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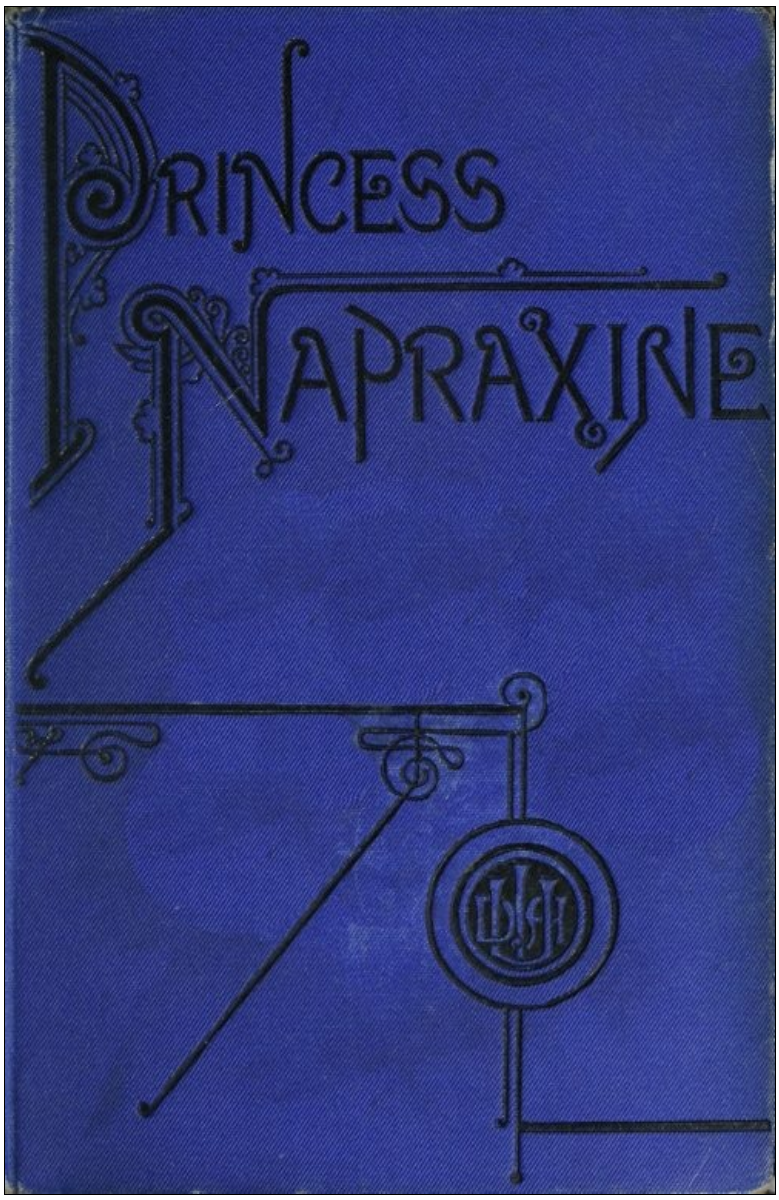

Princess Napraxine

II.

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Princess Napraxine

BY

OUIDA

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

London

CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1884

PRINCESS NAPRAXINE. [1]

CHAPTER XIV.

When her husband and her guests came downstairs at one o’clock, they found the Princess Nadine looking her loveliest.

‘Oh, you lazy people!’ she cried to them. ‘Are you any the better for sleeping like that? Look at me. I have been swimming half an hour; I have dictated twenty letters; I have scolded the gardeners, and I have seen three boxes from Worth unpacked; it is only one o’clock, and I can already feel as good a conscience as Titus. I have already saved my day.’

‘I daresay you have only been doing mischief,’ said Lady Brancepeth. ‘I should like to see the letters before I judge of the excellence of your actions.’

‘Anyone might see the letters; they are all orders, or invitations, or refusals of invitations; quite [2] stupid, but very useful; epistolary omnibus horses driven by the secretary. When I had done with them, I had my half hour’s swim. What nonsense the doctors talk about not swimming in winter: the chill of the water is delicious. In summer one always fancies the sea has been boiled. Platon, if you had not gone to bed, you would have seen your friend Othmar. He was here for half an hour.’

‘Othmar!’ exclaimed the Prince. ‘Here at that time of the morning?’

‘He does not want to go to sleep,’ she retorted. ‘He had his chocolate with me, and then rowed himself back to S. Pharamond and Baron Fritz.’

Lady Brancepeth glanced at her.

‘You have certainly done a great deal, Nadine, while we have been only dozing,’ she said drily. The Princess looked at her good-humouredly, with her little dubious smile.

‘There is always something to do if one only look for it. You feel so satisfied with yourself too when you have been useful before one o’clock.’

‘Othmar!’ repeated the Prince. ‘If I had known, I would have come downstairs.’

‘My dear Platon, you would have done nothing of the kind; you would have sworn at your man for [3] disturbing you, and would have turned round and gone to sleep again. Besides, what do you want with Othmar? You do not care about “getting on a good thing,” nor even about suggesting a loan for Odessa.’

‘I like Othmar,’ said Napraxine with perfect sincerity. His wife looked at him, with her little dubious smile. ‘It is always so with them,’ she thought. ‘They always like just the one man of all others——!’

‘I suppose, if I had done quite what I ought, I should have asked Othmar to “put me on” something,’ she said aloud. ‘It is not every day that one has one of the masters of the world all alone at eight o’clock in the morning.’

‘The masters of the world always find their Cleopatras,’ said Lady Brancepeth. ‘At La Jacquemerille, perhaps, as well as in Egypt.’

‘Cleopatra must have been a very stupid woman,’ said Nadine Napraxine, ‘to be able to think of nothing but that asp!’

‘I do not know that it was so very stupid; it was a good *réclame*. It has sent her name down to us.’ [4]

‘Anthony alone would have done that. A woman lives by her lovers. Who would have heard of Héloïse, of Beatrice, of Leonora d’Este?——’

‘You are very modest for us. Perhaps without the women the men might never have been immortal.’

‘I cannot think why you sent Othmar away,’ repeated Prince Napraxine. ‘I wanted especially to know if they take up the Russian loan——’

‘I did not send him away, he went,’ replied his wife, with a little smile; ‘and you know he will never allow anyone to talk finance to him.’

‘That is very absurd. He cannot deny that his House lives by finance.’

‘He would certainly never deny it, but he dislikes the fact; you cannot force it on him, my dear Platon, in the course of breakfast chit-chat. I am sure your manners are better than that. Besides, if you did commit such a rudeness, you would get nothing by it. I believe he never tells a falsehood, but he will never tell the truth unless he chooses. And I suppose, too, that financiers [5] are like cabinet ministers—they have a right to lie if they like.’

‘I am sure Othmar does not lie,’ said Napraxine.

‘I dare say he is as truthful as most men of the world. Truth is not a social virtue; tact is a much more amiable quality. Truth says to one, ‘You have not a good feature in your face;’ tact says to one, ‘You have an exquisite expression.’ Perhaps both facts are equally true; but the one only sees what is unpleasant, the other only sees what is agreeable. There can be no question which is the pleasanter companion.’

‘Othmar has admirable tact——’

‘How your mind runs upon Othmar! Kings generally acquire a great deal of tact from the obligation to say something agreeable to so many strangers all their lives. He is a kind of king in

his way. He has learnt the kings' art of saying a few phrases charmingly with all his thoughts elsewhere. It is creditable to him, for he has no need to be popular, he is so rich.'

'Ask him to dinner to-morrow or Sunday.'

'If you wish. But he will not come; he dislikes dinners as much as I do. It is the most barbarous method of seeing one's friends.' [6]

'There is no other so genial.'

She rose with a little shrug of her shoulders. She seldom honoured Napraxine by conversing so long with him.

'Order the horses, Ralph,' she said to Lord Geraldine; 'I want a long gallop.'

'She has had some decisive scene with Othmar,' thought Lady Brancepeth, 'and she is out of humour; she always rides like a Don Kossack when she is irritated.'

'There is no real riding here,' said the Princess, as she went to put on her habit. 'One almost loves Russia when one thinks of the way one can ride there; of those green eternal steppes, those illimitable plains, with no limit but the dim grey horizon, your black Ukrane horse, bounding like a deer, flying like a zephyr; it is worth while to remain in Russia to gallop so, on a midsummer night, with not a wall or a fence all the way between you and the Caspian Sea. I think if I were always in Russia I should become such a poet as Maïkoff: those immense distances are inspiration.'

She rode with exquisite grace and spirit; an old Kossack had taught her, as a child, the joys of the saddle, on those lonely and dreamful plains, which had always held since a certain place in her heart. That latent energy and daring, which found no scope in the life of the world, made her find pleasure in the strong stride of the horse beneath her, in the cleaving of the air at topmost speed. The most indolent of *mondaines* at all other times, when she sprang into the saddle as lightly as a bird on a bough, she was transformed; her slender hands had a grip of steel, her delicate face flushed with pleasure, the fiery soul of her fathers woke in her—of the men who had ridden out with their troopers to hunt down the Persian and the Circassian; who had swept like storm-clouds over those shadowy steppes which she loved; who had had their part or share in all the tragic annals of Russia; who had slain their foes at the steps of the throne, in the holiness of the cloister; who had been amongst those whose swords had found the heart of Cathrine's son, and whose voices had cried to the people in the winter's morning, 'Paul, the son of Peter, is dead; pray for his soul!' If she were cruel—now and then—was it not in her blood? [7] [8]

Meanwhile Yseulte was helping her foster-mother to pack tea-roses, to go to England for a great ball, in their little hermetically-sealed boxes. The roses were not wholly opened before they were thus shut away from light and air into darkness. They would not wither in their airless cells, but they would pale a little in that dull sad voyage from the sunshine to the frost and fog. As she laid the rosebuds,—pink, white, and pale yellow,—one by one on their beds of moss, she thought for the first time wistfully that her fate was very like theirs; only the rosebuds, perhaps, when they should be taken out of their prisons at their journey's end, though they would have but a very few hours of life before them, yet would bloom a little, if mournfully, in the northern land, and see the light again, if only for a day. But her life would be shut into silence and darkness for ever; she would not even live the rose's life '*l'espace d'un matin*.'

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[9]

CHAPTER XV.

When Othmar went out from her presence, he was more near to happiness than he had been in his whole thirty years of life. He was filled with vivid, palpitating, intoxicated hope. He was passionately in love, and almost he believed himself beloved in return. As much as she had allowed to him she had certainly allowed to no living man. The very force of his passion, which had driven him to scorn the conventional court which he might have paid her in common with so many others—the spaniel's place of Geraldine, the slave's place of Boris Seliedoff—rendered him as willing to set no limits to the sacrifices which she should be free to exact from him, and he be proud to make. Only he would never share her, even in nominal union with her lawful lord. He would be all to her, or nothing.

He loathed the conventional adulteries of his time and of his society; he sighed, impatiently for [10] the means to prove that the old fearless, high-handed, single-hearted passion which sees in the whole teeming world only one life, was not dead, but lived in him for her.

He foresaw all the loss of freedom and of fair repute which would be entailed on him by the surrender of his life to her; he knew well that she was a woman who would be no docile companion or unexacting mistress; he knew that there were in her the habits of dominance, the instincts of egotism, and that *esprit gouailleur* which compelled her, almost despite herself, to jest at what she admired, to ridicule her better emotions, to make a mockery of the very things which were the dearest to her. He did not because he loved her become blind to all that was cold, merciless, and capricious in her nature; he was conscious that she would never lose her own identity in any passion, never surrender her mind, even if she gave her person, to any lover; he knew that she would always remain outside those tropic tempests of love which she aroused and controlled, and which offended her or flattered her, according to the mood in which they found her.

He knew all these things, and was aware that his future would not be one of peace. But he loved [11] her, and agitation, jealousy, suffering beside her would, he felt, be sweeter to him than any repose beside another. Even these defects, these dangers, which he clearly perceived, added to her sorcery for him. It is the mistress who is indifferent who excites the most vehement desires; and, by reason of his great fortunes, women had been always to him so facile, so eager, and so easily won, that the coldness of Nadine Napraxine, which he knew was a thing of temperament, not of affectation, had but the more irresistible power over him. The very sense with which she impressed everyone, himself as well as others, of being no more to be held or relied upon than the snowflake, to which her world likened her, attracted a man who had, from his boyhood, been wearied by the adulation, insistence, and sycophancy of almost all who approached him.

The few days of his probation passed slowly over his head, seeming as though they would never end. He was restless, feverish, and absent of mind; Friederich Othmar, who, contrary to all his usual habits, remained at S. Pharamond, tranquilly ignoring the visible impatience of his host at [12] his unasked presence, was sorely troubled by the alternate exhilaration and anxiety of spirit which all the reserve and self-possession of Othmar himself could not wholly conceal from the penetration of a person accustomed to divine and dive into the innermost recesses of the minds of men.

'What, in God's name, is he meditating?' thought his uncle. 'Some insanity probably. I should believe he was about to disappear from the world with Madame Napraxine if I were not so persuaded that her pride and her selfishness will never permit her to commit a folly for anyone. Morality is nothing to her, but her position is a great deal; her delight in being insolent will never allow her to lose the power of being so.'

So accurately did this man of the world read a character which baffled most persons by its intricacy and its anomalies.

To Friederich Othmar human nature presented many absurdities but few secrets.

He remained at S. Pharamond, despite his own abhorrence of any place which was not a capital. He passed his mornings in the consideration of his correspondence and his telegraphic [13] despatches, but in the later hours of the day and in the evenings he was that agreeable member of society whom society had known and courted for so many years; and beneath his pleasant subacid wit and his admirable manner his acute penetration was for ever *en vedette* to penetrate his nephew's purpose and preoccupation. But a lover, on his guard, will baffle an observer whom the keenest of statesmen would, in vain, seek to deceive or mislead, and the Baron learned nothing of Othmar's inmost thoughts. Although Othmar and Nadine Napraxine met twice or thrice in his presence at other people's houses, and once at S. Pharamond itself, where some more choice music was given one evening, the acute blue eyes of the elder man failed to read the understanding which existed between them. All he saw was that she appeared to treat Othmar, before others, with more raillery and more nonchalance than usual. He remarked that Othmar did not seem either hurt or surprised at this.

'Since he is as much in love with her as ever, he must be aware of some intimacy between them [14] which renders him comparatively insensible to her treatment of him in society,' thought the sagacity of his uncle, who was alarmed and disquieted by a fact which would have reassured less fine observers—the fact that the master of S. Pharamond did not once, during fifteen days, cross the mile or two of olive-wood, orange orchard, and hanging field which alone separated him from La Jacquemerille.

'No love is so patient but on some promise,' he reflected. He knew the romantic turn of Othmar's

character, and he feared its results as others would fear the issue of some mortal or hereditary disease. A week or two previous the ministers then presiding over the fortunes of France had met, at his little house in the Rue du Traktir, the representatives of two great Powers, and in the newspapers of the hour that informal meeting, which had led to many important results, had been called the Unwritten Treaty of Baron Fritz; and yet, at such a moment, instead of being entranced with such influence as such a nickname implied to his House, instead of being occupied with the power, the might, and the mission of the Othmars, which that gathering [15] around the library-table in the Rue du Traktir displayed for the ten thousandth time to the dazzled eyes of suppliant and trembling Europe, Otho himself could only think of a woman with larger eyes and smaller hands than usual, but a woman absolutely useless to him in any ambitions—likely, rather, to be his ruin in all ways!

'I could understand it were she one of the great political forces of the world. Some women are that, and might so, to us, be of very high value,' thought Friederich Othmar, 'but Madame Napraxine is as indifferent to all political movement as if she were made of the ivory and mother-of-pearl which her skin resembles. If she be anything, she is that horrible thing a Nihilist, only because Nihilism embodies an endless and irreconcilable discontent, which finds in her some secret corner of vague sympathy. But for politics in our meaning of the word she has the most complete contempt. What did she say to me the other day? "I am a diplomatist's daughter. I have seen the strings of all your puppets. I cannot accept a Polichinelle for a Richelieu, as you all do." And she declared that if there were no statesmen at all, and no journalists, life would go [16] smoothly; everybody would attend to their own affairs, the world would be quiet, and there would be no wars. What but disaster can such a woman with such views bring into the life of Otho, already paralysed as it is by poco-curantism?'

He asked the question of himself in his own meditations, and could give himself no answer save one which grieved and alarmed him.

Othmar himself bestowed on his guest but little thought except a passing impatience that his uncle should have taken that moment, of all others, to instal himself at S. Pharamond.

He had not the cynicism nor the *insouciance* of the woman he adored. He did not attempt any sophisms with his own conscience. He knew that to do a man dishonour was to do him a violence unkinder, and perhaps even in a way baser, than to take his life. But he was ready to pledge himself to that which, unlike her, he still considered was a sin. He was entirely mastered by a force of passion which she could have understood by the subtlety of her intelligence, but was not likely ever to share by any fibre of her nature. He was lost in that whirlpool of emotion, [17] anticipation, and fear which carried his inner life away on it, although his outer life remained in appearance calm enough for no eyes save those of the Baron to penetrate the disguise of his serenity.

Yseulte he had forgotten.

The simple and innocent tenderness which she had momentarily aroused in him could not hold its place beside the overwhelming passion which governed him, more than a slender soft-eyed dove can dispute possession with the fierce, strong-pinioned falcon. Once or twice he saw her and spoke to her with kindness, but his thoughts were far away from her, and he did not linger beside her, although each time he chanced to meet her on the way to her foster-mother's, in lonely lovely country paths, which might well have tempted him to tarry.

On the thirteenth day of his probation, the priest's gown which, to please her, he had ordered for the church of S. Pharamond, arrived at the château, and, his attention being drawn to it by his servants, he remembered his promise to her. It was the last day of the year. A passing remembrance of pity came over him as he thought of her; she was so entirely alone, and she [18] would go to the life of the cloister; a fancy came to him to do some little thing to give her pleasure; a mere evanescent breath of innocent impulse, which passed like the cool breeze of an April day, sweet with scent of field flowers, across the heated atmosphere of desire and expectation in which his soul was then living. Conventional etiquette had seldom troubled him greatly; he had always enjoyed something of that sense which princes have, that whatever he did the world would condone. A man of the exceptional power which he possessed can always exercise on his contemporaries more or less of his own will. Whatever he might have done no one would have said of him anything more severe than that he was singular.

When he went into Nice that day he chanced to see a very pretty thing, modern, but admirable in taste and execution, a casket of ivory mounted on silver, with a little angel in silver on the summit. On its sides were painted in delicate miniatures reproductions of Fra Angelico and Botticelli. It was signed by a famous miniaturist, and cost ten thousand francs. Othmar, to whom the price seemed no more than ten centimes, bought it at once. [19]

'It will please her,' he thought. 'It shall go to her with the soutane;' and he sent it with the vestment to Millo, addressed to Mademoiselle de Valogne. His knowledge of etiquette told him that he ought to send it, if he sent it at all, through the Duchesse; but he did not choose to obey etiquette; he had discarded social rules, more or less, all his life, according to his inclination, and people had not resented his rebellion simply because he was who he was. He utterly disobeyed etiquette now, and sent his present direct to Yseulte very early on the morning of the New Year.

It did not occur to him that he might only run the risk of cruelly compromising the poor child. He gave hardly more thought to the action than he would have given to a rose which he might have broken off its stalk to offer to her. All his heart had gone with the basket of flowers which he had sent at sunrise to Nadine Napraxine, who allowed no other offering.

The chances were a million to one that his casket would never reach its destination without being [20]
seen, if not intercepted, by the governesses; but as it happened, his messenger gave it to the gatekeeper, and the gatekeeper gave it in turn to the woman who served her as maid during her stay at Millo, and who was passing through the gates, on her way home from matins. The woman was attached to her; indeed, being a religious person herself, considered that Yseulte was the only creature whose presence saved Millo from the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah; therefore, pleased that the girl should have pleasure, she carried the packet straight to her as she rose from her bed; and in the cold, misty morning of the New Year the first thing that greeted the astonished eyes of Yseulte was the Coronation of the Virgin, glowing like a jewel on the side of the ivory casket.

The whole day passed to her in an enchanted rapture.

In the large, idle, careless household there was a general exchange of congratulations and *étrennes*, and a pleasant tumult of good wishes and merriment. Blanchette and Toinon danced about before a pyramid of bonbons and costly playthings, and the Duchesse, descending at her [21]
usual hour, two o'clock, gave and received a multitude of felicitations, gifts, and visits. 'The most tedious day of the whole three hundred and sixty-five,' she said pettishly, giving her cheek to the touch of her children's pale little lips.

In the many occupations and ennuis of the day no one heard or knew anything of Othmar's present. At noon some bouquets of roses and some orchids, laid on a plate of old *cloisonné* enamel, were brought in his name to Madame de Vannes, but she knew nothing of her cousin's casket. Meanwhile nothing could hurt Yseulte. The contempt with which her little cousins received the gifts she had made for them in the convent, the oblivion to which she was consigned by every one, the carelessness with which the Duchesse received her timidly-offered good wishes, the severity with which the governesses forbade her to go out in such weather to see Nicole or attend Mass in the little church, the unconcealed ill-temper with which Alain de Vannes flung her a word of greeting—none of these things had any power to wound her; she scarcely perceived them; she was lifted up into a world all her own. Unnoticed in the general *branle-bas* of the day, [22]
she passed the hours, when she was not at Mass in the chapel, locked safely in her own room, before her treasure, in a rapt happiness, in a wonder of ecstasy, which were so intense that she feared they were cardinal sins.

