characterise. The Kallists replied with equal warmth, declaring that absolute falsehood was the last thing to stand in the way of a hypocritical Agathist when he wanted to gain his selfish ends; they knew perfectly well that the Kallists did not object to virtue; they admired beauty, which was a very different thing. Above all things Mlle de Tricotrin was beautiful, the most beautiful woman that had ever appeared in Oneiria, and it was therefore sheer nonsense to pretend that she ought to be an Agathist candidate. It was well known that Agathists hated beauty, and cared for nothing but virtue; and therefore for them to set up a claim to Mlle de Tricotrin was nothing less than unconstitutional.

The Kallikagathists as usual held a little aloof. They did not hurl themselves into the thick of the fight. The party, it has been said, consisted chiefly of superior persons, and was nothing if not dignified. They listened to the clangour of the fray with lofty contempt, assuring each other the while, with well-bred reserve, that whatever lies idiotic politicians might tell, the true state of the case must be clear to all plain, sensible people. At last a lady had appeared who was at once divinely beautiful and sublimely virtuous. No amount of clamour therefore could disguise the [Pg 136] simple fact—and facts were strong things—that Mlle de Tricotrin could not by any possibility be the candidate of any party but their own.

So furiously did the battle rage that Kophetua could hardly get the Council to pay any attention to the state of the Liberties of St. Lazarus. Objections and insuperable difficulties they had in plenty, but that was all. Turbo, however, fortunately adopted a different view, and he was a host in himself. He seemed to be taking no interest whatever in what was going on about him. To all appearances he might have been entirely ignorant of the whole discussion, and of how serious was the pressure which was likely to be put upon the King to induce him to accept the hand of Mlle de Tricotrin. Perhaps, however, he had the matter more deeply in his mind than was suspected. It was, possibly, nothing but this which induced him to give his unqualified support to his majesty's suggestion that, as a preliminary measure, details of the frontier gendarmerie should be gradually concentrated in the neighbourhood of the capital. Whatever may have been his real motive, this policy was certainly calculated to distract the King's attention from matrimony and Mlle de Tricotrin.

The indifference of their chief, however, in no way lessened the ardour of the Kallist party. By the time the day came round for the usual monthly reception at the palace, the quarrel was in full [Pg 137] swing. The occasion was expected with considerable excitement, for it was an open secret that each party was going to make it the scene of a demonstration, by which each thought to gain a march upon its adversaries.

The Agathists especially were in a high state of elation, and not without cause. The stroke they had prepared displayed real political ability. The Queen-mother was of course surrounded by Agathist ladies. Every day they had an opportunity of seeing and speaking to Mlle de Tricotrin, for Margaret seemed unable to pass a single day without the society of her new friend during some portion of it. Thus there was plenty of opportunity of examining Mlle de Tricotrin's costumes minutely, and by dint of intense application the ladies of the Queen's circle were able to prepare for the reception a number of gowns whose resemblance to the original model was very creditable, considering the impediment of unsuitable materials and the difficulty which the rococo tastes of the designers naturally had in grasping the spirit of Mlle de Tricotrin's neo-classic style.

All was ready the day before the momentous occasion. A great strategical advantage seemed assured to the Agathist party, when, unfortunately, the vigilance of the Kallist intelligence department discovered the secret by means of a corrupt maid. In the utmost consternation they [Pg 138] flew to the Marquis with the news. His Parisian experience of the influence of women in politics told him at once that it was a crisis of the highest gravity—a crisis of that transcendent nature which serves to mark out the great from the moderate men—a crisis to which intellects like M. de Tricotrin's are alone equal. He gravely heard the whole case, considered for a few moments, and then it was plain that he had taken his decision.

"I presume," he said, with an air of calm resolution, "that Lady Kora and the Count will be there." The Count was the Kallist candidate for the chair, and Lady Kora, his daughter, was the beauty of the party. Of course they would be there. "Very well," continued the Marquis; "request them to be so kind as to come to my house to-morrow afternoon, and beg them not to be at the trouble of dressing for the reception."

The deputation was satisfied. They were coming to have entire confidence in the Marquis's generalship, and they retired with expressions of mutual esteem. M. de Tricotrin at once went to his daughter's apartment. As it happened, he found Penelophon laying out a beautiful gown for her mistress's inspection.

"See, sir," cried Mlle de Tricotrin, as he entered. "There is the gown I wear to-morrow. Is it not lovely?"

The Marquis looked at it critically. "Is that the handsomest one you have?" he asked. [Pg 139]

"Yes, sir," she answered. "It is the loveliest one I ever had. I have kept it back on purpose for a time like this. I am so happy that I did."

"I am happy too, my child, for I want it."

"But it won't suit you, sir?"

"My child," said the Marquis, with Spartan severity, "this is no time for levity. We are on the brink of a desperate crisis. It is a moment of gravest peril, and that gown alone can save us." And then he explained to her the whole situation, and how he had resolved that Lady Kora should wear her most beautiful dress. Poor Mlle de Tricotrin! Like most pretty women, and many others, she was very fond of her pretty frocks. She had an exquisite taste in them, and had been preparing this present one for a triumph which should outdo all her previous successes. She and Penelophon had been thinking of little else for some days past, and her beautiful eyes filled with tears at her bitter disappointment.

"O sir," she said, "you are always asking sacrifices of me."

"But I ask none," he answered, "that I do not make myself. I shall lend the Count the very last suit of clothes which I had from Paris."

"But that is so different," she answered. [Pg 140]

"I really cannot see how," said he; "but that is a matter of detail. You have some intelligence, my child, and you must see that as long as we can hold the balance true between the parties, they will all struggle which is to support us most vigorously. If we once let one of them get the upper hand, we shall immediately have an opposition. No! be brave, be my own daughter, and fling your gown into the rising scale as I do my plum-coloured suit. It is a sacrifice, I know, but to win a crown you must expect greater sacrifices than this. Many have to sacrifice honour, and even lives, to their ambition; be thankful that this is all I demand of you—as yet."

"Take it away, Penelophon," said Mlle de Tricotrin desperately, "I cannot bear to see it now; and yet how pretty it is! Had you told me yesterday I would give this up, I should have said, 'No, that is impossible; as impossible as that I should sacrifice you, child.'"

It was miserable work for both mistress and maid dressing Lady Kora on the following afternoon. But Mlle de Tricotrin had made the sacrifice, and had sense and determination enough to be loyal to it, and make the most of it. She draped Lady Kora herself, and Penelophon dressed her hair as she had been taught by her mistress. Lady Kora had pretty hair and a pretty complexion, so she [Pg 141] was well enough without her rouge and powder. It made poor Mlle de Tricotrin almost break down to see how charming she had made her look in her own best-loved gown.

But the effect on the Agathist ladies was something very much more severe. When they assembled in the throne-room, they were in the highest spirits. Nothing was heard but mutual congratulations on the success of their manœuvre, and the sour looks of the opposition. True, the costumes were not all that they had intended. The rich satins and flowered brocades upon which they had worked did not lend themselves particularly well to the neo-classic treatment. The general effect was decidedly bunchy. There was a want of softness and grace about the folds, and some of the coiffures gave evidence of a serious want of feeling for the style. The harmonious disorder of Mlle de Tricotrin it was found very hard to attain. Most of the heads presented a shock of ugly tangle, such as the Sleeping Beauty must have suffered from when she first awoke; others had frankly given up the attempt, and, merely abandoning their powder, had kept to their old-world design, with a somewhat painfully incongruous effect. Still, whatever might be the artistic verdict, politically it was an immense success, and Agathist spirits ran high.

The Kallikagathist ladies displayed their characteristic moderation with an increase of self- [Pg 142] respect which, as usual, was in direct proportion to the contempt with which it inspired their opponents. With sagacious self-control they had given up powder, clung to their rouge, and shortened their waists without lessening the girth of their hoop. The compromise served well to mark their principles, but sadly spoilt their figures.

We can imagine, then, the terrible shock which the entrance of Lady Kora and her father created. That the Kallist candidate should outshine the Marquis was bad enough, but that his daughter, the recognised beauty and leader of fashion in Kallist circles, should put Mlle de Tricotrin into the shade with her gown was simply a disaster. The more the Agathist ladies looked at her, the more absurd and bunchy did they feel. With the appalling conviction that they had made themselves ridiculous they tried to hide themselves in the throng. More than one poor girl was found in tears as she thought of her shock head, and the hateful costume she had been compelled to wear. How could they ever recover their reputation?

The cup of the vanquished was full when the King danced a second minuet with Lady Kora. The Marquis even began to be alarmed lest his manœuvre was being too successful. Still there was in any case one point gained. In spite of Turbo, the Kallist party was openly committed to the support of Mlle de Tricotrin. Turbo saw it plainly, and saw it without dismay. With perfect [Pg 143]

unconcern, he had been watching while De Tricotrin laboriously constructed his matrimonial engine. The ingenuity which the Frenchman displayed only served to amuse him while he was waiting for the moment to deliver the blow, which he calculated would smash the elaborate machine to pieces. He well knew how Kophetua would see through the whole conspiracy, and resent the pressure that was being prepared for him. He was fully alive to the fact that the least thing would now be enough to turn his pupil against Mlle de Tricotrin, and he laughed to himself to think how, when the hour was come, at one stroke he would gain all he wanted, and prevent all he did not want. It was now that the hour had come.

"Permit me, Marquis, to make you a compliment," said Turbo, as with engaging freedom he drew the Frenchman on to a balcony in a secluded part of the state apartments. "Your generalship is simply consummate; I am completely out-manœuvred."

"My dear Chancellor," replied the Marquis in some suspicion at this sudden surrender, "I trust you will not interpret any move that I have made as an offensive operation against yourself."

"M. le Marquis," said Turbo, looking frankly at his rival, "let us be perfectly open. We are each of us too old to be deceived by the other. Each knows the other's game perfectly well. You are quite [Pg 144] aware that as regards your daughter's marriage with the King I am in opposition, and I know equally well that this splendid combination—for so you must permit me to call it—this splendid combination, which has cut my party from under my feet, is the product of your genius and nothing else."

"Your frankness, Chancellor," replied the Marquis, with pardonable pride, "is as charming as your compliment. I meant to thwart you, and I think I have pretty well succeeded."

"Precisely," said Turbo, "and, while I still have a chance, I wish to make terms with you."

"I am prepared to consider anything in reason," replied the Marquis magnanimously.

"I am glad you take that tone," said the Chancellor, "for you see I have a reserve which I should be very loth to use, but which I should be compelled to use, if we failed to agree."

"Well," said the Marquis, smiling with lofty incredulity, "let me hear your terms."

"It is merely that you should hand over to me, without reserve, your daughter's new maid."

"My dear Chancellor, nothing would give me greater pleasure, but my daughter would never consent to such a thing." The Marquis was an old schemer, and at once winded a very cunning attempt to blacken his daughter's character irrevocably in the eyes of the King. [Pg 145]

"Are you sure?"

"Perfectly."

"Then I must take my own course."

"By all means; I am quite prepared with mine."

"Ah! you think I am so silly as to boast of forces that I do not possess. Wait! I will be franker with you still. I will draw my weapon and show you how bright and sharp it is."

"Really, Chancellor, you are very kind."

"Listen," hissed Turbo in his ear. "The King does not love your daughter. He loves her maid. None but I know it. Why do you think he used to watch the beggar-maid continually from his windows? Why did he fetch her at the risk of his life and in disguise out of the Liberties? Why did he place her with the most accomplished woman he knew, to be refined and sweetened for him? Why does he sit continually before the old picture in the library? Ha! he thought he was so cunning when he put her with your daughter. He thought no one would guess, if she were under the wing of the woman whom every one thinks is going to be his bride. But I know him. I was not blinded. He means to marry the beggar-maid to spite you all, and because he loves her. Think what his principles are! How he would rejoice to share his throne with one of the lowest of the people! He [Pg 146] is a dreamer. You do not know him. He is a dreamer, and it is a thing that has happened here before."

Turbo's infatuation for Penelophon made him believe every word he said, and his intense earnestness was not without its effect upon the Marquis. After his long career of intrigue, De Tricotrin was a man difficult to deceive, and he was also a man to know when another was speaking what he thought to be the truth.

"This is a very serious view to take of the situation, Chancellor," he said, after a short silence. "Pardon me if I cannot adopt it at once. There are difficulties. He did not ask my daughter to receive this girl; it was she that chanced to offer."

"Chanced!" said Turbo scornfully. "Are you deceived by such a trick as that? Why do you think he chose the very hour when your daughter was with the Queen? Why, only because he knew the Queen would refuse, and that your daughter would offer."

"True!" answered the Marquis thoughtfully, "I remember she told me the King asked her to remain while he made his request. Are you sure you are right in your story of this romantic abduction? Is there evidence of it?"

"See," said Turbo, coolly bringing a paper from his pocket, "here is the very warrant under which General Dolabella detained her till she could be otherwise disposed of." [Pg 147]

"But how do you come by it?"

"After execution all warrants are brought to me to file in the archives."

"And all you ask," said the Marquis, after carefully examining the warrant, "is the surrender of this girl? It seems a small price to pay for your adhesion."

"Possibly, but it is not so," replied Turbo. "To begin with: I cannot prevent the King marrying either your daughter or the beggar. I must lose my game now, in any case. Then I have a strong fancy for this girl myself, and ask her as the price of my not prolonging the struggle. Of course I could manage that the King should marry her, but I should gain nothing by it. By the present arrangement I do."

"Your position is quite clear to me now," said the Marquis.

"Then you accept my terms?"

"I do."

CHAPTER XIII. [Pg 148]
MISTRESS AND MAID.

"She had forgot her gowne of gray
Which she did weare of late."

It would be hard to imagine a prettier picture than there was to be seen in the apartments of Mlle de Tricotrin on the afternoon of the day following the eventful reception. The cold season was drawing to a close. The day had been very sultry; and clad in the rich *déshabillé* of the zenana, the beauty was lying listlessly on a luxurious divan, pretending to finish her siesta. A loose white robe of softest cotton was wrapped about her negligently, and her bare feet peeped shyly out of it. Her rounded arms, her littered brown hair, the tumbled heap of gaily striped pillows, in which her flushed face was half buried, all told of the languorous unrest of the East; and the soft, rose-coloured light glimmered in from the domed ceiling upon a scene in which Europe seemed quite forgotten.

Indeed, it was in its only half-concealed Orientalism that Oneiria had the greatest charm for her. That was easy to see in all the decoration and appointments of the room, in the harmonious [Pg 149] shimmer of the arabesques, with which the plastered walls were painted, and the dwarf tables, and scattered cushions and softly glowing mats, which almost hid the cool, polished floor. No less was it visible in her own dress, and that of Penelophon, who stood fanning her mistress with a large and gaudy palm-leaf fan. It has been said that Mlle de Tricotrin had a pretty taste in costume, and it was her delight to devise modifications of the Eastern attires, which surrounded her amongst the lower orders, and dress her pretty maid in them. To-day Penelophon wore in the Moorish fashion, to which she was accustomed, a long robe that reached loosely from her shoulders to her feet, of a soft yellow hue. Low about her waist it was girt by a band of scarlet cloth, richly embroidered with gold, and of almost extravagant breadth. Yet there is no other cincture which will so beautifully express the grace of a lithe young figure. It confined without restraint, and allowed the robe to fall open naturally at the breast, so as to show beneath it a glimpse of a scarlet bodice. A silken scarf, knotted about her head, almost concealed her dark hair. Her arms and feet were bare, and looked almost as white as the silver anklets and armlets with which they were clasped, and which jingled with a soft and pleasant sound as she gently moved the fan. All other noise was hushed, and Penelophon stood quiet and content to look down [Pg 150] with deepest admiration at the lovely face resting in the pillows, while she waited patiently till her mistress should be tired of pretending to sleep.

"'Tis useless," said Mlle de Tricotrin at last, rousing herself with a lazy toss of her arms; "I can sleep no more."

"Is it thinking of Trecenito that keeps you awake?" asked Penelophon, as her mistress sat up on the divan, and she kneeled at her feet to put on her dainty slippers.

"Hush! hush! my girl; a maid must not speak of such things to her mistress."

"Forgive me, madam, for indeed I meant no harm," said Penelophon, pausing in her work and looking up wistfully.

"And you did no harm," replied her mistress. "Yes, you may speak of this to me. I like to hear you, for you are maid and friend in one. Yes, child," she went on, taking the sweet upturned face in her hand caressingly, "you are the only woman I ever loved; the only friend I ever had."

She sank back wearily upon the divan, and Penelophon stooped and kissed in deep devotion the little white foot she held in her hand before she hid it in the slipper.

"Why do you do that, child?" asked her mistress.

"I don't know," answered Penelophon; "but you are so kind, and I am so happy, and you love Trecenito so."

The girls great dark eyes were brimming with tears as she looked up, and her mistress saw them. [Pg 151]
"Why, child," she said, "you love him too!"

"No, no," said Penelophon eagerly, a faint blush tinting her pale face. "I do not love him. He is high above where my love can reach. I adore him and worship him, and it is you I love because you love him. There is no one but you in the wide world whom such a man as he could love. It is only such a one as you who can know how to love him, and that is why you are so dear to me. You are the sweet saint that helps me to reach the throne of my heaven. It is like worship to tire your hair, and dress you, and send you away in all your beauty to make him glad. You are the prayers I say to him, and the hymns I sing, and the sweet incense I offer to my god."

"My child, my child," said her mistress in a hushed voice, as of one who speaks in some vast, solemn cathedral, "whence and what are you? It is only the angels who love like that. Surely it was one of them who whispered in my ear that I should ask him to give you to me."

"Yes," answered the maid, "and it was surely one that brought you to him, because they knew how good he would be to me. 'He must not wait for paradise,' they said. 'We will bring him a wife as bright and pure and beautiful as the heavens, and he shall have a paradise on earth.' So they [Pg 152]
brought you to him, and they will show him the sunshine in your face, and the blue sky that slumbers in your eyes; he shall feel the warm glow of your lips, and know it is the spirit of life; he shall hear the murmur of your voice, and know it is the echo of the prayers which the saints have prayed."

"Hush! hush!" said her mistress, almost beneath her breath. "You must not speak so. You frighten me. I am not what you think. God help me! I am not what you think. And yet, child, yet I believe you would almost make me what you say. Ah me! if I had had a sister such as you! Sing to me, child, while I lie and think what I am and what I might have been."

Penelophon rose, and took a kind of lute, which was the instrument of the people, and began to sing to it some half Moorish love-song, full of those slurs and weird modulations which sound so strange to European ears. But Penelophon's plaintive voice had a fascination for her mistress, and she lay quite still listening till the end. As the song finished, the door opened, and Monsieur de Tricotrin came in.

"My child," said he, "I want to speak to you."

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone."

"Go then, Penelophon," said Mlle de Tricotrin; "but come back and talk to me before I dress." [Pg 153]

"It is a pretty wench the King gave you," said the Marquis, as the beggar-maid left the room. "I doubt if she helps much when he sees you together."

"But I am very fond of her, sir!"

"That is what I fancy is the case with him."

"No, that is impossible. A man could never be taken with a child like her."

"You must remember, my dear," said the Marquis, "they have been playing hero and heroine together in a very romantic drama? You know?"

"Perfectly, sir; Penelophon has told me."

"And yet you do not believe a man may be infatuated with her?"

"No, sir. She has nothing to charm a man."

"Well, I have reasons for what I say."

"Indeed, sir."

"Yes. To begin with, Turbo, the Chancellor, is crazy about her."

"That was but the passing fancy of a brutal nature."

"My dear, you are quite mistaken. He is crazy still."

"You surely must be joking, sir."

"Not at all. In fact, it is on this very subject I came to speak. He wants you to give her up to him."

"I would rather give up the throne!" cried she warmly.

"Softly, my child," said the Marquis. "Do not decide this matter too hastily. A throne is not a thing [Pg 154]
to be lightly cast on one side for the sake of a miserable little beggar-girl."

"Yes; but that is not the question now."

"My dear, it is the question."

"You do not mean——"

"I mean simply that the Chancellor asks your maid as the price of his adhesion, and without his adhesion we cannot succeed. That is all. I call it really handsome."

"And I—I call it infamous!" cried Mlle de Tricotrin hotly. "It is a villainy, and I will never consent to it!"

"My dear," said the Marquis soothingly, "what a fuss to make about this miserable creature. It is a mere matter of business; for you can hardly call a beggar a human being. Equality and fraternity are all very well, but that would be going too far."

"I know your principles of equality well enough, sir, and I do not call this poor girl human. She is an angel, and he—he is a fiend that Penelophon dreams of and wakes screaming. She shudders when she even thinks of him, and the sight of him is a horror that paralyses her. No, no; I will not part with her. You have my answer, sir."

"My child," said the Marquis calmly, in spite of his vexation, "I am not pleased with you. You are talking very foolishly. I did not ask you for an answer now, and I will not take one. This evening, [Pg 155] ere you retire for the night, I will hear your decision. Turbo will be in waiting, and you can send the girl to him to be got out of the way, or else you can let her stay for the King to marry, whichever you like. Remember what has happened in this country before, and remember the character of the present sovereign. That is all I ask at present. I will leave you to consider the matter."

With these words M. de Tricotrin went abruptly from the room. He saw he had made an impression upon his daughter by what he had said, and he was an old enough hand at the game of persuading women to know the value of allowing impressions so made to ferment by themselves. He knew that further discussion would only disturb her and arrest the process, till perhaps what he considered a mere girlish fantastic mood would become solidified into a wholly illogical and obstinate determination which might afterwards prove quite insoluble.

"Women," he used to say, "have no opinions. They have merely contradictory states of mind, which serve them indifferently instead. They are states of mind which live upon contradictions. Failing this they perish, and, consequently, as a state of mind of some kind is a moral necessity, to women no less than to men, in the absence of external contradiction, they will soon contradict themselves."

Whether the Marquis's theory has any real scientific value is a matter of doubt. It is merely [Pg 156] interesting here as the one upon which he acted with his daughter. She was not always easy to manage. She was naturally a woman of spirit, and, moreover, quite understood the high pecuniary value her father placed upon her. She had known all her life that she was the best card he had to play, and that now she was the only one. It is not to be wondered at then, that, being human, she from time to time showed a strong disposition to have a say in the game. The Marquis saw she was in one of her antagonistic moods now; so, as we have said, he left the poisonous barm he had dexterously planted to ferment and produce the metamorphosis he desired.

Mlle de Tricotrin did not talk much to Penelophon when she returned. She was occupied in trying to convince herself that no man of the world could possibly admire the girl. She had always liked the pale, delicate face herself for its purity and dreamy simplicity. She could imagine, perhaps, a painter, or a sculptor, or a poet—yes, but was not Kophetua a poet after all? Were not all the high-flown democratic opinions which he was constantly expressing nothing but the love of a poet for nature, and the base multitude whom he idealised as the children of nature?

She was conscious of feeling distinctly colder to her maid, as she was being dressed for Count [Pg 157] Kora's rout, to which she was going that evening. But Penelophon saw no difference, and she fondled her idol's lustrous hair, and caressed the soft folds of her gown as lovingly as ever; and when all was done rejoiced as unaffectedly in the surpassing beauty she was sending forth as her offering to the hero she worshipped.

The Marquis did not refer again to the subject at his heart; but as he ascended the stairs of the Kora Palace, he gently stirred the fermentation he had set up.

"You know, my child," he said blandly, "that your presence here to-night finally marks you as the accepted candidate of the Kallists."

"You have told me so, sir."

"And you know that there remain now only two persons to gain."

"You mean, sir, I presume——"

"The Chancellor and the King. To-night you will either win or lose the former. You have to play a stroke which will count more than everything we have done. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then, as you are determined to refuse the price Turbo asks for his alliance, you had better try and win him by the other way in which you are so clever, my dear."

"He is invulnerable to those weapons, sir. I might as well try to charm the wind."

"Then I suppose we must call him lost." [Pg 158]

Mlle de Tricotrin did not answer. It was a good sign. The Marquis felt hopeful, and determined to assure the Chancellor that if he would be present at the time and place appointed he would not be disappointed.

CHAPTER XIV. [Pg 159]
"MORIBUNDUS AMOR."

"What is thy name, faire maid? quoth he.
Penelophon, O king, quoth she."

Count Kora's rout did little to restore Mlle de Tricotrin's peace of mind. To be sure Kophetua was there. He was fond of society, and went freely amongst his rout-giving subjects. Kophetua talked with Mlle de Tricotrin, but somehow he did not seem so animated as usual. It is true they spoke in the same familiar tone as before, but for the first time the spice of growing intimacy was wanting.

It is the most intoxicating flavour that conversation can have, and nothing is more banal than the sense of staleness when it ceases. To-night was one of these occasions for these two. Their words seemed dead, and every effort which Mlle de Tricotrin made to restore their life was unavailing. In vain did she pose in her privileged *rôle* as his gentle philosopher. In vain did she tempt him to further confessions, and raise the deep questions which before had always made him speak so low and earnestly.