The weather was cold, some snow had even fallen, and the north winds blew, making all the chilly foreigners gathered on those shores shiver and grumble like creatures defrauded of their rights; but all the grey, cheerless, misty landscape, and the fog upon the sea, appeared more beautiful to her than they had ever done before in its sunshine. From her window she looked at the towers of S. Pharamond, and on her table—all her own—was the ivory casket.

The Duchesse de Vannes, waking in the forenoon after the Jour de l'An, cross, peevish, sleepy, and yet sleepless, which is, in itself, the most irritating and dispiriting of all human conditions, and morbidly conscious that, as her little daughter had said, she was beginning to *baisser un peu*, was in a mood of natural resentment against all creation in general and the human race in particular, and quite ready to vent her ill-humour on the first object which offered itself. That [23]
first object was one of the little prim notes by which her children's instructresses were wont to communicate any terrible event in the schoolroom, or any entreaty for guidance when Mademoiselle Blanchette had insisted on riding the wooden horses at a village fair, or Mademoiselle Toinon had dressed herself up in the smallest groom's clothes. 'Ne m'ennuyez pas; vous savez vos devoirs' was the only reply they ever received; but the good women continued to write the notes as a relief to their consciences. They wrote one now, signed in their joint names, humbly entreating to be informed if it were the pleasure of Madame la Duchesse that Mdlle. de Valogne should receive presents of which the donor was unknown. Mdlle. de Valogne was in possession of a new and very valuable locket; they believed also that she was in the habit of going to the gardens of S. Pharamond; they had deemed it their duty to acquaint Madame la Duchesse, &c., &c.

Blanchette, with the most innocent face in the world, had said to them, 'I have seen the big pearl locket of Yseulte! *Oh, vrai!* When I am as old, I will not hide my handsome things as she does. [24]
Who gave it her? Who do you think could give it to her? She is friends with that gentleman at S. Pharamond—the one that is as rich as M. de Rothschild. I think he gave it her! Do you tell mamma.'

Blanchette guessed very shrewdly that her father had given the locket; but she was too wary to offend him. Blanchette was like the little cats who steal round and round to their mouse by devious paths unseen. She had alarmed the governesses, and the prim note was the consequence.

When the Duchesse read it, she flung it away in a corner. '*Tas d'imbéciles*,' she said, contemptuously; then said to one of her maids, 'Request Mdlle. de Valogne to come hither.'

Yseulte was presented in a fortuitous moment as the whipping-boy on whom could be spent all that useless irritation which she could not spend on the real offenders, her ineffective chloral, her increasing wrinkles, and the indifference of Raymond de Prangins.

'Mamma is always cross,' the wise little Blanchette had reflected. 'She is always angry, even for nothing. That great baby will get a lecture, and she will be sure to say it was papa; she always [25]
tells the truth—such a simpleton!—and papa will hate her for ever and for ever!'

Then Blanchette made a *pied de nez* all by herself in her little bedroom: when you were a child you could not have many things your own way, but you could spoil other people's things very neatly with a little pat here, a little poke there, if you looked all the while like your picture by

Baudry, an innocent cherub with sweet smiling eyes, who could not have made a *pied de nez* to save your life. Blanchette had already acquired the knowledge that this was how the world was most easily managed.

When Yseulte was summoned to her cousin's presence, the girl was startled to see how old she looked, for it was scarcely noon, and the handsome face which 'Cri-Cri' was wont to present to her own world had scarcely received its finishing touches from the various embellishing *petits secrets* shut up in their silver boxes and their china pots, which were strewn about under the great Dresden-framed mirror in front of her.

'Good-day,' she said, with irritation already in her voice, as Yseulte timidly kissed her hand. 'Is [26] this true what they tell me, that you receive presents without my knowledge and consent? Do you not know that it is perfectly *inconvenable*? Are you not taught enough of the world in your convent to be aware that a young girl cannot do such things without being disgraced eternally? What is it you have accepted? Is it a jewel? Can you realise the enormity of your action?——' she paused, in some irritation and uncertainty. 'Well, why do you not speak? Can you excuse yourself? What is it you have taken? From whom have you taken it? My people have told me you have a new and valuable jewel and refuse to say who gave it.'

'My cousin, M. le Duc, gave it me,' said Yseulte. 'He said that I was to tell you if you asked me, but not anyone else.'

She spoke frankly, without any hesitation. The Duchesse stared at her, half rose in her amazement; her face was dark with anger for a moment, then cleared into a sudden laughter.

'My husband!' she echoed. 'A *fillette* like you! And they say there are no miracles now! Do you [27] absolutely mean to say that Alain gave you a jewel?——'

'He was so good as to give me a locket—yes,' murmured Yseulte, conscious that her cousin was angry, insolent, and derisive, and afraid that the Duc would be irritated at the issue of his kindness to her.

'Pray, has he given you anything else?' echoed Madame de Vannes. 'Has he given you the diamonds he had bought for Mdlle. Rubis, or the *coupé* from Bender's which he meant for *la grande* Laure?'

'He has not given me anything else,' answered Yseulte, to whom these terrible names conveyed no meaning.

'Where is this locket? Show it me.'

'It is in my room. Shall I fetch it?'

'No, no. It does not matter. You can send it me. I will send Agnès for it. The idea of Alain having even looked at you!—it makes one laugh; it is too absurd.'

She continued to laugh, but the laughter did not convey to the ear of Yseulte any impression either that she was pardoned or that her cousin was amused. It was a laugh expressive of irony, [28] irritation, wonder, contempt, rancour, all in one.

'You should not have taken it. You should have told me,' continued the Duchesse. 'To be sure, he is your cousin. But it is not proper to take a man's gifts. It is not becoming. It is too forward. It is even immodest. Is that the sort of thing the Dames de Ste. Anne have taught you? Surely you might have known better.'

These phrases she uttered in a staccato rapid succession, as if she thought little of what she said; she was indeed thinking as the girl stood before her:

'What a skin! What shoulders! What a throat! What a thing it is to be sixteen! Why did not *le bon Dieu* make all that last longer with us? It goes too soon; so horribly soon; after one is five-and-twenty it is all one can do to make up decently. If it were only the complexion which went it would not matter; that one can easily arrange; but it is the features that change; they grow out or they grow in; the mouth gets thin or the cheeks get broad; the very lines alter somehow, and we cannot alter that; and then to make oneself up is as much trouble as to build a house, and the [29] house has to be built anew every day!—it is horribly hard—and yet one has compensations, revenges; it is not those children whom men care to look at though they are fresh as roses; at least not usually. Alain, I suppose, does—what can he mean by giving her a medallion?'

While these thoughts ran through her mind, she was staring hard at Yseulte through her eyeglass, as though they had never met before then. The girl had coloured scarlet at the epithet 'immodest,' but it had made her a little angry, with the righteous indignation of innocence. Respect kept her mute, but her face spoke for her.

'Alain was right; she is really handsome,' reflected the Duchesse.

She was herself only eight-and-twenty, but in the world as on the racecourse it is the pace that kills; and before she had passed through all those arduous processes which she had rightly compared to building a house anew every day, she knew very well that she looked cruelly old, though after two o'clock in the day she was still one of the great beauties of France.

She had been immersed in pleasures, pastimes, and excitements from the day of her marriage; [30] she had lived in a crowd, she had gambled not a little, and she had had certain intrigues, of whose dangers she had at times a vivid and anxious consciousness, for the Duc was indifferent but not base, and might any day be roused if he came to be aware that men laughed at him more than he liked. As a rule, she and he understood each other very well, and tacitly condoned each

other's indiscretions; but there might come a time when he would break that convenient compact, as she felt disposed now to resent his admiration of her young cousin. On the whole, perhaps, she mused, she had been wrong to do so; she would let the girl keep his present; he might, if she provoked him, insist that Raymond de Prangins should leave Millo. All these reflections occurred to her during that one minute in which her eyeglass watched the indignation rise in Yseulte's face.

'Have you seen M. de Vannes alone?' she resumed, with a sharpness in her voice, due rather to her own sense of the girl's beauty than to her knowledge of her husband's admiration for it.

'Now and then,' said Yseulte without hesitation. 'He has come into the schoolroom——' [31]

'For a lesson in A B C, I suppose?—or a cup of Brown's green tea?' said the Duchesse contemptuously. 'Well, he may *conter ses fleurettes ailleurs*. I should have thought he had had better taste than to begin in his own house: however,' she continued, interrupting herself, as she remembered that she was suggesting, 'I do not suppose it is you who are to blame. But another time, ask my permission before you accept anything from anybody. I will not deprive you of the Duc's gift. He is in a manner your cousin—your guardian—of course he meant very kindly, but another time remember to come to me. You will tell the Duc that I said so.'

'Good heavens!' she was thinking, 'who would have supposed that Alain had a taste for a creature like that, half a saint and half a baby? To be sure, her eyes are superb, and the throat and bosom —what beautiful lines they have; why did they send her here? She shall go back next week. The wickedness of the thing would charm him; the nearer it was to a crime, the more of a *clou* it [32] would be. To play Faust under the respectable shade of Brown's teapot and the big dictionaries would be sure to enthral him, out of its very drollery—men are made like that.'

Then a remembrance of S. Pharamond passed over her, and she said aloud, with an unkind sarcasm in her voice:

'Perhaps you have other friends beside M. de Vannes? Pray tell me if you have. I fully appreciate the effects of the education which the Dames de Ste. Anne have given you.'

Yseulte coloured scarlet, and the Duchesse's eyes scanned her face as Blanchette's had done, without mercy.

'Pray tell me,' she continued, with a chill dignity, which was in sharp contrast with the sarcasm and railing of her previous manner. 'You will be so good as to remember that I stand in the place of your mother; your indiscretions are not alone painful to me, but compromising to me. Is it true that you are intimate with Otho Othmar?'

'He has been kind to me,' murmured Yseulte, an agony at her heart and the hot tears standing in her eyes. She did not understand enough of the world to justify herself by the fact that the [33] offender had been presented to her by her cousin herself; nor, if she had done so, would the position she stood in towards Madame de Vannes have allowed her to use such a justification without apparent impertinence. For eight years she had owed everything to the Duchesse.

'Kind to you!' echoed her cousin, 'a most fortuitous phrase, but not one that young girls can employ except to their own ridicule and injury. Pray how has he been kind to you? has *he* given you a locket?'

Yseulte might easily have told a lie; no one knew of the casket, no one could tell of it; she loved it more dearly than anything she had ever possessed. But she had been taught in her childhood that falsehood was cowardice, and the courage of the de Valogne was in her; therefore she answered, with an unsteady voice indeed, but with entire truthfulness, 'He has given me a very beautiful box, it is made of ivory and painted, it came yesterday——'

Madame de Vannes burst into another laugh, which jarred on the child's ear:

'Really,' she cried, relapsing into the manner most natural to her, 'you begin well! Othmar and [34] my husband! and you are not quite sixteen yet, and we all thought you such a little demure saint in your grey clothes! Send the casket to me. You cannot receive presents in that way. From your cousin, *passe encore*, but from a man like Othmar—you might as well go and sup with him at Bignon's. Good heavens! What are Schemmitz and Brown about that they have let you meet him? Where have you seen him? how have you become intimate with him?'

Yseulte had become very pale. She had done her duty; done what honour, truth, obedience, and gratitude all required; but it had cost her a great effort, and she would lose the casket.

'I have only seen him three times,' she said, with her colour changing; and she went on to tell the story of her visit to his gardens, of his conversation with her on the seashore, of the priest's soutane, and of their meeting at the house of Nicole. It was a very simple inoffensive little story, but it hurt her greatly to tell it; cost her quite as much as it would have done Madame de Vannes to unfold all her manifold indiscretions in full confession before a *conseil de famille*. [35]

'He has been very kind to me,' she said timidly, as she finished her little tale, 'and if—if—if you would only let me keep the casket and take it to Faïel?'

The Duchesse laughed once more:

'You do not care to keep the Duc's locket—how flattering to him! Really, *fillette*, you are sagacious betimes; I would never have believed you such a cunning little cat! Did you learn all that at the convent? you convent-girls are more *rusées* than so many rats! Othmar, of all men of the world! My dear, you might as well wish for an emperor. There is not a marriageable woman in Europe who does not sigh for Othmar! He is so enormously rich! There is no one else rich like

that; all the other financiers have a tribe of people belonging to them. “The family” is everywhere, at Paris, at Vienna, at Berlin, at London, and have as many branches as the oak; but Othmar is absolutely alone—for old Baron Fritz does not count—he is absolutely alone, that is what is unique in him. Whoever marries him will be the most fortunate woman in Europe. Yes, I [36] say it advisedly, it is fortune that is power nowadays; our day is over; we do not even lead society any longer.’

The colour had rushed back into Yseulte’s face; the Duchesse’s words tortured her as only a very young and sensitive creature can be tortured by an indelicate and cruel suspicion. ‘I never thought, I never meant,’ she murmured. ‘You know, my cousin, I am dedicated to the religious life; you cannot suppose that I—I——’ The words choked her.

‘*Ne pleurnichez pas, de grâce!*’ said the Duchesse impatiently. ‘I have no doubt you have taken all kinds of impossibilities into your head, girls are always so foolish; but you may be sure that the gift of the casket means nothing—nothing. Othmar is always giving away, right and left; most very rich men are mean, but he is not. It was a wrong thing, an impertinent thing, for him to do, and it must be returned to him instantly; but if you imagine you have made any impression upon him, I can assure you you are very mistaken, he only thinks of Nadine Napraxine.’

Yseulte remained very pale; her eyes were cast down, her lips were pressed together. She had [37] done her duty and told the truth, but she was not recompensed.

The Duchesse rang for her maids. To the one who answered the summons, she said: ‘ Accompany Mdlle. de Valogne to her room, and bring me a casket she will give you, which is to be sold for the Little Sisters of the Poor. *Va-t’ -en, Yseulte.*’

She put out her hand carelessly, and the girl bent over her.

‘My cousin! I have never seen him but three times,’ she murmured again. Her face was very pale; she had been wounded profoundly by the Duchesse’s words, even though their full meaning was not known to her.

Madame de Vannes laughed again; then, with an assumption of dignity, which she could take on at will, said coldly:

‘Once was too much. Never accuse accident; no one believes in it. Remember also, that as one vowed to the service of Heaven, it is already sin in you if you harbour one earthly thought. Go, and send me the casket.’

Without another word Yseulte curtsied and withdrew from her presence.

When the maid returned, she brought her mistress the ivory casket; but inside it was the Duc’s [38] medallion. Madame de Vannes laughed yet again as she saw.

‘The little obstinate!’ she murmured. ‘It is not often that Alain throws pearls, or anything else away. And what a casket! Heavens! it is fit for a wedding gift to a queen. Is it possible that Othmar—— No, it is not possible; he would never think of a child like that. Perhaps he did it to rouse Nadine. What a cunning little pole-cat these nuns have sent me!’

But a kind of respect awakened in her towards her young cousin. A girl who could charm Alain de Vannes and Othmar was not to be dismissed scornfully as a novice and a baby. The Duchesse drew some note-paper to her, and wrote a little letter to her neighbour, in which she expressed herself very admirably, with dignity and grace, as the guardian of a motherless child who was dedicated to the service of Heaven. She suggested, without actually saying so, that he had failed in reverence towards Heaven, and towards the Maison de Vannes and the Maison de Creusac, in permitting himself to offer gifts to Mdlle. de Valogne; she recalled to him, without any positive [39] expression of the sort, that a young girl of noble descent could not be approached with gifts as a young actress might be, and that if any had been offered they should have, at least, been offered through herself.

She was honestly irritated with Othmar for having thus been wanting, as she considered, in full respect for those great families from which Yseulte de Valogne had sprung. She was excessively angry with her children’s governesses, whose negligence had rendered it possible for the girl to wander about alone, and she gave them a short but very terrible audience in her dressing-room; yet, on the whole, the affair amused her a little, and the high-breeding in her made her do justice to the honour which had forced her young cousin to tell unasked all the truth.

Later on she had a little scene with her husband, half comic, half tragic, in which they flung the *tu quoque* liberally one at the other, apropos of many vagaries less innocent than his fancy for Yseulte de Valogne; but she did not tell him about Othmar’s casket, for she reasoned, with admirable knowledge of men’s natures, that they cared so much more if they thought any one [40] else cared too.

Meanwhile Yseulte, having given the casket into the hands of the maid without a word or a sign of regret, locked herself in, threw herself on her bed, and sobbed as piteously as though the magic box had been that of Pandora, and bore all hope away within it.

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[41]

CHAPTER XVI.

Nadine Napraxine kept her promise to Othmar. She did for him what she had done for no other human being; she meditated on his entreaties as a thing which might possibly be granted by her. She looked for a little while through the play and the glow of his impassioned words as through some painted window into some agreeable land whither, perchance, she might travel.

The very sternness and daring of his manner of demand had its attraction for her. None of her courtiers had wooed her quite in that way: some had been too timid, some too submissive, some too worldly-wise. The insane desire to fly with her from the world to some far-away, semi-barbaric, mysterious Eden of his own making had never been so boldly and uncompromisingly set forth to her by any lover as now by Othmar. It had a certain fascination for her even while the philosophy and irony in her ridiculed the idea. It responded to the vague but very real [42] dissatisfaction with which life, as it was, filled her. She was tired of the routine of it. Everyone said the same thing. Its very triumphs were so monotonous that they might just as well have been failures. Half her provocation and cruelty to men arose from a wish which she could not resist, to find something vivid and new to interest her. She succeeded in causing tragedies, but she did not succeed in being interested in them herself.

Othmar did interest her—in a measure.

He had done so from the first moment that she saw him coming in—tall, slight, grave, with great repose and more dignity than most men of his day—through the vague light, *entre chien et loup*, into the hall of a country house in the green heart of the Ardennes, where she and her hosts and a great party, wearing the russet and gold and pale blue of their hunting clothes, were waiting for the signal of the *curée* from the terraces without.

He had interested her then and always in a degree; but only in a degree.

'It certainly cannot be love that *I* feel,' she said to herself, with regret. 'I am glad when he comes [43] because he—almost—excites me, but I am glad when he is gone because he—almost—disturbs me. I can imagine certain follies being possible to me when he is here, but they never quite become possible. If I were sure they would become so, and in becoming so be agreeable to me, I would go away with him. But—but—but——.'

The objections seemed many to her, in a way insuperable; they lay in herself, not in him, and so appeared never to be removed.

She respected him because he would have scorned one of those intrigues screened under conventional observances, of which the world is so full. If she could have entirely persuaded herself that his life was absolutely necessary to hers, she would not have hesitated to let society become aware of the truth. She had no grain in her of the hypocrite or of the coward.

But she was not sure: and to break up your life irrevocably, to throw it into a furnace and fuse it into a wholly new shape, to fling your name to all the hounds who fed on the offal of calumny, and then to find, after all this *Sturm und Drang*, that you had only made a mistake, and were only a little more bored than before!—this possibility seemed to be at once so dreary and so ridiculous [44] that she did not dare to put it to the proof. Her own potential weariness in the future to which he wooed her, rose before her in a ghastly shape and barred the way.

She pondered on the matter fully and sincerely for some days: days in which nothing pleased her: days in which her riding-horse felt her spurs, and her friends her sarcasms: days in which her toilettes had little power to interest her; Worth himself seemed worn out; her admirable tire-woman did nothing well; and her husband seemed to her to have grown heavier, stouter, stupider, more Kalmuck, and more intolerable than ever during the hours of breakfast and dinner, which were the only hours weighted by his presence. In those few hours she felt almost persuaded to take her lover at his word. Platon Napraxine was so densely, so idiotically, so provocatively unalarmed and secure! He would have tempted almost any woman to make him suddenly awake to find himself ridiculous.

'He would howl like a wounded bear!' she thought contemptuously, 'and then somebody would [45] bring him brandy, and somebody would mention the tables, and somebody would talk about Mdlle. Chose, and he would be all right again. He is too stupid to feel. There are prairie dogs, they say, which hardly know when they are shot or beaten; he has got the soul of one of them. Because I have married him he is convinced that I shall never leave him;—*la belle raison*! There are so many men like that. They marry just as they buy a cane; they put the cane in the stand; it is bought and it cannot move; they are sure it will always be there. One fine day some one comes and takes it; then they stare and they swear because they have been robbed.'

This time of uncertainty and doubt, which was to Othmar fraught with such wild alternations of hope and of fear, which now swung him in his fancy high as heaven and now sunk him deep in the darkness of despair, was to her a period rather of the most minute analysis and of the most subtle self-examination. In the *naïveté* of her profound and unconscious egotism she never once considered his loss or gain: she was entirely occupied with the consideration of her own wishes. Everything bored her; would she, if she took this step, which to most women would have looked [46] so big with fate, be less bored—or more? This seemed to her the one momentous issue which trembled uncertain at the gate of choice.

She considered it thoughtfully and dispassionately. She was not troubled by any moral doubts, or any such reasons for hesitation as would have beset many women of more prejudices and of less intelligence than herself. All these things were *le vieux jeu*. She was far too clear-sighted and too

highly-cultured to be scared by such bogies as frighten narrow minds. She saw no sanctity whatever in the marriage ties which bound her to Platon Napraxine. You might as well talk of a contract for eggs and butter, or an operation on the Bourse being sacred! No human ordinances can very well be sacred, and we cannot be sure there are any divine ones, logically, all the probabilities are that there are none; so she certainly would have said had anyone challenged her views on such a subject.

In a manner, this crisis of her life amused her like a comedy. The unconsciousness of her husband whilst the unseen cords of destiny were tightening about him; the revolt and impatience of [47] Othmar, conveyed to her by many a restless glance and half-uttered word as they passed each other in his drawing-rooms or in those of others; the ignorance of her lovers and her friends; and her own meditations as to the many comments that the world would make if ever it knew: all these diverted her.

What alone troubled her was her own pride. Would she ever be able to endure any loss of that? '*Je serai honnête femme*,' she had said to her father in her childhood, and when she had repeated the words in her womanhood her mind had been made up not so much by coldness, chastity, or delicacy as by hauteur. She could not have endured to feel that there were any doors in Europe which could be shut in her face, or that she could not shut her own whensoever and against whomsoever she might choose.

His term of probation came to an end one morning when the day had nothing of winter save its date; a morning rosy and golden, with distant mists transparent as a veil, and the mild air soundless and windless amongst the mimosa and eucalyptus groves of the grounds of La [48] Jacquemerille. For once Nadine Napraxine condescended to be true to an appointment; whilst the day was still young and all the lazy world of the modern Baiæ still dozed or, at the utmost, yawned itself awake, she moved, with that lovely languor which was as much a portion of her as the breath she drew, along the sea-terrace of her house, and smiled to see Othmar already standing at the foot of the sea-steps.

'What children men are!' she thought, with that ridicule which the ardour of her lovers was always most apt to awake in her, as he bent over her hand and pressed on it lips which trembled.

'It must be really delightful,' she continued in her own reflections, 'to be able to be so very eager and so very much in earnest about anything. Instead of abusing us, men ought to be infinitely thankful to us for giving them emotions which do, for the time at least eclipse those of baccarat and of pigeon-shooting. In a moment or two he will be inclined to hate me, but he will be very wrong. He will always be my debtor for fifteen days of the most exquisite agitation of his life. Twenty years hence he will look back to this time, and say, "*Oh, le beau temps quand j'étais si* [49] *malheureux!*"'

Whilst she so mused she was saying little careless, easy phrases to him, pacing her terrace slowly, with her great mantle of iris-coloured plush, lined with silver-fox fur drawn close about her, and its hood about her face, like its spathe around the narcissus. She was serene, affable, nonchalante; he was silent, and deeply agitated; so passionately eager for his fate to be spoken, that he could find no light sentences with which to answer hers.

'He looks very well in that kind of excitement,' she thought, as she glanced sideways at him. 'He is poetic in it, instead of being only awkward, like poor Ralph. Really, if one could only be sure of one's self——'

She amused herself awhile by keeping him upon the terrace, on which all the windows of the house looked, and where regard for her must perforce restrain him from any betrayal of his own emotions. She felt as if she held in leash some panting, striving, desert animal which she forced to preserve the measured pace and decorous stillness of tamed creatures.

At length, compassion or prudence made her relent, and enter the little oriental room where his [50] eloquent avowals had been made a fortnight before. She closed the glass doors, threw off her furs, and stood in the subdued light and the heated air of the room, cool, pale, delicate as the April flower which she resembled, long trailing folds of the primrose-coloured satin which formed her morning *négligé* falling from her throat to her feet in the long lines that painters love; one great pearl fastened a few sprays of stephanotis at her throat. She sank into a chair which stood against a tree of scarlet azalea set in an antique vase of brass. She was one of those women who naturally make pictures of themselves for every act and in every attitude.

The moment they were secure from observation Othmar knelt at her feet and kissed her hands again; his eyes, uplifted, told their tale of rapture, hope, fear, and imploring prayer more passionately than any words. He would have cut his heart out of his breast if she had bidden him.

She glanced down on the agitation which his features could not conceal with a sense of that wonder which never failed to come to her before the intensity of feeling with which she inspired [51] others.

'When I really do nothing to make them like that!' she reflected for the hundredth time before the tempest which she raised almost without endeavour.

Othmar had recovered his presence of mind, though none of his tranquillity; his words, impetuous, persuasive, at times broken by the force of his emotion, at times eloquent with the eloquence natural to passion, fell on her ear uninterrupted by her. She listened, much as she might have listened to the sonorous swell of the *Marche au Supplice* of Berlioz, or any other harmony which should have pleased her taste if only by contrast of its own vehemence and strength with the serenity of her own nature. She listened, without any sign of any sort, save of

so much acquiescence as might be indicated by the gentleness of her expression and the passiveness with which she left her hand in his. He believed her silence to be assent.

'This is what I have always fancied might conquer me,' she thought, whilst his ardent protestations and entreaties held her for the moment pleased and fascinated. 'And yet, I do not [52] know. To leave the world, to be always together, to go, heaven knows where, into a sort of Mahometan paradise—would it suit me? I am afraid not. The idea pleases one in a way, but not quite enough for that. Always together, and alone—one would tire of an angel!'

So still she was, as these thoughts drifted through her mind, so unresistingly she let his forehead, and then his lips, lie on her hand, that he believed himself successful in his prayer. He lifted his eyes and looked at her with a gaze full of rapturous light, of adoration and of gratitude.

'Oh, my love! my love!' he murmured. 'Never shall you regret an hour your mercy to me!'

His lips would have sought hers as his words ended in a sigh, the lover's sigh of happiness, but she moved and disengaged herself quickly, and motioned to him to rise. On her mouth there was the slight smile he knew so well—the smile that was the enemy of men.

'My dear friend,' she said, in her melodious voice, sweet as the south wind, and never sweeter [53] than when it uttered cruel truths to ears that were wounded by them, 'I will do you the justice to grant that I quite believe you care very much for me' (he made an indignant gesture); 'well, that you love me *un peu, beaucoup, passionnément*, as the convent girls say to the daisies. But I am equally convinced that you do not understand me in the least. I understand myself thoroughly. We are all enigmas to others, but we ought to be able to read our own riddle ourselves. I can read mine; many people never can read theirs all their lives long, and that is why they make so many mistakes. Now, I do know myself so very well. I know that no kind of sin, if there really be such a thing as sin, would frighten me much. I think my nerves would stand even a crime without wincing, if it were a bold one. If the world threw stones at me, it would amuse me. I cannot fancy anybody being unhappy about it. Therefore you will comprehend me when I say that it is not any kind of commonplace nonsense about doing anything wrong which moves me for a moment, but, —I have thought of it all very much and very seriously, and really with a wish to try that other [54] kind of life you speak of, but—I cannot go with you!'

She said it as quietly and as lightly as if she were saying that she could not drive with him to the Col di Guardia that morning. She was smiling her pretty, slight, mysterious smile, which might have meant anything, from pity to derision. She had a sprig or two of the leafless calycanthus in her fingers, which she played with as she spoke. He hated the fragrance of that winter blossom ever afterwards.

'You cannot? You cannot?' he murmured almost unconsciously. 'And why?'

He did not well know what he said, the paralysis of a sudden and intense disappointment was upon him; he forgot that he had no right to interrogate her, that no faintest breath of promise from her had ever given him title to upbraid her; the noise as of a million waves of stormy seas was surging in his ears.

'Why?' she repeated, with the same serenity, and with a kind of indulgence as to a wayward, imperious child. 'Oh, for so many reasons!—not at all, believe me, from any kind of hesitation about Platon; he would do very well without me, though he would try to kill you, I suppose, [55] because men have such odd ideas; besides they are always fretting about what the world thinks, just as when they play billiards they think about the opinion of the *galerie*; no, not for that, believe me; that is not my kind of feeling at all; but I have thought over it all very much, and I have decided that it would not do—for me. I should be irritable and unhappy in a false position, because I should have lost the power to shut my doors, other people would shut theirs instead; I should be quite miserable if I could not be disagreeable to persons whom I did not care to know, and no one in a false position ever dares be that; they smile, poor creatures, perpetually, like so many wax dolls from Giroux's. Of course the moral people say it is the loss of self-respect which makes them so anxious to please, but it is not that: it is really the sense that it is of no use for them to be rude any more, because their rudeness cannot vex anybody. I quite understand Marie Antoinette; I should not mind the scaffold in the least, but I should dislike going in the cart. "*Le roi avait une charrette*," you remember.'

Othmar had risen; as she glanced up at him, even over her calm and courageous temperament, a [56] little chill passed that was almost one of alarm. Yet her sense of pleasure was keener than her fear: men's souls were the chosen instrument on which she chose to play; if here she struck some deeper chords than usual, the melody gained for her ear. Profound emotions and eager passions were unknown to her in her own person, but they constituted a spectacle which diverted her if it did not weary her—the chances depended upon her mood. At this moment they pleased her; pleased her the more for that thrill of alarm, which was so new to her nerves.

Othmar did not speak: all the strength which was in him was taxed to its breaking point in the effort to restrain the passionate reproaches and entreaties which sprang to his lips, the burning tears of bitter disillusion and cruel disappointment which rushed to his sight and oppressed his breath. What a fool, what a madman, he had been again to throw down his heart like a naked, trembling, panting thing at her feet to be played with by her.

'How well he looks like that!' she thought. ' Most men grow red when they are so angry, but he [57] grows like marble, and his eyes burn—there are great tears in them—he looks like Mounet-Sully as Hippolytus.'

Once more the momentary inclination came over her to trust herself to that stormy force of love

which might lead to shipwreck and might lead to paradise; there were a beauty, a force, a fascination for her about him as he stood there in his silent rage, his eyes pouring down on her the lightnings of his reproach; but the impulse was not strong enough to conquer her; the world she would have given up with contemptuous indifference, but she would not surrender her own power to dictate to the world.

Her soft tranquil voice went on, as a waterfall may gently murmur its silvery song while a tempest shakes the skies.

'I know you think that love is enough, but I assure you I should doubt it, even if I did—love you. Rousseau has said long before us that love lacks two things,—permanence and immutability; they seem to me synonymous, and I do not think that their absence is a defect; I think it even a merit. Yet, as they *are* absent, it cannot be worth while to pay so very much for so very defective a thing.'

'God forgive you!' cried her lover in passionate pain. 'You betray me with the cruelest jest that [58]
woman ever played off on man, and you think that I can stand still to hearken to the pretty tinkling bells of a drawing-room philosophy!'

'You do not stand still,' she answered languidly, 'you walk to and fro like a wounded panther in a cage. I have in no way betrayed you, and I am not jesting at all. I am saying the very simplest truth. You have asked me to do a momentous and irrevocable thing; and I have answered you truthfully that I should not shrink from it if I were convinced that I should never regret it. But I am not convinced——'

'If you loved me you would be so!' he said in a voice which was choked and almost inaudible.

'Ah!—if!' said Nadine Napraxine with a smile and a little sigh. 'The whole secret lies in that one conjunction!'

His teeth clenched as he heard her as if in the intolerable pain of some mortal wound.

'Besides, besides,' she murmured, half to herself and half to him, 'my dear Othmar, you are [59]
charming. You are like no one else; you please me; I confess that you please me, but you could not ensure me against my own unfortunate capacity for very soon tiring of everybody, and,—I have a conviction that in three months' time *I should be tired of you*!'

A strong shudder passed over him from head to foot, as the words struck him with a greater shock than the blow of a dagger in his side would have given. He realised the bottomless gulf which separated him from the woman he adored,—the chasm of her own absolute indifference.

He, in his exaltation, was ready to give up all his future and fling away all his honour for her sake, and would have asked nothing more of earth and heaven than to have passed life and eternity at her feet; and she, swayed momentarily towards him by a faint impulse of the senses and the sensibilities, yet could draw back and calmly look outward into that vision of the possible future, which dazzled him as the mirage blinds and mocks the desert-pilgrim dying of thirst; she, with chill prescience could foresee the time when his presence would become to her a weariness, [60]
a chain, a yoke-fellow tiresome and dull!

She looked at him with a momentary compassion.

'Dear Othmar, I am quite sure you have meant all you said,' she murmured softly. 'But, believe me, it would not do; it would not do for you and me, if it might for some people. I am not in the least shocked. I think your idea quite beautiful, like a poem; but I am certain it would never suit myself. I tire of everything so quickly, and then you know I am not in love with *you*. One wants to be so much in love to do that sort of thing, we should bore one another so infinitely after the first week. Yes, I am sure we should, though I know you are quite sincere in saying you would like it.'

Then, still with that demure, satisfied, amused smile, she turned away and lifted up the Moorish chocolate pot and poured out a little chocolate into her cup.

'It has grown cold,' she said, and tinkled a hand-bell which was on the tray to summon Mahmoud.

Othmar, who had sprung to his feet and stood erect, seized her wrist in his fingers and threw the [61]
bell aside.

'There is no need to dismiss me,' he said in a low tone. 'Adieu! You can tell the story to Lord Geraldine.'

His face was quite colourless, except that around his forehead there was a dusky red mark where the blood had surged and settled as though he had been struck there with a whip.

He bowed low, and left her.

She stood before the Moorish tray and its contents with a sense of cold at her heart, but her little self-satisfied smile was still on her mouth.

'He will come back,' she thought. 'He came back before; they always come back.'

She did not intend to go with him to Asia, but she did not, either, intend to lose him altogether.

'He was superb in his fury and his grief,' she thought, 'and he meant every word of it, and he would do all that he said, more than he said. Perhaps it hurt him too much, perhaps I laughed a little too soon.'

She was like the child who had found its living bird the best of all playthings, but had forgotten [62]
that its plaything, being alive, could also die, and so had nipped the new toy too cruelly in careless little fingers, and had killed it.

CHAPTER XVII.

Othmar, as he left La Jacquemerille, forgot the boat in which he had come thither. He walked mechanically through the house, and out by the first gate which he saw before him. He was in that state of febrile excitation in which the limbs move without the will in an instinctive effort to find outlet to mental pain in bodily exertion. The gate he had passed through opened into a little wood of pines, whence a narrow path led upward into the hills above. With little consciousness of what he did, he ascended the mule-road which rose before him, and the chill of the morning air, as it blew through the tops of the swaying pines, was welcome to him. He had that cruel wound within him which a proud man suffers from when he has disclosed the innermost secrets of his heart in a rare moment of impulse, and has seen them lightly and contemptuously played with for a jest.

He had gone through life receiving much adulation but little sympathy, and giving as little [64] confidence; in a moral isolation due to the delicacy of his own nature and to the flattery he received, which had early made him withhold himself from intimate friendships, fearing to trust where he would be only duped.

To her, in an unguarded hour, he had shown the loneliness and the longing which he felt, he had disclosed the empty place which no powers or vanities of the world could fill; he had staked the whole of his peace on the caprice of one woman, and he knew that, in the rough phrase which men would have used to him, he had been made a fool of in return; he had betrayed himself, and had nothing in return but the memory of a little low laughter, of a tranquil voice, saying: '*Tout cela c'est le vieux jeu!*'

He never knew very well how that day of the 2nd of January passed with him. He was sensible of walking long, of climbing steep paths going towards the higher mountains, of drinking thirstily at a little woodland fountain, of sitting for hours quite motionless, looking down on the shore far below, where the blue sea spread in the sunlight, and the towers of S. Pharamond were mere [65] grey points amidst a crowd of evergreen and of silvery-leafed trees.

There was an irony in the sense that he could have purchased the whole province which lay beneath his feet, could have bought out the princeling who reigned in that little kingdom under old Turbia, as easily as he could have bought a bouquet for a woman, could have set emperors to war with one another by merely casting his gold into the scales of peace, could have created a city in a barren plain with as little effort as a child builds up a toy village on a table, and yet was powerless to command, or to arouse, the only thing on earth which he desired, one whit of feeling in the woman he loved!

It was late in the afternoon when he took his way homeward, having eaten nothing, only drunk thirstily of water wherever a little brook had made a well amongst the tufts of hepatica in the pine woods. He was a man capable of a spiritual love; if she had remained aloof from him for honour's sake, but had cared for him, he would not have demurred to her choice, but would have [66] accepted his fate at her hands and would have served her loyally with the devotion of a chivalrous nature.

All the passion, the pain, as of a boy's first love, blent in him with the bitter revolts of mature manhood. He believed that Nadine Napraxine had never intended more than to amuse herself with his rejection; he believed that for the second time he had been the toy of an unscrupulous coquette. Whatever fault there might be in his love for her, it was love—absolute, strong, faithful, and capable of an eternal loyalty; he had laid his heart bare before her, and had meant in their utmost meaning all the words which he had uttered, all the offers which he had made. Despite his knowledge of her, he had allowed himself to be beguiled into a second confession of the empire she possessed over him, and for the second time he had been not alone rejected, but gently ridiculed with that quiet amused irony which had been to the force and heat of his passion like a fine spray of ice-cold water falling on iron at a white-heat. She had not alone wounded and stung him: she had humiliated him profoundly. If she had rejected him from honour, duty, or love for [67] any other, he would have borne what men have borne a thousand times in silence, and with no sense of shame; but he was conscious that in her absolute indifference she had drawn him on to the fullest revelation of all he felt for her, only that her ready satire might find food in his folly, and her fine wit play with his suffering, as the angler plays the trout. She seemed to him to have betrayed him in the basest manner that a woman could betray a man who had no positive right to her loyalty. She had known so well how he loved her. He had told her so many times; unless she had been willing to hear the tale again, why had she bidden him come there in that charmed solitude in the hush and freshness of the early morning? When women desire not love, do they seat their lover beside them when all the world sleeps? He had been cheated, laughed at, summoned, and then dismissed; his whole frame thrilled with humiliation when he recalled the smiling subdued mockery of her voice as she had dismissed him.

He had been willing to give her his life, his good repute, his peace, his honour, his very soul; and [68] she had sent him away with the calm, cool, little phrases with which she would have rejected a clumsy valser for a cotillon!

He had little vanity, but he knew himself to be one of those to whom the world cringes; one of those of whom modern life has made its Cæsars; he knew that what he had been willing to surrender to her had been no little thing; that he would have said farewell to the whole of mankind for her sake, and would have loved her with the romantic devoted force and fealty of a franker and fiercer time than his own; and she had drawn him on to again confess this, again offer this, and all it had seemed to her was *vieux jeu*, an archaic thing to laugh at, to yawn at, to

be indulgent to, and tired by, in a breath!

He was a very proud man, and a man who had seldom or never shown what he either desired or suffered, yet he had laid his whole heart bare to her; and she, the only living being who had either power over him, or real knowledge of him, had looked at him with her little cool smile, and said, ‘In three months I should be tired of you.’

If, when the knight had killed his falcon for his lady, she had scoffed at it and thrown it out to [69]
feed the rats and sparrows he would have suffered as Othmar suffered now. He had killed his honour and his pride for her sake, and she had held them in her hands for a moment, and then had laughed a little and had thrown them away.

Where he sat all alone he felt his cheeks burn with the sense of an unendurable mortification. At this moment, for aught he knew, she, with her admirable mimicry and her merciless sarcasm, might be reacting the scene for the diversion of her companions! Passion was but *vieux jeu*; it could expect no higher distinction than to be ridiculed as comedy by a witty woman. Did not the universe only exist to amuse the languor of Nadine Napraxine?

The world, had it heard the story, would have blamed him for an unholy love, and praised her for her dismissal of it; but he knew that he had been as utterly betrayed as though he had been sold by her into the hands of assassins. She had drawn him on, and on, and on, until all his life had been laid at her feet, and then she had looked at it a little, carelessly, idly, and had said she had [70]
no use for it, as she might have said so of any sea-waste washed up on the sea-steps of her terrace with that noon.

Of course the world would have praised her; no doubt the world would have blamed him; but he knew that women who slay their lovers after loving them do a coarser but a kinder thing.

It was almost dark as he descended the road to S. Pharamond, intending when he reached home to make some excuse to his uncle and leave for Paris by the night express or by a special train. The path he took led through the orange-wood of Sandroz, which fitted, in a triangular-shaped piece of ground, between the boundaries of his own land and that of Millo. Absorbed as he was in his own thoughts, he recognised with surprise the figure of Yseulte as he pushed his way under the low boughs of the orange trees, and saw her within a yard of him. She was with the woman Nicole.

She did not see him until he was close to her, where she sat on a low stone wall, the woman standing in front of her. When she did so, her face spoke for her; it said what Nadine Napraxine’s [71]
had never said. The emotion of joy and timidity mingled touched him keenly in that moment, when he, with his millions of gold and of friends, had so strongly realised his own loneliness.

‘*She* loves me as much as she dare—as much as she can, without being conscious of it,’ he thought, as he paused beside her. She did not speak, she did not move; but her colour changed and her breath came quickly. She had slipped off the wall and stood irresolute, as though inclined to run away, the glossy leaves and the starry blossoms of the trees consecrated to virginity were all above her and around her. She glanced at him with an indefinite fear; she fancied he was angered by the return of the casket; he looked paler and sterner than she had ever seen him look.

He paused a moment and said some commonplace word.

Then he saw that her eyes were wet with tears, and that she had been crying.

‘What is the matter?’ he said, gently. ‘Has anything vexed you?’