A damp and chilly pall seemed to overhang them, and she felt the familiar path which was once [Pg 160] so gay and sweet with flowers was now worn bare, and had no longer any power to charm. All her noble sentiments and pretty fancies, for which he had been so greedy, were now like empty husks she was offering him. The grain was gone.

She knew that the King felt it too, and was not amused or even interested. She knew he was loyally making efforts not to fall back from the point they had reached together, but soon he changed the conversation to the lightest banter. He even began to pay her compliments. Then the bitter truth against which she was struggling seemed to gain a sudden strength. It framed itself in words upon her lips, and she said to herself, "He is getting tired of me."

Her sad conviction was only strengthened when at last, as with a forlorn hope of keeping up the tone of their talk to the pitch of confidential friendliness which it had previously attained, Kophetua broached a subject which was peculiar to themselves. Their secret, as he fondly thought it, was his last resource to recall the delight which he had been accustomed to find in her society. For in spite of all his certainty that she was playing a deep game with him, and using against his heart a whole battery of carefully prepared weapons, yet he was obliged to confess [Pg 161] that her society had been irresistibly delightful, and he was resolved not to let the sweet cup pass away from him without at least another draught.

"How is our Penelophon, mademoiselle?" he asked.

"In the best of health, sire," she answered, perhaps a little coldly.

"I can never thank you enough," he went on, "for being so kind to her."

"I do nothing for her, sire," she replied, with that little laugh that means everything but enjoyment. "At least, nothing that a mistress will not do for a faithful maid, and one whom she has so much reason to make a favourite."

"Oh, but you do," he answered; "I have seen, for instance, how you try to please the poor child with those gowns in which she looks so pretty."

"Had I known your majesty observed her so closely," she said, "I should hardly have dared to show my interest in her so plainly; but I ought to have guessed that you would feel a more than passing interest in a girl whom you had rescued so romantically."

"Then she has told you the whole story?" asked the King, with a shade of annoyance in his voice.

"Yes."

"Then you can understand the interest I must feel in her future."

"Perfectly," answered Mlle de Tricotrin. "It must have such a charming flavour of the old ballad [Pg 162] for you."

"I am not very fond of ballads," said the King, a little distantly.

"I am sorry, sire," she answered simply, "because they have for me such a delicious savour of nature. I was going to ask you to tell me the name of the beggar in the story. I had a fancy for

calling my maid by it."

"Do you not know?" asked the King, looking at her fixedly.

"No," she answered, meeting his look with perfect frankness, for she was speaking the truth; "I have never heard or seen the ballad."

"She was called Penelophon," said the King, with an embarrassed laugh.

Mlle de Tricotrin gave a genuine start of surprise. "Is your majesty serious?" she said.

"Perfectly."

"What a strange coincidence!"

Their conversation had been getting colder and colder. By some evil influence Kophetua seemed to be choosing the worst things he could say, and Mlle de Tricotrin replying with everything that was best calculated to annoy the King. It had reached at last to a painful iciness, and the embarrassment which now fell upon them both froze it altogether. They sat in silence, each knowing perfectly that the other was thinking something it would be a wide breach of manners to say, and that is almost worse than saying it. [Pg 163]

Yet they need not have been so embarrassed, for, as it happened, it was no coincidence at all. The old tradition still grew green within the Liberties of St. Lazarus, and there were few families in which one of the women was not named Penelophon. Still the beggars kept so much to themselves that this very natural custom was not generally known, and certainly it had never come to the ears of the King or Mlle de Tricotrin. Hence their embarrassment was as great as if it had been well-founded, and was most happily relieved by the Count desiring to know if his majesty would take a dish of tea.

It was perhaps more than a coincidence which later in the evening caused Kophetua to ask M. de Tricotrin what he thought of the new American Republic. His interview with Mlle de Tricotrin seemed to put matrimony further from him than ever, and his abdication was staring him in the face. He began to see it was unavoidable, and his innate moral courage and conscientiousness made him cast about for a light in which the inevitable should appear a duty that he chose for himself to perform. More than ever he began to wonder whether his position were not a crime, and whether plain morality did not bid him resign and form a republic. The Marquis, with his revolutionary ideas, was naturally the man to help him along the road by which alone his moral escape could be made. He determined to lose no time in getting the help he expected, seeing that M. de Tricotrin, like all Frenchmen of fashion, was ready to express a passionate admiration of the American Constitution. [Pg 164]

"As a republic," said the Marquis, in answer to the King, "if I may so far express myself in your majesty's presence,—as a republic, I look upon it as one of the sublimest emanations of the human brain."

"Pray do not apologise for your opinions," replied the King; "they are entirely in accord with my own. I myself regard a republic as an institution so divine that I am tempted to look upon a king as amongst the worst of criminals."

"There," said the Marquis, with deferential positiveness, "your majesty, and I differ entirely. I look upon a king as the greatest of human benefactors."

"But, my dear Marquis," said the King, "your two positions are flatly contradictory."

"With submission," answered the Marquis, "it seems to me that one is the corollary of the other. It is because I so admire a republic that I also venerate the institution of hereditary monarchy."

"I must positively congratulate you, Marquis," said the King, "on your inimitable genius for paradox. It is most wittily conceived; but, seriously, I want your opinion." [Pg 165]

"And seriously I give it you, sire," said the Marquis, in whose political programme the resignation of Kophetua found no place.

"Then permit me to say," answered the King, "that I entirely fail to understand your opinion."

"And yet," said the Marquis, "it is not so obscure. Your majesty will admit that the most perfect republic is that in which the greatest amount of power remains actually in the hands of the sovereign people in their corporate capacity."

"Certainly," answered the King. "The less a constitution necessitates the delegation of authority to officers, and especially to a chief officer, the more perfectly republican it is."

"Very well," pursued the Frenchman. "Then as a chief officer of some kind is necessary, the first question to solve is the manner of his appointment. Now if you elect him, it is certain that some real power will slip into his hands. It is even necessary that it should, in order to give dignity to the office. For since he is unadorned with the panoply of heredity, a lack of dignity will always be a difficulty about your elected chief officer. For the same reason the elective machinery must be such as to ensure, as far as is humanly possible, that the cleverest man in the state shall be chosen; otherwise your majesty sees that the government of which he is head will not receive the respect that is necessary to stability." [Pg 166]

"So far I perceive your meaning," answered the King. "It is that there is no instinctive reverence felt by the vulgar for an elected president. He is, as it were, a mere chip carved by the elective machine from the mass of the community. Therefore for sentimental reasons—that is, in order that he may be endowed with that weight of authority which is the mainspring of cheerful obedience to the law—it is necessary that he should be an extraordinary man, with extraordinary powers."

"Exactly," said the Marquis; "and it is precisely there that you find the weak point of the non-monarchical republic, if your majesty will allow me the expression. It is a form of government which involves an almost fatal inconsistency. It gives you as a leading idea the election of one man in whom the ultimate legislative and administrative powers must be vested to a greater or less extent, and this very man is also, by the fundamental theory of the system, the most dangerous person to whom those powers can be committed, seeing that, as he is the citizen of the highest political ability, he is also the man best able to abuse them to his own advantage. I would submit then, sire, that this paradox, which is inherent in all constitutions like the American —although theoretically that is the best that was ever devised—is beyond expression more [Pg 167] remarkable than that of which your majesty accuses me. It is a paradox which shows us how a kingless commonwealth is like an arch: apparently it is perfectly stable, and yet from the first day of its erection it is exerting a force which tends to its own destruction."

"Well, I must admit," answered the King, "the existence of this paradox. You make it quite clear to me that it is a real objection to what you call a non-monarchical republic; but, at the same time, the vice is obviously far greater in an hereditary monarchy."

"If your majesty will pardon me," replied the Marquis, who felt his blood getting up as his hobby pranced beneath him, "I think I can show you that this is not so."

"If you can," answered the King, with some irritation at the disappointment he felt in his expected ally, "may I die if you could not show anything!"

"And yet it is not so difficult," continued the Marquis. "Your majesty will observe, if I may so far presume in the cause of truth, that the real merit of hereditary monarchy in the eyes of all enlightened publicists is this: It involves the assumption that the chief officer of the state should always be a man of ordinary capacity, and, as far as possible, without political aspirations or abilities. That is the very essence of the hereditary principle."

"Really, Marquis," said Kophetua, a little nettled, "it is a charming doctrine to address to a King." [Pg 168]

"Your majesty will pardon me," pursued the Marquis hastily, "in the cause of truth. We have arrived then at this position: A chief officer appointed on the hereditary principle is the best, as assuring the lowest possible intellect which we can reach without bringing the office into contempt; and thus we see that a limited monarchy, such as England or your majesty's own state, is the only true form of republic, in that it distinctly repudiates the idea that the head of the community is in any way its ruler, or fit to be its ruler."

"In fact," said Kophetua bitterly, "we kings are only perfect in our imperfection, and useful in so far as we are useless."

"God forbid that your majesty should put such a cynical paradox on me," cried the Marquis. "Your usefulness is extreme. The necessity for your perfection cannot be exaggerated. I have said that you represent the lowest point of capacity which is consistent with the safety of the state. It is there that you have the advantage over a president. In you the minimum of capacity may be extremely low without danger, seeing that there is a divinity clinging about the kingly office which is entirely absent from any elective magistrate. You are the visible emblem of law and order. You are instituted as the personification of loyalty. Without such a personification the [Pg 169] feeling cannot exist amongst the vulgar. Precisely in the same way and on the same grounds wise men long ago invented God as a personification of morality. There is no visible reason why you should be head of the state more than any one else—an advantage which an elected officer of course cannot enjoy. In default of a visible reason, the people's instinctive faith in the existing institution invents for them one that is supernatural and mystic. You are to politics what the deity is to ethics, with the additional advantage that you really exist. No position could possibly be more respectable."

"Or more degrading," Kophetua broke in. "It is a noble and inspiring conviction for a man that he is an idol to sit and wag his head when some one pulls the string."

"Your majesty is unjustly severe upon the office," said the Marquis. "To me it is the most ennobling a man can hold; for it involves the duty of fostering a love of law and order by attaching the people to your own person by ties of affection. With action forbidden you, you have to make yourself popular and respected. It is a task of the utmost difficulty, and only to be accomplished by the highest nobility of character. It is a task," continued the Frenchman, with a profound bow, "in which your majesty has entirely succeeded. In you, at least, to resign would be criminal."

"Marquis," said Kophetua, after a pause, with that expression of lofty sentiment which sometimes [Pg 170] illumined his handsome face, "you give me the richest of gifts. You give me a new point of view, and from it I see a prospect of surpassing beauty."

M. de Tricotrin's conversation with the King made him more eager than ever to win the

assistance of Turbo. He had made another impression, he was sure. He had found the King quite content not to marry in the prospect of forming a republic. He had left him with the seed of a desire for a wife that he might continue to be a king. But Kophetua must not be left alone. He was a man, and had opinions. It was absolutely necessary to ensure that Turbo would cultivate instead of rooting out the good impression. Then, with Penelophon secretly removed out of the way—and the King need never know how it was done—the course would be clear for his own daughter.

CHAPTER XV.
TWO VICTIMS.

[Pg 171]

"I doe rejoyce
That you wil take me for your choyce,
And my degree's so base."

Considerable as was the anxiety which Count Kora's rout caused the Marquis de Tricotrin, his state of mind as he was carried home was enviable compared to that of his daughter. He at least had the relief of active scheming to console him, but she could only lean back in her chair and confess herself utterly miserable.

So deep was her melancholy that she found herself wondering if she were not really in love with the handsome, high-souled Prince. But the thought had no sooner framed itself than a bitter smile crossed her beautiful face, and she mocked away the only consolation that could lighten her sorrow.

"How I befool myself," she murmured, "to think I grieve for his love! It is for his power and his throne that I sigh. I know that well enough. It is all I care for."

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Poor Mlle de Tricotrin! She had long ceased to credit herself with one good thought, with one womanly motive. Her education had been such that it would have been strange if she had had any self-respect left. Deprived in babyhood of a mother's love and care, she had been left entirely in the hands of her selfish and ambitious father. He was a man no better, and perhaps not much worse, than his fellows—a self-seeking courtier, who clung with the rest to the sickly heart of France, and sucked its blood till the Revolution came and swept them all away, like the noxious parasites they were. Till then their one idea was to get a better place, where they could suck a fuller draught, and to that end they pushed and schemed and struggled, and thought no sacrifice too great.

It was the "Court of Petticoats" where M. de Tricotrin strove with the rest. Women ruled supreme. Hitherto the Marquis had not been successful. He had learnt by bitter experience that the only path to wealth and fame lay in the track of a fascinating woman. But each of them had her crowd of jostling followers; and time after time, as he had tried to grasp the flying skirts, he had been thrust out and left behind.

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He was almost in despair when, after a long period of neglect, he chanced to visit his little motherless daughter at the convent where she was placed. She had grown from babyhood to be a lovely child since he had seen her last, and he at once recognised the promise of extraordinary beauty that she showed. A few hours spent with her assured him of the brightness of her wit and the fascination of her manners, and he saw that a new career and a new interest was before him.

His determination was taken at once. She was removed from the convent and taken to Paris; for the Marquis had resolved to fit her for a position which was thoroughly understood in Paris alone. It was the position to which nothing was denied, to which all things were open. It was the throne before which the greatest, the most sagacious, the most upright, statesmen had to bow—before which even the proudest ecclesiastics would cringe like hounds. Who can wonder that when the brilliancy of the career was so dazzling, that the shame on which it rested could hardly be seen?

For this, then, was Mlle de Tricotrin brought up. For this she was taught to struggle, heedless of all but the end. The only duty which she learned was to be beautiful; her only books were the philosophic chatter which was the fashion of the hour; her only friends were the creatures which that rotten society engendered, and which it seems profanity to call women.

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We have seen how the system succeeded. As the child came to womanhood, the Marquis knew his triumph had been greater than he had ever hoped. He saw his daughter courted and petted, and he laughed to see the skill and delight with which she played her part. For no one can blame the poor child that her head was turned. The extravagant admiration with which she was everywhere greeted told her that the most honoured and powerful position in France was almost within her grasp.

Then came the crash. The long-nursed hopes were shattered to the ground, and father and daughter had to fly the country before the rising storms of the Revolution. In England M. de Tricotrin hoped to find a new arena for his child; but poor *émigrés* were too plentiful, and English

ideas so unintelligible, and he could nowhere find even a beginning. Broken in hopes and health, he was forced at last to the South, as we have seen.

It could hardly be that, to a girl of Mlle de Tricotrin's natural refinement, moments of regret and repentance did not sometimes come; but they had always been stifled with the excitement of her personal triumphs. To win the power that belongs by nature to men, she had been trained to fling away the most precious treasures of women, and she did it with a light heart in the intoxication of the game. But when the lull came her self-reproach grew so constant as to be almost a pain, and so infected her as to become something she could not entirely throw off again.

The pure presence and innocent talk of Penelophon had only served to make her trouble more distinct. The beggar-maid was the first real woman she had ever known, and for the first time her own womanliness was really aroused in sympathy. She could see clearly what she was, and felt she could never be otherwise now. She despised herself, and knew the only solace was to brazen out her base career bravely. So she rejoiced cynically over the influence she was winning with Kophetua, and despised herself in secret too much to allow there was anything good in her joy. In marrying him she would gain the queenly power for which she had struggled so hard, and for which everything had been sacrificed; and in marrying him she would also escape the path of shame, by which alone she thought the goal was to be reached. [Pg 175]

Which thought was it that made her heart ache so as she reached her room that night, and saw how she was losing him? Who shall tell? Who can read aright the thoughts that vexed that lovely figure which had thrown itself in weary grace upon the soft divan? How can a thing so beautiful know the ugliness of sorrow? Yet it is there, and tells her that Kophetua is slipping from her hands, that life will be unendurable without him, and worst of all—worst of all, the only voice to which she has ever been taught to listen is whispering the old things in her ears.

It is whispering what it is that has come between her and her end. She looks down at herself where she sits and thinks; she sees the gleaming beauty of her restless breasts, and the soft white arms and the obedient folds that wrap so closely the voluptuous figure; but the voice only whispers it is all of no avail. There is something between her and him; something which draws his eyes from her; something she has in her power to sweep away at a word. [Pg 176]

Even as she wondered what childish scruples or silly affection it was that made her hesitate, the door opened and her father broke into the midst of her temptation. For a while he held the door in his hand, and stood admiring her as she lay curled upon the divan. At last she looked up at him with a deep-drawn breath, as though to brace herself for the crisis she saw was at hand.

"My child," said the Marquis, as he caught her glance, "you did not look well to-night. Are you ill?"

"No, sir."

"Was not the King pleased with you, then?"

"No, sir."

"That is most unfortunate," said the Marquis, in a feigned tone of extreme anxiety. "He was in a very strange humour to-night."

"Yes, sir?" said Mlle de Tricotrin, assuming an air of complete indifference.

"He spoke to me in a very extraordinary manner," continued her father. "It causes me no inconsiderable anxiety." [Pg 177]

"What did he say, sir?" said she, apparently as little concerned as ever.

M. de Tricotrin told his daughter all the opinions which the King had expressed to him, and which led him to believe that he had determined to remain a bachelor, and let things take their course; but he omitted all the arguments by which he considered he had so successfully opposed the King's intention. "So you see, my dear," he concluded, "that our Quixotic Kophetua is bent on abdication and a republic."

Mlle de Tricotrin had listened attentively as her father unfolded to her the King's indifference as to whether he reigned or not. It was the last blow on her already shattered resolution. She saw one more guarantee of her ultimate success disappearing. Though she could not own it to herself, the very loftiness and unselfishness of the King's ideas made her desire him more. It was more than she could bear, added to the load of temptation under which she already struggled. Suddenly laying aside her indifference, she started up in her seat, and, with a violent gesture, cried out, "He shall not abdicate!"

"How will you prevent it?" asked the Marquis, unmoved.

"I cannot prevent it; but Turbo can, and he shall!"

"But you forget there is a price to pay first, my child." [Pg 178]

"No, I do not, sir. I remember it very well. It is not a thing to forget so soon. Bad as you have made me, I have not yet been guilty of so many sins that this one should be lost in the throng."

"Well, well, my child, we need not go into ethics now. Do I understand that you mean to pay the Chancellor his price."

"I do."

"I congratulate you on your good sense."

"I want no congratulations. I only want a throne; and for that I am ready to disgrace myself, as you have taught me, sir. So if you will tell me how this business is to be arranged, it shall be done."

"Turbo will be in the street on which the little garden door opens. You can send her to him with a note, and he will manage the rest. See, here is a letter that I have already prepared."

"What is in it, sir?"

"Nothing; it is a mere pretence."

"Does he really mean to come in person?"

"Yes; it is more than he can afford to intrust his secret to another."

"When will he be here?"

"In a quarter of an hour."

"Then pray leave me, sir, and I will see that she is there too."

"My child," said the Marquis, laying his hand with awkward affection on the warm brown hair, "I am very pleased with you. I have never seen you more sensible." [Pg 179]

She shook his hand off with a gesture of disgust, and with a shrug he left the room. It was some time before she could gather her cruelty sufficiently to summon Penelophon. She knew well enough that the indignation with which she had at first repudiated her father's suggestion was due to the beneficent influence which the purity and innocence of her handmaid had upon her. She had been talking to her then, and the charming sweetness of her presence had expelled the devil she had taken to herself. That influence away, the sight of what she longed for still receding, had brought the evil spirit back, and she had resolved that this thing should cease. Whether Penelophon appeared to her as an actual obstacle in the path of her ambition, or as a siren who beckoned her away from the worldly road in which alone she had faith, it was clear that the girl must be cast away.

And, after all, where was the crime? Penelophon would only go to a lot which she herself had lived for. It was only the child's silly prudery that frightened her. But that would soon pass. Yet, how the poor thing loathed the man to whom she was sold, and how she adored him who had saved her from his embraces! And no wonder, when he had dared so much to make the rescue. That was it. He, her own King, had dared too much for the girl. She could not forgive her for that; [Pg 180] and, resolved at last, she clapped her hands.

Penelophon answered to the call immediately; and the sight of her delicate form in the doorway disturbed her mistress strangely. She looked so tender and fragile a thing to be flung out, as it were, to the beasts; and the iniquity of Mlle de Tricotrin's resolve grew very distinct to her. To add to her mistress's distress, the girl came forward with the same glad smile with which she always greeted the summons of her idolised protector; and Mlle de Tricotrin's heart beat faster at the sight of her devotion.

"Will you undress now?" asked Penelophon, as her mistress only looked at her and did not speak.

"Not yet, Penelophon," was the answer. "I have something I want you to do. It is a little thing, and yet my happiness depends upon it."

"Will it bring Trecenito nearer to you, then?" asked Penelophon.

"Yes, it will bring him nearer—very near indeed, Penelophon."

"And you will let me do this little thing?" said the maid.

"Yes," answered Mlle de Tricotrin; "it is you I ask to do it, because I know how you love me."

"Ah!" cried Penelophon, clasping her hands before her mistress, in an attitude of glad devotion; [Pg 181] "but I wish it were a great thing you asked of me, and then I could show you indeed how I love you and him."

"Nay, there is no need," said Mlle de Tricotrin, feeling that a choking sensation was coming in her throat. "I know how you love us, and long to see us one; and now I have but a little thing for you to do."

"What must it be, then?"

"Only to take a note to a man who is waiting in the street by the little garden door."

"What, now? to-night? in the dark?" exclaimed Penelophon, her great dark eyes dilating with sudden fear.

"Yes, now. You are not afraid of the dark?"

"No; but I dread what is in the dark," the girl answered, shuddering.

"Why, what is it you fear?"

"It is a terrible thing. You cannot know how terrible. It is wrapped in a cloak, and it limps as it goes, and it glares at me. Even in my own soft bed at your feet it glares at me, so that I have to creep close to you before it will go away."

"Why, child, that is only a baby's fancy. You will not meet it," answered Mlle de Tricotrin, steadying her voice with difficulty; for her breath was coming thick, and her heart was beating fast, to see the poor girl's terror.

"Yes, I know," answered Penelophon, in an awe-hushed voice; "but as I looked at the stars just [Pg 182] now, and wondered which was yours, and which was Trecenito's, and which was my little one, I saw it pass under the window. It limped and glared, and was wrapped in its cloak. Oh, I saw it!" she cried, again covering her face in terror,—"I saw it, and it will be there to glare at me when I open the gate. Oh, I dare not go! Can you not send another?"

"No, Penelophon," said her mistress, after a pause; for she was hardly able to speak in her growing agitation. "It is only you that will do. I promised you should take the letter, as a token that it came indeed from me. So be brave, child. On you it all depends. Be brave this once, and then Trecenito will be mine, and we shall both be always with him."

The iniquitous deceit of her words seemed to stab her like a knife, and for shame she dared not so much as look at her humble maid. She felt that one more of those devoted, trusting looks from the girl's dog-like eyes would overcome her. So she did not see how Penelophon drew herself up and set her lips, and she was surprised to hear her speak quite calmly and cheerfully again.

"And will it really bring you and Trecenito together if I go?" she said.

"Yes," answered her mistress; "and it is the only thing that will."

"Then I will go," said Penelophon. "Where is the note I shall take?"

"I will write it," said her mistress. The sight of the maid she loved so well—and yet, as she [Pg 183] thought, had such cause to hate—and the devotion with which she overcame her terror, had softened Mlle de Tricotrin out of her former hard mood, although she knew it was only the girl's deep love for Kophetua that gave her the strength she showed. Still she was softened, and determined not to let her go without one little attempt to lighten the terrible lot to which she was condemning her. So she reached to the dwarf table beside the divan, and wrote on the blank paper which her father had given her this short note:—

"Here is the price you ask for your adhesion. Use her kindly, as you value the love of

"Héloise de Tricotrin."

She folded the note and addressed it; but her heart beat so hard and her breath came so thick that she could not speak as she handed it to Penelophon. The girl took it, kissed the white hand that gave it, and then turned to go. It was well-nigh more than Mlle de Tricotrin could endure to see such simple faith and love in her victim, and a tear had fallen on the hand the maid had kissed. There came to her a sudden sense that she was looking for the last time on the child in whom she had found the only pure delight she could ever remember, who had shown her how holy is the unstained soul of a woman, who had made her almost feel worthy to be a true wife to [Pg 184] Kophetua. She could not let her part so to the sacrifice, where the poor lamb was to lose all that she might win her little end; and suddenly she started to her feet.

"Penelophon!" she cried, in a strange, unnatural voice, in spite of a great effort to control herself. The girl came back directly, looking anxiously into her mistress's troubled face. Then Mlle de Tricotrin saw how the dark eyes were brimming with tears, and in an uncontrollable impulse she threw her arms about the beggar-maid's neck, and kissed her passionately on either cheek.

"Now begone quickly," she said to the wondering girl; and Penelophon, in a transport of delight at her mistress's affection, tripped lightly away to the garden. For a moment Mlle de Tricotrin stood with hard-clenched hands, and stared at the door that had closed on her victim. Then a convulsive sob shook her lovely form, and she cast herself prostrate upon the divan in an agony of tears.