‘They are sending her away,’ said Nicole Sandroz, with indignant tears in her own eyes, finding [72]
that she did not reply for herself. ‘They are sending her to the Vosges, where, as Monsieur knows very well, I make no doubt, the very hares and wolves are frozen in the woods at this month of the year.’

‘Are you indeed going away?’ he asked of Yseulte herself.

She did not speak: she made a little affirmative gesture.

‘Why is that? Bois le Roy, in this season, will be a cruel prison for you.’

‘My cousin wishes it,’ said the girl; she spoke with effort; she did not wish to cry before him; the memory of all that her cousin had said that morning was with her in merciless distinctness.

Nicole broke out in a torrent of speech, accusing the tyrants of Millo in impassioned and immoderate language, and devoting them and theirs to untold miseries in retribution.

Yseulte stopped her with authority; ‘You are wrong, Nicole; do not speak in such a manner, it is insolent. You forget that, whether I am in the Vosges or here, I equally owe my cousin everything.’

She paused; she was no more than a child. Her departure was very cruel to her; she had been [73]
humiliated and chastised that day beyond her power of patience; she had said nothing, done nothing, but in her heart she had rebelled passionately when they had taken away her ivory casket. They had left her the heart of a woman in its stead.

Othmar was ignorant that his casket, fateful as Pandora’s, had been returned, but he divined that his gift had displeased those who disposed of her destiny, and had brought about directly or indirectly her exile from Millo.

‘When do you go?’ he asked abruptly.

‘To-morrow.’

As she answered him the tears she could not altogether restrain rolled off her lashes. She turned away.

‘Let us go in, Nicole,’ she murmured. ‘You know Henriette is waiting for me.’

‘Let her wait, the cockered-up Parisienne, who shrieks if she see a pig and has hysterics if she get a spot of mud on her stockings!’ grumbled Nicole, who was the sworn foe of the whole Paris-born and Paris-bred household of Millo. But Yseulte had already moved towards the house. When she had gone a few yards away, however, she paused, returned, and approached Othmar. She looked [74] on the ground, and her voice trembled as she spoke: ‘I ought to thank you, M. Othmar—I do thank you. It was very beautiful. I would have kept it all my life.’

‘Ah!’ said Othmar.

He understood; he was moved to a sudden anger, which penetrated even his intense preoccupation. He had meant to do this poor child a kindness, and he had only done her great harm.

Yseulte had turned away, and had gone rapidly through the orange-trees towards the house.

‘She is not happy?’ said Othmar to her foster-mother, whose tongue, once loosed, told him with the eloquence of indignation of all the sorrows suffered by her nursling. ‘And they will make her a nun, Monsieur!’ she cried; ‘a nun! That child, who is like a June lily. For me, I say nothing against the black and grey women, though Sandroz calls them bad names. There are good women amongst them, and when one lies sick in hospital one is glad of them; but there are women enough in this world who have sins and shame to repent them of to fill all the convents from here [75] to Jerusalem. There are all the ugly ones too, and the sickly ones and the deformed ones, and the heart-broken; for them it is all very well; the cloister is home, the veil is peace, they must think of heaven, or go mad; it is best they should think of it. But this child to be a nun!—when she should be running with her own children through the daisies—when she should be playing in the sunshine like the lambs, like the kids, like the pigeons!’ ——

Othmar heard her to the end; then without answer he bade her good-day, and descended the sloping grass towards his house.

‘They say he has a million a year,’ said Nicole to herself, as she looked after him. ‘Well, he does not seem to be happy upon it. The lads that bring up the rags on their heads from the ships look gayer than he, all in the stench and the muck as they are, and never knowing that they will earn their bread and wine from one day to another.’

She kicked a stone from her path, and hurried after her nursling.

Othmar went quickly on to his own woods. ‘They could not even let her have that toy,’ he thought [76] with an emotion, vague but sincere, outside the conflict of passion, wrath, and mortification which Nadine Napraxine had aroused in him. He saw the sudden happiness, so soon veiled beneath reserve and timidity, which had shone on the girl’s face as she had first seen him under the orange boughs. He saw her beautiful golden eyes misty with the tears she had had too much courage to shed; he saw her slender throat swell with subdued emotion as she had approached him and said shyly, ‘I would have kept it all my life.’

All her life,—in the stone cell of some house of the Daughters of Christ or the Sisters of St. Marie!

> ‘To love is more, yet to be loved is something,’

he thought. ‘What treasures for one’s heart and senses are in her—if one could only care!’

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[77]

CHAPTER XVIII.

When he reached home that evening he found on his writing-table the ivory casket and the letter of Madame de Vannes. In the pain and the passion which wrestled together against his manhood in him, he scarcely heeded either, yet they brought before his memory the face of Yseulte, and the sound of her soft grave voice with that sweet thrill of youth in it which is like the thrill of the thrush's in the woods at spring-time. She had youth, but she would have no spring-time.

And in the strong and impotent rage which consumed him, in the pain of bruised and aching nerves, and the sickening void which the certain loss of what alone is loved brings with it, Othmar, seeing the ivory casket, and glancing at the letter which he had had no patience to read through, thought to himself, 'The child loves me; she will have a wretched life; what if I try to forget? They threw virgins to the Minotaur. Shall I try to appease with one this cruel fire of love, [78] which leaves me no peace or wisdom?'

It was the act of a madman to attempt to make one woman take the place of another to the senses or to the heart, but in that moment he was not master of himself. He was only sensible of a cruel insult which he had received from the hand he loved best on earth; of a cruel betrayal which was but the more merciless because wrought with so sweet a smile, so apparent an unconsciousness, so seemingly innocent a malice.

He passed the night and the next morning locked in his own room; when he left it, and met the Baron Friederich, he said to him:

'I have thought over all you said the other day. You are right, no doubt. Will you go across to our neighbours at Millo and ask of them the honour of the hand of their cousin, of Mademoiselle de Valogne?'

The Baron stared at him with a little cry of amaze.

'For you?' he stammered.

'For me,' said Othmar. 'What have you said yourself? I do not want wealth; I want good blood, [79] beauty, and innocence; they are all possessed by Mademoiselle de Valogne. Go; your errand will please them. They will pardon some breach of etiquette. It will be a mission which you will like.'

As the Baron, a little later, rolled through the gates of Millo in full state, his shrewd knowledge of men and their madnesses made him think:

'So the Princess Napraxine evidently will have nothing to say to him! *A la bonne heure!* There are some honest women left then amongst the great ladies. She could so easily have ruined him! He takes a droll way to cure himself, but it is not a bad one. The worst is, that this sort of cure never lasts long, and when she can make the unhappiness of two persons, instead of only the happiness of one, perhaps Madame la Princesse will be tempted to make it!'

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[80]

CHAPTER XIX.

On the following day Platon Napraxine drove home from Monte Carlo at sunset with a piece of news to carry there which amused and unusually animated him.

He went up the stone stairs of the terrace of La Jacquemerille with the quick step of one who is eager to deliver himself of his tidings, and approached, with a rapidity unfrequent with him, the spot where his wife sat with her guests under the rose and white awning beside the marble balustrade and the variegated aloes.

The Princess Nadine was also full of unwonted animation; her cheek had its sea-shell flush, her eyes a vague and pleased expectancy; she was laughing a little and listening a good deal; besides her usual companions, she had there a group of Austrian and Russian diplomatists and some Parisian boulevardiers. They were just taking their leave as she was taking her tea, but it was not very greatly of them that she was thinking: she was thinking as she heard the roll of her husband's carriage wheels beneath the carouba trees;——'Ten to one Othmar will return with him.' [81]

She lost her gay expression as she saw that he was alone.

All the day she had expected the man whom she had banished to return. She was accustomed to spaniels who crawled humbly up after a beating to solicit another beating rather than remain unnoticed. She had dismissed a certain apprehension which had told her that she had gone too far with the reflection that a man who loved her once did so for ever, and that, as he had returned from Asia, so he would return this morning, however great his offence or his humiliation might have been.

'He is more romantic than most,' she had thought, 'but after all, he must be made of the same stuff.'

Napraxine approached her hurriedly, and scarcely giving himself time to formally greet the gentlemen there, cried to her aloud:

'*Ecoutez donc, Madame!* You will never guess what has happened.'

'It is of no use for us to try then,' said his wife. 'You are evidently *gonflé* with some tremendous intelligence. Pray unburden yourself. Perhaps the societies for the protection of animals have had Strasburg *pâtés* made illegal?' [82]

'I have seen the Duchesse, I have seen Baron Fritz, I have seen Melville,' answered her husband impetuously and triumphantly, 'and they all say the same thing, so that there cannot be a doubt that it is true. Othmar marries that little cousin of Cri-Cri: the one of whom they meant to make a nun. What luck for her! But they say she is very beautiful, and only sixteen.'

The people assembled round her table raised a chorus of exclamation and of comment. Napraxine stood amidst them, delighted; his little social bomb had burst with the brilliancy and the noise that he had anticipated.

Nadine Napraxine turned her head with an involuntary movement of surprise.

'Othmar!' she repeated; her large black eyes opened fully with a perplexed expression.

'It must be the girl who was in the boat,' said Lady Brancepeth. 'She was very handsome.'

Geraldine looked at Madame Napraxine with curiosity, eagerness, and gratification. [83]

'Who told you, Platon?' she asked, with a certain impatience in her voice.

'Three of them told me; Melville first, then Cri-Cri herself, in the Salle de Jeu. She did not seem to know whether to be affronted or pleased. She said the whole thing was a great surprise, but that she could not refuse Othmar; she declared that her projects were all upset, that her young cousin had been always destined to the religious life; that she regretted to have her turned from her vocation; in short, she talked a great deal of nonsense, but the upshot of it all was that Baron Fritz had made formal proposals, and that she had accepted them. In the gardens, coming away, I met the Baron himself; he was in a state of ecstasy; all he cares for is the perpetuation of the name of Othmar; but he declares that Mademoiselle de Valogne is everything he could desire, that she was excessively timid, and scarcely spoke a word when they allowed him to see her for five minutes, but that it was a very graceful timidity, and full of feeling.'

'Baron Fritz in the operatic *rôle* of Padrone d'Amore is infinitely droll,' said Nadine, with a little cold laugh. [84]

'Of course Othmar was obliged to marry some time,' continued Napraxine, who did not easily abandon a subject when one pleased him. 'And he is—how old is he?—I saw the Baron as I left; he is delighted. He says the poor child fainted when they told her she was to be saved from a religious life.'

'My dear Platon,' said his wife impatiently, ' we can read Daudet or Henri Greville when we want this sort of thing. Pray, spare us. I hope Baron Fritz explained to her that all she is wanted for is to continue a race of Croatian money-lenders which he considers the pivot of the world. If she fail in doing that he will counsel a divorce, *à la* Bonaparte.'

'He might marry an archduchess,' said one of the diplomatists. 'Surely, it is throwing himself away.'

'It must be for love,' said Geraldine, with an ironical smile.

‘The de Valogne was a great race, but impoverished long ago,’ said a Russian minister. ‘ I think, if he had married at all, he should have made an alliance which would have brought him that [85] unassailably great rank which is usually the ambition of all financiers. For a man of his position to make a mere romantic *mariage d’amour* is absurd—out of place;—and who knows if it be even that?’ he pursued, with an involuntary glance at the Princess Napraxine.

‘Why on earth should we doubt it?’ said her husband. ‘It cannot be anything else, and they say the girl is quite beautiful. Surely, if anyone can afford to marry to please himself, that one is Othmar.’

‘At any rate, it is his own affair,’ said Nadine, in a voice which was clear and sweet, but cold as steel. ‘I cannot see why we should occupy ourselves about it, or why you should have announced it as if it were the dissolution of the world.’

‘Mademoiselle de Valogne is very beautiful,’ said Geraldine, ‘I have seen her once at Millo. Why should they pretend to hesitate?’

‘They hesitated because she is *vouée à Marie*,’ replied Napraxine, ‘and also the de Vannes and the de Creusac scarcely recognise the princes of finance as their equals. Still the marriage is magnificent; they felt they had no right to regret it since it fell to them from heaven.’ [86]

‘Do you still believe, Platon, that heaven has anything to do with marriage?’ said his wife, with her little significant smile; a slight colour had come upon her cheeks, tinging them as blush-roses are tinged with the faintest flush; her eyes retained their astonished and annoyed expression, of which her husband saw nothing.

‘Heaven made mine at least,’ he said, with his unfailing good-humour, and a bow in which there was some grace.

‘Louis Quatorze could not have answered better,’ said Nadine. ‘I cannot say I see the hand of heaven myself in it, but if you do, so much the better. "Les illusions sont des zéros, mais c’est avec les zéros qu’on fait les beaux chiffres."’

‘I do not know whether Mademoiselle de Valogne has illusions, but her settlements will certainly have *de beaux chiffres*,’ continued Napraxine, who was still full of the tidings he had brought. ‘Did Othmar say nothing to you the other morning of what he intended to do?’

‘Nothing; why should he? I am no relation of his or of Mademoiselle de Valogne.’ [87]

‘He might have done so; he was a long time alone with you. Perhaps he did not know it himself.’

‘Perhaps not.’

‘It seems a *coup de tête*. Madame de Vannes told me that he had only seen her cousin four times.’

‘That is three times more than is necessary.’

‘They say the girl is very much in love with him, and burst into tears when they told her of his proposals.’

‘Oh, my dear Platon! That the girl marries Othmar one understands; she would be an imbecile, a lunatic, to refuse; but that she weeps because she will enjoy one of the hugest fortunes in Europe —do not make such demands on our credulity!’

‘They say their acquaintance has been an idyl; quite *hors d’usage*; they both met in his gardens by chance, and he——’

‘Chance? I thought it was heaven? You may be quite sure neither had anything to do with it. Aurore is a very clever woman; she knew very well what she did when she brought her cousin [88] down to Millo this winter; if the girl had been honestly *vouée à Marie*, would they have had her in the drawing-room after their dinner-parties? Ralph says he has seen her there.’

‘Well, if it were a conspiracy, it has succeeded.’

‘Of course it has succeeded. When women condescend to conspire, men always fall. Our Russian history will show you that.’

Being, however, an obstinate man, who always adhered to his own opinion, even in trifles which in no way concerned him, Napraxine reiterated that Baron Fritz had expressed himself satisfied that the girl was in love with his nephew.

‘And why not?’ he said stoutly, with more courage than he usually showed. ‘Most women would soon care for Othmar if he wished them to do so.’

‘Oh, *grand dada*!’ murmured Nadine, in supreme disdain, whilst her eyes glanced over him for a moment with an expression which, had he been wise enough to read it, would have made him less eager to extol the absent.

‘After all,’ she said aloud, ‘what is his marriage to us, that we should talk about it? I suppose it is [89] the sole act of his life which would have no effect on the Bourses. We get into very base habits of discussing our neighbours’ affairs. Let us say, once for all, that he has done a very charitable action, and that we hope it will have a happy result: *e basta!* We will call at Millo to-morrow. I am curious to see the future Countess Othmar.’

‘They say she is very shy.’

‘Oh, we all know Ste. Mousseline,’ said Nadine Napraxine, with scorn. ‘Besides, convent-reared girls are all of the same type. I only hope Cri-Cri will not assume any hypocritical airs of regret before me; the only regret she can really have is that Blanchette was not old enough to have won

this matrimonial Derby.'

'You always speak so slightingly of Othmar,' said Napraxine, with some reproach.

'I really thought I paid him a high compliment,' said his wife.

'Why has he done it?' said one of the Russian diplomatists to another, when they had taken leave of the Princess and her party.

'I imagine that Madame Napraxine piqued him,' said another. 'You know he has been madly in [90] love with her for two years.'

'She does not seem to like his marriage.'

'They never like it,' returned the Russian minister. 'They may not look at you themselves, but they never like you to look at any one else.'

'If he marry her because he is in love elsewhere, and if she have the Princess Nadine for an enemy at the onset, this poor child's path will not be of roses.'

'She will be almost the richest woman in Europe; that must suffice.'

'That will depend on her character.'

'It will depend a little on whether she will be in love with her husband. If she be not, all may go smoothly.'

'Do you know what I thought as I looked at Madame Napraxine just now?' said the younger man. 'I thought of that Persian or Indian tale where the woman, leaning over the magic cup, dropped a pearl from her necklace into it, and spoilt the whole charm for all eternity. I dare say it will be only a pearl which she will drop into Othmar's future life, but it will spoil the whole charm of it [91] for ever and ever.'

'You never liked her,' said the elder man. 'She is a woman capable of an infinitude of things, good and bad. She has the misfortune to have a very excellent and very stupid husband. There is nothing so injurious for a clever woman. A bad man who had ill-treated her would not have done her half as much harm. She would have had courage and energy to meet an unhappy fate superbly. But a perfectly amiable fool whom she disdains from all the height of her own admirable wit, coupled with the habits of our idiotic world, which is like a mountain of wool steeped in opium, into which the strongest sinks indolent and enfeebled, have all tended to confirm her in her egotism and her disdain, and to send to sleep all her more noble impulses. Whatever men may be, women can only be "saved by faith," and what faith has Nadine Napraxine except her perfect faith in her own irresistible and incomparable power over her innumerable lovers?'

'Well,' said the younger man, 'if she chose to drop that pearl in, as I said, I would not give much for the chances of Othmar's wife against her. I have seen the girl. She is very lovely, serious, [92] simple; no match at all against such a woman as Princess Napraxine.'

'She will have the advantage of youth, and also—which, perhaps, will count for something with such a man as Othmar, though it would not with most men—she will be his wife.'

'Perhaps. He has been always eccentric,' rejoined the other.

Watching her with all the keen anxiety of jealousy Geraldine had been unable to discover that the intelligence of Othmar's marriage caused her any more surprise or interest than any other of the hundred and one items of news which make up the daily pabulum of society. But then he knew very well that she was of such a character that though she might have suffered intolerably she would have shown no sign of it any more than she would have shown any fear had a dozen naked sabres been at her breast.

Left alone beside his sister for a moment, he said to her, with doubting impatience: 'Does she care, do you think?'

'What affair is it of yours if she does?' returned Lady Brancepeth. 'Does she ever care for [93] anything? And why should she care here? Othmar has been known to be violently in love with her —as you are—but no one has ever had the slightest reason to suppose that she had any feeling in return for him. He does a foolish thing in marrying one woman while he loves another. Some men have faith in that cure. Myself I should have none. But whatever his reasons for this sudden choice of Mdlle. de Valogne, I imagine that his marriage is a matter of as perfect indifference to Nadine as your own would be.'

Geraldine grew red, and his mortification kept him silent. But the insight of a man in love told him that his keen-eyed sister was for once in error.

Nadine Napraxine herself had gone to her own rooms to change her gown for dinner, but she dismissed her maids for twenty minutes and threw herself on a couch in her bedroom. She was herself uncertain what she felt, and angered that she should feel anything. She was conscious of a sense of offence, irritation, amazement, almost chagrin, which hurt her pride and alarmed her dignity. If a month before she had been told that Othmar was dead, she would have felt no more [94] than a momentary regret. But the strength of his passion in the morning interviews with her had touched some fibre, some nerve in her, which had been dumb and numb before. Again and again she had recalled the accents of his voice, the sombre fire and pathetic entreaty of his eyes; they had not moved her at the time to anything more than the vague artistic pleasure which she would have taken in any emotion admirably rendered in art or on the stage, but in remembrance they had haunted her and thrilled through her with something more nearly resembling response than

had ever been aroused in her.

The expectation of his return had been as strong as certainty; the sense that she had gone too far with him had heightened the interest with which she had awaited her next meeting with him. One of the greatest triumphs of her fascination had been the power she had exercised over him. She was the only living person who could say to this man, who could have purchased souls and bodies as he could have purchased strings of unpierced pearls if he had chosen: ‘You desire something [95] of which you will never be master.’

That she had had influence enough on such a career as his to drive him out from the world where all his interests, pursuits, and friendships lay, had pleased her with more keenness in her pleasure than similar victories often gave her. She had seen his return to Europe with amusement, even with derision; she had seen at a glance that he had fled in vain from her; she had been diverted, but she had remained indifferent.

In those morning hours when he had addressed her with an almost brutal candour, he had taken a hold upon her admiration which he had never gained before. His accents had lingered on her ear; his regard had burned itself into her remembrance; she had begun to look forward to his next approach, after her rejection, with something more than the merely intellectual curiosity with which before she had studied the results of her influence upon him. The news of his intended marriage came to her with a sense of surprise and of affront which was more nearly regret than any sentiment she had ever experienced. It seemed to her supremely ridiculous that a [96] man who adored *her* should seek or hope to find any oblivion elsewhere; she even understood that it was no such hope which had actuated him, but rather his wounded pride which had rebelled against herself and been unwilling to allow the world to consider him her slave. Of the more delicate and more tender motives which had led him towards Yseulte de Valogne she could know nothing; but of those more selfish and embittered ones she comprehended accurately all the sources and all the extent.

‘He does it to escape me,’ she thought as she sat in solitude, while the last faint crimson of the winter’s sunset tinged the light clouds before her windows; a smile came slowly on her beautiful mouth,—a smile, proud, unkind, a little bitter. There was resentment in her, and there was also pain, two emotions hitherto strangers to her heart; but beyond these, and deeper than these, there was a caustic contempt for the man’s cowardice in seeking asylum in an unreal love, in endeavouring to cheat himself and another into belief in a feigned passion.