CHAPTER XVI. [Pg 185]
A NIGHT MARCH.

"The beggar blusheth scarlet red,
And straight againe as pale as lead,
She was in such amaze."

With her terror almost forgotten in the memory of her mistress's caress, Penelophon ran down into the garden, and kept on bravely till she came to the little door which led out into the street. Here she paused; for so great was the horror she felt for the world outside ever since the terrible

night on which the King had rescued her, that it was all she could do to find courage enough to open it.

She could not persuade herself that the eyes were not waiting to glare at her on the other side; but at last she hardened her poor fluttering heart to lift the latch and look out. It was very dark. There was no light but what the stars gave, and a dim old oil lamp that swung groaning on a chain across the road. She could see nothing of what she dreaded, and this gave her heart to step out into the street to find the man who was to receive the note. In her anxiety to get her painful [Pg 186] duty over, she went as far as where the street turned round the corner of the garden to see if he were coming. Not a trace of any one could she detect; so, putting the note into her bosom, she flitted back, to wait a little within the shelter of the door.

She had hardly reached it when she stopped, frozen with horror. The door was shut, and out of the dark recess where it was the thing she dreaded was looking at her. That was all she could see. If the glaring presence had any form, it was hidden in the black shadow of the doorway. Only the two eyes burned, with a dim and terrible glow which paralysed her. She knew not what to do. She dared not approach the thing for fear it would take hold of her, and her limbs refused to fly.

At last there was a low hoarse chuckle of satisfied greed, which made the blood fly to her face, as it recalled a memory of her day of terror. She found the light of the lamp was falling full on her, so that the eyes could see her well, and that suddenly gave her strength to turn and run.

The thing sprang out after her with another coarse chuckle; but she ran on bravely. Soon she heard the deep-drawn breath of her pursuer sounding hoarsely behind. Closer and closer it drew, and made her feet feel like lead. She was like one in a fevered dream, when at the critical moment the limbs refused their office. With the blank dread we only know in distempered [Pg 187] slumber, she fancied she was falling, when the hoarse breath all at once was at her ear, and the thing seized her. She tried to scream; but her despairing cry was choked by a hood that was drawn tightly over her face. The monster's arms clasped her about roughly, and she felt herself hurried along in spite of her frantic struggles to escape.

Turbo had her safely at last. He laughed to himself, and cracked coarse jokes to his burden as he limped hastily along. He was a strong man in spite of his deformity, and Penelophon soon desisted from her hopeless resistance, so that it was not long before he reached the street in which his own house stood. His fiendish glee increased as he saw himself so near his end; but suddenly he stopped, and a low curse hissed on his snarling lips. For even as he entered the street the cheerful clatter of horses' feet at the other end of it fell on his ear.

What could they be? There were many together, and that was a sound that was never heard in the capital at night. Still they were coming towards him, whatever they were; and he hurried on, hoping to reach his own door before they would see him. There was plenty of time if he made haste; but all at once it seemed that the same sounds had reached his burden's ear, for she began struggling again desperately.

He could hold her no longer, and was obliged to put her down. Now he could hear the clink of [Pg 188] steel as well as the tramp of hoofs; and, uttering furious threats beneath his breath, he tried to drag Penelophon along; but his anger and frantic efforts were useless. All he could do was to get with his charge against the wall of his garden, when he was surrounded by some dozen horsemen.

Then he cursed himself again; for he knew he had encountered the first detachment of the frontier gendarmerie, whom, by his own encouragement, Kophetua had ordered to be concentrated on the capital. It had been arranged that they were to enter the city by night as quietly as possible, in order that the beggars might take no alarm. That had been his own suggestion; and here was the end of it. Still he determined to brave it through, and cried out to them to know what they did hustling an honest man and his child at that time of night.

"Soho! my night-hawk," cried the officer of the party, in a round laughing voice; "is that your note? 'Sblood! then we'll sing a chorus, for 'tis ours too."

The troopers all laughed together at their leader's wit, and Turbo eyed his man to see what stuff was in him. It was too dark to make out his face under the high-plumed helmet which he seemed to wear so jauntily, but the Chancellor could see he was a tall fellow, who sat his horse with a [Pg 189] defiant air. His toes were stretched out impudently in the stirrups, and his right arm was well bowed, and rested knuckles down on his thigh, with quite a splendid swagger. Altogether he looked formidable enough as he sat laughing on his tall horse, with the brilliant uniforms and glittering accoutrements of his men faintly discernible in a semicircle at his back.

"My note is low enough," said the Chancellor, with affected humility, when his inspection and the laughter were done. "I only ask to pass on quietly with my daughter."

"So you shall, my bully, when we know why you tie up pretty faces in hoods, and why pretty figures struggle in your arms. So come, my bully night-hawk, unhood, unhood!"

"I tell you it is but my daughter!" cried Turbo angrily. "Let me pass, or the King shall hear of it!"

"Ho-ho!" cried the officer, as merrily as ever. "Will a beggar out of bounds try to frighten the King's own Gendarmerie of the Guard with the King's own name. No, no, my joker; come, give her up."

Penelophon gave a start as she heard the officer's words, and tried to tear the hood from her head. Turbo dragged her roughly behind him, and stood confronting the officer, who spurred his horse forward.

"Stand back!" cried Turbo; "stand back, at your peril! I am the Chancellor. Can you not see? Stand back! I command you." [Pg 190]

"And I, sink me!" cried the officer, drawing his sabre, "am the king, and the general, and the beggar emperor all in one; so let her go, and take that for your insolent lie."

As he uttered the word, he gave the Chancellor a wringing blow across the shoulders with the flat of his sabre. Turbo drew back; but the officer spurred on to repeat the chastisement. "Let her go, you scurvy hound! Let her go, I say! or, 'sblood! you shall have the edge."

Turbo saw but one way to escape the now infuriated soldier. In a frenzy of passion to be so balked again, he brutally thrust the blinded girl before the restive horse, so that to avoid trampling on her the officer had to curb it on to its haunches. With ungainly activity the Chancellor took advantage of the delay to spring along the wall towards the spot where, as in all the houses in the city, a door gave him admission into his own garden.

"Stop the cur! stop him!" cried the officer. "Cut him down, or anything. Zounds! will you let him laugh at our noses like this?"

Two men wheeled like hawks at the hurrying Chancellor with uplifted sabres. In another instant it seemed he must be slashed with the gleaming blade that was nearest him, when suddenly he stopped and turned. There was a flash, a sharp report, a cloud of smoke, and the gendarme threw [Pg 191] up his hands with a choking cry. The officer dashed to his side to seize the assassin; but as he cleared the smoke he found the man he sought had vanished.

At the door which he fancied he had heard shut he drew rein. It was there he suspected the man had escaped him, and leaping from his saddle, he applied his head to the keyhole and listened intently. The sound of halting footsteps within fell faintly on his ear, and he shifted his attitude to hear better. Presently he drew back into the middle of the street, carefully surveyed the premises, and after giving a long low whistle to himself, he returned to the wounded man with a very serious air. Three or four saddles were empty, and a sergeant who was kneeling by a motionless body looked up as his commander drew near.

"Is he hurt?" asked the officer.

The sergeant did not answer, but slowly removed his helmet. The officer and all the men did the same, and stood round in silence, till the dying man gave a shudder and then lay quite still.

"Right lung, sir," said the sergeant laconically.

"Well, get him across his saddle," said the officer, "while I look to the girl."

She was still lying motionless where she had fallen, as though she had been struck with the [Pg 192] horse's feet, or else was stifled with the hood that muffled her face. First he felt her pulse, and having ascertained that she was still alive, uncovered her head to let her breathe freely. She opened her eyes almost directly, and the officer gazed at her pale face with great interest. As he examined her attentively by the light of a lantern which the sergeant now brought, his eye fell upon the note which still remained where Penelophon had placed it. He took it quietly, and read the address by the lantern light.

"To his Excellency the High Chancellor." With no more show of interest than another low whistle betokened, he put it deliberately into his sabretache, and proceeded to revive his patient. She seemed to come round very slowly; so he gave the word to fall in, mounted his horse, and ordered Penelophon to be lifted up in front of him. He had excellent reasons for taking charge of her himself.

As soon as they were started again, the motion of the horse seemed to revive the fainting girl; but still she sat quite quiet, nestling with complete confidence in the officer's arms, and leaning her head upon his breast. Presently she gave a long sigh of contentment, and looked up in his face with her big dark eyes.

"Did you not say you were Trecenito's soldier?" she asked.

"Yes, pretty one. What of that?" answered the soldier. [Pg 193]

"Ah! I thought I remembered that," she replied dreamily. "I knew you would come!"

"The devil you did, child!" exclaimed the soldier.

"Yes; I knew Trecenito would send you to take me away from that thing."

"He is always kind, and loves his people," said the officer vaguely, to humour her.

"Is he? I don't know. But he is always kind to me, and loves me. So I knew he would send you if he could not come himself, as he did before."

"Did he come himself before?" asked the officer, in incredulous astonishment.

"Yes; and he will be so pleased with you when he knows you have saved me."

The soldier could only give another long whistle, which seemed a habit with him. He began to find himself the possessor of a very mysterious case, which might turn out to his immense credit, or the reverse, and he felt the necessity of care and his utmost detective ability.

"Are you taking me back to my mistress," asked Penelophon, after a pause.

"Who is your mistress?"

"Mlle de Tricotrin. She who will be 'Trecenita.'"

"No; I cannot take you to her," answered the officer, for whom this new complication was almost overwhelming; "but I will take you to a safe place till Trecenito tells me what to do." [Pg 194]

"Very well," said Penelophon contentedly, and she laid her head down on his broad breast again. He was sorely tempted to kiss the delicate face just once. It was so quiet and peaceful and childlike; but somehow she was so trusting and mysterious that he took a better view and refrained. Yet it must be said that he was not sorry when, after a half-hour's ride, they reached an old hunting lodge in a remote part of the royal park, which was to be their quarters. Here he put temptation out of his way by locking her in a little room which had been prepared for his own use, and giving the key to the sergeant to keep. Nor did he regret his cautious action, when shortly afterwards he took an opportunity of opening the note of which he had taken possession. It seemed entirely to confirm the girl's words and his own impression—that somewhere there was some foul play to the advantage of the Chancellor, whom he did not like, and to the detriment of Kophetua, to whom he was devoted.

Then a serious crime had been committed, which must inevitably become public. One of the gendarmes of the guard had been assassinated. He had noticed windows opening after the pistol-shot. The whole affair was almost sure to leak out. To hush the matter up until he could receive [Pg 195] personal instructions from the King was probably impossible. But then, on the other hand, there were circumstances which told him that a discreet secrecy was the line of conduct which would be most likely to commend him to all the parties implicated, and to lead to promotion. At a loss what course to take, he finally, like the sensible fellow he was, determined to do his plain duty, and report the whole affair to the commander-in-chief the first thing on the following morning.

CHAPTER XVII. [Pg 196]
"CHECK!"

"O base Assyrian knight, what is thy news?
Let King Cophetua know the truth thereof."

The King next morning was pacing his library with unquiet step. He was disgusted with every one and all the world, and with nothing so much as himself. To begin with, the Marquis de Tricotrin's disquisition on the kingly office had made a deep and unpleasant impression upon him. He felt the Frenchman was perfectly right in all he had said, and that a king, to do his duty, must be practically a nonentity. It was like a crown to his old trouble. Long he had grieved over his enforced inaction, and now, just when he hoped to find an escape, and spread his wings as wide as King Stork, he found himself crowned King Log by the very hand, by the very facts, by the cogency of the very philosophy in which he had put his trust.

It was true that the Marquis had suggested to him a path by which he might still climb to the far-off heights on which his eyes were always fixed; but yet he knew it was only done to amuse him, [Pg 197] to get him, as it were, out of the way. He was man of the world enough to know that M. de Tricotrin could not have meant what he said. And yet, was it not the truth? Was not the sublime life, after all, the life of moral influence rather than the life of action? Was it not a grander thing to implant a living spirit of nobility into his people than to try and amend them by what were only little bits of tinkering after all?

Yes; no doubt the Marquis was right unconsciously; but how to live the life he praised? Alone, without sympathy, without encouragement, he could not do it, and there was no one to whom he could go and say, "Help me!" There was no one who would even understand what he meant. At least only one, and since last night she was cut off as far as the rest. Ah! if she had only been what he had almost thought her, how all his troubles would have been ended? At last he might have ceased to resist the snares and cunning of the heartless daughters of Eve; he might have taken the lovely woman in his arms, to find in her beauty and refinement, in her spiritual influence and tender sympathy, the divine secret of the noble life. All that was wanting in him she would have supplied; and when those soft eyes lit up with the light of love, as they watched the efforts which she inspired, and which she alone could understand, it would be reward and [Pg 198] encouragement enough to lead him ever onward, upward, hand in hand with her.

But there were no such women now. It was only a boyish dream to think of it; and it only made him angrier with himself to recognise how much her sympathy must have been to him, since now that he had lost it he could muse so childishly. He laughed bitterly to think of himself like a baby crying for the moon, or at least for something as pure and gentle and serenely bright, and as far

off and as impossible to attain.

He strode to the window to watch those that came and went at the palace gates, and so dissolve his thoughts. The beggars were crouching there as usual in the blazing sunlight, making deep-blue shadows under their broad hats and voluminous turbans and tattered cloaks. Here and there a leg or an arm, or a shaggy breast, baked to a ruddy brown, gave a glowing bit of colour amidst the grey of filth; and here and there in the blue shadows a forbidding face could be dimly seen distorted and screwed into deep-marked wrinkles, to keep out the fierce glare which beat on them from the parched roadway and the dusty walls.

Like all who pretended to any taste at that time, the King was an authority on *chiaroscuro*, and was never tired of studying the picture at his gates. But to-day it brought no sense of art. It only raised again the memory of Penelophon, and then all at once perfect purity and gentleness and [Pg 199] the serenity of an unsullied soul seemed close within his grasp. It almost alarmed him to find how that which had been a mere fancy was growing in his mind to be a possibility. He began to think his senses must be strangely unhinged if for one moment he could harbour the preposterous thought that perhaps here after all was what he sought. The painting above the hearth seemed to be gaining over him the mystic influence which he had always permitted to the old knight's armour. In vain he recalled the beggar-maid in her dirt and ignorance; in vain he told himself it could never be as long as reason remained to him. Still the prospect would always be returning to him, and at each return it gained new strength.

He was turning away from the window that he might not see the beggars any longer, when a commotion amongst them attracted his attention. The bright lights and blue shadows and bits of warm colour broke up and intermingled into new combinations as they lazily scrambled together to pick up some coins that had been flung to them; and then he saw hurry by them the beautiful figure of Mlle de Tricotrin. She was coming for her morning walk, which she always took now, at his invitation, in the shady alleys of the palace gardens. He marked her downcast looks, the graceful folds of her clinging gown, gathered daintily at her breast with a flowing knot of ribbon, [Pg 200] and the gentle refinement which her every movement told of. He watched her as she passed beneath his window, and felt his eyes dim at the sight of the marvellous beauty that could never be his.

Suddenly she raised her head to look up where he was, and ere he could withdraw their eyes had met. He had seen the sad, pleading look beneath the dark lashes; he had seen the soft flush that spread over the matchless face; he had seen the shapely head bowed again in deepest resignation down upon the troubled breast as she passed on from the cold, unanswering look he gave her; and now he was pacing the room again in strange agitation.

Could such beauty be the outward sign of the baseness which he had been taught to believe in? If one woman could be as good and pure and gentle as Penelophon, why should not another? Why should not this one? If she had jarred upon him so last night, did it not show that she was not the perfect schemer he had thought her? A knock at the door came to his relief. It was the Chancellor's hour of audience, and Turbo entered as calm and snarling and business-like as ever.

"Good morning, Chancellor," said the King, as usual. "Is there any business?"

"None, sire," answered Turbo—"at least, none of mine; but I believe General Dolabella has something to report."

"Why, what is that?" exclaimed the King. [Pg 201]

"Oh, nothing, I fancy," said the Chancellor. "Some blunder of the officer in command of the party of gendarmes who arrived last night. There was a stupid brawl with the townsfolk, or something of that kind."

"But that seems to me serious," said the King, "considering how necessary secrecy is to my purpose. Let him be admitted at once."

General Dolabella was ushered in, wearing a look of tremendous mystery and importance, and with official brevity reported that a party of gendarmes arriving in the city during the previous night had encountered a man maltreating a girl, and that in endeavouring to arrest him and prevent further violence, one of the privates had been shot dead by the miscreant; "and if your majesty pleases," concluded the General, with an even greater air of mystery than before, "the officer is in attendance to give further details."

"I will question him immediately," said the King.

"Would your majesty wish to make the examination in private?" said Turbo. "If so, I will retire."

"I see no occasion," answered the King, before the commander-in-chief could interpose. "Besides, I shall probably need your assistance. Let the officer enter."

The hero of the last night's adventure was at once introduced. He saluted the King with spirit, [Pg 202] and then stood rigidly at attention, without in the least noticing the Chancellor.

"This is a most grave affair, sir," began the King. "Have you any light to throw on the parties concerned?"

"I believe, sire, I have identified the girl," replied the gendarme.

"And who do you suppose she is?"

"She is a servant of Mlle de Tricotrin.

"In what capacity?"

"I do not know, sire; but it may elucidate the point if I inform your majesty of a curious statement she made to me."

"Well, sir, proceed," said the King, as the officer hesitated.

"She spoke very strangely," replied the gendarme, "of having been rescued from some danger by your majesty."

"And what of the man?" asked the King, endeavouring to conceal his interest.

"As to that, I cannot speak with such certainty," answered the officer.

"But of what kind was he?"

"He was dressed, sire, like a beggar."

"Hear, Chancellor! hear, General! to what a pitch of insolence these wretches are coming!" said the King hotly. "It is growing past bearing. We have not acted a moment too soon."

"Not a moment," said the General. [Pg 203]

"Not a moment, I quite agree," said the Chancellor.

"If you could recognise the man," pursued the King. "I would have him arrested at once."

"It is possible, sire, that I might," said the officer, as rigid as ever. "He was a beggar with a limp, deformed shoulders, and a peculiarly educated voice for one of his class. And, further, I think I can tell your majesty where to inquire for him."

"What do you mean, sir?" said the King. "Proceed as shortly as possible."

"He took refuge in the High Chancellor's garden," said the officer.

"Are you sure of this?" asked the King, growing suddenly calm.

"I took particular pains not to be mistaken, sire," answered the gendarme, "because the fellow had the impudence to say he was the Chancellor himself."

"What is the meaning of this?" said the King, turning on the Chancellor.

"A lie to cover a lamentable piece of incompetency, I should say," said Turbo coolly.

"That, sire, is a very natural solution for his excellency to offer," said the General, coming with subdued excitement to the aid of his subordinate; "but it hardly explains the fact that this note, directed in Mlle de Tricotrin's hand to his excellency, was found upon this unfortunate girl."

With all his self-control Turbo could not suppress an uneasy movement as the General produced the little note and handed it to the King. In the excitement of having the girl in his power he had quite forgotten this part of the arrangement, and so had omitted to possess himself of the evidence of Mlle de Tricotrin's treachery. [Pg 204]

"It appears to be meant for you, Chancellor," said the King quietly, passing on the note to him. "You see?"

Turbo took it and read it through with deliberation. "It was intended for me, sire," he said imperturbably.

"Then the beggar who was guilty of this crime," said the King, with affected calm, "is no other than the High Chancellor of Oneiria."

"Your majesty's conjecture is perfectly correct," replied Turbo, who saw that all hope of concealment was now at an end.

"Before Heaven, this is too much!" exclaimed Kophetua, still in a well-controlled voice, but growing white with anger. "General Dolabella, you will arrest his excellency."

The General came forward with an uneasy air to receive the Chancellor's sword. Turbo drew it quietly from its sheath, and presented it with elaborate politeness.

"Shall I take his excellency's parole?" asked the General, "or will your majesty?"

"Neither, sir," answered the King. "You will call a guard, and remove him to the Tower immediately." [Pg 205]

The General, after looking at the King for a moment in blank amazement, bowed, and despatched the officer for some files of the Palace Watch. A distressing silence followed his departure, which Turbo seemed to enjoy immensely, till at last he broke it himself.

"I do not wish," said he, with affected humility, "to complain of your majesty's vigour. In my old pupil I can only warmly admire it. But as your majesty has adopted this spirited course, I would

beg the privilege of the meanest prisoner, and demand on what charge I am arrested."

"You may inform the prisoner," said the King, addressing Dolabella, "that he is arrested on confession of murder and abduction."

"Your majesty is extremely kind," answered Turbo, "and it is only right that I should show my sense of your clemency by letting you know that you are acting in error both of law and fact."

"I must beg," said Kophetua, "that all further communication between us shall be made through the proper channel."

"As your majesty pleases," replied the Chancellor. "But as your experience in these matters is not extensive, I thought I could save your majesty from an undignified position, and from the publication of matters which you would prefer to have concealed. If you would read this note, [Pg 206] sire, you would see at once what I mean."

Kophetua was, in spite of himself, impressed by the calmness of the Chancellor, and, moreover, was sensible of considerable curiosity to see what Mlle de Tricotrin could have written to him. So he took the note, and read it with a shock that he was not fully sensible of till some time after.

"You see, sire," said the Chancellor, "this girl had been lawfully assigned to me in writing. Your majesty is too well aware of the paternal nature of the laws regulating domestic service in this country to be ignorant that I was within my rights in using reasonable violence to compel a servant so assigned to assume her duties. The interference of the gendarmerie was, therefore, quite illegal, and the homicide which I unfortunately committed a justifiable act of self-defence."

Poor Kophetua! He saw in a moment how precipitate he had been. He saw that the Chancellor was perfectly right. Technically no offence whatever had been committed, and even had there been one, he confessed it would have been impossible to charge the Chancellor with it. For if he were to put Turbo on his trial, the whole circumstances of his own connection with Penelophon must inevitably come to light. And what was worse, Mlle de Tricotrin's conduct could not be [Pg 207] concealed. Abominable as it was in Kophetua's eyes, still his perhaps fantastic sense of chivalry forbade him to expose her. After all, it was only for him another example of what must be expected from the levity and weakness of women; it was a thing to shield, and not to resent.

As the bitter truth flashed through his mind, and he recognised the full meaning of the infamous plot, a sense of despair possessed him—a sense of incompetency, of powerlessness, of utter disappointment, which told him his struggle was hopeless, that it was wisdom to yield.

"General Dolabella," he said at last, after some moments of silence, "this document reveals to me circumstances which render it necessary to proceed in this matter with extreme caution."

"Yes, sire?" replied the General, in a tone of innocent inquiry, as if he were quite unaware of the contents of the compromising document.

"They are circumstances," continued the King, "opening up a prospect the painfulness of which can only be increased by any precipitate action."

"What steps then," asked the General, "would your majesty desire me to take?"

"I desire you to take none," answered Kophetua. "I desire you to retrace those you have already taken."

This the King said with the air of having given his instructions; and the commander-in-chief, after [Pg 208] a moment's hesitation, as though not quite sure of his sovereign's meaning, advanced to Turbo, and with a profound bow handed him back his sword; but the Chancellor stood with his hands behind him, without making the slightest motion of accepting the proffered weapon.

"His majesty," he said, with a malicious look at Kophetua, "is making another mistake. It is not such a little matter for a king to arrest his chief minister. So bold a stride is not so easily retraced. There is danger even for a monarch in playing with edged tools. I, the High Chancellor of Oneiria, have suffered the disgrace of a public arrest. By this time our zealous gendarme may have spread the news all over the palace. His majesty must see that the affront I have suffered is not to be expiated by an offhand return of my sword, and I refuse to accept it."

The poor General stood holding out the slender weapon, and feeling very foolish, which indeed was no more than he looked. It was a situation of extreme sweetness to Turbo, and the King tried hastily to end it.

"Chancellor," said he peremptorily, "take your sword. It is I, the King, who command you."

"With great submission to your majesty," answered Turbo, without moving, "you have no power [Pg 209] to command this."

"Why, what folly is this?" cried the King. "It is I who took away your liberty, and it is I who have power to give it back."

"Your majesty will pardon me," said Turbo. "You had power to arrest me. You have exercised that power, and there your prerogative ends. I am now in the bosom of the law, which is above your majesty, nor can you take me from it without its consent or mine. If I have contravened any term of the Social Contract, by my arrest you have invoked the jurisdiction by which alone such breaches may be considered. We are King and subject no longer. We are parties to a suit. The

tribunal of eternal justice stands between us, and to that I appeal."

"General Dolabella!" exclaimed the King abruptly, "have the kindness to leave us for a few minutes."

The General retired, and master and pupil were left confronting each other, like gladiators seeking for a favourable moment to close.

"What do you mean by all this?" asked the King, in a low, calm voice. "Just now you wished to save us all from having this miserable business brought to light."

"And I am still willing to do so," answered Turbo.

"Then why refuse to receive your sword?" asked Kophetua. "Why all this nonsense about demanding a trial?" [Pg 210]

"Sire," said the Chancellor, "upon this affair we have thrown off all disguise. I will continue, then, to be frank. You want this beggar-maid, so do I. I do not seek to deny it. I am in a position to demand terms of you, and I ask for her."

"Do I understand you to say," said the King, "that it is only on the surrender of this unhappy girl that you will forego your right to an inquiry."

"Your majesty takes my meaning accurately," answered Turbo.

Kophetua did not answer. The two paths opened before him, and he knew not which to take. Upon neither could he go without irreparable injury to a woman. By the one he must condemn Penelophon to the hateful lot from which he had rescued her; by the other he must expose the iniquitous conduct of Mlle de Tricotrin, to say nothing of the Quixotic part he himself had played in the drama, which every one would misunderstand, and of which he felt heartily ashamed. Still, that was but a little thing. Had he had himself alone to consider, he would not have hesitated, painful as the ridicule would have been which the exposure of his boyish knight-errantry must have entailed. It was for Mlle de Tricotrin that he felt. He held the secret of her shameless perfidy, and his whole nature revolted from making it known. It was well enough to chatter [Pg 211] lightly of women's worthlessness, but when it came to laying bare before the world the infamy of a tender, gentle thing like this, one whom he had deemed his friend, it seemed an action so unmanly, so unchivalrous, so cowardly, that he could not bring himself to do it. She deserved it all, and more; he knew that well enough. Nothing could have been more detestable in his eyes than what she had done. Yet who would befriend her or pity her if he gave her up. The more he thought of her crime the greater it seemed; but that only brought a stronger reason for shielding her from its consequences, and he resolved to shield her.

But then the alternative—to betray the very incarnation of his ideal of womanhood to what for her was worse than hell itself; to shake off the delicate despairing suppliant who had clung to him so trustingly. No, that was impossible too. He was at his wits' end, and Turbo knew it well as he watched his sovereign's silence with his snarling smile.

"Chancellor," said Kophetua at last, "I will consider your terms. Meanwhile, I would request you to receive your sword, and confine yourself to your house till I come to a determination."

"Your majesty must pardon me," replied Turbo, "if I insist on my rights, unless you pass your word to me at this moment to accept my condition."

Kophetua's face changed to an expression which Turbo had never seen there. There was within [Pg 212] his pupil a smouldering fire. The soft gales which had hitherto stirred his soul had never fanned it into a blaze. It was the sacred fire which had been kindled in the hour of his birth; it was the immortal spark which had been handed on from descendant to descendant, down from the very flame that had burned in the heart of the old knight.

As Kophetua sank deeper and deeper in desperation, and struggled to find an escape, he looked ever into the shadow beneath the ancient morion. The grim face grew very distinct there, and as Turbo spoke his last word it seemed to look down at the King with an expression where sorrow struggled with contempt, and Kophetua started up, desperate indeed, with the fire of his fathers' soul glittering in his eyes.

"By the splendour of God!" he cried, springing from his seat with the oath that had been the founder's favourite, "you shall not use me so! You shall have neither terms nor trial, except that which is the birthright of every man!"

"Does your majesty threaten me?" said Turbo, trying to keep up the insolent tone he had adopted, though in truth feeling he was faced by a force that was beyond his control.

"That is what I do!" cried the King, drawing the glittering rapier on which his hand was laid. "You [Pg 213] have outraged the woman I have sworn to protect, and, by the soul of the knight! here and now we will see whose she shall be. Take your sword, you double cur and coward! take it, or receive my point where you stand!"

With that he fell *en garde*, with his blade straight at the Chancellors throat. Turbo saw the time for words was gone by. They had often fenced together, and he knew, in spite of his lameness, he was the better man. Yet so fiercely did the King's eye fix his, that it was with no sense of ease that he took up his sword from the table at his side, where Dolabella had laid it.

With such fury did Kophetua attack when they were once engaged that Turbo had to give ground fast. Already he was forced against a table, and was barely defending himself with his utmost skill, when the door burst open, and Dolabella, alarmed by the quick clink of steel, rushed in, followed by the gendarme and two files of the Palace Watch. Kophetua retreated immediately, and dropped his point.

"You come most inopportunely," said the King angrily.

"Nay, your majesty," said the General. "Permit me to say most opportunely."

"Yes, most opportunely, with your majesty's pardon," echoed the officer, to whom Dolabella had confided the King's difficulty about the Chancellor's arrest. "I can take his excellency red-handed, and no trial will be necessary now." [Pg 214]

It was true. The officer of gendarmes knew his work well, and valued at its true worth his favourite and most dreaded weapon—red-handed justice. He was quick enough to see that here was a solution of the difficulty which his commander had confided to him.

For a moment the King hesitated before the temptation, but it was a meanness of which he was incapable.

"No, General," he said, as he sheathed his sword; "the Chancellor will retire to his house, and doubtless give us his word to remain there till we are resolved how to deal with his case. I fancy," he continued, with a defiant look at Turbo, "that we have found a method of settling our differences amicably."

The Chancellor recognised that he had aroused a spirit in the King which it would be well to let cool. There came vividly before him the ominous scene when the long rapier had fallen into his pupil's hands, and the kind of awe he had experienced then was upon him now. So he too sheathed his sword, and, having passed his word as the King suggested, left the room.

"Has your majesty any further orders for me," said the officer, saluting.

"What is your name?" asked the King.

"Pertinax," answered the officer. "Captain Pertinax, at your majesty's service." [Pg 215]

"Then, Captain Pertinax," answered the King, "I commend your conduct, and shall not forget it. You may retire."

"And what, sire," he asked diffidently, "shall I do with the girl?"

"I confide her to your custody," replied Kophetua, after a little hesitation, during which he eyed the gendarme with careful scrutiny. "You will keep her where she is, with liberty of the park, till further orders."

CHAPTER XVIII. [Pg 216]
THE QUEEN'S MOVE.

"Her arms across her breast she laid;
  She was more fair than words can say:
Bare-footed came the beggar-maid."

It was impossible that the Queen-mother's anxiety should not have revealed to her the coldness which had sprung up between her son and Mlle de Tricotrin. She had been at the Kora rout, and her intense love for Kophetua, and her absorbing desire to see him united to her new favourite, had made her eyes sharper than those of the rest of the world, interested as they were.

Hitherto her hopes had been rising daily. She was rejoicing not only at the skilful manner in which the Marquis was winning over all parties to their common cause, but also at the warm relations which seemed to be growing between Kophetua and the beautiful Frenchwoman. It was quite clear to her that he was taking an interest in Mlle de Tricotrin which he had never shown for a woman before. At last she felt her long-deferred hopes were about to be realised, when suddenly she was aware that the happy love-progress was arrested. Some discord had jarred in upon the growing harmony. It rang in her listening ears rudely enough, but whence it was she could not tell. [Pg 217]

It was this that made her look so sad and anxious, as she took her usual drive in the cool of the following afternoon. Of late Mlle de Tricotrin, who had grown to be like a daughter to the lonely Queen, had always accompanied her on these drives. This time, however, she had sent an excuse that she was not well. Indeed, she felt that after her crime she could not play her part before the keen eyes of her patroness without breaking down. So Margaret was alone, for she would have no one to replace her Héloise. She wished besides to think over quietly by herself what could be the cause of the coldness which Mlle de Tricotrin's message only confirmed.

It was the Queen's custom during these drives to visit from time to time the public hospitals of

the villages around the capital. For in this well-ordered kingdom every village possessed its hospital, maintained at the public expense, and there was not one in which the benign and stately presence of Margaret was not familiar and welcome. With the affection of the people she strove to fill the aching void, where should have nestled the love and confidence which her only son denied her; and if her visits of mercy did not bring her a full measure of consolation, they at least won her a wide popularity, which shed an intermittent glow of happiness into her clouded life. [Pg 218]

It was only natural that she should try to-day the specific her womanly heroism had taught her. She drove to a village which lay before the furthest gate of the Royal Park. The people were all assembled on the green, and she could see they were eagerly watching a rude stage which some wandering players had set up under the spreading shelter of an ancient acacia. They gave her a ringing shout of greeting as she passed by, oblivious of the sorrows of the highly rouged lady who raved before them. Nor would they give the stage another glance till the Queen's stately coach had rolled by out of sight.

An hour or so was spent in reading to and comforting the few sick that the hospital contained, and then the Queen returned. The play was done, and the dispersing people so blocked the road that the chariot had to pull up. A man in a fantastic dress took advantage of the delay to approach the Queen and ask her a boon with that elaboration of ceremony by which players consider they imitate the manners of the great. It was a little thing that he wanted, though his air was lofty enough to have prefaced a demand for half of the kingdom. As the privileges of the chartered beggars in Oneiria were wide, so were the laws against unlicenced vagrancy excessively severe. The status of strolling players was at the best doubtful, and in the present case the mayor of the village had refused them permission to camp on the green, upon the ground that such a proceeding was flat vagrancy. Not a house or even a barn was to be had, and so the motley player was begging leave to pass the night within the gates of the park—a request which Margaret granted graciously enough. [Pg 219]

To the sound of another cheer from the villagers the park gates closed behind the Queen, and she went on her way towards the palace. It was a lovely evening, and before she had gone far she was tempted to leave the chariot to go round a wide sweep of the road, while she herself walked across under the great acacias to meet it again. Her trouble was as heavy on her heart as ever now her Samaritan visit was over; and, alone with the rugged trunks and the spreading boughs and peeping flowers, she felt she could think it out more easily, and perhaps light upon the cause that made the sweet bells jangle out of tune.

Her way soon led her along a gully, where a little brook hurried gently down with happy chatter to find its way to its father Drâa. Here some long-dead king had obliterated all trace of the rank vegetation that had stolen up from the tropical regions to the southward, and in its place had fostered the nobler forms which through the long ages have gathered about the blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea. On the favoured slopes of the Atlas, where the mighty breath of the Atlantic still has power to cherish and make strong, he found them, and here they now rejoiced together in the vigour of lusty age. Giant oaks stretched out their limbs across the moist rocks to greet their rough-coated cousins the cork-trees on the other side. And almost in their arms grew the wild olives in wanton freedom, as though they mocked the modest silver poplars which quivered hard by. They, shy prudes, stood aloof delicately, and trembled always, as though they never ceased to fear the rough embrace of the wanton olive's friends. And here and there, where the tinkling stream idled through a wider channel, and the banks were marshy beds of vivid green, an oleander stood; and, as its ruddy flowers began to peep out to see the ripening year, it seemed to blush for the immodest hypocrite who, with her sober hue, had cheated the old Greeks to call her chaste. [Pg 220]

The murmuring brook splashed up upon the rocky path, and the leaves bent down and rustled in the evening breeze, as though they would whisper to the passing Queen the secret she could not divine. But, plunged in deep and miserable thought, she kept on her way unheeding, till all at once she was aware of a nymph-like figure that sat upon a rock on the further side of the brook, and dipped her white feet in it. Upon her long dark tresses was a crown of flowers, and in her lap lay others, which ever and again she tossed upon the stream, and watched in idle reverie racing, embracing, and dividing, as they sported with the laughing eddies. [Pg 221]

The Queen could not help admiring the picture in spite of her surprise at the intrusion. She drew nearer, and then, to her complete astonishment, saw that the flower-crowned nymph was none other than the pretty maid of Mlle de Tricotrin. She had always liked the girl for her gentleness and modesty, no less than for her evident devotion to her mistress. Still her presence in the park alone was a liberty that could not be passed over. Margaret called her gently by her name.

Penelophon rose hastily when she saw who spoke, and cast a whole lapful of flowers into the stream as she made her humble reverence. The water seemed to seize the blossoms greedily, and hurried away with its prize, as though the maid had lost all that could tempt it to linger.

"My girl," said the Queen, with severity, though not unkindly, "why are you here? Do you not know that no one is allowed in the park without leave?"

"Yes, madam," answered Penelophon, with quiet confidence, "but Trecenito gave me leave."

"Who do you say, girl?" cried the Queen, drawing herself up, and speaking with great asperity. [Pg 222]

"I mean his majesty gave me leave," answered Penelophon, looking down and blushing faintly in her confusion.

"But how did you come here?" asked the Queen, trying to conceal the interest which a sudden suspicion gave her.

"From the old hunting-lodge, madam," answered Penelophon, "where Captain Pertinax and the gendarmes are."

"But what were you doing there?" said the Queen.

"Trecen—— I mean his majesty," said Penelophon, looking down again, "told Captain Pertinax he was to keep me there till his majesty was resolved where I was to go."

"Where you were to go, child?" echoed the Queen, assuming her kindest tone, for she felt she had found a clue to the mystery, and did not want to frighten the girl. "But why are you not to be with Mlle de Tricotrin? How did you come to leave her?"

"Do you not know, madam?" said Penelophon, with a look of pain in her trusting eyes. "Did my good mistress not tell you?"

"No, child; what was it?"

"Then I will come and tell you. I will come and whisper in your ear; I dare not speak it loud. I hardly dare to think of it, lest the thing should come again."

She spoke in a low, frightened voice, and then stepped in trembling agitation across the brook, and came to the Queen's side. [Pg 223]

"The thing came——" she began, beneath her breath.

"What thing, my girl?" asked the Queen, with increasing excitement.

"That thing that limps and glares, and is wrapped in a cloak," answered Penelophon, in a hurried whisper, while she looked anxiously about her. "The thing that Captain Pertinax says is called Turbo, the Chancellor. Well, it came and dragged me away from Mlle de Tricotrin in the dark night; but Trecenito sent the gendarmes and took me away from it, and they brought me here, where its eyes cannot look at me."

The Queen made no reply. It was all she could do to conceal the sudden elation that possessed her, for now she was sure that accidentally she had stumbled on what she sought. Penelophon's familiar way of speaking of the King had aroused suspicions which her story served only to confirm. The case was perfectly clear. This innocent girl was the means that Turbo was using to thwart her plans for Kophetua's happiness. The Chancellor had obviously discovered that the fascination which Mlle de Tricotrin was exercising over his pupil was something which he could not meet with his ordinary weapons. The beauty and sweetness of her Héloise had at last touched [Pg 224] the King's stony heart, and love was alive in him. Turbo was man of the world enough to know that this was a state of mind which was not to be reasoned with, and he must have thought that the only means by which he could prevent the attachment getting past undoing was to place another woman in the way.

In the sudden reaction of spirits brought about by the unexpected success of her quest, the Queen could hardly help smiling at the Chancellor's astuteness. It was certainly a clever move. She knew her son's nature well enough to understand how this dreamy child of the people was just the most dangerous rival Mlle de Tricotrin could have. It was just the idyllic passion to commend itself to a nature which, though outwardly cynical, was, as she well knew, at bottom imaginative, poetical, and even Quixotic.

It was clear then to the Queen that Turbo had stolen the girl from Mlle de Tricotrin, in consequence, probably, of the King having noticed her. He had arranged for her this romantic retreat, where Kophetua could visit his Rosamund with the added spice of secrecy on pretence of inspecting the gendarmes. The plot was perfect, and Margaret's elation at her fancied discovery was in proportion to its perfection. For not only had she unravelled the whole mystery which had so troubled her, but she found herself in a position to foil the Chancellor's last attempt. [Pg 225]

The fear which, by her view of the situation, Turbo seemed to have of Mlle de Tricotrin's influence entirely coincided with her own idea that Kophetua was on the brink of an irresistible passion for the Frenchwoman. All, then, that was necessary was to remove Turbo's counter-attraction, and the game was won. Her motherly eagerness showed her the means by which this might be accomplished, and taught her to play her part with the skill and delicacy which was essential to success.

"My dear," said the Queen at length, softly stroking Penelophon's hair, "I am very sorry for you. I am very glad I found you here."

"Thank you, madam," answered Penelophon. "It is not hard to see why my mistress loves you so. But why are you glad?"

"Because, my child," said the Queen, "you are not safe here any more than you were with your mistress."

"Not safe?" cried Penelophon, her big eyes dilating with fear.

"That thing knows where you are," answered the Queen, in a mysterious voice, "though the King thinks you are safe. He does not know, but to-night it will come and look at you."

"No! no!" cried the poor girl, covering her face interior. "But will it take hold of me too?" [Pg 226]

"I cannot tell," replied the Queen-mother doubtfully. "Perhaps the gendarmes will prevent it; but it is a cunning thing."

"O madam!" exclaimed Penelophon, casting herself at Margaret's feet, "what shall I do? I could not bear it again. Will you not take me away where it cannot come? For the love of Trecenito take me away!"

"Well, child, for the love of Trecenito I will take you away," said the Queen, covering her deceit with words that were true. "I will bring you to some good friends of mine hard by, and they shall take you far away where the thing can never find you,—far away to the mountains, where the King's hunting-tower stands, and I will tell him, and none but him, whither you have gone."

"Bless your sweet majesty! bless you!" cried Penelophon, fervently kissing the hand that soothed her. "But now let us go quickly before the gendarmes see."

"Follow me, then, child," said the Queen, and hastily retraced her steps up the gully to where she knew she would find the players; and as they passed, the oleanders blushed deeply to see what wrong a mother's love could do, and the white poplars trembled with dread. Overhead the Turkey oaks and the rough cork-trees shot out their muscular arms stiffly, as though they would have [Pg 227] stopped the cruel deed; but the wild olives nestled close, and whispered wantonly it was no harm.

The players were already there with their carts when the two women came to the park gate. A few words and a little purse soon persuaded Margaret's motley friend to take the matter in hand. All the Queen required was that he should start away betimes in the morning with his company, and carry the beggar-maid to some remote part of the kingdom, and she promised the man a handsome present if the girl were not found for a year.

Then she gave her hand to Penelophon, who kissed it again with devotion. Margaret, in a voice that all could hear, charged the players to treat her kindly, and so took her leave, and hurried to meet her carriage at the point agreed.

The Queen's delight at the way she had outwitted her cunning adversary only increased as she thought over it, and by the time she reached the palace she felt compelled to share her joy with some one. So she easily persuaded herself that M. de Tricotrin ought at once to be informed of the plot against his daughter, and how, in consequence of her clever move, it was now, instead of a cause of anxiety, a thing to rejoice over, as evidence of how nearly the King had come to yielding to Héloise's charms.

She sent to him at once to request the favour of an interview, and M. de Tricotrin appeared [Pg 228] without delay. Margaret told him the whole story with great animation, and was perhaps a little surprised at his reception of her news. She had certainly looked for a little more enthusiasm in his congratulations, but was too happy and too satisfied with herself to take much notice of his manner. As for the Marquis, the instincts of an old diplomatist prevented him explaining the Queen's mistake. It was true that her story took his breath away at first; but it was a second nature with him, when he found any one labouring under an error, not to undeceive until he was sure that there was nothing to be made out of the situation as it stood.

So after his first surprise he listened with interest, gravely thanked the Queen for her energy in his daughter's behalf, and ceremoniously took his leave, with the unpleasant conviction that things had taken a very awkward turn.

What had happened he could hardly tell. That the Queen's view of the affair was wrong he had little doubt. A much more natural explanation suggested itself to him. Somehow or other Kophetua had got wind of the intended abduction, and had ordered the gendarmes to be on the alert to prevent it. How the secret had leaked out of course he could not be sure; but, in all probability, his own daughter, prompted by her silly infatuation for the girl, had given the King a [Pg 229] hint. Whether this were so or not, he was sure that Turbo would come to the same conclusion, and feel that the Tricotrin side of the bargain had not been loyally carried out.

The only thing to be done was to go to the Chancellor at once, find out what had actually happened, and, as a proof of sincerity, inform him what had become of the girl. This could certainly do no harm. For, even supposing the Queen were right, and Turbo's proposition had only been part of a deep-laid scheme to draw off the King from his daughter, it would, at any rate, be better to let the wily Chancellor know that his game was seen through.

So to the Chancellor M. de Tricotrin went.

CHAPTER XIX. [Pg 230]
CONSPIRATORS.

"The gods preserve your majesty."

By the force of circumstances, and Captain Pertinax's ingenious idea of red-handed justice, the

Chancellor was sitting interned in his own official residence. For a man like Turbo to fail is very hard. Failure was a thing of which he had little experience. Yet now he was obliged to confess that his elaborate manœuvre had not succeeded. True, it had been so far successful as to irrevocably ruin Mlle de Tricotrin's chances of the throne. On that side the King was firmly blockaded in his bachelordom. But the rest of the operation was a disaster.

It was certainly nothing but a piece of pure ill-luck that had upset the strategist's calculations; but Turbo held that a man should be master of his fate, and leave no room for fortune to interfere either one way or the other. In the present case fortune might easily have been held at a distance. He ought to have remembered the gendarmes, and fortune would not have deprived him of half the battle. [Pg 231]

Indeed, it was more than half that had been lost. Not only had he failed to secure Penelophon for himself, but he had allowed her to come into the King's possession. So far from finally shutting off his sovereign from matrimony, he had actually hastened his approach to it. His idea that Kophetua intended to marry the beggar-maid, in order to secure the continuance of his reign, became more pronounced than ever. It was an eventuality which he had long foreseen. He had taken unsparing pains to prevent it. His whole powers, as a man and a politician, had been directed to keeping Penelophon away from Kophetua, and the only result had been to place the girl in his very arms. Something, he felt, must be done, or his ruin was complete. After what had occurred his favour in the King's eyes was gone for ever. He was a disgraced minister, whom nothing but a revolution could set on high again. Could he only stay the King's marriage a few months more, the revolution would come by peaceful process of law, otherwise his fall was complete, or a more violent course must be taken.

Into the midst of the Chancellor's perplexity broke M. de Tricotrin. By this time the Marquis had ascertained approximately what had occurred in the morning. The news of the palace was that General Dolabella and an officer of gendarmes had presented a report to the King, which had led to a scene between his majesty and the Chancellor, resulting in the latter being confined to his residence in deep disgrace. This violent splash in the quiet waters of Oneirian politics was generally said, by well-informed persons of unimpeachable authority, to be due to a difference of opinion as to the course to be taken with the beggars, but M. de Tricotrin knew better. From what the Queen-mother had told him, and the facts within his own knowledge, he had now no doubt that the King had got wind of their little plot, and had ordered a party of gendarmes to frustrate it as quietly as possible, and he more than ever felt that an interview with the Chancellor was necessary to establish his own fidelity to the infamous bargain, and to concert measures for the future. [Pg 232]

"I thought your excellency would have something to say to me after this disaster," said the Marquis, as soon as the two old schemers were alone.

"Yes?" said Turbo warily.

"You have an accusation to make, no doubt," said the Marquis.

"None in the world," answered Turbo; "why should I?"

"Then whom do you blame for the unfortunate intervention of the gendarmes?"

"I blame no one. They were there at my suggestion."

"Upon my word, Chancellor," said the Marquis, astounded at Turbo's cool admission. "I must congratulate you upon the *sang-froid* with which you speak of your infamies." [Pg 233]

"I do not understand you, Marquis," answered Turbo.

"The word is plain enough. What you confess is an infamy. It is an infamy to enter into an arrangement to further my daughter's marriage, and deliberately to frustrate it by making an exposure of us to his Majesty, and providing him with a consolation. It is clever; but, I repeat, it is an infamy."

"My dear Marquis," cried Turbo, almost with enthusiasm, "I see we shall work together admirably. Your suspicions do you infinite credit. They display in you possibilities of unscrupulous intrigue such as I myself have not yet attained. I have still to reach the point at which I could even suspect a man of the admirable insensibility of which you are so flattering as to accuse me. I bow to you as a master. To conceive such ingenious treachery belongs only to a master."

"Then you withdraw the confession you just made."

"I wish that I could, Marquis," said Turbo. "For it was a confession of stupidity;" and with that the Chancellor explained to M. de Tricotrin how the presence of the gendarmes was a mere accident, for which no one was to blame but himself.

"Well," said M. de Tricotrin, when Turbo had done, "you must permit me to apologise for the unwarranted accusation I made." [Pg 234]

"Not at all," answered Turbo. "It was a compliment I value highly."

"Then at least let me offer you my commiseration," said De Tricotrin, "upon the loss of all you hoped to gain. But I trust it is only temporary. I am happy to announce to you that I have discovered the retreat of your little friend, and, no doubt, can put you in the way of recovering

her, when it may be done with safety;" and M. de Tricotrin explained in detail to the Chancellor the Queen-mother's move.

"I am delighted," concluded the Marquis, "to be able to announce to you so excellent a piece of fortune."

"I regret, Marquis," answered Turbo, "that I cannot share your delight."

"But surely," replied the Frenchman, "it is an extraordinary piece of good fortune."

"I do not deny it," said Turbo; "but I am accustomed to look with suspicion on any position, however attractive, which is founded on fortune. Nothing is stable without a substructure of sagacious purpose. For a position to be in any way modified by fortune is for me merely evidence of defective calculation. In the present case the danger is obvious."

"Why so?" asked the Marquis.