‘I thought him more brave!’ she said bitterly to herself. ‘He is like a beaten warrior who makes a [97] rampart of a virgin’s body!’

And yet, in that moment she was nearer love for him than she had ever been before.

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[98]

CHAPTER XX.

Blanchette was dancing round her cousin in the twilight of the January day, making her *pied de nez* triumphantly, but pausing every now and then to look up in her face with her habitual inquisitiveness, yet with a respect quite new to her.

'*Tiens, tiens, tiens!*' she was crying in her little shrill voice, like the tiniest of silver trumpets. 'To think you are going to be married after all! You will be ever so much richer than mamma, they say; you will be as rich as all the *Juiverie* put together, and you will be as great a lady as all the *grandes dames*. You will have as many jewels as Madame de Talleyrand; you will have as many horses and houses as Madame de Sagan; you will have two new gowns every day if you like. Have you seen the Hôtel Othmar? I have seen it; it is as big as the Louvre. What will you ask him for first? If I were you, I should ask him for a rope of pearls, all as big as pigeons' eggs. What are the [99] Othmar liveries? I never saw them; the state liveries, I mean. I like canary-colour best, and Louis Treize *tricornes*. What will he settle on you? He will give you what you wish; I heard mamma say so. Make him give you S. Pharamond for your very own. I am sure you will not get half you might, you are such a silly little snipe; you are as tall as a Venetian mast on a feast day, but you are a simpleton. You cried when mamma told you he would marry you. The idea! You should have danced for joy. It would be delicious to marry him if he were as old as the hills and as ugly as Punch, but he is not old and he is handsome: all that *par-dessus le panier*, and thirty thousand francs a day, Julie says; and Brown and Schemmitz wanted to kiss your hand! What fun you would make of them if you were me. You should skip and shout all day;—I should. To be sure, he is *dans la finance*, but they are the only royalties nowadays; I have heard mamma say so. Whatever can he see in you? You are pretty and tall, but you don't know it; you stand and stare like an owl with your big eyes. What can he want with you? He will give you everything, he must be a simpleton, [100] too! he might marry somebody quite great; none of them can imagine what he wants you for——'

'Oh, Blanchette!' said Yseulte de Valogne, with a look of pain, as she tried to silence her little tormentor, whose words she only vaguely heard as she stood lost in the golden mists of an incomparable dream.

'*Vrai!*' said the cruel little child. 'Nobody can think what he can see in you. It is Madame Napraxine whom he loves.'

Yseulte coloured with sudden anger, and a look of severity and sternness came on her youthful face, while its happy wistful eyes lost their light and grew cold:

'You must not say these things, Blanchette,' she said sternly; 'you may laugh at me as you like, but you must respect M. Othmar.'

The red deepened in her cheeks as she spoke, and realised that she had the right to defend his name thus. She was thinking in herself as she did so: 'If it were true, if I thought it were true, I would bury myself in the convent for ever.'

The quick little mind of Blanchette divined the direction of her thoughts, and dearly as the child [101] loved to do mischief and to torment, she loved her own pleasure and gain better. She had no wish for this *beau mariage* to be broken off, as she foresaw from it endless diversion, gifts, and bonbons for herself.

'Othmar will give us each at least a medallion with diamonds on the back,' she reflected; and she was conscious, too, that if the marriage fell through by any doing of hers, her mother would be unsparing in her punishment, of which not the least portion would be banishment to Bois de Roy; for Blanchette adored her spring-time in Paris, her summer months at Deauville and Homburg and Biarritz, her wagers on the *petits chevaux*, her exploits in the water, and the many whispers of scandals and naughty witticisms which she caught, when apparently engrossed with her toy balloon or her ball, behind the chairs of her mother and other great ladies on the sand by the sea or under the trees of the fashionable inland baths.

With a rapid remembrance of all that she herself would lose if there were no grand wedding at which she would assist at the Madeleine or S. Philippe du Roule, she threw her arms about her [102] cousin with her most coaxing *câlinerie*: 'It was only my fun,' she whispered; ' pray don't tell any one, *chérie*. It was years and years ago that they laughed about Madame Napraxine; of course, it is you he loves now. Why should he marry you if he did not? He could marry anywhere, anybody, —mamma says so. And you *are* handsome, if you would only think it! Mamma says when you shall have been married a week, and have all your jewels you will be superb.'

Her cousin's face flushed more warmly till it was the hue of those Charles Raybaud roses which she had used to pack for Nicole. Her heart beat in that tumult of emotion, of joy, and of vague, most sweet, fear, in which she had lived for the last twenty-four hours. She thought: 'Why, if he did not care for me, why, indeed, should he seek me?'

It seemed marvellous to her that it should be so, but she could not doubt it.

She had only seen him for ten minutes that morning, in the presence of the Duchesse de Vannes, but though her confusion had been too great to let her eyes meet his, the few soft grave words he [103] had spoken, and the touch of his lips on her hand, had left with her an ineffable sense of protection and affection received. If it were not for love, why should he have paused on his way to thrust back the gates of the convent and take her to himself?

As for herself, the timid, pure, half-unconscious feeling which he had awakened in her was growing in strength with every hour now that it had recognised its own existence and been

permitted its expansion without shame. It remained as shy and fearful as a freshly captured wood-dove, but it had in it all the elements of an intense and devoted passion.

She did not hear the child's chatter, which rippled on like a little brook, asking her a thousand questions of what she would do, of what she would wear, of what she would give away. Blanchette was herself half sympathetic, half envious; disposed to resent her cousin's sudden and splendid change of destiny, yet inclined to rejoice in it, as it would secure to herself a spectacle, a new costume, and a costly gift. She kept looking at the girl critically, with her head on one side, and affecting to help her only hindered her, as she dressed for the first ceremonious dinner at [104] which she had ever assisted.

'To think you can dress yourself; how queer!' cried the little censor. 'I cannot put on a stocking, nor Toinon either. I never mean to do it. Mamma could not to save her life. How many women will you have? Two? three? Never let your maids carry your jewel-box; have it always put in the train by your major-domo, between two footmen. Mamma says all the robberies are done by the maids. What are you going to put on? You have only white frocks. Don't you long to wear satin and velvet? Oh, you are so stupid; you ought to marry a shepherd, and wear lambs'-wool that you spun yourself. You must not be so simple. A Countess Othmar ought to be very magnificent. The finance is nothing if it do not look gorgeous. Oh, what are you doing? You must not put a black sash on; you are a *fiancée*. Have you got nothing but black? Wait a minute; I will run and get one of mine.'

'I have always worn something black or grey since my grandmother died,' said Yseulte, a little sadly.

But Blanchette made a *pirouette*. [105]

'Henri IV. est sur le Pont-Neuf!' she cried. 'Oh, you silly! You were Cendrillon yesterday; now you are the prince's betrothed. Yesterday you were a little brown grub; now you are a butterfly. I will go and get my sash.'

The child flew out of the room and left Yseulte standing before the mirror, looking shyly at her own reflection as though she saw a stranger. She felt, indeed, a stranger to herself; so long she had been resigned to the religious life, so long she had been accustomed to regard obscurity, neglect, sadness, loneliness, as her natural lot; so long she had been trained to submission, lectured to the shade and the silence of resignation, that to be thus suddenly called out into the light, and lifted on to a pedestal, dazzled and almost paralysed her.

It seemed to her as though it could never be herself, Yseulte de Valogne, to whom her cousin had said, with an admiration that was almost reverence: 'You will be the most enviable woman in Europe. Do you understand all you have done for yourself?'

She did not understand it; she only understood that he had rescued her from the conventual life, [106] and that he loved her—surely he loved her, or he would not wish?——

Blanchette flew back into the room, accompanied by the maid Françoise.

'Yseulte! Yseulte!' she shrieked, waving a blue sash in one hand and with the other clasping to her a square parcel tied with silver cord. 'Here is something he sends you: Françoise was bringing it. Open it quick, quick. Oh, what a happy creature you are, and you only stand and stare like the statues in the Luxembourg! Open it quick! It is sure to be something worth thousands and thousands of francs.'

'Hush, Blanchette!' said the girl, with a look of pain, as she took the packet and undid its covering. Within was the ivory casket; and within the casket was a necklace of great pearls.

A little note lay on them, which said merely:—

'*No one can dispossess you of the casket now. Receive what is within as a symbol of your own innocence and of my reverence for it.—Yours, with devotion*, Othmar.'

On the other side of the paper was written more hastily:—'*Pardon me that I must leave* [107] *immediately after dinner for Paris and shall not see you for a few days. I have explained to the Duchesse.*'

Yseulte grew very pale. If the eyes of her little tormentor and of the woman Françoise had not been on her, she would have kissed his note and fallen on her knees and wept. As it was, she stood still in silence, reading the lines again and again, with sweet, warm tears in her eyes. It was Blanchette who took out the pearls and held them up in the lamplight, and appraised their value with the keenness of a jeweller and screamed in rapture over their size and colour.

'They *are* the pigeon's eggs!' she cried, ' and four ropes of them; they must be worth an empire. They are as fine as mamma's, and she has only three rows. I will marry into the finance myself. Oh, what a happy creature you are! Brown says it all came out of your going to gather flowers in his garden. Is that true? How clever it was of you! Who would ever have believed you were so clever, with your silent ways and your countryfied scruples. Let me see his note? You will not? [108] What nonsense! You must put the pearls on. Let me fasten them. Four ropes! They are fit for a Court ball. What a *corbeille* he will send you!'

As she chattered she clasped it round the throat of her cousin, who grew red, then white, as the pearls touched her skin. They made her realise the immense change which one short day had made in her lot. They made her realise that Othmar henceforth was her lover.

While Blanchette chirped and skipped around her, directing her toilette with the accurate instinct in decoration of a little Parisienne, the eyes of the girl were suffused with unshed tears of

gratitude and tremulous joy.

'What can I render thee, O princely giver?'

she was saying in her heart, although she had never read the Portuguese sonnets; while her little cousin babbled on of jewels and ball-dresses, and horses and establishments, and dowries and settlements, and the *régime dotal*, and all the many matters which meant marriage to the precocious comprehension of Blanchette.

'You will have your box at all the theatres, will you not? You have never been to a theatre, but I [109] have. Mind that you go the evening after your marriage. When will your marriage be? I heard mamma say that he wished it to be very soon: but then there is all your *lingerie*, and all your gowns to be made. I suppose mamma will give you your trousseau; she must. Oh, how happy you ought to be, and you look just as grave as an owl! Nobody would guess you were going to be the Countess Othmar. Do you know that he could be made a prince if he liked? You have never learned to ride, Yseulte. What a pity! It is so *chic* to ride early in the Bois. Well, you will have a *coupé* for the early morning, and then you will have a Daumont for the afternoon, of course. There is nothing so pretty as postillions in velvet jackets and caps—if you only knew what colour his liveries are? Won't you have out-riders? I do not know, though, whether you can; I think it is only ambassadresses and princesses of the blood who may have out-riders——You might have a special train every day,' continued Blanchette, exciting herself with her own visions. 'There is nothing such fun as a special train; we had one when grandmère was dying at Bois le Roy all in a [110] moment and wanted to see us; it is so diverting to go on, on, on, through all the stations, past all the other trains, never stopping—pr-r-r-rut!'

'Oh, hush, Blanchette! What do I care about those things?' murmured Yseulte, as she put his note into the casket, locked it, and slipped the little silver key in her bosom, blushing very much as she did so.

It seemed so very wonderful to her that such lines should have been written to her. She wanted to be all alone to muse upon the marvel of it. She remembered a little nook in the convent garden where a bench was fixed against the high stone wall, under the branches of an old medlar tree; a place that she had gone to with her sorrows, her fancies, her visions, her tears, very often; she would have liked to have gone now to some such quiet and solitary nook, to realise in peace this miracle which had been wrought for her. But that was impossible; they had ordered her to dine with them at eight—her first great dinner. She must submit to be gazed at, commented on, complimented, felicitated.

The sensitive, delicate nature of the child shrank from the publicity of her triumph; but she [111] understood that it was her duty, that henceforth these things would be a prominent portion of her duties; the wife of Othmar could not live shut away from the world.

Blanchette tossed her golden head with immeasurable contempt.

'It is all "those things" that make a *grand mariage*. If you think you do not care now, you will care in a year's time. Mamma said so. Mamma said you will be just like anybody else when you shall have been in the world six months.'

Yseulte shook her head with a smile, but she sighed a little also; it pained her that the world, and all it gave, was so intermingled with this beautiful, incredible, dream-like joy which had come to her like some vision brought by angels. In the singleness and sincerity of her young heart she thought: 'Ah! if only he were poor!—how I wish he were poor!—then they would know and he! ——'

But he was not poor, and he had sent her pearls worthy of an empress, and Blanchette was dancing before her in envy, longing to be sixteen years old too and betrothed to an archi- [112] millionaire.

She cast one last timid glance at herself and at the great pearls lying beneath the slender ivory column of her throat, then she drew on her long gloves, and went, with a quickly-beating heart, down the staircase, Blanchette shouting after her Judic's song,—

On ne peut pas savoir ce que c'est,
Ce que c'est,
Si on n'a pas passé par là!

which the child had caught up from the echoes of the boulevards, and sang with as much by-play and meaning as Judic herself could have put into it.

There were some twenty people assembled in the oval drawing-room when Yseulte entered it. It was not of them she was afraid: it was of seeing Othmar before them. There was a murmur of admiration as she appeared in her childish white dress, with the superb necklace on, which a queen might have worn at a Court ball. Her shyness did not impair her grace; the stateliness and pride which were in her blood gave her composure even in her timidity; her eyes were dark and soft with conflicting feelings, her colour came and went. She never spoke audibly once in answer [113] to all the compliment and felicitation she received, but she looked so lovely and so young that no one quarrelled with her silence. When Othmar gave her his arm she trembled from head to foot, but no one noticed it save Othmar himself.

'Do not be afraid of me, my child,' he murmured, and for the first time she took courage and looked at him with a rapid glance that was like a beam of sunlight. The look said to him, 'I am not afraid, I am grateful; I love you, only I dare not say so, and I hardly understand what has happened.'

The dinner seemed both to her and to him interminable; she was quite silent through it, and ate nothing. She was conscious of a sullen gaze which her cousin, de Vannes, fastened on her, and which made her feel that, by him, she was unforgiven. She was confused by the florid speech made to her by the Baron Friederich, who was so enchanted by her that he put no measure to his audible admiration. Othmar, seated beside her, said very little. The party was gay, and the conversation animated. The silence of each of them passed unnoticed. The Duchesse, who alone [114] remarked it, said to Raymond de Prangins:

'It is their way of being in love; it is the old way, which they have copied out of Lamartine and Bernardin de St. Pierre. It is infinitely droll that Othmar should play the sentimental lover, but he does. I want Nadine Napraxine to see him like that. I asked her to dinner, but they had a dinner party at home. She sent me a little line just now, promising, if her people were gone, to come for an hour in the evening. The child looks well, does she not? What jewels he has given her! They are bigger than mine. It is the least he can do; the Finance is bound to buy big jewels. Who would ever have supposed he would have seen anything in that baby, that convent mouse? To be sure, she is handsome. Such a marriage for that little mouse to make! a mere baby like that, a child proud of being the *médaillon* of her convent yesterday! After all, nothing takes some men like that air of innocence, which bores them to death as soon as they have put an end to it. It is like dew; it is like drinking milk in the meadow in the morning; we don't care for the milk, but the doctors say it is good for us, and so——I wonder what she is thinking about. About her gowns, I [115] dare say, or about her jewels. She is just like a vignette out of "Paul et Virginie." She need not pretend to be in love with him; no one will believe in it; he will not believe in it himself; he is too rich. What can he have seen in her more than in five thousand other *fillettes* he might have married? To be sure she is handsome. She will be handsomer——'

She put up her eyeglass and looked down the table at her young cousin with amusement and envy, mingled as they mingled in little Blanchette. The amusement was at the girl's evident embarrassment, the envy was of her youth, of her complexion, of her form, of all which told her own unerring instincts that Yseulte in a few years, even in a few months, would be one of the most beautiful women of her world.

And she said angrily to de Prangins, 'Some men like children; it is as boys like green apples.'

'At least the green apples are not painted,' thought the young man as he murmured aloud a vague compliment. Raymond de Prangins, like most men of his age, had never looked twice at a [116] *fillette*; he had been three weeks in the same house with this child and had never addressed a word to her or noticed whether her eyes were black or brown; but now that she had become the betrothed wife of Othmar, the charm of the forbidden fruit had come to her; she had suddenly become an object of interest in his sight; he was never tired of finding out her beauties, he was absorbed in studying the shape of her throat, the colour of her hair, the whiteness of her shoulders, which came so timidly and with a little shiver, like shorn lambs, out of the first low bodice that she had ever worn. To know that she was about to belong to another man, gave her all at once importance, enchantment, and desirability in his sight.

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[117]

CHAPTER XXI.

Immediately that the dinner was over Othmar made his excuses and left Millo to take the night express to Paris. When once she knew that he was absent, she lost all fear.

Her innocent love was at that stage when the presence of a lover is full of trouble and alarm, and the happiest hours are those in which his absence permits its dreams to wander about her memory undisturbed. When he was there he was still, to her, a stranger whose gaze embarrassed her, whose touch confused her, whose association with herself was unfamiliar and unreal; but, away from him, there was nothing to check or dismay those spiritual and poetic fancies which had lodged their ideal in him. No one of those around her would ever have imagined that she had these fancies, or would have understood them in the slightest degree; they only thought that she was very naturally enraptured to be chosen by a very rich man, and did not doubt that in her [118] mind she was musing, as Blanchette had suggested, on the colour of her liveries, the number of her horses, the places of her residence, and the prospect of her jewels.

Baron Fritz, who made her blush with the fervour of his compliments, and was so delighted with her that he could not cease from gazing at her as though she were a water-colour of Copley Fielding's, was alone sufficiently sympathetic, despite all his seventy years of cynicism, to perceive that the things of this world had little place in her thoughts, and he thought to himself as he looked at her:

'Will Otho be wise enough to appreciate all that? He will have the carnation in its bud, the peach in its flower; he will make just what he pleases of them; the worse will be if he should leave them altogether alone: then the carnation will unfold, the peach will ripen and come out into fruit unnoticed, and if he be an ingrate, they will both come to their perfection for someone else—which will be a pity. The child is in love with him—*parbleu!*—he does not deserve it; he only cares for his Russian woman, his hothouse narcissus; he only wants to cure himself of Nadine [119] Napraxine; as if one blush of this child's cheek were not worth a century of Madame Napraxine's languor!'

And he felt a passing regret that he was not forty years younger and in the place of his nephew.

After dinner he seated himself beside Yseulte, and talked to her of Othmar, of his boyhood, of his talents, of his opportunities, and of his destinies, with so much tact and so much skill that she was moved to an affectionate gratitude towards the speaker and to a sense of infinite awe before all the ambitions and responsibilities with which he filled her future.

'She is a baby, but she is not a fool,' thought the wise old man. 'When the love fever has passed, we shall make of her just what we want, provided only that she has influence over Otho. But will she have any? In marriage there is always one who rules the other: "*un qui se baisse, et l'autre qui tend la joue*": and it is always the one who *cares* who goes under.'

Even as he had eaten his truffles and drunk the fine wines grown on the de Vannes' estates in [120] Gironde, he had been more troubled by an impersonal anxiety than he had ever allowed himself to be in the whole course of his existence. The child had sat opposite to him, looking so youthful beside the faces, more or less *maquillées*, of the women around her, with her soft surprised eyes, happy as those of a child that wakes from sleep, and her colour coming and going, delicate and warm: 'And he will not stay here to see, just because the desire for another woman is in him like a fly in the ear of a horse!' had thought the Baron impatiently. He guessed very accurately that the departure of Othmar was due to a restless unwillingness to face the fate which he had voluntarily made for himself.

He himself had had no heed of Othmar's marriage except as a means of legally continuing his race; his only notion of a woman was Napoleon's, that she should bear many children; but as he looked at Yseulte de Valogne, something kinder and more pitiful stirred in his selfish old heart; she seemed to him too good to be sacrificed so; he understood that there would be other things than money and children which this sensitive plant would want; and worldly, unemotional, and [121] unprincipled as he was, Baron Fritz was the only person present who divined something of the dreams which she was dreaming and felt a compassionate regret for them, as for flowers which opened at dawn to die perforce at noonday.

About eleven o'clock in the evening, when Yseulte was beginning to feel her eyelids grow heavy, and was thinking wistfully of her little white bed amidst the murmur of conversation unintelligible to her and the stare of inquisitive eyes, she heard with a little thrill of an emotion quite new to her the voice of the groom of the chambers, which announced Madame la Princesse Napraxine.

Jealousy she was too young, too simple, and too innocent to know; but a strange eagerness and an unanalysed pain moved her as she saw the woman whom they said that Othmar loved.

'Is that really Madame Napraxine?' she said in a low voice to the Baron, who was beside her.

'Who has told you of Madame Napraxine?' he thought, as he answered her: 'Yes! that is the name of the lady coming in now; she is a famous European beauty, though to my taste she is too [122] slender and too pale.'