"You see," pursued Turbo, "another piece of fortune may at any moment put the King in [Pg 235] possession of the information we enjoy. A pursuit and recapture will ensue, and our Quixote will have fattened his folly with another ration of romance. Your unhappy daughter's supplanter will then be on the steps of the throne."

"Then what do you propose?" said De Tricotrin. "To recapture the girl yourself, I presume?"

"Precisely," answered Turbo. "The thing is easily done. I will send officers to watch the players. They will be instructed to take advantage of any disorderly conduct to arrest the whole company as vagabonds, and convey them to the capital. Disorder amongst such people is easily fomented. I apprehend no difficulty or even delay."

"But how can you arrange this delicate mission," objected the Marquis, "while you are under arrest?"

"To-morrow," said Turbo, "I propose to submit unconditionally to the King's terms, and I shall be free. It will be unpleasant, but under the new aspect of affairs there is no other course open. I must absolutely be at liberty to act at the present crisis."

The Chancellor's evident anxiety to get the beggar-maid back to the capital began once more to arouse M. de Tricotrin's suspicion. His doubts as to the loyalty of his ally began to recur to him. His own idea was that at present Penelophon was much better where she was. He objected to the [Pg 236] Chancellor's plan, but it was not his habit to insist on real objections. There was a crudeness about honesty which jarred on the old diplomatist's sense of refinement. He loved always to mask his position with minor obstructions.

"You seem, Chancellor," he began, "to over-estimate the danger we are to apprehend from this beggar. It is impossible to conceive that the King seriously means to marry her."

"I quite agree with you, Marquis," answered Turbo. "He had no such intention. Till this morning the danger was shadowy. But now it is different. In his present state of mind he is capable of any indiscretion. I cannot exaggerate to you the intensity of the shock which he received at the discovery of your daughter's implication in our disgrace."

"What!" cried the Marquis, surprised into an unwonted show of feeling. "The discovery of my daughter's complicity? What do you mean?"

"Did you not know?" said Turbo, with an affectation of tender concern. "Really this is most painful. I imagined you knew all, and envied you your calmness. You see it was that unlucky note. The girl did not deliver it, and so it came into the King's hands through the police."

"Oh, it is that which has alarmed you," said the Marquis, in a tone of great relief. "I am happy, [Pg 237] then, to reassure you. Believe me, there was nothing compromising in that. I was careful that the letter should be but a blank sheet of paper."

"Then what is the meaning of this?" said Turbo, handing Mlle de Tricotrin's note to her father. M. de Tricotrin read it through. Then he set his teeth, and hissed out between them, "Sink the little fool!" and many other like exclamations that were only fit for Turbo's ears.

As soon as the ebullition which Turbo's announcement produced in the Marquis had a little subsided, and while his spirits were still hot, the Chancellor proceeded to throw in, in the guise of consolation, the ingredients which he considered necessary to convert the Frenchman's state of mind into a mixture that would minister to his own disease.

"And, after all, Marquis," said Turbo, at last, "perhaps you have lost nothing. I begin to think you had gained nothing, and had nothing to lose. I am inclined to believe the King is a deeper politician than we thought. Some of us are old hands, but I believe he has been laughing at us all along. He amused us with your daughter, and Penelophon, and this Herculean notion of his of cleansing his Augean stables. But my experience of this morning has opened my eyes. He is a man, and not the decrepit boy I took him for. The spirit of his race is alive in him. It has burst into [Pg 238] sudden vigour. He begins to itch for power like his fathers, and he means to grip it in spite of the law. He means to have it, and throw us all over,—you and me and Mlle Héloise, who have sinned in his eyes beyond redemption. That is why his calmness and obstinacy are so unassailable. That is what this concentration of the gendarmerie means. I tell you, Marquis, as sure as there is an earth beneath, our little Kophetua contemplates a *coup d'état*."

"But this is astounding!" cried the revolutionary statesman, with the air of one who smells the battle afar off.

"It *is* astounding, Marquis," replied Turbo, "and we must not rely entirely on the correctness of our view. It is possible he may still be halting between the revolutionary and constitutional course. He may, even at the last moment, retreat by abdication. Meanwhile, we must prepare for every eventuality. Our first step will be for you as satisfactory as it is obvious. We must at once bring to bear the whole pressure of the political combination which you have so cleverly framed, in order to drive the King into a marriage with your daughter."

"But is there the slightest chance of success?" said the Marquis.

"I think so," answered Turbo, who knew perfectly well the attempt was hopeless, and therefore safe as far as he was concerned. "The party you have gathered at your back is stronger than [Pg 239] anything he has met with before. Its influence is incalculable."

"But if we fail!"

"It will at any rate force his hand. We shall know what to do next. Meanwhile, I should value your opinion and assistance in the elaboration of various methods of proceeding upon which I am engaged in view of the possible crisis. A marriage with the beggar, or an attempt at a *coup d'état*, must be met——"

"With revolution," broke in the delighted Frenchman, with impressive solemnity of voice and manner.

"Precisely,—with revolution," answered the Chancellor. "It remains but to settle the details to our mutual satisfaction, and we cannot begin too soon. With your experience of these matters, my dear Marquis, our success is assured."

"You flatter me," answered M. de Tricotrin. "Permit me to say it is for such a coadjutor as you that my experience has waited. We are necessary to each other, you and I. Let us recognise the fact, and nothing is impossible."

The two old hands set to their work. All night long they sat, drawing up memoranda, consulting official lists, marking the names of those whom they intended to employ, and devising bribes for the doubtful. Like sober men of business they devoured the work, and sketched out with official [Pg 240] brevity and distinctness the plan of operation. What these designs were it is premature to inquire now. Before long they were made patent to every one. Suffice it for the time that when the grey light of morning broke, M. de Tricotrin went quietly forth from Turbo's garden, wearing on his face an expression which he felt would not have disgraced Cassius as he left the orchard of Brutus.

Several similar meetings followed in quick succession, and began to make themselves felt. Turbo made his peace with the King, and was continued in office in order that Mlle de Tricotrin's sin might not be blazoned to the world. The whole affair, in fact, was hushed up, and the Chancellor left free to work his tools.

As the day for the meeting of Parliament drew near, Kophetua began to be aware that every one was taking an unaccountable interest in his marriage. Petitions came up from the country. Gentlemen and ladies of both parties, whether Kallist or Agathist, seemed to want to talk of nothing else. Every subject he started in the Council seemed to transform itself into the same haunting shape.

Parliament met, and General Dolabella, amidst indescribable excitement, was elected Speaker according to the original arrangement on which M. de Tricotrin's coalition was founded. Then the pressure redoubled. The Kallikagathists joined with quiet dignity the general movement, and [Pg 241] were heard to say, with an air of noble patronage, that it was at last a great fact. In tones of reserved intensity, so characteristic of the inflexible bigotry of those who believe they are nothing if not open-minded, the Kallikagathist party assured themselves that further resistance from the King was impossible. The party of order, the party of moderation, the party of intelligence, had triumphed at last. At length, by the unostentatious use of reason and common-sense, they had drawn the extremists together, and a coalition was standing before the King demanding his marriage with the lady who embodied the principles of everybody and everything. It was no longer the voice of party that spoke. It was the harmonious flood in which the voice of party was drowned. It was the holy voice of compromise.

At last things came to a crisis. An address was moved urging the King to marry the woman of the people's choice. A lengthened debate took place, but only upon its wording. The Kallist amendments, dictated by Turbo, were almost indecent in their plain speaking. A coaxing and apologetic obscurity was the tone of those which the Queen-mother approved for the Agathists. Eventually the spirit of compromise, which presided over the assembly in the person of its new Speaker, triumphed over every difficulty, and the address was passed in a form which was a [Pg 242] masterpiece of inconsistency. Kallist violence and Agathist weakness were there in glaring contrast. The insolence of the one was only enhanced by its proximity to the servility of the other. Nothing could have been better calculated to offend the King or impress him with a sense of the perplexity of his position and the malicious origin of the cross-bred coalition which confronted him.

At no time was Kophetua a man to bear pressure patiently if he was conscious of it, and his

present state of mind was one of universal defiance. The shock which Mlle de Tricotrin's heartless perfidy had produced upon him had been at least as acute as Turbo imagined. Till he had quarrelled with her at Count Kora's rout he hardly knew how much she had been to him. Till then he had not recognised how he craved for a woman to love, and how nearly she was fitted to satisfy his hunger. He began to see how dull his life would be again without her. The one imploring look she had given him as she passed beneath his window had turned his contempt into pity. The beauty, the tenderness, the self-abasing resignation of that lovely vision had done its work, and at last a great resistless love had filled every chamber of his soul.

Then fell, sudden as the hand of death, the crushing revelation of her guilt. It was as though he [Pg 243] had gathered the luscious fruit of the Tree of Life and found it ashes between his teeth. The first shock past, he turned, as men will in such a case, to find comfort in the light of another's eyes. He turned to Penelophon, where he saw the very antithesis of her in whom he was deceived. The passion that was aroused in him must find a resting-place. So violently did his noble nature revolt from its fallen idol that it was only in the opposite extreme of womanhood it felt it could be at peace.

Prepared to risk all, he was going forth to seek her when they told him she was gone. At first none could say whither, but soon there were some who whispered she had run away to the strolling players, and were careful that the whisper should reach Kophetua's ears. Such folk had an evil reputation enough in Oneiria, and in his despair the heart-broken King cried out that she was as bad as the rest. There was now none good; no, not one. There was nothing in life but loneliness, and no weapon to battle with it but defiance.

He laughed to himself to think how wasted were the efforts he felt pressing about him, how utterly they mistook him to think he would bend to force. He laughed till he wearied of the sport, and the last stroke angered him. The address he saw as a ridiculous insult, and was resolved to [Pg 244] have no more. Once or twice before, when he had been over-worried on the marriage question, he had made an end by a simple manœuvre, and he was determined to repeat it now.

So when General Dolabella attended with a deputation to receive the King's answer to the address of his faithful Parliament, there was no one to receive him but the Chancellor. Turbo briefly announced that the King had left that morning for his hunting-tower in the mountains, and handed Mr. Speaker an order for the prorogation of the House.

CHAPTER XX. [Pg 245]
PLAYERS.

"He went out a-riding one fine day
The countryside to see."

In happy ignorance of the reports which reached Kophetua's ears, Penelophon continued with the players. Indeed, she could not have done otherwise; for though she was treated kindly enough, yet Bocco, the *arlecchino*, who had made the bargain with the Queen-mother, and Frampa, the old actress, his partner, took good care that she should not escape. She was far too valuable to lose. The firm of Bocco and Frampa, sole lessees and managers of the rumbling old caravans which were stage and dwelling and all, fully appreciated the prize they had captured, and were determined to watch it carefully.

The payment which the Queen-mother had promised on account of the girl made her precious enough to be a thing worth careful tending; but the professional eyes of the managers saw in their *protégée* further possibilities of profit, which they valued even more highly. With the ready [Pg 246] discrimination of old fanciers, they rapidly noted her points as soon as she was in their charge. They remarked complacently her graceful figure, her delicately moulded features, her great lustrous eyes, her wealth of silky hair, and the thrilling earnestness of her voice, and they nodded to each other with the solemn satisfaction of those who know.

"It is the most promising material I ever remember handling," said Bocco profoundly.

"You are right, Bocco," answered Frampa, with the air of a *connaisseuse* who does not praise lightly. "She is a little pale and sickly, of course, for my taste as she is; but fine feathers make fine birds. With a smart costume to show off her figure, and a good rouging, call me a dolt if I don't turn her over to you the prettiest bit that was ever on our boards."

"And trust me to do the rest," replied Bocco, with enthusiasm. "She was born for an actress—so sensitive, so tender, so intelligent. What stuff to work on! Ah! I have a chance at last. Think what I have done for that lump of stupidity and dulness, Nora, and picture to yourself what the same hand will do with this piece of pure gold. But do you think you will bring her to it easily, Frampa? She seems a shy, silly little thing."

"Trust me, Bocco," said Frampa, with dignity. "I am no journeyman. I know my trade. You do your [Pg 247] part, and trust me to do mine. It is not the first."

"Right, Frampa," answered Bocco, with respect. "You are a genius. She will tax you hard if I read

her right; but you are a genius."

Bocco was not mistaken. Frampa found she had a hard task before her. All she could say or do could not draw from Penelophon the slightest expression of a desire to appear on the stage; and when the old actress went further, and hinted how nice it would be for her to stand up like Nora before the people, and hear them shout and clap with delight, Penelophon only shuddered and looked like a frightened fawn. Indeed, the very presence of the other actresses was painful to her. Frampa she did not mind so much, for the manageress never acted now. She was too old and fat for anything but taking the money and dressing the girls. She had a not unpleasant face, with hard wrinkles and bright dark eyes, and a great double chin that had taken entire possession of the room once enjoyed by her neck. Her ways were so kindly, too, that Penelophon could be almost happy with her when she was not teasing her to act.

The very idea of that grew more painful to her each day. To see Nora sitting bold and brazen in her paint and shameless attire on the gaudy car, in which the company were wont to exhibit themselves through the villages, was too shocking for her to bear. She used to go and hide in [Pg 248] Frampa's cart, and try to think of Trecenito, that she might shut out the wickedness that surrounded her.

Bocco was more successful with his part. He began by coming to the lonely girl, and repeating verses to amuse her. Then he asked her to try and say them, and his bright black eyes looked at her so strangely that she dared not refuse. She grew afraid of him and the strange power in his sharp face which seemed to fascinate her. So she always tried hard to remember what he read to her, and say it as he did to please him, and make him go away and not stare at her.

After Penelophon had been with the players some weeks, to all these troubles a new one was added. For one day, while Nora was riding her brazen course round a village which they had reached the night before, and Penelophon was hiding in Frampa's cart, she saw the door stealthily open, and the face of a man peep in and look at her. He said nothing, but went away as quietly as he came. Presently the door opened once more, and the strange face was there again with another. Suddenly, just as she thought they were coming in, and she was cowering down as close as she could in her corner, the door shut, and she heard the sound of feet hurrying away. Then Bocco came in, looking very angry.

"Do you know those men?" he asked, in his sharp way. [Pg 249]

"No," answered Penelophon. "Why do they come to look at me?"

"Because they are bad," answered the *arlecchino*. "If they ask you to go with them, be sure you do not. They are very bad. If they try to take you, cry out for me, and I will blast them with an evil eye. They dare not let me look on them as I know how. They will run away if you call out."

Bocco indeed had considerable faith in the power of his eye; but perhaps he told Penelophon a little more than he actually believed; still he was generally credited by his acquaintances with the evil eye, and he made the best use of his reputation. Now he wished to complete his influence over Penelophon, for he felt it was more than ever necessary. For some days he had had a suspicion that he was being followed by some men of mysterious manners, and he shrewdly suspected their attentions were due to the presence of Penelophon in the caravan. Frampa and he apprehended an attempt to carry her off, and the chance of losing their hopeful *protégée* increased their anxiety to make use of her.

This last discovery of Bocco's so alarmed him that he made up his mind to leave the village secretly by night, and go on to the next, in hopes of eluding his pursuers. There the caravan [Pg 250] arrived on the following morning, and Bocco felt himself comparatively safe; for on the precipitous rock above the village hung the royal hunting-tower. The King was there, he knew, and from this he hoped great things. The mysterious persecution of which he found himself the object determined him to waste no more time over Penelophon's scruples.

"It is of absolute necessity," he said to Frampa, "that she must act. She must be forced or cheated into it at once."

"Yes, Bocco," answered Frampa. "We must not leave her alone; it is not safe."

"And, besides," said Bocco, "there is a greater reason still. Some of the castle servants are sure to be at our performance. They cannot but be struck with the child, and the King will hear of her."

"And will order a special performance," exclaimed Frampa eagerly.

"And will give us a protection," said Bocco.

"Splendid!" cried Frampa. "No one is so clever as you, Bocco."

So the two set about a scheme of which poor Penelophon soon found herself the victim. It was growing very hot, and towards the middle of the day the girl had crept into a quiet place to sleep. It was a little shed leading out of the barn which Bocco had hired for a theatre. It was Frampa's private room, but as Penelophon slept in her cart she felt she was free of the little shed too; so [Pg 251] she spread her quilt in a corner, and, casting off her outer clothes, lay down to sleep.

Her slumber was disturbed. She had never really recovered from the effects of the rough treatment she had received at Turbo's hands. The heat made her feverish, and the memory of what Bocco had told her of the bad men took shape in troubled dreams. At last she awoke,

unrefreshed, and with an aching head. She thought she would go out into the air; but when she sat up to reach her dress, she saw lying in its place a flimsy, spangled thing, such as Nora wore on the stage. She took it up to discover what the change might mean, but she dropped it quickly when she saw how scanty and evil-looking it was, and lay down again with a flushed face. Then the door opened, and she saw Frampa come in.

"O Frampa!" she said, still blushing at the thought of the thing on her bed, "some one has taken my clothes and left me that. O Frampa! go and see who has done it, and bring them back."

"Why, deary," said Frampa, "what is the matter? I did it myself. The bad men have followed us here. So Nora is going to wear your clothes, and I have got this for you to put on, so that the men will not know you. Come, I will help you put it on."

"O Frampa!" said Penelophon, with a shudder, "I cannot; indeed, I cannot. I should die of shame." [Pg 252]

"Tut, tut, deary!" said Frampa, "be a woman. You need not be afraid. You can stay here all alone, and no one will see you. So come now and put it on, and make yourself safe."

"But are you sure no one will see me?" asked Penelophon.

"Why, of course not, child," answered Frampa cheerily. "You know no one can come here but I. There, there, that's a little woman." Frampa raised up her *protégée* as she spoke with motherly tenderness, and Penelophon, trembling from head to foot, allowed herself to be clad in the actress's dress. But when it was on, and she saw how flaunting and shameless it was, and how it hardly covered her more than her own shift, she buried her face in her hands and began to cry.

"There, there, deary," cried Frampa soothingly, "don't take on so. 'Tis nothing to cry over. Many a bonny lass would jump for joy to make such a pretty figure as you do now."

"I know, I know!" sobbed Penelophon, whose trouble was only increased by Frampa's admiration, "but I cannot help it. I will try to bear it because you are so kind; but I am so unhappy, and O Frampa! my head aches past bearing."

"Well, never mind," cooed Frampa; "have a good cry and lie down a bit. There now, that is it. [Pg 253] Shut your eyes, and let me charm your pain away."

So Penelophon did as she was told, and soon felt that Frampa was stroking her face with something very pleasant and soft, while she sang a low-toned charm like a lullaby. It was soothing, and seemed to take away the pain. So Penelophon lay quite still and left off crying.

Frampa's conjuring had gone on for some time, when all at once the door opened and she stopped. Penelophon looked up. Bocco's sharp face and bright black eyes were peering in.

"They are here!" he cried, in affected alarm. "Quick, Frampa, bring her away. She is not safe there. Bring her along and hide her."

"Come, child," said Frampa, in great agitation, as the door closed again. "Quick! jump up; we will foil them yet."

Penelophon rose mechanically in her alarm, and Frampa half led, half dragged her to the door; but just as she reached it she caught sight of a face she hardly knew in Frampa's mirror, which hung there upon the wall. For a moment she stopped and took another look. Then with a low cry of horror she dragged her hand from Frampa's and started back, staring at her conductor with a look in which terror struggled with reproach.

"O Frampa!" she cried, in a hushed voice of anguish, "what have you done? You have painted my [Pg 254] face. Oh, how wicked! how very wicked of you!"

"Nonsense, child!" cried Frampa, getting a little vexed. "It is only to disguise you better. Come along quick, or it will be too late."

She took her by the wrist again, but Penelophon hung back from her in disgust. Just then the door opened and Bocco rushed in again.

"Quick, my girl," he said, as, heedless of her fear, he took her other wrist and looked her hard in the face. "Do what I bid you, and all will be well. But, mind, do as I say."

Then she gave herself up to her fate. There was something she could not resist in this man, and she let them lead her right through the barn. Outside she saw the tawdry car standing ready, with all the men and girls upon it, except Nora, whose place at the top was vacant. They all laughed and whispered together when Penelophon appeared, but she had no time to heed them.

"Come, child," said Bocco sharply, "climb with me; it is your only chance."

The car was a kind of pyramid, on the flattened apex of which stood a stanchion with a gilded belt of metal attached to it. It was to this that Nora was always fastened to prevent her falling with the jolting of the car. Powerless for further resistance, Penelophon soon found herself standing in [Pg 255] Nora's place, ready to sink with fear and shame. But Bocco clasped the iron girdle tightly about her waist, and then got down to his own post in front. In another moment the music struck up, and the car began to move on its progress through the crowded village.

The people shouted as they passed, for in their eyes Penelophon was a beautiful sight, with her gaudy attire and high colour. Bocco never ceased to crack his jokes, as the car laboured on

towards the market-place; and the more he joked the louder the people shouted. The music grew wilder and wilder, and every one seemed half mad with excitement, till it was all like a horrible dream to Penelophon. Her thoughts seemed to be part of the scream of the fifes, and the squeaking of the fiddles, and the hurried clatter of the drum. They mixed helplessly with the wanton din and got lost. Then it was as though it were some one else who was fastened there and not herself. She thought she was going mad. The throb and clatter of the mocking music had stolen all her senses. Once she threw up her bare arms and screamed, but the people only shouted "Brava! brava!" to her, and tossed up their caps in delight. She covered her ears to shut out the clamour, but it pierced through all. She tried to throw herself down, but the iron girdle [Pg 256] pressed tightly about her waist, and she could not move. It seemed to be gripping her closer and closer, as though some vile thing had her in its embrace. At last everything swam before her, and she felt the end had come, when suddenly the music stopped, and the car came to a standstill in the middle of the crowded market-place.

Some one was answering Bocco smartly out of the throng, and the people were jeering at him. The *arlecchino* was not used to rivalry, and when he found he could not silence his antagonist he began to lose his temper and take to abuse. But he got nothing for his pains, except a large vegetable in his face, thrown by an unerring hand. In a moment he had leaped from his place to the ground, and was belabouring his assailant with his baton, for he was a high-spirited fellow enough when roused. Some of the company rushed to their chief's assistance, and fell upon his adversary's friends. As for the bystanders, they took one side or the other, or none at all, as it suited them; but every one shouted, and the girls on the car added their frightened screams to the clamour.

The fray was growing fast and furious, cudgels were whirling on all sides, and blood was beginning to flow, when some half-dozen men, in the uniform of the Chancellor's runners, were seen making a way towards the car, where the fight was thickest. They used their halberts freely, [Pg 257] and shouted as they came on, "Peace! peace! in the Chancellor's name!"

So great was respect for the laws in Oneiria, that something like order was very soon obtained, and the runners set to work to secure the players. Still, it was not all done in a moment, and before the men were all manacled the girls had found time to run away and hide themselves, with the help of sympathising townsmen. Only Penelophon was left standing on the top of the car, unable to escape from the grip of her supports.

"Bring down the girl, one of you," cried the leader of the Chancellor's men, and Penelophon shuddered anew to see a rough fellow climbing up the car to her. But now a new diversion was made by the approach of the town bailiff, with his constables at his back. He came ruffling up to the Chancellor's men, swelling with offended dignity.

"Who is this," he cried, "that dares to make arrest in a royal borough? It is I, the King's bailiff, who have jurisdiction here. Come, hand over your prisoners at once, or I will clap you all in jail together."

But the Chancellor's men, armed with a special warrant, and fortified with the dignity of their uniform, had no idea of giving up their prize. A violent altercation ensued between the bailiff and the head runner. The man at Penelophon's side leaped down to his chief's assistance, and two of [Pg 258] the constables, anxious to make a point, at once took possession of her. This only made the runners more angry. They flatly refused to surrender their prisoners to any paltry bailiff. They were Chancellor's men, they said, and would take a man in the King's own privy chamber if it pleased his excellency to order it.

"Well, we will soon see who is the better man," cried the infuriated bailiff, as the runners began to retreat, with the players in the midst of them. "Clap the girl in the stocks, one of you—we will keep her at any rate—and then run for the watch, and bid them come after me. I will keep an eye on these curs meanwhile; and then we will see who is King and who is Chancellor."

Penelophon soon found herself led out of the throng by one of the constables towards the upper end of the market-place, where the stocks stood waiting for her. She shrank in terror as she saw them, but the man dragged her on. The leg-holes looked like great wicked eyes gloating over her, and the whole thing seemed to the poor girl's fevered sense like some ugly monster, squatting down and waiting in hideous glee to devour her.

Most of the people followed the bailiff, so as not to lose the end of his quarrel with the Chancellor's men, but a good many stayed to see Penelophon put into the stocks. They gathered [Pg 259] round, grinning and jesting, as the constable sat her down in the low settle at the back. Ready to sink with shame, she covered her face with her hands, while the man lifted the hinge-board and made her feet fast. She thought the worst was done then, but rough hands took hers and drew them from her face.

"Come, lass," said the man, laughing, "I want these too."

Then she saw the iron clamps on the two side-posts, and knew what he was going to do. "Not that, sir, not that!" she cried wildly; "for God's sake, leave me my hands to hide my shame!"