The girl did not reply; her eyes followed the trail of Princess Nadine's pale primrose-coloured skirts laden with lace, and fastened here and there with large lilies and lilac. Before that inimitable grace, that exquisite languor and ease, that indescribable air of indifference and of empire and of disdain which made the peculiar power of Nadine Napraxine, the poor child felt

her own insignificance, her own childishness, her own powerlessness; she fancied she must look rustic, awkward, stupid: she grew very pale, and her throat swelled with pain under her lover's pearls.

'It is too early for you to have that adder in your breast,' thought Friederich Othmar, as he watched her. 'What a coward he was to go away, instead of standing his ground beside you! After all, why is everyone so afraid of this Russian woman?'

Aloud, he only said: 'The Princess is coming to you; courage, *mon enfant*. A woman of the world is certainly an alarming animal, but you will have to meet many such, and you will be one yourself before very long.'

'*Fillette*, come and be presented to Mme. Napraxine; she wishes it,' said her cousin at that moment in her ear. The girl shrank back a little, and the colour came into her face; she rose, nevertheless, obediently. [123]

Nadine Napraxine came half-way to meet her, with an indulgent little smile, of which the compassion and disdain penetrated the inmost soul of Yseulte with a cruel sense of inferiority. Yet had she not been so humble and so embarrassed she might have seen a look of surprise in the eyes of her rival. Nadine saw at a glance that in this child there was no 'Sainte Mousseline' to be easily derided and contemned.

'How beautiful a woman she will be in a year or two!' she thought, with that candour which was never lacking in her in her judgments of her greatest foes. 'He is going to possess all that, and he only sighs in his soul for me!—what fools men are!'

While she so thought, she was still smiling as she came to meet Yseulte with that slow, soft, indescribable grace of which she had the secret.

'I am an old friend of Count Othmar's; you must let me be yours in the future,' she said with gracious kindliness. 'Shall I offend you if I venture to say that I am sure he is a very happy and fortunate person? I dare say I shall please you better if I say that he deserves to be so.' [124]

The girl could not have found words to answer to save her life. Instinctively she made her grand eighteenth-century curtsy in acknowledgment. She was very pale; her heart seemed to sink within her as she realised all the charm of this her rival.

Mme. de Vannes murmured a few amiable words, and left them opposite to one another; the girl trembled despite herself, as those indolent lustrous eyes scanned her with merciless investigation and smiled at her embarrassment.

It was her first experience of that obligation, so constant in the world, to meet what is dreaded and disliked with suavity and compliment.

'I am a great friend of your cousin, too,' continued Nadine Napraxine, with all the amiable condescension of a woman of the world to a child. 'We shall be sure to meet constantly in the years to come, which will leave you so young and make us so old! Where have you lived? In an old Breton convent? I wish I had lived in a Breton convent too! Come and sit by me and talk to me a little. Do you know that I am here to-night on purpose to see you. I had a tiresome dinner, all of Russian people, or I should have come here earlier.' [125]

She drew the girl down beside her on a sofa with that pretty imperiousness of which women as well as men often felt the charm and the command. She was most kindly, most gentle, most flattering, yet Yseulte suffered under all her gracious compliments as under the most poignant irony. She answered in monosyllables and at random; she was ill at ease and confused, she looked down with the fascination of a bird gazing at a snake on the hand which held hers, such a slender hand in its tan-coloured glove and with its circles of *porte-bonheurs* above the wrist, and its heavy bracelets crowding one another almost to the elbow.

She would not have spoken more than Yes or No to save her life, and she said even these in the wrong places; but Nadine Napraxine did not make the mistake of thinking her stupid, as less intelligent women would have done. [126]

She studied her curiously whilst she continued to speak those amiable and careless nothings which are the armoury of social life; toy weapons of which the young know neither the use nor the infinite value. She had all the kindly condescension, the good-humoured, amused indulgence, of a grown woman of the world for a schoolgirl; by dates she was only seven years older than Yseulte de Valogne, but in experience and knowledge she was fifty years her senior.

'*Elle est vraiment très bien*,' she said, as she turned away from the girl and took the arm of Friederich Othmar. 'At present she is like a statue in the clay, like a sketch, like a magnolia flower folded up; but Othmar will change all that. You must be so glad; his marriage must have been such an anxiety to you. Suppose he had married a Mongol! What would you have done?'

'It was not precisely of the Mongol that I was most afraid, Madame,' replied the Baron. ' Do you think too that a marriage is a termination to anyone's anxieties? Surely, the dangerous romance begins afterwards in life as in novels.' [127]

'It would be very dull reading in either if it did not,' said Madame Napraxine. 'But we will hope that Mademoiselle and your nephew will read theirs together, and eschew the dangers; that is possible sometimes; and she will have one great advantage for the next five years; she will be handsomer every year.'

'It will be a great advantage if he find her so, but perhaps only others will find her so; marriage does not lend rose-coloured spectacles to its disciples,' thought the Baron, as he answered aloud,

‘There can be no one’s opinion that he could value as much as he is sure to do that of Madame Napraxine.’

‘I imagine my opinion matters nothing at all to him,’ she answered, with her enigmatical smile. ‘But when I see him I shall certainly be able to congratulate him with much more truth than one can usually put into those conventionalities. Mademoiselle de Valogne is very beautiful.’

The Baron sadly recalled the saying of that wise man who was of opinion that it makes little difference after three months whether your wife be a Venus or a Hottentot; but he did not utter [128] this blasphemy to a lovely woman.

The girl remained on her sofa gazing wistfully after this *élégante* who had all the knowledge which she lacked, and who impressed her so sadly with an indefinite dull sense of inferiority and of helplessness. She put her hand up to her throat and felt for his pearls; they seemed like friends; they seemed to assure her of his affection and of the future. People thought she was proud of them because they were so large, so perfect in colour and shape, so royal in their value; she would have been as pleased with them if they had been strings of berries out of the woods, and he had sent them with the same message and meaning.

She watched Nadine Napraxine with fascinated eyes; wondering where was the secret of that supreme seduction which even she, in her convent-bred simplicity, could feel was in her. In the few words which had been addressed to her she was dimly conscious that the other disdained her as a child, and derided Othmar as a fool.

Madame de Vannes roused her from her preoccupation with a tap of her fan.

‘How grave you look, *fillette*,’ she said with some impatience. ‘You must never look like that now [129] you are in the world. Everyone detests grave people. If you cannot always smile, stay in your convent.’

‘I beg your pardon,’ murmured Yseulte, waking from her meditation with a little shock. ‘I did not know—I was thinking——’

‘That is just what you must not do when you are in society. What were you thinking of? You looked very sombre.’

The girl coloured and hesitated, then she said very low:

‘The other day—the day of the casket—you said he loved her—was it true?’

She glanced across the room at Nadine Napraxine as she spoke.

‘Did I say so?’ answered the Duchesse, with annoyance at herself. ‘Then I talked great nonsense. But how was I to know then that he was thinking of you? Listen to me, *fillette*,’ she continued, with more real kindness in her tone than the girl had ever heard there. ‘ You will hear all kinds of scandals, insinuations, stories of all sorts in the world that you will live in; never listen to them, or you will be perpetually irritated and unhappy. People say all sorts of untruths out of sheer [130] idleness; they must talk. M. Othmar must certainly have some very especial esteem for you, or why should he choose you out of all womankind for his wife? That is all you have to think of; do not perplex yourself as to whom he may, or may not, have loved beforehand. All your care must be that he shall love no one else afterwards. You are tired, I think; go to bed, if you like: you can slip away unnoticed. You are only a child yet.’

Yseulte went at once, thankful for the permission, yet looking wistfully still at the delicate head of Nadine Napraxine, as it rose up from a collar of emeralds. Madame de Vannes passed to the music room, where a little operetta was being given, with a vague compassion stirring in her.

‘I am sure the old Marquise could not have given her more moral advice than I,’ she thought, ‘but I am afraid the silly child will have trouble, she is so old-fashioned. Why cannot she marry the man, and enjoy all he will give her, without perplexing herself as to what fancies he may have had for other people? What does it matter? She will have to get used to that sort of thing. If it be [131] not Nadine who makes her jealous, it will be someone else; but one could not tell her that. How right I was not to send Blanchette and Toinon to a convent! The holy women make them so romantic, so emotional, so *pleurnicheuses*!’

At the same moment Nadine Napraxine said, when she had left her and was speaking to Melville of her:

‘She is very interesting. She will have plenty of character; he thinks that he is marrying a child; he forgets that she will grow up, and that very rapidly. Marriage is a hothouse for women who are young. I was married at her age; in three months’ time I felt as old—as old—as old as I do now. Nobody can feel older! You are sixty-five, you say, and you are so young. That is because you are not married and can believe in Paradise.’

‘You mean that I hope for compensation?’ said Melville, with his pleasant laugh.

‘Or that you keep your illusions. There is so much in that. People who do are always young. I do not think I ever had any to lose!’

‘It is great emotions which make happy illusions, and I believe you have never permitted those to [132] approach you?’

‘I have viewed them from afar off, as Lucretius says one ought to see a storm.’

‘I do not doubt you have seen them very often, Princess,’ said Melville, with significance. ‘But as you have not shared them, they have passed by you like great waves which leave no mark upon the smoothness of the sand on which they break.’

‘Perhaps,’ she said, while her mind reverted to the scene of which her boudoir had been the theatre three days before; then she added a little abruptly: ‘You know Mlle. de Valogne well—you are interested in her? What do you think of her marriage?’

‘I have known her from the time she was four years old,’ replied Melville. ‘I have seen her at intervals at the convent of Faïel. I am convinced she has no common character; she is very unlike the young girls one sees in the world, who have had their course of Deauville, Aix, and Biarritz. She is of the antique French patrician type; perhaps the highest human type that the world has ever seen, and the most capable of self-restraint, of heroism, of true distinction, and of loyalty. I [133] fancy Elizabeth de France must have been just such a girl as is Yseulte de Valogne.’

‘What eulogy!’ returned his companion, with a little incredulous accent. ‘I have always wondered that your Church did not canonize the Princess Elizabeth. But you do not tell me what you think of the marriage.’

Melville smiled.

‘I might venture to prophecy if the success of a marriage depended on two persons, but it depends on so many others.’

‘You are very mysterious; I do not see what others have to do with it.’

‘And yet,’ thought Melville, ‘how often you have stretched out your delicate fingers and pushed down the most finely-wrought web of human happiness—just for pastime!’

Aloud he said: ‘If she and he were about to live their lives on a desert island, I am convinced they would be entirely suited to each other. But as they will live in the world, and perforce in what they call the great world, who shall presume to say what their marriage will become? It may pass [134] into that indifferent and amiable friendship which is the most usual issue of such marriages, or it may grow into that direct antagonism which is perhaps its still commoner result; on the other hand, it may become that perfect flower of human sympathy which, like the aloe, blossoms once in a century; but, if that miracle happen, such flowers are not immortal; an unkind grasp will suffice to break them off at the root. On the whole, I am not especially hopeful; she is too young, and he——’

‘And he?’ said Nadine Napraxine, with a gleam of curiosity in her glance.

‘I am not his confessor; I doubt if he ever confess—to his own sex,’ replied Melville; ‘but if I had been, I should have said to him: “My son, one does not cure strong fevers with meadow-daisies; wait till your soul is cleansed before you offer it to a child whom you take from God.” That is what I should have said in the confessional; but I only know Othmar on the neutral ground of society. I cannot presume to say it there.’

‘You are too serious, Monsignore,’ said Nadine, with her enigmatical smile. ‘Marriage is not such [135] a very serious thing, I assure you. Ask Platon.’

‘Prince Napraxine is exceptionally happy,’ said Melville, so gravely that she laughed gaily in his face.

Meanwhile Yseulte dismissed the maid, undressed herself slowly, kissed the pearls when she had unclasped them; and, kneeling down under her crucifix, said many prayers for Othmar.

She was soon asleep, like a tired child, and she had his note under her pillow; nevertheless, she dreamed of Nadine Napraxine, and her sleep was not the pure unbroken rest that she had always had before. Once she awoke in a great terror, her heart beating, her limbs trembling.

‘If he did not love me!’ she cried aloud; then the light of the lamp fell on the open casket, on the necklace of pearls. They seemed to say to her, ‘What should he want with you, unless he loved you?’

She fell asleep again, and with a smile on her face.

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[136]

CHAPTER XXII.

The fortnight passed away rapidly and dizzily for her. They took her at once to Paris, and gave her no time for thought. She lived in a perpetual movement, which dazzled her as a blaze of fireworks would dazzle a forest doe. All the preparations of a great marriage were perpetually around her, and she began to realise that the world thought her lot most enviable and rare. Often her head ached and her ears were tired with the perpetual stream of compliment and felicitation, the continual demands made on her time, on her patience, on her gratitude. What would have been ecstasy to Blanchette was to her very nearly pain. There were moments when she almost longed for the great, still, walled gardens of the Dames de Ste. Anne, for her little whitewashed room, her rush chair in the chapel, her poor grey frock.

Then she thought of Othmar, and the colour came into her face and she was happy, though always unquiet and a little alarmed, as a dove is when its owner's hand is stretched out to it. [137]

To Yseulte he was a hero, a saint, an ideal. He had come so suddenly into her life, he had transformed it so completely, that he had something of a magical fascination and glory for her. She knew nothing of the House of Othmar, or of their position in finance; if she had understood it, she would have disliked it with the instinctive pride of a daughter of '*les preux*;' she had a vague, confused idea of him as the possessor of great power and wealth, but that taint of commerce, which in Othmar's eyes soiled every napoleon he touched, had not dimmed his majesty for her.

She was never allowed to see him alone; her cousin insisted on the strictest observance of '*les convenances*,' and though a Romeo would have found means to circumvent these rules, her lover did not. He was glad of the stiff laws of etiquette which forbade him unwitnessed interviews. He felt that if she asked him straightway, with her clear eyes on his, what love he had for her, a lie would not come easily to his lips. He was lavish of all offerings to her, as though to atone materially for the feeling that was wanting in him. The Duchesse was herself astonished at the magnificence and frequency of his gifts. Unasked, he settled S. Pharamond and an estate in Seine et Oise upon her in absolute possession, while a commensurate income was secured to her to render her wholly independent in the future of any whim or will of his own. [138]

'He is really very generous,' said the Duchesse to herself. 'But what perplexes me is, he is not in love; not the very least in love! If he were, one would understand it all. But he is not in the very slightest degree *amouraché*; not half as much as Alain is.'

But she was heedful that no suggestion of this fact, which her observation made clear to her, should escape her before Yseulte or anyone else. If he were not in love, yet still wished to marry, it was his own affair; and she was not his keeper.

To Yseulte, it was absolute shame to find that she was regarded by all who approached her as having done something clever, won something enviable in the lottery of life. A vague distress weighed on her before the motives which she felt were attributed to her. [139]

When her cousin said to her, '*Fillette*, you were really very audacious when you went to gather those flowers at S. Pharamond. But audacity succeeds—Voltaire and Napoléon were right,' she could have wept with humiliation and indignation.

'Perhaps he thinks as badly of me, too!' she thought, in that perplexity which had never ceased, since his gift of the ivory casket, to torment her.

'There is storm in the air,' said the Duc once to his wife; 'Othmar will be like one of those magicians who used to raise a force that they could neither guide nor quell. He is making a child worship him, and forgetting that he will make her a woman, and that then she will not be satisfied with being hung about with trinkets, and set ankle-deep in gold like an Indian goddess. I am quite sure that this marriage, which pleases you all so much, will be a very unhappy one—some day.'

'You think what you wish—all men do,' said his wife. 'I have not a doubt that it will be perfectly happy—as happy as any marriage is, that is to say. She will adore him; men like to be adored. You can only get that from somebody very young. He will never say an unkind word to her, and he will never object, however much she may spend. If she cannot be content with that——' [140]

The Duc laughed derisively.

'Gold! gold! gold! That is the joy of the *cabotine*, not of Yseulte de Valogne. What she will want will be love, and he will not give it her. With all deference to you, I see the materials for a very sombre poem in your *épopée*.'

'I repeat, your wish is father to your thought. On the theatres women do rebel, and stab themselves, or other people, but in real life they are very much more pliable. In a year's time she will not care in the least about Othmar himself, but she will have grown to like the world and the life that she leads in it. She will have learnt to amuse herself; she will not fret if he pass his time elsewhere——'

'You are entirely wrong,' said de Vannes, with irritation. 'She is a child now, but in a few weeks she will be a woman. Then he will find that you cannot light a fire on grass and leave the earth unscorched. She has the blood of Gui de Valogne. She will not be a saint always. If she find herself neglected, she will not forgive it when she shall understand what it means. If he be her lover after marriage, all may be well; I do not say the contrary. But if he neglect her then, as he neglects her now——' [141]

‘Pray, do not put such follies into her head. Neglected! When not a day passes that he does not send her the most marvellous presents, does not empty on her half the jewellers’ cases out of Europe and Asia.’

‘He makes up in jewels what he wants in warmth,’ said Alain de Vannes. ‘At present she is a baby, a little saint, an innocent; as ignorant as her ivory Madonna; but in six months’ time she will be very different. She will know that she belongs to a man who does not care for her; she will want all that he does not give her; she will be like a rich red rose opening where all is ice——’

‘You go to the theatres till you get melodramatic,’ said his wife, with contempt. ‘I do not believe she will ever have any passions at all; she will always be the ivory saint.’

Alain de Vannes laughed grimly. [142]

‘Women who are beautiful and have good health are never saints,’ he said, ‘and saints are not married at sixteen.’

‘Françoise Romaine was,’ said his wife, who always had the last word in any discussion.

Othmar was more restless than he had ever been in his life, more dissatisfied, and more impatient of fate. Yet he was not sure that he would have undone what he had done, even if honour would have allowed him.

The tenderness which Yseulte had awakened in him, though it could not compete with the passion another had aroused in him, made him feel a charm in her presence, a solace in her youthfulness. The restrictions imposed on their intercourse sustained the mystic spiritual grace which the young girl had in his eyes, and it prevented any possible chance of disillusion or of fatigue on his part. Hers was really the virginal purity, as of a white rosebud which has blossomed in the shade. He was not insensible to its beauty, even whilst a beauty of another kind had fuller empire upon him. He had done an unwise thing, but he said to himself continually, ‘At [143] least I have made one innocent creature happy, and surely I shall be able to continue to do so; she can hardly be more difficult to content than a dove or a fawn.’

He forgot, as so many men do forget, that in this life, which seemed to him like the dove’s, like the fawn’s, there would be all the latent ardours of womanhood; that in the folded rosebud there was the rose-tinted heart, in which the bee would sting. They met at ceremonies, banquets, great family réunions, solemn festivities, in which all the Faubourg took part. She was intensely, exquisitely, happy when she was conscious that he was near her, but she was as silent as a statue and as timid as a bird when he looked at her or addressed her. Every day, every hour, was increasing what was to become the one absorbing passion of her life, but he was too indifferent, or too engrossed by other thoughts, to note the growth of this innocent love. Alain de Vannes saw much more of it than he.

She had the spiritual loveliness for him which S. Cecilia had in the eyes of the Roman centurion who wedded with her; a more delicate and more ethereal charm than that which only springs [144] from the provocation of the senses. A caress to her seemed almost a profanity: to disturb her innocent soul with the grossness of earthly love seemed like a sort of sacrilege.

The whole of this time was a period of restless doubt with him, and the sense that he had not been honest with her rebuked him whenever he met the timid worship of her wistful eyes. He thought, ‘She would not give herself to me, if she knew!’

He was impatient to have all the tumult and folly which precede a great marriage over and done with. Every detail annoyed him; every formula irritated him.

‘All I entreat is, that there may be no delay,’ he said so often to her cousin, that Madame de Vannes ended in believing that he must be much more enamoured than his manner had betokened, and said with amusement to her husband:

‘It has often been disputed whether a man can be in love with two persons at one time: Othmar is so, unquestionably. It is like the bud and the fruit on the same bough of camellia.’

‘It is to be hoped that when the bud is a flower the fruit will fall,’ said de Vannes, with a grim [145] smile.

‘You are not sincere when you say that,’ said the Duchesse, ‘and you know that both always fall—after a time.’

‘A law of nature,’ said her husband. ‘And it is a law of nature also that others come in their place.’

‘My dear friend,’ said Aurore de Vannes, with good-natured contempt, ‘when Yseulte shall have followed the laws of nature in that way, believe me, it is not you who will profit by them. You were good-looking ten years ago—or more—but absinthe and bacarat does not improve the looks after five-and-twenty, and you have crow’s-feet already, and will soon have to dye your hair if you wish still to look young. Yseulte will never think of you except as a *vieux cousin* who was kind enough to give her a locket—if she will even do that when she has got all the diamonds that she will get as Countess Othmar.’

Meantime, Othmar himself was constantly saying to the Duchesse:

‘I put myself completely in your hands; only, all I beseech of you, Madame, is not to delay my [146] marriage longer than you are absolutely obliged.’

‘He does not say his happiness,’ thought Madame de Vannes, as she said aloud, ‘Well, what will seem terrible to you? I think I ought to exact a delay of at least six months. She is so very young.’

‘It is her youth that is delightful to me,’ he replied abruptly. ‘I am old enough to need its charm. I

should be glad if you would consent to our nuptials very soon—say within a fortnight. I have already instructed my solicitors to meet you and to make whatever settlements you and the Duc de Vannes may desire upon Mademoiselle de Valogne.'

'What! carte blanche?' thought Cri-Cri, with a wonder which she took care to conceal, whilst she objected that such speed as he desired was impossible, was quite unheard of, would be indecorous: there were so many things to be done; but in the end she relented, consented to name that day month, and reflected that he should pay for his haste in the marriage contract. It would make no difference to herself whether he settled ten millions or ten pence on her young cousin, but it seemed to her that she was not doing her duty unless, in condescending to ally [147] herself with la Finance, she did not shear its golden fleeces unscrupulously.

In her own mind she reflected that it was as well the marriage should take place speedily, for she perceived that his heart was not much in it. She divined that some alien motive actuated him in his desire for it, and she would have regretted if any breach had occurred to prevent it; for, although she professed to her intimate friends that she disliked the alliance excessively, she was nevertheless very gratified at her own relative having borne off such a great prize as Othmar. One never knew either how useful such a connection as his might not become.

'I would never have let her marry into the *Juiverie*,' she said to her husband. 'But Othmar is quite different; his mother was an English duke's daughter, his grandmother was a de Soissons-Valette, he has really good blood.'

'And besides that,' said de Vannes savagely, 'he is a man whom all Europe has sighed to marry ever since he came of age. Why do you talk such nonsense to me? It is waste of good acting!'

'As you wasted your medallion,' said his wife, with a malicious enjoyment. 'If she had taken the [148] veil, you would have been quite capable of eloping with her, the very infamy of the action would have delighted you. But Othmar will certainly not let you make love to his wife; he is just the sort of man to be jealous.'

'Of Nadine Napraxine, not of his own wife!' said de Vannes, with an angry laugh. 'Marry them quickly, while he is in the mind, and before Madame Napraxine can spoil the thing. In six months' time he will return to her, but that will not matter; our little cousin will be Countess Othmar, and will probably learn to console herself.'

'You are not hopeless?' said his wife, much amused. 'Well, I do not think with you. I believe that Nadine Napraxine has never been anything to Othmar; that the child, on the contrary, is passionately in love with him; and that the marriage will be a very happy one.'

Alain de Vannes shrugged his shoulders. He was very angry that the matter had turned out as it had done; the more angry that it was wholly impossible for him to display or to express his [149] discomfiture, and that he was compelled to be amiable to Othmar and to all the world in relation to it, and bear himself before everyone as the friend and guardian of his wife's cousin. His fancy for her had been a caprice rather than anything stronger, but it was resentful in its disappointment and impotence, and might even be capable of some vengeance.

Faïel had left sweet, solemn memories with the girl: the green gloom of the fern-brakes and the wooded lanes, the soft grey summers, and the evenings with their mysterious silvery shadows; the silent corridors, the tolling bells, the altars with their white lilies, the pathetic monotonous voices of the nuns—all were blent together in her recollection into a picture full of holiness and calm. Now that she knew what the gipsy woman had meant, she wished to be there for a little while to muse upon her vast happiness, her wondrous future, and consecrate them both.

She asked for, and obtained, permission to go to her old convent in retreat for the two weeks before her marriage. Madame de Vannes was inclined to refuse what she regarded as excessive [150] and eccentric, but Othmar obtained her consent.

It pleased him that she should pass her time before her marriage with the holy women who had trained her childhood; it was not so that Nadine Napraxine had spent the weeks preceding her soulless union.

'You wish not to see her for two whole weeks?' said the Duchesse, suspiciously.

'I wish her to do always what she wishes,' he answered.

'She will be a very happy woman then,' said Cri-Cri, drily.

He added, with a little hesitation: 'It is her unlikeness to the world, her spirituality, which has charmed me; I wish her to retain them.'

'It will be difficult,' said the Duchesse, with a laugh. '*Fillette*,' she said with amusement to her young cousin, 'I do not know why you are so very solemn about it all; I assure you the soul has very little to do with marriage, as you will find out soon enough. Why should you go in retreat as if you were about to enter religion?'

Yseulte coloured; she answered timidly: 'I am forgetting God; it is ungrateful; I am too happy; I [151] mean—I grow selfish, I want to be quiet a little while to remember——'

The Duchesse laughed, much amused: ' You ought decidedly to have taken the veil; you will be a *religieuse manquée*! At your age I thought of nothing but of my balls and my bouquets, and of the costumes they gave me, and of the officers of the Guides—Alain was in the Guides, he was very good-looking at that time. I must say Othmar and you are like no lovers in the world that I have ever known.'

However, she gave her permission, and Yseulte went to the ancient stonebuilt fortress-like house of Faïel, where the quiet corridors were filled with the smell of dried herbs from the nuns' distillery and the little grey figures of the children played noiselessly under the leafless chestnut avenues of the tranquil gardens.

It was all so welcome to her after the babble of Blanchette, the tumult of congratulation, the succession of compliments, the perpetual sense of being exhibited and examined, discussed and depreciated; but it did not change her thoughts very much, for even in her prayers her wondrous [152] change of fate always seemed with her, and she found that even amongst her pious and unworldly Dames de Ste. Anne the betrothed of Count Othmar was received as a very different being to the dowerless Yseulte de Valogne; and something of that bitterness which so often came to her lover reached her through all her guilelessness. Even Nicole, also, embracing her with ardour and tenderness, with the tears running down her brown cheeks, and pleading for the right to send her *pétiote* the orange-blossoms and the lilies-of-the-valley for her bridal-dress, yet amidst her joyful tears and tearful joy had not forgotten to whisper: 'And, *dis donc, ma mignonne*, you will say a word now to the Count Othmar to get my husband the municipal concession to put up the steam mill? It will make our fortune, my angel, and I know what a happiness that will be to you!'

'A fortune! Money, money! It seems all they think of in the world!' the child reflected sadly. 'What can Nicole and Sandroz want with more money? They are very well off, and they have no children, no relations even; and yet all they think about is laying by one napoleon on the top of [153] another! It is horrible! Even the Mother Superior has never said to me how good he is, how kind, how generous; she only says that I am fortunate because he is so rich! They make me feel quite wicked. I want to tell them how mean they are! Why am I so much better and greater in their sight because I am going to become rich too? I thought they cared for none of those things. But our Reverend Mother asks me for a new altar service as Blanchette asked me for a turquoise necklace! I understand why he is always a little sad. He thinks no one cares for him, for himself.'

And, after many days and nights of most anxious thought and most entreating prayer, she gathered up all her courage and wrote a little letter to Othmar, the only one which she had ever addressed to him; she was afraid it was a strange thing to do, and one perhaps unmaidenly, but she could not resist her longing to say that one thing to him, and so she wrote:

'Monsieur,—I do not know whether I ought to say it, and I hope you will forgive me if it be wrong [154] to say so, but I have thought often since I hear and see so much of your great wealth that perhaps —perhaps—you may imagine it is that which I care for; but indeed I do not; if you were quite poor, very poor to-morrow, it would be just the same to me, and I should be just as happy. I do pray you to believe this.

'Yours, in affection and reverence,
'Yseulte.'

She had hesitated very long before she ventured to sign herself so, but in the end it seemed to her that it could not be very wrong as it stood: she owed him both affection and reverence—even the Mother Superior herself would say so.

She enclosed the little note in a letter to her cousin the Duchesse, knowing that otherwise it would not be allowed to pass the convent walls. When Madame de Vannes received it she looked at it with suspicion.

'If it should be any nonsense about Nadine Napraxine?' she thought with alarm; 'if it should be any folly that would break the marriage?'

She decided that it would be unwise to send it to Othmar without knowing what it said, so she [155] broke the little seal very carefully and read it. Something in it touched her as she perused the simple words, written so evidently with a hand which trembled and a heart that was full. She sealed it again and despatched it to its destination. 'Poor little simpleton,' she thought, 'why did she take the trouble to say that? She will not make him believe it!'

But he did believe it.

It was because she made the belief possible to him that the child had seemed to him like a young angel who brought healing on her wings; and the love which did not venture to avow itself, but yet was visible in every one of these timid sentences, went to his heart with sweetness and unconscious reproach. He wrote back to her:

'I believe you, and I thank you. You give me what the world cannot give nor command.'

And he added words of tenderness which, if they would have seemed cold to an older or a less innocent recipient, wholly contented her, and seemed to her like a breath from heaven.

The fortnight soon passed, and after its quiet days at Faïel, filled with the sounds so familiar to [156] her of the drowsy bells, the rolling organ swell, the plaintive monotonous chaunts and prayers, the pacing of slow steps up and down long stone passages, the grinding of the winch of the great well in the square court, she felt calmed and strengthened, and not afraid when the Mother Superior spoke of all the responsibilities of her future.

To her, marriage was a mystic, spiritual union; all she knew of it was gathered from the expressions borrowed from it to symbolise the union of Christ and His saints. She went to it with as religious and innocent a faith as she would have taken with her to the cloister had they sent her there. If any human creature can be as pure as snow, a very young girl who has been reared by simple and pious women is so. Even the Duchesse de Vannes felt a vague emotion before that

absolute ignorance of the senses and of the passions of life.

‘It is stupid,’ she said to herself. ‘But it is lovely in its way. I can fancy a man likes to destroy it—slowly, cruelly—just as a boy pulls off butterflies’ wings.’

CHAPTER XXIII.

The first days of February came all too soon for the vague fears of Yseulte, which throbbed in her as the heart beats in a bird which feels a captor's hand approaching. All the ridicule of Blanchette and Toinon, all the good-natured banter of their mother, and all the endless congratulations of society which rained on her like the almond blossoms which were falling in showers in the wind, could not make her otherwise than bewildered and alarmed, and as the time of her marriage drew closer and closer her terror almost obscured her happiness. No one would have believed in it; everyone, had they known the secrets of her shy and silent mind, would have laughed at it as hypocrisy; but with her it was most real.

Away from Othmar, she adored him; but near him, she dreaded him as a stranger who was about to lead her into the strangest and most terrible mysteries of life. But time stays not for the [158] sinking or the fluttering of any poor human heart, and they brought her from the dim, cold, misty Breton country back into the gay and crowded world of Paris; and the great rooms of her cousin's house, filled by brilliant throngs for the signing of the contract, brought home to her the inexorable fact that her marriage would itself take place in another forty-eight hours.

'You are so pale, *fillette*!' said the Duchesse in some impatience. 'One would think that we were forcing your inclinations!'

Yseulte said nothing; she could not have explained the tumult of agitation which was in her. She was marvellously happy; and yet——

A lover who had loved her would have divined and penetrated all those mingled emotions, which were unintelligible to herself; but Othmar was too *distrait* and too absorbed in thought, wherein she had no share, to do so. Though she was the centre of the world around her for the moment, the child remained in an absolute solitude.

Friederich Othmar, studying her with his exquisite power of penetration, alone perceived her [159] trouble, and thought with pleasure: 'The poets are not quite the fools I deemed them; there *is* such a thing as a virginal soul in which the senses do not speak, and to which the gewgaws of the world say nothing either. I should never have believed that, but I see it. He has found a pearl, but he will not care for it. He will absorb it into the acid of his own disappointed passions, and then will be surprised if it disappear.'

If he had been told a month earlier that he would have had such sentimental regrets, he would have been wholly incredulous, but something in the sight of the young girl, in her innocent gravity, with her wistful, changeful eyes, touched him, as she stood by the table where the marriage contract was signed. She seemed to him too good to be wedded with indifference, taught the fever of passion, the suffering of maternity, and then be forsaken—as she would be.

'I am glad that I did not meet her, or one like her, thirty years ago; she would have unnerved me,' he thought, as he stooped and wrote his own name.

Amongst the nuptial gifts had been one of great value from the Princess Napraxine. It was a gold [160] statuette of Love, modelled by Mercié and standing on a base of jade and agate. It had all the cruelty and irony of the modern Italian school in it, for the poor Amorino was trying to drink out of a gourd which was empty, and the expression of his disappointed, distressed, pathetic features was rendered with admirable mockery and skill. He turned his sad eyes ruefully on those who looked at him; some withered passion-flowers and a little asp were near his feet. When Othmar saw it, his face darkened; he thought it a jest at himself, nor had the giver selected it without intention. Behind the gold Amorino he seemed to see her smiling, serene, jewel-like eyes, her delicate, contemptuous mouth, which said: '*Va donc! C'est le vieux jeu!*'

'The only woman that I shall ever love!' he thought with a thrill of remorse, of shame, and of anger, all in one.

What right had he, while his veins were hot with those unholy fires, to simulate love for an innocent and virgin life?

The morning came for which Blanchette and Toinon had been longing for a month; and clothed in [161] palest blue velvet, carrying white bouquets as large as themselves, they wore at their throats the new diamond lockets of their ambition, with the miniature of their cousin within each, for which they cared nothing at all. But the diamonds were as large and as numerous as ever their hearts could desire. '*Vrai! Il est bon prince!*' they cried in chorus, as they skipped round each other, and made the sun sparkle in the jewels, and sang the song of Judic.

Then they went to the church of S. Philippe du Roule, and made their little naughty faces as grave as mice that see a cat, while the incense rose and the organ pealed, and the Latin words rolled out sonorously, and the pale wintry sunshine shone over the brilliant crowd assembled there for the marriage.

Yseulte herself looked like a slender white lily.

The deep peace and serenity of her convent days had come there with her; certain instincts of her race kept her still and composed with the eyes of so many strangers upon her; a dignity that was exquisitely graceful blended with her childish air; she looked like some young princess of the [162] Valois time, such as poets and painters still see in their dreams.

One of those special trains which Blanchette thought the supreme privilege of marriage bore them without a pause through the wintry landscapes between Paris and Blois.

The day was fine and windless; there was a scent of spring which breathed through the leafless poplars and willows, and over the frosted fields and vineyards, with sweet, vague promise; here and there burst in to sight, out from a forest glade beside some château, some gaily-clad hunting party, the last of the season; ever and anon there was some little town, with its old ruined castle, or its monastic church, shut in, in leafless orchards. The broad river glistened in the light under the burden of its many islands, its breaking blocks of ice drifting on turbid green waters, its flood of mud and melted snow rolling heavily beneath the colliers and the merchant craft, which made their way slowly against the floes. In the drear blackened vineyards, peasants, like pictures by Millet, were at work; sometimes a woman with faggots on her bowed shoulders straightened herself to watch the swiftness of the train, or a bluefrocked herd-boy stopped his cattle at a [163] crossing.

All these pictures passed before the eyes of Yseulte like the panorama of a dream: the early morning hours had been one long bewilderment to her; though she had carried herself so bravely, her heart had beaten all the while like a caught bird's: even now the scent of the incense, the waves of sound from the organ, the sonorous voice of the great prelate in its admonitions, seemed to come with her into the still, brown, fresh country; the sense of some infinite and solemn obligation, accepted and irrevocable, was upon her.

They had left Paris immediately after the ceremony; and the evening sun was glowing in the west and lighting the pastoral country with its leafless woods and glancing rivers as they reached the château.

Amyôt was a place of great beauty and stateliness; it had been built for François Premier, and had the salamander and the crown carved on its stones and blazoned on its metal work; it was surrounded by water like Chenonceaux, and in the sunset-glow its pinnacles and towers and high steep roof gleamed as if made of gold; it stood on a hill amidst great woods, overlooking the [164] fruitful valleys and fertile plains which lie between the Loire and Cher, and in its gardens all the art that modern horticulture can boast was united to the stately avenues, the close-shorn turf, the long grey stone terraces with the motto of the Valois and the fleur-de-lis of France carved upon their pilasters, which had in their day seen the *mignons* of Henri II., and felt the feet of Diane de Poitiers and of Mary Stuart.

Amyôt was a poem, epic and epopee in one; she had never seen it before; she gazed at it with entranced eyes, glad that her home would be in such a place; then she looked timidly at Othmar.

He was not looking at her.

She sighed, hardly knowing why, but with a vague sense of neglect and disappointment. She was in a trance of mingled joy and dread. She saw the dusky avenue of yews through which they passed, the long lines of majestic terraces, the sheets of glancing water, the masses of camellias and azaleas, brought from the hothouses to make the wintry gardens bloom for that momentous hour, the vast fantastic solemn pile towering up against the evening skies. She saw them all as in [165] a dream; she was wondering wistfully in her ignorance whether it were possible that she had offended him, or possible that already he regretted what he had done. She shrank a little from him, and sat quite silent as their carriage rolled under the great stone gateway.

There had been enough in his caresses, in his words, as they had come thither, to startle her innocent ignorance into some sense of the meaning and the demands of love, but they had left her dimly alarmed and troubled, as before some great mystery, and he had soon grown abstracted, almost indifferent, and had abandoned himself to his own thoughts.

Amyôt even in its winter silence and sombreness, was a place where lovers could well forget the world; yews and bay trees made perpetual verdure around its lawns, and orangeries and palm-houses made ceaseless summer within its walls; in its halls and galleries old tapestries and Eastern hangings muffled every sound and excluded every draught; and in the warm air of its chambers, ceiled with cedar-wood, embossed with the salamander, and the 'F.' in solid gold, and [166] having embayed windows, all looking straightway south over the Loire water, the winter's landscape, seen through its painted casements, was but as a decorative scene set there for the strong charm of contrast.

They passed through the ranks of the bowing servants, and remained at last alone in the great suite of drawing-rooms, whose oriel windows all looked southward. They were rooms hung with pale satins, still ceiled with cedar, and keeping the Valois crown and arms upon their gilded carvings and lofty archways. They preserved the style and charm of the age which had begotten them. She was in harmony with them as she moved there, the dull red light which preceded evening falling through the painted panes on the dove-hued velvet and dusky furs of her travelling-gown, and touching the light gold of her fair hair coiled in a great knot above her throat.

He, when his servants had retired, kissed her hand with a ceremony which seemed, even to her innocence, very cold.

'You are at home,' he said gently. 'Here it will be for you to command, for all to obey.'

She stood before him in one of the embrasures of the windows; the cream-hued velvet of her [167] travelling-dress trimmed with sable, caught the rays of the setting sun.

'You are châtelaine of Amyôt,' he added, with a smile. 'Here I shall be but the first of your servants.'

The words were gracious, and even tender, but they touched her with a sense of chillness; she felt, without knowing why she felt it, that it was not with this courteous ceremony that he would

have welcomed her if he had loved her—much.

She said nothing, though she coloured a little as he kissed her hands.

She moved to one of the great windows and looked out a little wistfully towards the rolling waters, the deep, dark brown forests with their purple shadows. The dim afternoon light spread over the landscape without, and through the gorgeous and majestic chambers, which had once heard the love words of the Valois. She had laid her hat down on a table near, the lingering glow of the dying day fell on her white throat, on her cheek with its changing colour, on the knot of orange blossom fastened amongst the lace at her breast; she thrilled through all her nerves as [168] she suddenly realised that she was altogether his, to be used as he chose, never to be apart from him unless by his wish.

She gazed at the scene around her, troubled, perplexed, wistfully, vaguely alarmed, afraid she knew not of what; whilst he watched her with a certain futile anger against himself that her loveliness did not excite him and content him more, a remorseful sense that he was not the lover she merited and should have won.

A sort of self-reproach moved him as he looked at her in her innocence, which seemed too holy a thing to be profaned by the grossness of sensual approach—on the morrow she would not look at him with those serene, childlike eyes.

It seemed to him almost cruel to rouse that perfect innocence from its unsuspicious repose.

Before he could speak again she had turned towards him; her lips trembled a little as she gathered her courage and said aloud what had been in her thoughts all the day through.

‘It will be for me to obey,’ she murmured, with the colour deepening in her cheeks. ‘And I will do it always, so gladly: but would you tell me one thing: did you—I mean—if you had not cared for [169] me a little, surely you would never have wished—–?’

She paused, overcome by the sense of her own hardihood, and her eyes filled with tears; she longed to say to him, ‘Instead of all your jewels, instead of all this luxury, give me one fond word,’ but her timidity and her modesty would not let her lips frame the supplication. He was still as a stranger to her—a man whom she had seen scarce a dozen times.

The question in its timid commencement had said enough: his conscience shrank from it; he had always dreaded the moment inevitable of the fatal—

> ‘If this be love, tell me how much.’

‘Would you tell me?’ she repeated very low, then paused with an overwhelming sense of her own hardihood and great immodesty.

She made a beautiful picture as she stood before him; the cream-hued satin falling about her, the warm cedar-wood panels behind her, the red light of the sunset shed like a glory upon her head and shining about her feet.

‘Who would not love you, dear?’ he murmured, with a hesitation of which her own confusion [170] spared her from being conscious. ‘Never doubt my affection. I have not been as happy as the world thinks me, but if I be not happy beside you, fate will indeed find me thankless.’

Nor was it altogether untrue; she looked infinitely lovely to him in that moment, with the tears shining in her upraised eyes, and the blue veins of her throat swelling where the orange flowers touched them; and all this was his—his as wholly as the budding primrose in the woods is the child’s that finds it and may pluck and rifle it at will.

An emotion that was more nearly passion than he had hitherto felt for her moved him as he looked on her.

With a sudden impulse of the joy and mastery of possession, warmer and more eager than any she had roused in him before, he took her in his arms and kissed her throat where the orange flowers were fastened, and, with a tender touch, unloosed them.

CHAPTER XXIV.