"Willingly, lass," the constable said mockingly, "if you can pay for them, but we can't let you hide a pretty face like yours without buying the privilege."

"But I have no money?" she moaned imploringly.

"So much the worse for both of us," said the man; "we shall neither of us have what we want."

Without further ceremony he fastened one little wrist against the side-post with the iron clamp, and then did the same with the other; and so, after a quiet survey of his work, strode off, and left her to the jeers of the little crowd that had gathered.

Poor Penelophon! her cup was filled now past all endurance. When she looked down, it was but to find the spangled dress, which to her was like a robe of Nessus. When she turned her eyes from [Pg 260] that, it was only to see the staring townsfolk, and listen to their jeers at the painted face she could not hide. She felt each moment she would die. Such agony could not last long.

Fortunately it was not many minutes, though to her it seemed hours, before she had some relief. A fellow came running by, crying out that the bailiff had taken all the Chancellor's men, and was haling them to the court-house for summary justice. With that Penelophon's tormentors took to their heels and ran after the new excitement.

So she was left alone for half an hour or more. Her position began to grow very painful. Her feet were cramped, and the irons hurt her tender wrists, and it was a strange, undefined misery to be fastened there so long unable to move. But in a moment she forgot it all, when she heard men coming again into the deserted market-place. To be seen was the worst pain of all. She could hear the sound of horses' feet coming slowly across the square towards where she was fastened. In the bitterness of shame she hung her head, till she heard the horses stop in front of her. Then, feeling anything was better than the sight of the shameless dress that clothed her, she looked up.

With a cry of anguish she dragged at the clamps in a frantic impulse to hide her painted face; for [Pg 261] there, upon his horse, erect and handsome, and sad past words, sat Trecenito, looking at her.

For a moment their eyes met, but only for a moment. She saw him give a sort of shudder of disgust. She saw him turn with a bitter laugh to Captain Pertinax, who rode behind him, and heard him say of her a thing so terrible that it seemed to drive the very life from her heart. Like one in a swoon, she saw a vision of her angel angrily spurring his horse, and knew he had dashed away furiously out of the square with Pertinax at his heels.

CHAPTER XXI. [Pg 262]
HUNTER AND HUNTED.

"But when they knew she was good as she was fair,
Then homage to the maid they paid."

Kophetua was naturally of a much too chivalrous disposition to suffer himself to be guided far by the impulse to which his sudden meeting with Penelophon had given rise. Indeed, before he had ridden half a mile he began to find his conduct inexcusable. He fully believed the story of the beggar-maid's light behaviour which had been so carefully prepared for his ears; but to see so sudden and shocking a confirmation of her wantonness had thrown him off his balance.

Now he was recovering himself, and he felt how unworthily of his philosophy he was acting. He was foolishly resenting as a crime an action which was the natural and almost inevitable outcome of a woman's contemptible nature. This girl had made a ridiculous fool of him, to be sure; but that was no reason why he should forget his self-respect. She was in trouble. No matter who or what [Pg 263] she was, he must see her out of it. It was a rule of life with him, and, as a philosopher, he must observe his rules. They are not things to be broken with impunity.

Such was the reason he gave himself for reining in his horse and calling Captain Pertinax to his side. Yet it was hardly the real cause of his change of purpose. Kophetua had lost faith in himself and all the world. The lofty ideals of his romantic youth were withered and trodden under foot. He thought, like other men, that because they grew no longer green and vigorous in the ruined garden of his soul, that all such things for him had perished. He knew not how the flowers which once we valued highest, and whose savour seemed our very life, will fall and wither and be lost a while, only that forms of a beauty and fragrance beyond all we knew before may blossom out of their decay. So the King's good purpose sprang up and bore its flowers, but he knew not why. He remembered not how he himself had enriched with noble aspirations the soil in which it grew, nor ever guessed from what dead ideals its roots drew nourishment, deep down within his heart, in the grave where his boyhood lay buried.

"I wish you to ride back to the village," said Kophetua, in a constrained manner, as Captain Pertinax came up.

"And how can I serve your majesty there?" asked the gendarme.

"Did you recognise the girl in the stocks?" said the King. [Pg 264]

"I did, sire," answered Pertinax indifferently, as though he wished to imply it was an affair of his majesty's about which he had no curiosity, though, if the truth were told, his interest in the girl had certainly not diminished since the night he rescued her.

"Then you are aware," continued the King, "that she is the person whom you allowed to escape from your custody?"

"I am painfully aware of my neglect," answered the officer, with humility.

"Very well," said the King shortly; "go and repair it. You know your duty." And with that he gathered his reins to ride on, thinking how neatly he had got over his difficult task. But his instructions were still incomplete, and Pertinax did not go.

"Your majesty," began the officer, with hesitation.

"Well, sir?" cried the King sharply.

"Your majesty," continued Pertinax, "has omitted to indicate the destination of the prisoner when re-arrested."

"Bring her," said the King desperately,—"bring her up to the castle. Where else could you lodge her? Here is my warrant to the town bailiff." He handed his signet ring to Captain Pertinax; and the gendarme, with great alacrity, rode rapidly back to the village, where he carried out Kophetua's orders with the business-like despatch which characterised all his professional movements. [Pg 265]

As for the King, he went on to his solitude in the castle; for solitude indeed it was. It had always been his custom, when he periodically retired there, to live as far as possible the simple life of a hunter, with but one companion. It was only, he used to say, by lying in the bowers which your own axe had hewn, and living on the food which your own hand had won, that you could dip in the well-spring of life, and be made whole of all the diseases that were engendered in a civil state of existence.

Formerly this companion had always been Turbo, but that was impossible now. So when Kophetua determined to cut the bonds that were being so artfully twined round him, and boldly free himself by escape, he could think of none better to accompany him than the smart, jovial soldier with whom he had recently come in contact. He was a high-spirited, pleasant fellow enough, with a fund of stories and a rattling laugh. He was handsome, too, and good to have to look at, and, as for sport and camp-life, his fertility of resource in all the shifts and expedients of the hunter was quite phenomenal. When, added to all this, the King found that his comrade's activity and endurance were only surpassed by the sparkle and persistence of his good humour, he was delighted with his choice.

In a few days, however, Kophetua found out the difference between an attendant and a companion. As the former Captain Pertinax was complete; as the latter, entirely without value. It was well enough while they were out on the mountains, and could talk of sport or jest together over their rude meals; but when the night spread its pall of sadness and gloom over the world, Kophetua's mind was full of other things, of which he longed to speak. Once or twice he even attempted such conversation with Captain Pertinax, but the poor fellow stared at him with such a look of worried wonder that Kophetua soon desisted from his efforts. [Pg 266]

This evening they were dining in a commonplace way in the castle, and Captain Pertinax was more than ever unsatisfactory. Kophetua's meeting with Penelophon had seriously unsettled the comparative equanimity at which he had arrived, and he found it quite impossible to be interested in the soldier's conversation. So, as soon as the meal was over, he dismissed him, and sat looking out from his window over the fertile valley below. Far away it stretched, a broad, checkered expanse of cultivation, till it reached to the fantastic shapes of the mountain wall which shielded it from the Sahara. He watched the sunset glowing on its tanks and water-courses, and thought how often he had sat there with Turbo, talking over schemes for improving its irrigation. The past glowed in pleasant radiance through the veil of years, and made the present the more glaring and hideous. Do what he would, he could not keep from his mind the bright little sparks which, in the last few months, had seemed to be kindling his life. Untimely the glow had been smothered; and now it seemed as though, instead of the living fire, a smouldering smoke were rising up and spreading a black and stifling vapour over his gloomy life. As one that is suffocating, he strained unconsciously after a purer air. Again and again, in sighs that grew ever sweeter, the balmy fragrance he desired was wafted to his poisoned senses, and whence it was he could not choose but know. [Pg 267]

Down from the turret-chamber overhead it came—down from the room where lay the beggar-maid locked up all alone. It was useless to try and forget her. In the corner of the room was the little door which opened on to the turret stair; at his elbow hung the key which made her his. His solitude grew insupportable, and he began to cheat himself with reasons why he should visit his prisoner. He fell to wondering what was to be done with her. He told himself it was only half doing his work to bring her there and not try to find out how she got into trouble. Unless he knew that, there was little chance of getting her out of it. At any rate, it would only be kind to go and ask her what she would like him to do with her, and learn how he could get her back to her friends, the players. [Pg 268]

He was playing with the key now as he sat and thought. A cynical smile was over his handsome face, as he held it up in his hand, and talked to it as though it were a little devil that was stronger than he. "Why, what a stubborn little rogue it is!" he said. "Here am I, thy King and master, changing to a thousand purposes like a summer wind, whilst thou wilt not flinch or waver a hair's-breadth for all I can say. Curse thee for a stubborn rogue that will have his way at last!"

In truth, it was a stunted, sturdy-looking thing, as he held it up to the light. It seemed to Kophetua everything that he was not. "Why, lad," he cried again, "'tis thou shouldst wear the crown. Thou wouldst make a better king than I. Yes, thou shalt be king—a sturdy little stubborn king—and I'll be slave."

In bitter contempt of what he called his weakness, he laughed unsteadily as he rose and went to the door. Lightly he mounted the winding stairs, jesting wildly in a low, excited voice to the key as he went. "Hey! little rogue," he muttered, as he reached the room he sought. "Hey! little rogue. In with thee now, and have thy way." He thrust it into the lock, and turned it sharply with another "Hey! little rogue!" Then in a moment his whole aspect was changed, and he stopped [Pg 269] listening outside the closed door.

It was a sob he had heard. Just a woman's sob, low and tender, and heartrending beyond all that words can tell. What sound has power like that? The voice that tells of a gentle soul that is bruised and rent; of a tender spirit that can battle no more with its grief; of a staunch little heart that is stricken down at last, and is lying helpless in its anguish, while the woes it has so bravely fought trample it in triumph under foot.

Then another—and another—like voices that called to him out of heaven, and bade him imperiously be a man. Quietly he opened the door and looked in. She was lying on a rough pallet, still in her paint and shameless dress, sobbing herself to sleep like a child. The soft red light of the dying day shed a false glow of reality over the picture. Her little sylph-like figure glistened with an unearthly radiance as she sobbed, and the spangles on her elfish costume caught and lost the light. The colour on her cheeks glowed rich and warm, and her white breast and arms shone from out her littered hair with a fairy light of their own. She seemed an elf that was imprisoned and enchanted there; and Kophetua, moved with the beautiful sight, advanced into the room and closed the door with beating heart.

At the snap of the lock she looked up, and for a moment stared at him vacantly, as though her [Pg 270] reason were unhinged. Then she started up on the bed with the wild, helpless look of a fawn, when its captor visits it for the first time.

"What!" she cried, "not you too! Surely you have not come to mock me like the rest? Go, go! for the love of Heaven! You must not see me thus. My shame will never end if you look on it once. Go, for the love of Heaven, and come not near me! It is more than I can bear that you, too, should look at me!"

She was sitting up on the bed, resting on one arm, with her feet curled under her. The other was stretched out against him, as though to keep his presence away. Still he came near, not knowing what he did. Her beauty drew him like a charm. In the anguish of her shame Penelophon made one more effort, and, springing from her pallet, she fell on her knees before him. In wild entreaty she was gazing up out of her dark eyes, which still shone with all the added radiance of Frampa's art, and she held the hem of his coat convulsively in her little white hands as she poured forth her passionate prayer.

"Leave me, leave me!" she cried, "for the love of God! Do not be angry that I ask this thing. I have not forgotten; but you cannot understand the anguish you bring. Indeed, it is more than I can bear. You cannot tell what it is to crouch here, befouled as I am, for a man to see. If you were a [Pg 271] woman, you would guess. I know your greatness and nobleness and spotless honour. I have not forgotten; indeed, I have not, though you see me so changed. I know you cannot think an evil thought or do an evil thing, yet even you I cannot endure to see me thus. You have come in kindness, I know, to help and comfort me, as you always did. I have not forgotten. But oh! my angel, for you to see my shame is greater pain than even you can heal! So leave me—leave me, as you are great and godlike, before the anguish kills me. You have power above all to take away sorrow and drive out sin. It is you who bring down heaven to me on earth; but not even for heaven can I be seen like this. To be near you was like paradise. I have not forgotten; I cannot forget. You are all the world to me; but not as I am—not as I am!"

"But why are you thus," he said, irresolute and unable to comprehend whether it was play or earnest, "if it was not your desire? Was it not for this you ran away to the players? What else did you expect? You should be glad, they have made you so pretty."

"Don't! don't!" she said in anguish, as she hid her painted face in her hands; "I cannot bear it. I never dreamed they would be so wicked when your good mother took me to them. She would [Pg 272] punish them if she knew."

"What!" exclaimed the astonished King, "my mother took you to them? What do you mean? Tell me quickly."

And Penelophon, in a low, hurried voice, told him the story of her betrayal. Overwhelmed with shame she could hardly speak. Her distress was so acute and genuine that Kophetua's heart bled for her as she told, in simple words, of the ordeal through which she had passed unscathed. A sort of fierce, defiant joy sprang up in his heart as she ceased, to think that his own mother, with all her saintliness, the last friend who had not proved untrue, should now be found out as false and wicked and worldly as the rest. He rejoiced, for at last he was sure that he and the poor crouching thing at his feet were alone in the world together.

He had seen her in her filth and rags, he had seen her in the chaste simplicity of her handmaid's dress, he had seen her as one over whom the cleansing hand of Death had passed; yet never had

she shone so pure and holy in his eyes as now, all wantonly bedizened and painted as she was. The frame of dishonour in which her angel beauty was set seemed but to make her more divine. Humbled and ashamed, Kophetua devoutly laid his hand upon her head, and turned her face up to him. He saw no more the rouge and the paint. He marked not the wanton garb in which her [Pg 273] beauty was displayed. There was nothing there but the image of perfect womanhood which his dreams had made. He had one wild impulse to take her up in his arms and kiss away her shame, but the holiness which shone in her pleading eyes still held her sacred.

"I will go, child," he said, very gently. "I ask your pardon that I ever came. I will go and see that ere an hour is passed your suffering is ended."

She kissed the lace on the skirts of his coat, as though she would have stayed him for her thanks; but he hurried away, feeling it were guilt to look again.

Presently the women of the castle came to her with water in which she might wash, and a bundle of old clothes, too worn and stained for them to wear. So it was they obeyed the King's behest to see her fitly clad. Still they were such as she would have chosen for herself; and the night closed in upon her as she slept in peace, happy at last in her mean attire.

In the morning they came again to bring her food; but, in wonder, they saw the chamber was empty. In great trepidation they ran to Captain Pertinax for advice. With his usual determination he said the King must be awakened. The morning was well advanced, and he feared no evil consequences, especially as the news was important and pressing. He took the responsibility on [Pg 274] himself, and entered the King's bedchamber.

Presently he came out, looking very serious. They scanned his face narrowly, fearing some ill news.

"His majesty is indisposed," was all he said. "He will not come forth to-day, and will need no attendance but mine."

But the trusty captain lied for his master. The King was gone too.

CHAPTER XXII.
HERMITS.

[Pg 275]

"'For thou,' quoth he, 'shalt be my wife,
  And honoured for my queene;
With thee I meane to lead my life,
  As shortly shall be seene.'"

Far away in an interminable vista of rock and forest, which lay behind the King's hunting-tower, like the littered ruins of a world, stretched out the wilderness. Silent lay the piles of desolation, rank after rank, and voiceless save for the tales which none could understand of the ages that were gone. And wildest of all, and more silent and full of inarticulate eloquence, was the rift where the Cañon of the Hermits split the waste in two.

Deep into the bowels of the stony land a soft, little, laughing river had licked its way; and now in a cool channel, flanked with perpendicular walls, it ran on, hundreds of feet below the level of the wilderness, and seemed to rejoice to think how unenduring beside itself was the everlasting rock.

Once or twice in a century a man might find the spot as he followed a trail or sought the riches that lay hidden in the hills. And there, as he stood upon the brink of that Titanic trench, he could [Pg 276] not but feel the overpowering presence of the ages which were young when the foundations of the world were laid. He could not but feel, when he listened to the river far below, singing over its never-ending task, what a paltry scratching was the greatest work a man could do between the cradle and the grave.

Perhaps it was this that made the hermits choose it for a resting-place, and its utter solitude as well. Whatever was the cause, here they had settled, where the perpendicular walls were grimmest and highest; and here, far up in the face of the gaunt cliffs, they had hewn out caves to dwell in. Visibly there was no approach to them; but he who found his way to the little meadows at the foot, and pierced the luxuriant shrubs, that from which the mighty ramparts sprung, would have discovered on either hand a larger cave, which served at once as entrance-hall and corral to the monastery. From the inmost recess of these a rude spiral stair, cut in the solid rock, led upwards to a maze of crooked and inclined galleries communicating with the cells.

Strange as was the hermitage, the hermits were stranger still. Their order was probably without parallel in the history of Christian monasticism. For here in each cell lived monk and nun as man and wife.

The origin of the order was lost in obscurity and unknown. The literature on the subject was [Pg 277] consequently prodigious. It is hardly too much to say that Oneirian archæology lived on it. The accessible data were, however, confined to two rubbings of symbols, said to be carved on the

walls of all the cells. The younger members of the Royal Society were prepared to prove from these that the order was Pagan in its origin, and, further, that it was the original unreformed Oriental predecessor of the Eleusinian mysteries. Smart scientific and literary society took this view to a man; but plain people, such as local antiquaries, believed it to be a very ancient heresy of the Carthaginian Church. Both, perhaps, were right. The gloomy pessimism of African Christianity took many fantastic forms; and this, the most fantastic of all, may well have been a Montanist modification of some pre-existing Pagan brotherhood.

At any rate, it is certain that the order was in existence when Kophetua's ancestor founded his colony. At that time it was an isolated print of the Cross in a waste of heathendom; and, as soon as it was discovered, the old knight took it under his protection. He found a place for it in his absorptive community, along with all the other ruins of peoples and social systems with which the country was littered. He affiliated it to his beggar-guild. The order was thereafter regularly [Pg 278] subsidised; the hermits were registered; and, though amongst themselves they were all equal, they were placed under an abbot, who represented them in their relation to the state.

In those days the community had been numerous, but now its numbers had greatly fallen off. All children that were born to the hermits were taken away in infancy, to be brought up at a hospital of the order in a neighbouring town; and, though formerly many re-entered the hermitage, most of them now preferred the licence of the beggars' guild, of which they were free. Penelophon herself had been born in the monastery; but her father, on the death of his wife, had claimed his children in a fit of insane anger at Heaven, and taken to the Liberties of St. Lazarus.

The abbot had now scarce half a score of brethren and sisters to be responsible for; but he regularly made his report, and went to receive his subsidy. It was during one of these expeditions that Kophetua had encountered him out hunting. He was a pale man, with a red, ragged beard, and grey eyes, which glistened under their white lashes with an unhealthy restlessness. His spare figure, too, stooped forward with an air half feeble, half eager, so that his whole aspect was one of aimless intensity. The eagerness of the man had so struck Kophetua that he had accosted him; and, interested in his wild talk, had accompanied him, without revealing his identity, as far as his [Pg 279] cell.

Besides the hermits, Kophetua was probably the only man who knew where the rocky monastery was; and it was his first thought, after he had left Penelophon, that it was there he would be able to find a safe refuge for her. So, with the first glimmer of dawn, he had summoned her from her prison, and silently stolen out to the stables. Here he had saddled his horse, and, strapping a cushion across its withers, had ridden away, with Penelophon before him.

They spoke little as they went; she was too happy, and he half afraid. For, in the soiled and shabby gown she wore, and with her hair knotted loosely up as best she could, she seemed once more the same strange thing that first had fascinated him in its rags and filth. Presently she grew tired, and her head gradually fell upon his breast. Then, as she nestled close to him, a sense of peace came into his heart. Even as he had gone to fetch her from the turret he knew the desire of finding her a refuge was not the only reason for what he did. Another lay whispering deep down in the bottom of his thoughts. At first he would not own it; but now, as he neared the monastery, and the beggar-maid nestled still closer in her weariness, the little voice spoke louder, the fancy seemed less wild, and throne and crown and people grew faint and far away.

The abbot was getting water from the stream as, having descended the difficult bridle-way by [Pg 280] which the hermitage was reached, they approached it along the meadows. He looked up in great surprise to see riding towards him a young man in a plain hunting dress, with a girl in a grey gown, old and patched, on the saddle before him. It was many years now since a pair had come to join the hermit community, and they were younger than any novices he himself could remember. So he set down his gourd, and came forward eagerly to meet them.

"Welcome! welcome, my children!" he cried. "Even so should ye come to the holy place, riding upon one horse, even as one thought shall henceforth bear you both through life till the end. Come, my son, trust thy wife a moment to me, that I may lift her down. Then take her to thy breast for ever."

A faint flush overspread Penelophon's wan face as the hermit held up his arms to take her. And as for Kophetua, he felt his heart leap in a kind of reckless ecstasy; the blood rushed tingling through his veins, and the whispering thought that had lain so quiet seemed to spring up and speak aloud.

The moments flew by, and Kophetua let them go with never a word. Penelophon gazed with wide eyes upon him, in shy wonder that he still held back the truth. But Kophetua could not speak. The [Pg 281] long romantic ride, the almost unearthly scene about him, and the abbot's unexpected welcome had strangely affected him. That plain little word "wife" was full of magic. It seemed to have transformed his life into an old tale and himself into its unreal hero. An excitement of a delicacy he had never known took possession of him. It was like playing in a masquerade, where the audience believed what they saw was real. It was play with all the spice of earnest, and he could not bring himself to break the spell. It would be time enough to explain to-morrow, he thought. To-night, at any rate, the hermit's mistake would assure them of shelter, which it was possible he might deny if he knew the truth.

So Kophetua put his horse in the great cave on the abbot's side of the stream, and then they all went together up to his cell, where his wife prepared a frugal meal. Long they sat together,

listening to the anchorites as they talked of the blessedness of the married state; and each time they spoke of them as man and wife Kophetua's heart beat with fresh delight, and the beggar-maid blushed anew.

Night fell at last, and the hermit led them further up the long winding stair, all dark and slippery with the dripping moisture, to the cell that was to be theirs. There he placed a flickering lamp in a little recess, and then, with his blessing, left them alone in the heart of the living rock. [Pg 282]

For a little while they occupied themselves examining the gloomy abode. But the feeling of oppression, from the vast masses of rock that encompassed them, grew insupportable to the King, and he led the beggar-maid to the mouth of the cave. There they stood in silence, side by side, looking out upon the night. Before them was the giant wall of grey rock, pierced here and there with dark holes, that were caves like their own. In one glimmered a feeble light, and from it crept a weird, low sound, as of a man and a woman monotonously chanting a weary prayer. Then it ceased; the light died out with the chant, and, save for the voice of the heedless river, as it hurried on far below them, all was hushed in the majesty of the night.

The sense of perfect solitude that fell upon Kophetua then was strangely sweet. Far beyond the dark fringe of jungle that crowned the cliff rolled the solemn stars, but even they seemed nearer than the world he had left. As the last sign of life disappeared, he turned instinctively to the companion of his place. He saw her dimly in the faint starlight gazing wistfully at him. As their eyes met she leaned earnestly towards him, and half put out her hand in an unfinished gesture of supplication.

"Trecenito!" she said, and then stopped abruptly; but into the one word was gathered such intense emotion, such a world of inarticulate entreaty, that it made him start, and his breath came fast. For some moments they stood looking at each other, each deeply moved, and it was Penelophon who braved the evil silence and spoke first. [Pg 283]

"Trecenito," she said again, "why did you let them call us man and wife? Tell me, am I—am I indeed your wife?"

Once more her voice seemed to shed around the dim figure an inviolable holiness, and make him suddenly calm. Without a word he quietly stepped towards her, and deliberately put his signet ring upon her finger. Then, taking the grey form in his arms, he gently kissed the pure, pale face. In another moment she heard his firm step on the rocky stairs, and he was gone.

In the morning, when the abbot came to milk his cow, he found Kophetua fast asleep on a heap of rushes beside his horse. Immediately he roused him.

"My son, my son," he cried, "what do you here? Why are you not beside your wife?"

The King sprang up, and rubbed his eyes. Then he stared a while hard at the hermit's eager face, till he could remember where he was.

"I have no wife," he said abruptly; and, striding past the hermit, he walked rapidly to the river, and, casting off his clothes, he leaped into the cool and sparkling water.

But even the heedless river could not bring back to him the cynical calm he had lost. The ancient mystery of the place hung on him still like a spell, and the river ran by behind him, laughing in lofty contempt, as he took his way back. No longer could he think as was his wont. The grim cliffs seemed to bar him from his old philosophy; and out of the dark holes in their face, which marked the deserted cells, seemed to come whisperings of thoughts long dead. The ghosts of all the sharp griefs and insane dreaming that had wafted men and women hither, age after age, in search of peace, streamed out like some unseen miasma, and compassed him about. How many had been whirled into this silent eddy in the great river of time before him to find or wait for the telling of the great secret that vexed their soul! It was all he could bring his thoughts to rest on. He felt about him, like a living presence, the spirit of a mysticism long since dead, and he could reason no more. [Pg 284]

Suddenly he started to find himself face to face with the red-bearded hermit.

"What is this sin, my son? What is this lie?" cried the man, with unsteady anger in his eye and voice.

"It is no sin. It is no lie," answered Kophetua sharply. "She is not my wife. Last night she was, if ever man had wife. You yourself called her so, and I was sure you spoke a sudden truth; but to-day it is changed. You lied. She is not my wife. She shall not be my wife!" [Pg 285]

He was conscious of speaking like a madman, but it was all he could find to say. The hermit was in no way troubled at his wild speech. It seemed the language he best understood.

"And why not, my son?" he answered quietly, though his eyes glittered restlessly still.

"Because it was not for that I brought her here," said the King, trying to bring back clearly the events and thoughts of yesterday. "I brought her hither for refuge. She is wronged, foully wronged and persecuted, and you must give her sanctuary."

"'Tis not my office," said the hermit. "You should take her to the King."

"Nay," cried Kophetua, "her wrongs are more than a King can redress. It is you who must give her shelter."

"It is impossible," said the abbot. "By the eternal laws, which no one can break, none but man and wife may abide with us. Stay thou with her, and all will be well."

"It cannot be," answered the King. "The voice of duty calls too loud elsewhere."

"What duty is it speaks so big?" said the hermit, smiling, as though he spoke with a child, to humour it from its wilfulness.

"I am one in high place," answered Kophetua. "I am master of wide lands, and the well-being of [Pg 286] the people calls me back."

"Ah, thou art like them all, my son," said the hermit sadly; "and yet there is better than that in thee. I was even so myself long years ago. Far away to the northward, by the blue waters of the Mediterranean, I had authority over men. I had struggled for it from boyhood, for I knew there was no peace save in breeding happiness for the world; so I sought and won high place that I might teach men virtue and wisdom, and make laws to force them to it."

"And that is my life too," cried Kophetua. "It is the life it is cowardice to leave."

"Nay, hear me," continued the hermit. "There are worse sins than cowardice; and those are they which men commit in the life I led. For, mark me, however thou shalt ponder and prune and assay, yet every law thou shalt make to uproot an abuse shall sow the seed of twenty more. What law was ever proclaimed that did not bring evil in its train? I saw my choicest measures, that had cost me all the wisdom and strength that was in me, imperfect, always imperfect. As I passed by the ruins of the evil I had smitten, lo! I saw on all hands new crimes for men to commit. Look forward, I tell thee, as far as thou wilt, and look again and again in thy diligence to foresee the results for good or evil of what thou art about to do; strain thine eyes each time further into the [Pg 287] unborn time, till men shall wonder at thy foresight; yet never, never shalt thou see the end. Even close in front of where thy vision reached at furthest may slumber an evil tenfold more pestilent than that thou wouldst destroy, and the forces thou hast started shall waken it at last. If man will meddle with God's work, evil will come in the end. If he shall try to drive the chariot of the sun, he will only scorch the earth. God planted His laws in the beginning of the world that they might grow in His strength. It is only because men, in the vanity of their false wisdom, have cut and pruned and forced them to unnatural growth that there is evil in the world. Leave them alone, I say, and sin not."

"Nay, rather," cried Kophetua, "leave them and sin perforce. For how shall a man find the path of virtue if he cease to try and better his neighbours' lot."

"God has shown us the way," exclaimed the abbot, as one inspired; "join us, and thou shalt see it too. To this end woman was given to man, and man to woman. Take thou a woman to thyself, and find in her food to feed thy yearning. Take one soul, and live for it. To desire more is but vanity and ambition. Men will think themselves so great that one is not enough for their devotion; but God meant otherwise. Man and woman He made to be together, one perfect being. To cement [Pg 288] this unity He gave us the noble yearning of unselfishness, which has gone so wide astray. In their pride men let it dissipate itself in ambitious philanthropy. Love for the race is a dream. It is love of man and wife that is the only truth."

Kophetua could not but be moved by the man's earnestness, so strangely unhinged as he was by his surroundings and his troubles. The evils that the old knight's grandest fancy had bred came vividly before him. Did this hermit give the key of the mystery why his own life had been as great a failure as the beggar-guild? The hermit's solution of the great problem was easy; and sweet as it was easy.

"But I have no wife," objected the King, as he felt himself yielding.

"Ay, but there is one within thy reach," said the abbot. "Take her whom thou broughtest hither last night."

"But there is none to wed us here," answered Kophetua, still seeking an escape from the influence around him; "we will depart, and come again as man and wife."

"There is no need," said the hermit. "It is not ceremonies that unite two half-souls into one. Stay here the period of probation. Consecrate thy life to her; sacrifice thine every hour to her greater comfort; offer to her thine every thought and every action till the months of thy noviciate be expired. By such ennobling service shalt thou find thyself more truly wed to her than by the [Pg 289] grandest and most solemn rites that ever priests devised. Why, thou knowest it is true! Didst thou not feel it last night, when thou couldst not deny she was thy wife?"

Then the King could answer nothing; he wandered away without a word, and talked with other hermits. All had the same doctrine to preach, and each time its truth sank deeper into Kophetua's heart. Day after day went by, and still he did not depart. All day long the King and the beggar-maid wandered by the side of the busy river like lovers, and never were parted, save when the night fell and the abbess came to call Penelophon to the cell beside her own, or when Kophetua climbed up into the hanging woods to trap a deer and snare her a bird.

Hours they spent fishing, and took but little; for the King had no eye for his float, let it bob how it would. The most part of the time he would lie upon the flowery meadow, gazing like one bewitched at that for which he lived; and that was Penelophon, sitting before him and wreathing flowers and singing a low song, that mingled harmoniously with the happy hum of the little lives

of which the air was full. Ever and again she ceased, and the King crept to her to put his arm about her lovingly, and gently kiss the delicate face, as though he sipped honey from a flower. [Pg 290] Between each kiss she looked at him, still in shy wonder, not able to believe such happiness was real. So they would sit a little space, till the King was minded of his fishing, and rose to cast his line anew. That business done, he stretched himself upon the grass again to watch his float, and never watched it. For the maid began another garland and another song, as one that dreamed, and the King must feed his eyes again till his lips grew envious once more.

So the two worshipped one the other, and with idyllic ritual dallied through the long marriage service which the hermits had enjoined.

CHAPTER XXIII.
AN OFFICIAL REPORT.

[Pg 291]

"And she behaved herself that day
As if she had never walkt the way."

Kophetua's disappearance did little to allay the storm that was brewing in the political world. For, of course, it was very soon known that he had disappeared. News was scarce in Oneiria, and greedily sought for. To keep such a savoury morsel from the maw of the quidnuncs was even beyond Captain Pertinax's powers.

The simultaneous escape of the beggar-maid was naturally mentioned. Not that the informers wished to suggest any scandalous inferences, but merely in the interests of justice. Those who were not in the secret of her connection with the King had inexhaustible information on the point of a most authentic type. The few who knew carefully held their peace.

The Queen-mother, labouring under her unhappy misconception of the case, was heart-broken. The move she had been so proud of had brought about the very catastrophe she dreaded. She [Pg 292] was inconsolable, and in a few days retired to her country house, and refused to see any one.

As for Turbo, he was not a little anxious. His respect for the King was considerably increased by recent events, and he had a suspicion that Kophetua meant to spring a bride on him after all. He consulted his fellow-conspirator, and found that the Marquis had received the matter with his usual light-hearted confidence.

"It is merely a question of hastening the revolution a little," said M. de Tricotrin airily. "We must resolve the Council into a Committee of Safety, call a Convention Parliament, declare the throne vacant, and pass our Provisional Constitution. Nothing is simpler. On the whole, this new situation improves our prospects."

M. de Tricotrin ran off his programme as glibly as though a revolution were no more difficult than the arrangement of so many pleasant little parties, for which it was merely necessary to send out notes of invitation. Turbo was not so confident. General Dolabella was sounded. He had joined the triumvirate on the express understanding that nothing violent or precipitate or vulgar was to be done. He had been assured that the revolution should not so much as break the skin of the constitution; and he adhered. Now, to the Marquis's proposition, he offered an unqualified dissent.

"Create your committee," he said, "if you like. I have no objection; but I cannot answer for my [Pg 293] party, nor for the army nor the Church, if the Convention Parliament meets a day sooner than the natural end of his majesty's reign; and I must insist that, before taking any steps whatever, some official effort be made to discover the fate of the King."

Being commander-in-chief the General had to be humoured. As a conspirator, he was not a success. He was full of vanity and nervousness; and every one knows that is a union which breeds nothing so much as obstruction. He himself pardonably mistook the two qualities which he brought to the revolutionary councils for self-reliance and vigilance. He was always making a fuss; and, in order to remove the obstacles which he raised with prodigal fertility, Turbo and the Marquis found it more and more necessary to let him into their confidence.

The idea of the conspirators was naturally enough a republic on the Roman lines. The classics were popular at the time, and the Dual Consulate seemed peculiarly adapted for tiding over the real question which was nearest their hearts. For, of course, both Turbo and the Marquis merely regarded a republic as the foundation for a tyranny which each of them intended for himself; and had not the General's vanity been fathomless, he would have been overwhelmed with the [Pg 294] caresses which each of his colleagues showered upon him, with a view to obtaining an ally when the final struggle began.

Meanwhile everything went on as smoothly as could be expected. The conspirators and their immediate partisans anticipated no difficulty in inducing the House to accept the new constitution. The consular form seemed to remove every difficulty. Turbo would represent the Kallist party; de Tricotrin, who had quite stepped into the shoes of the Queen-mother since her retirement, the Agathist. It was agreed that they were to be the first two consuls; while the

General was to be flattered and his party consoled with the Presidency of the Senate. Dolabella was also to retain his present offices, with an enlarged salary, in view of his past services and increasing family.

So very attractive, indeed, was the prospect which the Chancellor and the Marquis had sketched out, that they were both desperately anxious to see it put in with permanent colours. They lost no time in fulfilling the General's preliminary condition—a commission was appointed to report on the disappearance of the King and the chances of his return. Voluminous evidence was taken; but the only fragment of it all that was of any value was the testimony of Captain Pertinax, and he protested that he neither knew nor could guess anything of his master's movements.

The commission promptly reported itself a failure. Theoretically, the King's person no longer existed. He was a factor that could now be eliminated from the problem. It was done without delay; the Committee of Safety began to sit, and the General's nervousness was redoubled. [Pg 295]

Yet he was not without his consolation, and he availed himself of it almost intemperately. To every new cajolery which Turbo could invent to win over the Commander-in-chief, M. de Tricotrin had one overwhelming answer, and that was his daughter. Mlle de Tricotrin, having been initiated into the whole plot, consented to obey her father's instructions, and make desperate love to the soft-hearted General, or rather to allow him to make love to her.

Could anything have added to the unhappy girl's misery, it would have been this. The old beau's gallantries were insufferable after the splendid homage of Kophetua; and the abasement under which she groaned at having to endure them with a smile was proportional to the self-respect which the King's chivalrous admiration had revived. She hated and despised herself more than ever. The memory of Penelophon's betrayal pricked and scourged her into a deep melancholy. By it she had lost not only the new-born faith in herself, but her earthly paradise as well. For as such she knew it now—the life that might have been hers. She knew that at last she loved the man whom at first she only desired. She felt she could give the whole world to have his love in return. Throneless and penniless she would take him now, and give more to win him than an empire. And this was the man she had driven to suicide or madness—she knew not what. By her crime she had poisoned herself in his eyes, and her handmaid too; and he she loved so well had fled the world in despair. She knew him well, and understood it all. It was a torment almost past endurance, and yet day by day she must smile beneath it, and push her father's scheme to try and drive the memory from her head. [Pg 296]

So she lay one afternoon upon her divan, little more than a week before the King's reign would come to an end, feeling, as the catastrophe drew near, there was nothing she would not do to repair the wrong of which she was guilty. She was awaiting the General's now daily visit, dressed voluptuously in one of those wonderful *demi-toilettes*, which drove the foolish old officer to the verge of distraction, and made him feel that one hour of her society, even at the tantalising distance she preserved, was compensation enough for all the little ease at home with which Madame Dolabella's jealousy made itself evident.

In due course he made his appearance; but it was not with the gallant air that usually distinguished him. He was evidently excited. [Pg 297]

"Mademoiselle!" he cried, seating himself beside her without ceremony or greeting, and spreading out a paper. "See here. What shall I do? I must do something, and there is no one I may safely consult but yourself."

"My dear General," said Mlle de Tricotrin, "calm yourself, and tell me all about it."

"Calm myself!" said the General, sinking his voice to an agitated whisper. "How can I? The King is alive, and I know where he is!"

Mlle de Tricotrin started up, and, seizing the paper from the General's hand, began to read it eagerly. Her beautiful lips parted, and her breath came quick and fast, as her eye ran down the lines. It was a report addressed to the Minister of Public Worship by the Abbot of the Cañon Hermits, giving him official intimation of the arrival of two novices, and furnishing him with particulars of their personal appearance for purposes of preliminary registration.

"There is no doubt who the novices are," she said.

"Not the slightest," answered the General; and then stopped, as he saw the eyes he adored dim with tears. In a moment she understood it all, and knew that another had won the love for which she could never cease to hunger. It was a bitter morsel between her lips; yet the desire to repair the injury she had done, and regain a little of the good opinion she had forfeited, prevailed over all. She had lost him, she knew, and her only consolation was to make him regret her. Could she but find some means to release him from his enchantment it would be done. His eyes would be open, and he would see what a mistake he had made. [Pg 298]

"What do you propose to do?" she asked abruptly, as she rose from her couch to hide her tears.

"To get the Committee of Safety summoned at once," he said, "and inform them of what I have discovered, that they may immediately dissolve themselves and send a deputation to the King, imploring his return."

"And you will explain to my father and the Chancellor," said Héloise, "that the revolution must go no further."

"Precisely."

"And find yourself in the Tower before the day is over."

"My dear mademoiselle!" cried the General in alarm, "what do you mean?"

"Why, my poor friend," she answered, "do you think they will go back now, with their hands on the prize? No! you have gone so far; you must go to the end. You are committed to a republic and the King's deposition."

"But this is terrible. I never intended——"

"I dare say not, General; but they intended all this for you, and it is I that have been told off to make a fool of you. Don't you see that?" [Pg 299]

"It is a little difficult at first," said the unhappy warrior lugubriously.

"So much the better," said Mlle de Tricotrin. "Pretend it is impossible. They must not think you see through them. Let no one get a sight of this report. Go on just as before; keep their eyes shut a few days longer, and leave the rest to me."

"But, my dear mademoiselle," objected Dolabella, "you cannot appreciate what it is you ask. You, no doubt, being a Frenchwoman, are used to revolutions. But to me they are unusual occurrences, and I cannot help them making me a little anxious and nervous. How can you ask me to further this desperate plot now I am aware of its enormity, on the mere chance that you, a woman——"

"Hush, my General!" she said, putting her little soft hand over his mouth, with the prettiest gesture in the world, and looking with all her art into his dazzled eyes. "Is it possible you distrust your *déesse*?"

"If I distrust, mademoiselle," said the soft-hearted soldier, utterly overcome, "at least it is impossible to resist. I will act implicitly by your directions. Deign to tell me what they are at this moment."

For a little while she paced up and down the room, not regarding her foolish adorer. Her face was flushed and agitated, as thoughts, good and evil, battled once more for supremacy. Love whispered revenge, and love whispered devotion. To which voice would she give ear at last? She felt it in her power to lift up the man who had discarded her to his throne again, or to condemn him for ever to the life which she knew would soon become intolerable to his refinement. Suddenly she paused before the General. [Pg 300]

"Place Captain Pertinax under my orders, and send him to me at once."

Like a queen she gave him her command, held her hand for him to kiss, and waved his dismissal without another word.

CHAPTER XXIV.
THE SACRIFICE OF LOVE.

[Pg 301]

"And when he felt the arrow pricke,
Which in his tender heart did sticke,
He looketh as he would dye."

It is not to be denied that in the course of a few weeks Kophetua began to find the hermits' marriage ceremony not a little irksome. It was not that the idea was any the less attractive to his imagination. Their notion of the real meaning of the period of affiance commended itself entirely to his lofty sentiments. He felt it was a reproach to civilisation that a few prayers and ritualistic forms should have been suffered to supplant the long vigil of the betrothal. The matrimonial state of his ideal was one long sacrament of transcendent sanctity, and he had come to believe that only by months of mutual worship and sacrifice could two lives be consecrated together. He grappled the situation with all the fanatical ardour of which a poet alone is capable; but from Penelophon he could get no response.

For hours he talked melodious mysticism to her in the homeliest phrases he could find, but she only looked at him in ever-increasing wonder, till her face grew so troubled that he was compelled to cease and take her soothingly in his arms to pet her like a child. Then she could understand; and, when his lips gently touched her cheek, she crept close to him, and often began to cry quite quietly, to think how far they were apart, though they sat so close. The old stained dress she wore was always tearing on the rocks and brakes, and hung in rags about her. Each new rent seemed to widen the gap; and, though she nestled never so near when his arms closed about her, she felt him growing each day more godlike, and herself sinking deeper back to beggardom. [Pg 302]

He strove to make her set him tasks to do for her, and she never could think of anything but a

flower for him to fetch or a deer to kill, and always she cried when he was gone, for very shame that such a man should do such work for her.

One day, when he had tried his hardest to make her see with his eyes, and she seemed still more troubled than ever, she had asked for a flower that grew on the cliffs above, knowing it was the best way to please him. So he hastened away with studied devotion, and quickly reached the summit. There he picked the blossom, and hurried down again, keeping steadfastly in his mind the while the wan, ragged figure, with the unkempt hair, that was awaiting him below. Leaping [Pg 303] from rock to rock, he soon reached the zigzag path by which he himself had at first descended. As he sprang down into it out of the bushes, he was startled by a little cry, and the sound of a horse's feet.

He looked up to see a vision that made his brain reel. For there before him, upon a splendid Arab, whose alarm she was controlling with matchless grace and skill, sat, more lovely in his eyes than ever, Mlle de Tricotrin. She was dressed in a riding costume of bewitching fashion, and her face was flushed and her eyes glittering in her efforts to quiet the startled horse. Everything about her was in perfect taste, and of the latest mode, and the air seemed redolent with the freshest breath of modern grace and refinement. He was painfully conscious of the impression this sudden meeting had made on him. He felt ashamed to be so caught, then angry at the intrusion, and turned on his heel to go. But another little cry, and a plunge of the horse, arrested him. His new movement had alarmed the frightened animal again. It was backing to the edge of the narrow path, where the precipice sank away to a depth of a hundred feet or more. Setting her lips, Mlle de Tricotrin was courageously trying to check the perilous movement, but in vain. Already her feet overhung the precipice. It was impossible for her to dismount, and Kophetua saw that any [Pg 304] attempt to grasp the bridle could only be fatal. In a moment he was at her side. Seizing her by the waist, he dragged her from the saddle, and then, with one frantic plunge, the Arab crashed into the abyss below.

For a little while he was obliged to support her as they stood, fearing she would faint. But she quickly recovered her strength. Then she quietly disengaged herself from his arm, and stood a little aloof.

"Your majesty has saved my life," she said simply, and then stopped, as though too moved to say more; but her words seemed to mean a thousand things.

"And how can I serve you further?" he asked, unable to take his eyes from her matchless beauty, as she stood before him trembling and agitated, with downcast eyes.

"I only ask," she answered gently, "that you should pardon this intrusion and hear my errand." He bent his head in royal assent, and she continued. "I came not idly," she said; "I came to save your people from the terrible calamity my wickedness has brought upon them. I come, King," she burst out, looking full in his face, with a little tragic air that well became the situation, "to summon you back to the duty you have deserted, to call you to the throne you have abandoned, to bid you turn your flight and face the fight once more. I come to charge you remember the name you bear, and the memory of your ancestors. Full of the spirit of the old knight I come, and with the voice of the [Pg 305] mighty dead I charge you rise from your enchantment. Traitors are creeping to your royal hearth. Rise up and strangle them. It was never so shamed before."

Then, with glowing words, and form transfigured, as it were, by inspiration, she told him of the plot which was on foot to wrest the sceptre from him. As the rich voice rang in his ears, he began to catch her enthusiasm, till anger filled his heart, and his eyes were open.

"By the splendour of God!" he cried, "they shall know a Kophetua is yet alive and reigns. I will return and crush them. If I leave the throne, it shall be of my own free will, and in favour of whom I will. I will return and teach them what it is to rouse the soul of the knight. Come! I will return, I say; I—and my Queen."

His voice fell nervously as he uttered the last words, and she dropped her eyes and bowed her head in touching resignation that was almost more than he could bear.

"You must descend with me," he said, with an embarrassed air, "to eat and rest before we start."

So they went down together, he helping her past the difficult places; and each time he touched her hand he felt a thrill pass through him, as though some subtle poison was passing upon his life.

"It is difficult to know how to thank you, mademoiselle," he said, after a long silence. [Pg 306]

"It is not thanks I desire," she answered. "It is forgiveness."

"But how did you find my retreat," he asked quickly, to change the key.

"Devotion to your majesty is a cunning guide," she replied. "It was that which showed me the way."

"May I not know who were your allies?" he asked.

"Your majesty may know anything that I have to tell. You have only to command."

"Then I command; for, thanks to you, mademoiselle, I am still a King."

"It was Captain Pertinax," she said, looking up with a bright, happy glance at his words. "He

consented to bring me hither, when I told him what my errand was. He followed your trail the day after you fled, but never opened his lips till I begged him for your sake. He is waiting above till I return."

"He shall not wait long," said the King, not a little touched by his new follower's fidelity, and feeling there was much in the world he had never known before. But he said no more; for now they emerged from the bushes, and came suddenly upon a beggar-girl standing in the meadow, a homely figure in shabby rags, with fingers stained with berry juice, and hair matted and unkempt, and a wan, vacant face. What had happened? Was this indeed the idol he had been [Pg 307] gilding so long? Was she so suddenly changed, or were his eyes dazzled by the vision on which he had been gazing too long?

Penelophon it was, indeed, and quite unchanged. Mlle de Tricotrin knew her at once; and, while Kophetua stood stricken with a sickening sense of disillusionment, she went towards the wondering girl. On her finger was the King's signet ring, and Héloise recognised it immediately. So, with the air of resigned humility that was so telling in that queen of women, she knelt upon the grass and loyally kissed the beggar-maid's hand.

"I crave your majesty's pardon," she said, as she bent over the berry-stained fingers.

Kophetua could endure no more. "She is not my wife!" he cried hastily. "We are not married yet. Rise, and reserve your homage till our wedding day."

Mlle de Tricotrin rose as he spoke. Their eyes met; the same thought flashed across them both, bringing a flush on the face of each. As it were in lines of fire, he saw the mistake he had made. He saw there was nothing about his idol but the mystic robes in which he had clothed it. It was his own dreaming he had been trying to love. Bright and resistless as the morning Héloise had burst upon him, and he knew the day from the night. Bitter indeed was the awakening; for, come what would, he could never betray the woman to whom his troth was plighted. [Pg 308]

"Here is your flower, Penelophon," he said, and kissed her as he gave it. But the beggar-maid had no eyes but for her mistress, and she blushed like a guilty thing to see the look of anguish that came over the face she loved so well. Then suddenly she sprang from Kophetua's embrace, and, flinging herself at Héloise's feet, she sobbed and sobbed again.

It was long before Penelophon's agitation could be calmed; but Mlle de Tricotrin coaxed away her tears at last, and then they sat beside the stream maturing their plan of action. Long Kophetua and Héloise talked. She was full of expedients, and he hung on her lips while she eagerly poured out to him her schemes for saving the throne. And Penelophon sat listening, but not to what their words were saying. Forgotten and unnoticed, she sat gazing upon them with unspeakable sadness. Their voices said things to her that were more than she could bear. They told her plainly that in the pursuit of her own happiness no lasting joy was to be found. How could she ever delight in her own poor ballad if it stood in the way of so full a poem being sung. And, as she listened to the harmony of the souls she loved, there came to her fragile face a weary smile, sadder than all her tears. Still, unperceived, she quietly rose and wandered away across the [Pg 309] meadow. From time to time she looked back to where they sat absorbed in each other. She marked Héloise's animated talk, and she saw the noble look of resolution that illumined her hero's face. Still smiling, as might some martyr as rude hands bound her to the stake, she wandered on, nor ever stopped, except where she could get a glimpse of the lessening figures beside the stream. At last she came to where the gendarme's horse was cropping the turf, and Captain Pertinax was snoring loudly on the sward. She looked at the handsome, soldierly figure for a while with a strange expression, and then awoke him.

"Rise, Captain," she cried; "I bring you orders from the King."

He was on his feet in a moment, rigidly saluting her. "To-morrow at dawn his majesty will set out for the capital to do the work you know of. To you he commits me. You saved me once, and it is to you he trusts me again. Mount and away. For you are to go before and see me to a place of safety. See, here is your warrant," and with that she held out to him her hand, on which was the King's signet ring.

"But how are we to travel?" said the Captain uneasily, saluting the ring.

"You must take me on the saddle before you," she answered, with a pretty smile, that redoubled the gendarme's uneasiness. "You do not mind that?"

"Mind it, mistress!" said he. "No, but——" [Pg 310]

"Then, I pray you lose no time," she replied, "but this instant strap your cloak upon the saddle to make a seat for me."

She went to him as she spoke, and laid her hand coaxingly on his arm. Poor Penelophon! she could be woman enough with this rough soldier, and she did not scruple to turn against him the honourable weapons with which her weakness was armed. Where is the true woman who would not do the same, and do it well in a good cause?

Never in her life had Penelophon so armed herself before. But the skill to wield the gentle weapons is born in every woman that is worth the name, and she knew her part as though she had practised it all her life, and she saw she was gaining ground by strides. Men's fullest might may appear when they are struggling for themselves, but a woman is strongest for those she

loves. She saw he could not hold out long, and grew more winsome every moment, as the bitter end for which she fought drew near.

While Captain Pertinax was getting ready her seat, she prattled such gentle nothings, and helped him with such pretty confusion, that the big soldier was almost undone; and, as soon as they were on their way, an ominous silence fell upon them.

Penelophon was holding on by the Captain's belt, and he, with a troubled air, sitting far back away from her, as though she were a noxious thing. Presently she looked up at him shyly, as though she were about to say something. He was looking resolutely in front of him. Still it could not be but that their eyes met. He quickly stared ahead again, and twisted his moustache fiercely. In a few minutes it happened again, and this time he desperately struck his spurs into the horse to relieve his feelings. The animal started forward, Penelophon reeled in the saddle, and he had to put his arm about her to prevent her falling. [Pg 311]

"Thank you," she said, looking up at him again with pretty diffidence; "I feel much safer now. There is no one takes care of me like you."

Then once more her prattle flowed; and, beating down the shame she felt as his arm closed more and more fondly about her, she stabbed him with tongue and eye and dimpled smiles till flesh and blood could endure no more.

The pretty little form was now nestling close to him in frank confidence. Once more he struggled to be loyal to his master's charge, and then he bent down and kissed the delicate face. She winced just a little—he could feel that—and the blood rushed to her face; and somehow he felt, in a moment, thoroughly ashamed of himself.

"Do you love me then so much?" she asked, looking up at him frankly once more. [Pg 312]

"'Sblood! lass," he burst out, "could iron and stone help loving such a little flower? I love you more than my sword, and more than my horse—ay, and more than the King himself."

"Ah! then," she said, "I can give you all the King's orders. I did not like to before."

He could feel her trembling in his embrace, and his voice was very gentle as he answered, "Why, pretty one," he said, "what were they?"

"He said," she answered, bravely meeting his passionate gaze, "that I should never be safe from my persecutors till I was some brave fellow's wife."

"And he said that I was to be the man?" cried Pertinax eagerly.

"But I could not give you his order," she answered shyly.

"Heaven bless him! Heaven bless you!" he said, with feeling, and kissed her again, and pressed her to him so fondly that she began to feel very peaceful and reconciled. She continued to beguile him with such pretty talk as she never could find for the King, and the big soldier was beside himself with love and tenderness. He begged her to tell him when she would marry him. Once more he thought she shuddered in his embrace, but it might have been fancy; for directly [Pg 313] afterwards she put her hand in his, and looked up at him tenderly as she answered. "When we reach the castle," she said. "There is no need to wait. The priest shall do it in the little chapel at the foot of the hills. It is better so; for then all will be safe, and we can wait till the King comes, and journey onward all in one company."

Vainly Kophetua and Héloise sought for Penelophon when the time came to set out. Not a trace of her could they find, and the Titanic walls of the cañon flung back their cries unanswered. They looked one at the other guiltily, and made their search far apart and in different directions. At last the abbot told them he had seen her climbing the bridle-path that led out of the cañon. There was no time to lose. The journey could not be delayed. So the King lifted Héloise on to his horse, and himself going on foot, led it up the ravine in pursuit.

Not a word he spoke, but looked resolutely onward, trying to catch a glimpse of the grey rags. Nor did she seek to break the silence or attract his attention. She saw well his agitation at being thus alone with her, and she sat upon the horse with downcast eyes, as though she too were ashamed. She was resolved to do no treason to the girl she had wronged. The self-respect for which she longed told her it was best, and love told her that resignation was the only means to turn to her the heart for which she pined.

In this way they reached the spot where Pertinax had waited. He was gone too. Again the King [Pg 314] searched and shouted, and the echoes seemed to laugh and mock at him, as though they knew he did not hope to find, but only dreaded to begin the journey anew. But it could not be put off for long. Time was flying, and if the throne were to be saved they must hasten on their way. He returned nervous and agitated to where the beauty lay, resting amongst the flowers in an attitude of enchanting grace. Her loveliness was like a pain to him; but fate had fastened them together, and the ordeal to which he felt his manhood unequal must begin at last.

"Mademoiselle," said he abruptly, "it is useless to seek further. We must ride away fast in pursuit."

Their eyes met a moment. A flush overspread her face, and Kophetua turned away, to throw himself fiercely into the saddle. No sooner was he mounted than she came to his side, with a little

air of embarrassment. At his curt request she put her dainty foot on his, and he lifted her up in front of him on to Penelophon's cushion. A glade of turf stretched away before them, and it was necessary to make the most of it before the difficult desert was reached, in order to recover the time they had lost. For one moment the King sat irresolute; in another he had desperately put his [Pg 315] arm about the bewitching shape, drawn the soft burden to his breast, and with heart aflame, and head in a delirious whirl, was spurring on at a rapid pace between the rustling trees.

So, like Pertinax and Penelophon, upon one horse, and with hearts that beat as one, Kophetua and Héloise came to the King's hunting-tower.

The shades of night had closed the day that followed. The moonlight was glimmering in through the narrow windows of the chamber where Mlle de Tricotrin lay. Not a sign of Penelophon had been found, nor had Captain Pertinax returned. Oppressed with the silence of the night in the lonely castle, Héloise was haunted by a terrible idea. She began to be certain that her handmaid had destroyed herself. The awful stillness seemed to whisper "murderess" to her uneasy conscience, and an appalling sense of guilt tormented her. Long she lay in fevered unrest; but at last, wearied with her arduous journey, and exhausted with the sweet excitement of the ride, she fell into a restless slumber.

But still she tossed uneasily upon her couch. The arm of him she had tried to steal from her victim seemed still about her. The last passionate kiss, in which he had said "Good night," still tingled on her lips. With a distinctness that terrified her, she felt his hand was once more [Pg 316] pressing hers, and she started up wide awake.

Still the pressure was there. Something was holding the hand which, in her restlessness, she had tossed outside the coverlet. With a low cry of terror she snatched it away; for there, crouching by her bedside in the ghostly moonlight, was the dim grey figure of her whose blood was on her head. In an agony she looked to find some brand upon her flesh where the spectre had touched it. She could see, in the white beams which fell upon it, there was none; but, with even greater terror, she knew her hand was wet with tears, and on it glistened the signet ring of the King.

Then into the midst of her terror broke a stifled sob, and the spell began to dissolve.

"Child," said Héloise, in a hoarse whisper, "is it you?"

No answer came, but another sob, and Héloise stretched out her hand to touch what seemed her handmaid's tangled hair. Slowly she moved it, with bated breath, in an agony lest she should feel nothing. But it was flesh and blood indeed, and Penelophon seized the hand that touched her, and covered it with kisses. In a few broken words she told her tale, and Héloise listened and blushed like a culprit who receives the reprimand of some august and stainless court.

"But where have you been?" was all she could think of to say when the tale was done. [Pg 317]

"We hid in the town down there away from you," Penelophon answered. "For after we were married he was afraid of the King's anger, and bid me let no one know till he had set Trecenito on the throne again, and then he would be forgiven. But I could not wait. So at dusk I stole up to the castle, and lay in the outhouses till all was still; then I crept up here, where I heard them say you were lodged, for I could not bear to think you were mourning for Trecenito; so I thought to come and put his ring on your finger that you might know he was yours and you were his at last. I would have done it secretly, and then departed; but you awoke, and I could not but tell you all, and hear your voice. For God knows," she continued, breaking down again, "I want comfort. He is kind and good, but it is a terrible thing I have done. I have given myself to buy the happiness of him we both love—you and I. It is done, and I would not have it undone; but, indeed, it is a terrible thing, and hard to bear when I am not near you or him."

"Stay, stay, Penelophon!" cried Mlle de Tricotrin; "I cannot bear to hear you speak like this. You are a saint, an angel, and I am worse than the fiends. You shall always be near me, and make me [Pg 318] like yourself. You shall never leave me again. Come now to me; come and lie in my arms, and try to make me like yourself."

As she spoke she clasped the slight grey figure to her breast, and soon the two loves of Kophetua were sleeping peacefully in each other's arms.

CHAPTER XXV. [Pg 319]
THE CROWN OF KISSES.

"And when the wedding day was come,
The king commanded strait."

The events of the next few days need not be told at any great length. Indeed, they belong more properly to the general history of Oneiria than to the foregoing episode, and are certainly a little too tragic to be pleasant reading.

The last day of Kophetua's celibate reign began with a formidable riot. M. de Tricotrin had put

the second string to his bow. He was a true Parisian, and for political purposes a mob held the next place in his esteem to a woman. "The two things resemble each other closely," he was fond of saying. "Both are impulsive, fickle, and easily cajoled. Any one who can manage the one can control the other." He regarded himself as in full enjoyment of this capacity, and on the desertion of his daughter he at once looked out for a mob to fill the gap she had left in his ranks. Within the Liberties of St. Lazarus he found an organised rabble ready to his hand. In his character of [Pg 320] intelligent foreigner he had already visited them several times under a safe conduct from the "Emperor," and had at once recognised their capabilities as a revolutionary engine.

At the present crisis he lost no time in renewing his previous acquaintances, and found that the Jacobin seedlings which, like the Laird of Dumbiedykes, he was "aye stickin' in," as a matter of habit, wherever he went, had flourished exceedingly. They had been growing while he was sleeping. He found himself in the midst of a vigorous crop of rods for the chastisement of his rival and the cleansing of the precincts which he meant to be sacred to himself. Furthermore, he found out Penelophon's father, and through his agency was able to redouble the energy of his machinery by stirring up a *Jehad* against Kophetua and Turbo for their profanation of the Liberties.

The result of his diplomacy was that, on the morning upon which the Convention Parliament was to meet to vote the new constitution, the beggars poured like a flood from the Liberties and took possession of the House. Under the Marquis's direction they speedily set about barricading every approach to it, and when that work was well in hand the Frenchman gave the word to march upon the Tower and the Palace. On the way he was met by Turbo at the head of the royal watch; but a vigorous volley of stones and a roaring rush of the beggars put those purely ornamental [Pg 321] officials to flight, and it was with difficulty that Turbo escaped to the palace.

As it was, he received an ugly wound in the head from some rude missile; yet never for a moment did he lose his presence of mind, and with admirable coolness he set about the defence of his quarters, till the gendarmes, to whom at the first alarm a summons had been sent, should arrive. Meanwhile the most determined assaults followed one upon the other from the beggars. Showers of missiles crashed through the windows of the palace, and only ceased while ladders were set up for an attempted entry by the unprotected first floor. Again and again they were hurled down, and again and again a hail of stones and potsherds drove Turbo and his desperate followers from the windows. Nothing seemed to daunt the fury of the beggars, or to abate for a moment the awful clamour of the assault. The rioters were long past the Marquis's control; and when a number of the wildest were seen dragging straw and faggots to fire the building, he knew it was useless to thwart them; so he rushed into the thickest of the fray to inspire them to new efforts. A pile of inflammable materials soon rose against the palace; torches began to smoke on the outskirts of the howling mob, when suddenly a ringing cheer rose above all. The gendarmes were upon them. A roar from a hundred carbines drowned the yells of the maddened throng. The [Pg 322] bullets tore through the swaying masses, and the bright blades of the cavalry glittered and grew red, as time after time they hurled themselves upon the mass, and wheeled and charged again. The beggars were helpless and terrified with the ping and thud of the bullets to which they were entirely unaccustomed. Assaulted from two sides, they were crowded into helplessness. The Marquis could do nothing. He was squeezed a hopeless prisoner against the faggots. The mob was leaderless, and now carbines began to flash and crack from the upper floors of the palace. Window after window was occupied by protruding muzzles, and a rain of bullets fell on the devoted mass below. The slaughter was fearful. The panic-stricken throng screamed for quarter; but Turbo looked on grimly with set lips, and would not utter a word to allay the carnage. Thinner and more frantic grew the struggling herd, till, in a last despairing frenzy, they hurled themselves upon one detachment of the breathless cavalry, and, with fearful loss, burst through their ranks. A rush for the Liberties followed, regardless of the sabres that charged through and through the flying groups. The townsfolk, who had remained secure at home while the danger lasted, now poured out to fall upon the helpless outcasts, and the slaughter never ceased till the last of the bleeding remnant was safe within the narrow tortuous streets behind the beggars' [Pg 323] gate.

Turbo had triumphed. On a ghastly heap of dead and dying beggars lay the Marquis de Tricotrin, with a bullet through his head. The Chancellor laughed to think what success after all he had reaped from his idea of concentrating the gendarmerie. He had lost his love, but he had gained a crown. After rapidly giving orders for blockading the beggars within the Liberties, and furnishing guards for the House, he sat down to consider the speech he would deliver to secure his election as head of the State. But his brain ached and throbbed, his wound seemed on fire, and he could not think. He sent for a surgeon, who insisted on bleeding him, and told him it would be certain death for him to attend the sitting of Parliament. He assured the Chancellor that his wound had produced concussion of the brain, and that he could not answer for the consequences if he exposed himself to the excitement of the approaching debate. Turbo knew the doctor was right, and felt only too acutely that he could not do justice to himself even if he attended the House. So he consented to remain at the palace and leave his cause in the hands of his lieutenants.

In due course the Convention met under the presidency of General Dolabella. In spite of Turbo's enforced absence, the Kallists anticipated an easy victory, for the plain reason that there was no [Pg 324] candidate but their own in the field. It was then to the surprise of everybody that Count Kora moved an amendment in favour of the Queen-mother. A scene of the wildest confusion ensued. Every one spoke at once, while the General exhausted himself in crying for order. Before noon it was understood that seventeen challenges had been given, and three of them fought in the

courtyard. The mid-day adjournment alone allayed the storm, and the Kallikagathists took advantage of it to place a common-sense motion on the paper. Common-sense was their rarest treasure. It was their political and social panacea. Their faith in it was profound and, indeed, astonishing, as their specific was usually found to be compounded of the weakest elements of the other two parties' prescriptions. In the present crisis they did not belie their reputation. In dignified and well-restrained terms their motion recommended an address to the Queen-mother and the Chancellor, humbly requesting them to marry and rule the State as King and Queen by the advice of the Parliament.

More furious than ever raged the storm as this cross-wind burst upon it; and, as from time to time news of the progress of the debate was brought to Turbo at the palace, he began to dwell strangely on Cromwell and his files of musketeers. But before he could make up his mind to take the violent course on which he was thinking, the door which led from the private garden staircase [Pg 325] was suddenly burst open. Turbo started to his feet. A wild throb of his heart sent the blood rushing to his reeling head, and, glaring like a madman, he stood transfixed, with the sight of Kophetua and Penelophon hand in hand.

They, too, were no less astonished. Early that morning, together with Captain Pertinax and Mlle de Tricotrin, they had secretly reached the old hunting lodge in the park. There the gendarme went out and gathered news of what was passing; on his return the Kings resolve was soon taken. Mlle de Tricotrin was conducted to her own house that she might change her dress for the coming ceremony. Pertinax was her escort, as it was considered necessary that the King should not run any risk of his presence being discovered till the last moment. Kophetua, therefore, undertook to see Penelophon to a place of safety. He could think of no better refuge than his own library, which he could reach by his private way. It was no wonder then that both were thunderstruck at the sight which met their eyes as they emerged from the dark stairway.

The splendid room was literally wrecked. Every fragile thing in it was smashed to pieces. The floor was scattered with stones and potsherds. A heavy missile had struck the old knight's trophy, and his arms lay in a heap on the ground. The picture of the King and the beggar-maid was torn [Pg 326] and riddled past recognition. But most shocking of all was the glaring, ghastly hideousness of Turbo in the midst. His face was pale as death, and rendered horrible beyond expression by the bloodstained cloth that concealed his forehead.

It was not long that they stared at each other thus. Turbo's face began to work malignly, and at last he burst out into a demoniac scream, as he saw the sweet fruit of his lifelong scheming about to be snatched from his teeth.

"Ah!" he cried, with terrible oaths, "you have her still—my own little love that you stole! You think you will steal the crown from me as well. With my own little love, whom you stole, you will steal it. Ha! ha! you think that? But I will tear my little love in shreds first. I will tear her, I will rend her, since my love can do no more. You think you have found a pretty head to wear the 'Crown of Kisses.' I tell you the people's kiss shall fall on a face that is dead, and you shall have a corpse for a Queen!"

With another scream he rushed upon Penelophon, who stood rooted to the spot with terror. But in the midst of Turbo's frenzied outburst Kophetua had snatched up the old knight's rapier which lay at his feet, and as the mad Chancellor sprang upon his prey he fell back with an agonised scream. The long glittering blade had pierced him through and through, and he rolled over [Pg 327] amongst the stones and potsherds, dead.

The tragedy stirred into a godlike flow all the heroism of Kophetua. With the reeking rapier in his hand he felt he could face the whole world; and, striding from the polluted chamber, still holding Penelophon by the hand, he descended the great staircase to meet the guard who were timorously approaching to ascertain the meaning of the unearthly sounds in the library.

The authority of Kophetua's presence was irresistible. In a very short time Penelophon was safe with a guard of the palace watch; and the King, mounted on a fresh horse, and followed by a troop of gendarmes, was on the way to the Marquis's house.

Mlle de Tricotrin's toilette was complete when the King arrived, and she tripped down to him entirely concealed under a splendid mantilla of white lace. A led horse was ready for her. The King lifted her upon it. The cavalcade once more started, and, after threading its way through the corpses and groaning heaps of the wounded beggars, that sometimes almost blocked the way, they reached the courtyard of the House.

Two prominent members were fencing furiously before the portico, and it seemed clear the Kings approach was unsuspected. One officious chamberlain had hurried off unbidden to announce it; but so wild was the confusion and excitement within that he could get no one to listen to him. No [Pg 328] wonder then that the whole throng was struck dumb and the uproar hushed as in a voice of thunder the King was heard demanding in constitutional form admission to the House. Without waiting for an answer he pushed his way through the astonished crowd that covered the floor. In his right hand he still held the old knight's rapier, red with Turbo's blood; in the other he led the veiled white figure of the woman who accompanied him. Awed by the mystery and majesty of the King's entrance, the members all fell back, and Kophetua and his companion ascended the dais, where Dolabella rose to receive them.

For a little while the King stood, sword in hand, proudly surveying the murmuring throng beneath him, and waiting for complete silence. But the murmurs only increased. A whisper was

spreading from member to member that the King had arrived at the palace with a ragged beggar-girl, and meant to insult the nation and deride the constitution by making her his Queen at the last moment. Some of the members in the back rows began crying, "Long live the Republic!" and others who were nearer called out, "Privilege! privilege!" At last some one dared to shout, "Down with the beggar King and his light-o'-love." Then a new fire flashed from Kophetua's eyes, and, swinging aloft his bloodstained rapier, with a commanding gesture he thundered out, "Silence for your King!" In a moment the assembly was hushed, as though the wings of death had passed over it, and the impassioned voice of the angered monarch rose solemnly out of the silence. [Pg 329]

"Traitors!" he cried. "Behold the blood of a traitor. The sword of the old knight has this hour made new its youth with the blood of your leader, and I am strong in its strength. Beware how you teach it to thirst again; for if it cries to me for traitors' blood, by the splendour of God I will give it drink! But what is the need? To you, as to me, our ancient laws are sacred. By them I am still your King, and in devout subjection to them I bring you a Queen to crown. Behold her!"

So saying, he swept the white veil from the figure at his side, and a strange low murmur passed over the throng, as though some witchcraft had struck them dumb. However the more violent members had been tempted to resent the Kings threatening speech, the vision which was suddenly flashed upon them paralysed every other thought. Mlle de Tricotrin's education had not been such as to make her under-estimate the importance of the part she had to play at the supreme moment. It has been said it was the custom of the country for the would-be queen to be presented to the House armed with every device that could enhance her charms. Mlle de Tricotrin knew the custom well, and took advantage of the opportunity the King had afforded her of doing justice to his forethought. Kophetua had had every confidence in the personal impression she would make; but even he started and held his breath to look on the figure he had just unveiled. For a moment he was shocked that his wife should so have made herself an eye-feast for the gaping throng, but his pain gave place immediately to pleasure to see how her beauty triumphed. [Pg 330]

Indeed, it was dazzling beyond expression. Everything about her voluptuous costumes to which the prudes had objected before was this day boldly exaggerated. The family diamonds, to which through all his troubles the Marquis had clung, shone upon her white arms and breast, and flashed out from her luxuriant hair. The soft thin robe that wrapped her seemed meant to display rather than to hide. As she raised her beautiful eyes, that they might see her loveliness to the full, a burning flush overspread her face, and seemed to redouble her beauty. It was more than the strength and boldness to which she had trusted could endure. A sudden shame to think how she stood there alone, exposed before that throng of men, overwhelmed her. Too late she learned how Kophetua's love had changed her. The devouring eyes of the ravished throng were piercing her like knives. She began to tremble violently, and Kophetua seized her hand. [Pg 331]

"Kneel," he whispered, "and be brave a little while longer."

A renewed murmur of admiration arose, as with matchless grace she knelt on the cushion which Kophetua had pushed to her feet. The new pose, and the accomplished sweep she gave her drapery as she assumed it, inflamed the assembly anew. A confused murmur arose; and in the midst General Dolabella, unable any longer to control himself, sprang from his chair, clasped the kneeling beauty in his arms, and kissed her heartily on the lips.

"Rise!" he cried, beside himself with excitement at the prospect of an end to his political anxieties, and the intoxication of the salute. "Rise, my dear young lady, crowned with a people's kiss!"

She sprang from his embrace to her lover's arms, and, hiding her face on his breast, burst into tears. In a moment he had veiled his treasure again from further profanation, and even as he did so the assembly found voice. The Oneirians, it has been said, were an imaginative people, and the scene they had just witnessed took them by storm. With one accord they shouted, "Long live Kophetua and his Queen of Kisses!" nor did they cease till every man of them had filed by to claim his privilege of saluting the new Queen's hand. The ceremony was long, but Héloise endured it well. For, with Kophetua's arm about her, she soon recovered her courage; and, unveiling her blushing face, she looked so radiant with happiness, and smiled with such ravishing sweetness on each member as he came, that there was not one who would not there and then have died for her sake. [Pg 332]

In a triumph of loyal enthusiasm, the King and Queen-elect rode back to the palace, and there were married in the chapel. The ceremony was necessarily a quiet one. It was attended only by the great officers of state and the personal adherents of the bride and bridegroom. Pertinax was there in his new capacity of Gentleman of the King's Bedchamber, and Penelophon radiant and happy to think she was chief Bower-lady to the Queen.

After the ceremony, when Pertinax attended the King to his privy chamber, he announced that he had a report to make. He had taken the liberty, he said, while the King was at the House, of leading his own troop of gendarmes into the precincts of St. Lazarus, to complete the work for which he had been originally summoned.

"I discovered the Beggar Emperor," he said, "on his throne in the Guildhall, and hanged him in front of it. I trust your majesty will forgive me. He behaved disgracefully to my wife."

Kophetua winced; he felt he had deserved hanging on the same charge, but consoled himself to think how devoted a substitute Penelophon had found, and smilingly commended his favourite's [Pg 333]

zeal.

Captain Pertinax had not reported the whole of his proceedings; for when Penelophon entered her mistress's boudoir, to which Héloise had been conducted in state, the Queen noticed she wore a strange ornament of gold upon her head, and asked her what it was.

"It is the Beggar Emperor's crown," she said, looking down and blushing.

"But where did you get it from?" asked the Queen.

"My Pertinax took it and gave it me," answered Penelophon; and then with a shy smile went on, "He said if Trecenito's wife were a Queen, his bride was worthy to be an Empress. So he crowned me with the Emperor's crown; and—and he crowned me with kisses too."

"Then you love him," cried the Queen, looking up fondly at her handmaid.

"He is very kind," said Penelophon; "but while you are here for me to love I think I can never love another."

Then Héloise felt a guilty pang like the King, and resolved to deserve the measureless love of the two hearts she had won.

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