‘Othmar *filant le parfait amour* while he gathers wet violets under his Valois woods, is a truly admirable idyl!’ said the Princess Napraxine, with her unkind little smile, a month later, while her eyes, from under an umbrella covered with old point duchesse, went indolently from the shining sea upon her right to the romantic gorge leading up to distant peaks of snow, which could be seen on her left through boughs of eucalyptus and mimosa. She was seated on the white terraces of a famous villa, crowning a promontory which carried luxuriant and fantastic gardens far out into the lazy blue water, across whose then smiling plains of azure light it looked straight southward to the cloud which was Corsica. It was the villa of another Russian magnate, Prince Ezarhédine, with whom there was at that time staying a mighty statesman at whose nod or frown Europe breathed lightly or held her breath; and under the guise of a breakfast there was an informal conference of diplomatists at his house that day. [172]

Friederich Othmar was staying at S. Pharamond for two days to meet the great Russian, and conduct, over a cigarette and a glass of kümmel, one of those delicate and intricate negotiations in which finance and diplomacy had equal parts, and which were the delight of his soul, and made the special fame of the House of Othmar.

The great statesman was a charming person, Oriental in morals, Athenian in mind, and French in manners; and Nadine Napraxine, who so seldom could be persuaded to go anywhere, had deigned to come and breakfast with him there and allow him to recall her childhood.

‘You would never give me a smile,’ he said to her. ‘At five years old you were as cruel as you are now. I remember taking you what I thought an irresistible bribe; a gardener in Saxe driving a wheelbarrow of bonbons. But you just looked at it—smileless—and said cruelly, “*Merci, Monsieur —mais j’en ai tant!*” You were five years old then.’

‘“*Tant*” and “*trop*” are the spoilers of our existence,’ she replied. ‘I remember as a child I never cared for bonbons; I used to say that if they hung up where the church bells were, and one could not get them, one would care——’ [173]

‘My intention was good,’ said the great man piteously; ‘you might have smiled on me for that.’

‘That would have been very commonplace, everybody is amiable in that kind of way; I am not amiable, they say, and yet I am never out of temper—which seems to me the first requisite for amiability.’

‘Serenity is unkind when it means indifference.’

‘But indifference is so comfortable to the indifferent!’ she had replied, and the reply admitted of no refutation.

Now, when the *déjeuner*, which had been the pretext and cover of the morning’s informal but pregnant discussion, was over, and she was about to go to her carriage, she had smiled with gentle condescension on the Baron, and asked him the tidings of Amyôt. Friederich Othmar, in his answers, had been incautiously and unusually enthusiastic in the hearing of a person who to all enthusiasm was merciless; the more merciless, because in a far-down and never-investigated corner of her own nature she was a little conscious that she also could have been enthusiastic—if it had been worth while. [174]

She had laughed a little unkindly, and had made the remark about the wet violets; the Baron, slightly irritated and considerably in earnest, had replied, that to gather violets with your own wife was less exciting, but perhaps sweeter, and certainly wiser, than to purchase orchids for the wife of someone else.

‘A most moral opinion, turned with classic elegance, and quite indisputable,’ said Madame Napraxine, with much amusement. ‘And orchids are so short-lived! Do you think home-grown violets live longer? Dear Baron, I am so glad to see you so pleased, and so poetical; Napoleon’s desire for an heir made him quite brutal; your desire for your nephew’s heir makes you quite full of pretty sentiment. Pray go on, you interest me! it is as if one heard Bismarck playing a guitar!’

‘Like Napoleon, I dislike *les amours stériles*,’ replied Friederich Othmar, with a smile. ‘My nephew was in danger of letting his life drift away in a dream; I know no means of recalling a man to the practical happiness of existence so efficacious as a young girl’s beauty.’ [175]

‘You are very primitive in your ideas, dear Baron, for a person who has lived all his life in Paris,’ said the Princess Nadine, with her little air of fatigue and of irony. She knew very well what had been implied in his words, and she resented them.

‘Nature is primitive, Madame,’ said the Baron. ‘But after all, we do not improve on her, nor exclude her, do what we may.’

‘You think not?’ said Madame Napraxine, much amused. ‘Well, for my part, I have never been able to discover that Nature is very charming: if we attended to her, she would make us eat with our fingers, fight with our teeth, drink only water, and wear no clothes; she would certainly, also, give Otho Othmar a score of wives instead of one Sainte Mousseline. Do not take to admiring Nature, Baron; she will lead you astray. It is too late for you to begin; no one after twenty can eat green fruit with impunity.’

‘Sainte Mousseline!’ echoed the old man, with more temper than prudence. ‘Surely that epithet would not apply to Yseulte!’ [176]

‘Of course not now,’ said Nadine, serenely. ‘Sainte Mousseline has given way to the nuptial white

satin. Only you spoke of Nature;—and if I were you I would not wish for Nature to prevail too much at Amyôt, for Nature has a sad trick of being soon satisfied, and dissatisfied, and disposed to change. You know it is only the poets who invented Constancy, at the same time that they created the Phœnix and the Hippogriff.'

'If I thought he could be unfaithful to so much youth and so much innocence——,' began the Baron, with some heat.

'He will not be so yet, at all events,' said Prince Ezarhédine. 'Men are not quite so fickle as Madame Nadine thinks.'

'Men are what women make them,' she replied, with her most contemptuous tranquillity. ' As a rule, they are always faithless to women who love them. It is tiresome to be loved; "*ça vous donne des nerfs*." You get out of temper and you go away; then silly people say you are inconstant.'

'You will admit that at least it seems very like it,' said Baron Fritz. [177]

The great statesman, standing near, looked a little wistfully at her. He thought that he would not have found it tiresome to be loved by the wife of Napraxine.

'The Countess Othmar will be too young to understand all that,' continued Nadine. ' She will give too much of herself. She will not have the first essential: *savoir se reprendre*. Love is like all other fine arts—it should be treated scientifically. Do you remember Sergius Veriatine? He was devoted to the Princess Platoff—my cousin Sophie. All at once he broke with her. Some one asked him why he did so. He answered honestly: "Un jour, elle faisait la faute de me prier de rester quand je voulais m'en aller." Serge Veriatine put the whole of male human nature into that sentence. Othmar's wife will be always begging him to stay when he will want to go; she is so young. She is, of course, in love with him; very much in love with him; and she is so unhappily inexperienced that she will be sure to tell him so a hundred times a day. Now, however pretty a story is, still when you hear it very often it grows dull: you see she is beginning with an immense [178] mistake: Amyôt in the winter!'

'Amyôt is his choice as much as hers,' said Friederich Othmar. 'You know he always liked solitude. They will be in Paris in the first days of April——'

'Two months, or to speak precisely, seven weeks, of Amyôt in midwinter is precisely the mistake that a very young girl would be sure to make,' continued his tormentor. 'Amyôt is a delightful place in its way; it is like a page of Brantôme. I remember the admirable hunting parties he gave there for the Orleans princes. But all the same, seven whole weeks of Amyôt in the rain of February and March would damp any ardour that he might begin with—do you think he began with very much? What a pity there was no one to tell her that a man is bored so soon! And Othmar is like Chateaubriand; he is the *grand ennuyé* just because his ideals are so high that it is wholly impossible to find anything like them anywhere. I am quite sure that he has imagined in this poor child an angel and a goddess; a kind of Greek nymph and Christian virgin blent in one. When he finds that she is only a child, who has had the narrowest of all educations, and is not [179] even a woman in her comprehension or her sympathies, he will be intolerably wearied. If they were in the world, the disillusion might be postponed; at Amyôt it must come in two days.'

'You are very clever, Madame,' said the Baron with some irritation, 'but even you may perhaps for once be mistaken. She is very young, as you say; but for that very reason she will be like clay in his hands which he can mould as he will.'

'If he take the trouble to model it at all,' said Nadine Napraxine. 'If the sculptor do not touch the clay, it lies in a lump neglected till somebody else comes. She will not know, I fear, how to tempt him to make anything of her. Do you suppose they have taught her the art of provocation in her Breton convent? She will only sob aloud if he go away for an hour, and be plunged into despair if his kisses be one less in number. My dear Baron, you lost all your wisdom when you failed to persuade them to leave Amyôt. They say there is no living woman who can be seen at sunrise after a ball and keep her lover; I am sure there is not one who can be shut up with a man for two [180] months in the country, in winter, and retain his belief in her.'

'You are very learned in these matters,' said the Baron, more and more irritated, 'and yet everyone knows that the Princess Napraxine has always herself despised all human affections!'

'It is not necessary to have sat in the midst of a maelstrom to have studied the laws of whirlpools,' said his tormentor. 'And what have human affections to do with it? You know as well as I do that humanity has only caprices and passions, with their natural issue, disillusions.'

Friederich Othmar thought of the terrace at Amyôt and the face of Yseulte.

Walking with her a moment, alone, in the afternoon sunshine, he had ventured on a word of counsel.

'My dear child, you are very young. Let an old man tell you something. Otho has one serious malady; nay, do not look so alarmed, it is only the malady of his generation—caprice and ennui. He has not an idea that he is capricious, but he is so. Do not let his caprices pain you; but, as far [181] as you can, vary with his varying moods; I think that is the secret of sympathy. Just now it is high noon with you; so there are no shadows; but shadows will fall. I want you to understand that. Otho is not perfect; in a way, he is very weak, though he has more intellect than most men. Do not make a god of him. You will only spoil him and blind yourself.'

And then she had looked at him with that look which he recalled now as he sat by Nadine Napraxine, and had said with a dignity of reproach which had sat very prettily on her youthfulness: 'If he have faults, I shall never see them—you maybe sure of that; and if you will

tell me how to please him, I will never think of myself.'

Remembering this, the Baron, who had never in his life cared greatly for any woman or believed much in one, felt a restless anger against the prophetess of woe.

'When they predict fire they have already laid the powder,' he thought, impatiently.

Friederich Othmar was surprised himself at the feeling of affection and of anxiety which Yseulte had aroused in him. He had wished Othmar to marry that the race might be continued, but he [182] had never supposed that any young girl would fill him with the solicitude for her own welfare which she made him feel for hers.

Women had always been *la femelle de l'homme* with him; no more; he was astonished at himself for being moved by a genuine desire to secure for her those more subtle joys of the soul which he had always derided. Before her he felt ashamed of his own grosser convictions (which a month before would have been so confident) that she could want nothing more than the riches her marriage conferred on her. Though he had been a man of little feeling he was not altogether without kindliness, and his keen penetration told him that hers was a nature which the glories and gewgaws of the world would do very little to console if its affections were starved or its higher instincts humiliated, and the prophecies of Nadine Napraxine but irritated him more because he knew that her merciless intelligence was as a seismographic pendulum which foretold truly the convulsions of the future.

'Surely,' she continued, 'S. Pharamond would have been a more natural place to select at this [183] season. Amyôt is superb, but it must be sunk fathoms deep in snow.'

'There is no snow; it was open weather, and even mild,' replied the Baron, who was ready to declare that roses were blossoming in the ditches of the Orleannais.

'But why did he not come to S. Pharamond? It is a paradise of azaleas and tulips at the present moment.'

'It is a pretty place,' he answered; 'but perhaps more suggestive of Apates and Philotes than of the true Eros.'

'The vicinity of the *tripots* hardly accords with the solemnity of Hymen? Do you mean that?' she said, with her enigmatical little smile. 'Who would ever have thought to live to hear Baron Friederich mention Eros! Well, we will hope that the god for once will be like the Salamander which is emblazoned, and carved so liberally, all over Amyôt. We will hope the fire that feeds him may not go out; but I am afraid the motto really means that what nourishes extinguishes.'

With that she rose and took herself and her sunshade, with its point duchesse, and her marvellous gown with its cascades of lace and soft pale hues, like tea roses, her provocative [184] languor, and her admirable grace, from the terraces of the Prince Ezarhédine. She was followed by longing eyes and a silence which was the truest of compliments. To more than one there, the sun had set whenever she had passed from their sight.

'What makes the world of men so fanatic about that woman?' asked Friederich Othmar, exhaling all the unspoken grievances of his own soul in a rude grumble, as the sound of the whirling wheels of her carriage died away. 'Why? Why? There are numbers more beautiful; few, perhaps, with so perfect a form, yet there are some who equal her even in that. She is as cruel as death, as cold as frost; no one ever saw a flush on her cheek or a tear in her eyes, and when she smiles it is like the sirocco and the north wind blent together; and yet there is no woman so blindly loved.'

'Yet!' echoed Prince Ezarhédine. 'Surely, you should say "therefore." The sirocco and the north wind blent together are electric shocks to the most sated senses.'

'Yes,' added the great statesman who was his guest, 'and if it will not sound too pedantic, I will [185] add also why it is. She is to her lovers very much what the worship of Isis became to the Latins. She blends an infinite subtlety of sentiment with an infinite potentiality of sensual delight.'

'Sensual! She is as cold as snow——'

'I know; she has that sobriquet. But every one feels what a paradise would lie within if the snow were melted. Every one hopes—more or less conscious or unconscious of his hope—to pass that frosty barrier. I think if Madame Napraxine ever loved any man, she would make such a heaven for him that he would be the most enviable of all human beings. But it would only last a month; perhaps six weeks. Although,' he added, with a faint sigh, 'it would be worth losing all the rest of life to be the companion of those six weeks.'

'If I may differ with you, Prince, I would say that, on the contrary, if ever Madame Nadine can be touched to love she will be most tenacious and most constant,' said Ezarhédine.

'Perhaps too much so for the felicity of the person whom she might honour,' added the Baron [186] with a smile that was a little impertinent. He had always disliked and dreaded her; she had wasted two years of his nephew's life, and he shrewdly suspected that she was the cause of Othmar's too slight ardour towards his young wife.

Meanwhile, the subject of their meditations and desires was borne by her fleet horses over the sea-road homeward to La Jacquemerille. She felt astonished, irritated, offended at the idyl of Amyôt. To have loved herself, and then to be content shut up within the stone walls of a country-house with a girl taken from a convent!

'He is like Gilles de Retz,' she thought, with bitter disdain. 'He takes the white flesh of a child to try and cure his malady.'

It seemed to her cowardly, sensual, contemptible.

She drove homeward through the olives and the lemon-yards and the green fields that were full of anemones and narcissus and of the bright gold and sea-shell hues of the crocus. The grey towers of S. Pharamond were on her left as she went, and beyond them the fantastic pinnacles [187] and gilded crockets of Millo. She looked at them with an anger foreign to her character.

‘Who could have dreamed he would have done so absurd a thing?’ she thought, irritated against him and against herself. Never before in her life had the actions of any other person had the slightest effect upon her own feelings. She had not lived very long, it is true, but to herself she seemed to have an illimitable experience; and within her memory there was no record of any time in which she had cared one straw what another did. That she should care now, ever so slightly, irritated her pride and wounded her delicacy. She was a woman at all times truthful with herself, however it might be her amusement to mislead others. She was quite as cruel to herself as to anyone else in her unrelenting and inquisitive mental dissection. She pursued her self-analysis with a mercilessness which, had she been less witty and less worldly, might have been morbid; and she did not disguise from herself now that the tidings of Amyôt were an irritation if not a pain to her. She did full justice to the loveliness with which Othmar had sought to find oblivion of [188] her own; and she knew that it might very well be that, as the Baron had said, he had become the girl’s lover as well as her husband.

‘Men are such poor creatures,’ she thought with scorn. ‘They are all the slaves of their senses; they have no character; they are only animals. They talk of their souls, but they have got none; and of their constancy, but they are only constant to their own self-indulgence.’

The contempt of a woman, in whom the senses have never awakened, and for whom all the grosser appetites have no attraction, for those easy consolations which men can find in the mere gratification of those appetites, is very real and very unforgiving.

Her scorn for Othmar, seeking forgetfulness of herself in the fresh and budding life of a child of sixteen, was equal to that which she felt for Napraxine finding solace for her own indifference in the purchasable charms of the *belles petites*; the one seemed as trivial to her as the other. When men spoke of their devotion, they only meant their own passions; if these were denied, they sought refuge in mere physical pleasures, which at all events partially consoled them. She [189] thought of him with increasing intolerance. She answered only by monosyllables to the remarks of her companions, and her mind wandered away to that stately place where life might well seem a love-lay of the Renaissance.

‘He will soon be tired,’ she mused, with cruel wisdom. ‘In a week the child will have become a romance read through; a peach with its bloom rubbed off; a poor little bird which has only one note, and has sung that one till its master is ready to wring its throat. It is always so. I never see a baby run through the fields gathering daisies and throwing them down but what I think of men with their loves. The only passion that lasts with them is one which is denied, and even that is a poor affair. To be sure, sometimes they kill themselves, but that is rather out of rage than out of any higher despair. And for one who kills himself for us there are a hundred who kill themselves for their debts. Othmar never can have any debts, so he invents woes for himself, and captivity for himself, and he will die of neither.’

Yet, contemptuous of him for what seemed to her his weakness and his unreason as she was, her [190] thoughts attached themselves persistently to him. He was the only living being who had never wearied her, who had always perforce interested her, who had seemed to her unlike the rest of the world, and capable of a master-passion, which might have risen beyond mediocrity. How would it have been with them if he had stood in the stead of Napraxine, whilst she was vaguely open to dim and noble ideals, to spiritual emotions, to human affections?

‘Pooh!’ she thought. ‘It would have been just the same thing. Love is gross and absurd in its intimacies; it is like the hero to his valet. Maternity is first a malady, and then an ennui; that *biche blanche* at Amyôt will learn that as I learned it. He would have been much more poetic than Platon, and much more agreeable; but I dare say he would have been much more exacting, and much more jealous.’

Yet the remembrance of Amyôt pursued her, and made her restless; with her lips she had ridiculed the idea of nuptial joys enshrouded in the wet woods and falling mists of the Orleannais; but in her heart she did not laugh; almost—almost—she envied that child, with the innocent, [191] serious eyes, whom she called contemptuously *la biche blanche*, who was learning the language of love in the earliest dawn of womanhood.

‘Only he does not love her!’ she reflected, with pity, disdain, and satisfaction, all commingled. No! He loved herself. She believed in few things, and in few emotions; but she believed that so long as Othmar lived he would love her alone.

‘*Quand on tient la dragée haute!*’ she thought, with her unkindest smile at the fractiousness and ingratitude of men, as she descended at the doors of La Jacquemerille, and with displeasure heard her servants say, ‘M. le Comte Seliedoff awaits Madame la Princesse.’

CHAPTER XXV.

Boris Fedorovich Seliedoff was a young cousin of Napraxine's; he was twenty-two years old, tall and well made, with a beautiful face on his broad shoulders, a face given him by a Georgian mother. He had been an imperial page, and was now a lieutenant in the Imperial Guard. He was an only son, and his father was dead; he had a great position, and was much indulged by all his world, and was as headstrong and as affectionate as a child. Nadine Napraxine alone did not indulge him, and he adored her with all the blind ecstasies of a first love; he had obtained his leave of absence only that he might follow her southward. He was extremely timid in his devotion, but he was impassioned also; the moral question of his love for his cousin's wife weighed no more with him than it weighed with Othmar. His world was not given to consideration of such scruples. As far as she could be entertained by such stale things, she was [193] amused by the worship of this boy. In Russia he had done the maddest follies at her whim and word; once he had come from Petersburg to the Krimea only to be able to dance one valse with her at a ball at her villa on the Black Sea; he had ridden his horse up the staircase of her house in Petersburg, and taken an incredible leap over a river in Orel, because she wished for a stalk of foxglove growing on the other bank; he had risked life and limb, position and honour, again and again, to attract her attention or to go where she was, and she had smiled on him the more kindly the more headstrong were his acts and the more perilous his follies.

Once Napraxine had dared to say to her:

'Could you not spare Boris? He is only a lad, and his mother trusts to me to keep him out of harm.'

She had answered in her chilliest tones:

'Pray keep him so. I do not think, however, that you give him the best of examples. Your clubs, your play, your various distractions, are not all of them virtuous?'

And he had been dumb, afraid to offend her more, though he was vaguely uneasy for his young [194] cousin. The lad was terribly in earnest, and she only saw in him a young lion-whelp whose juvenile ardours and furies were half grotesque, half amusing. Napraxine knew that if the lion-whelp went too far, or if she tired of his rage and fret, she would strike him with a whip like any other cur. But he dared not remonstrate more; and Boris Seliedoff, on a brief term of leave, had followed them to the sea-shores of the south-west, and was fretting his soul in futile rage before the indifference of his idol and the presence of her other lovers. It would have been very easy at the onset to have checked the growth of this boyish passion, but she had diverted herself with it, permitted its exaggerations, smiled at its escapades, fanned its fires as she so well knew how to do, and it had sprung to a giant growth in giant strength. This day, when she drove homeward from the breakfast at Ezarhédine's, he was waiting for her at La Jacquemerille. For anyone to wait for her was a thing she detested; it was a disobedience to all those unspoken laws which she required her courtiers implicitly to obey. She expected everyone, of whichever sex, of whatever [195] rank, in however high a degree of favour, to be the humble suer of her commands, the meek attendant of her pleasure. To be waited for without her desires being previously ascertained, made her instantly in a chill and irritable mood; it was a presumption. This morning she was especially ready to be irritated. When she saw the tall figure of the young soldier pacing to and fro, with feverish steps, the marble *perron* of her villa, she grew suddenly and disproportionately angry.

'The boy becomes audacious,—intolerable,—impertinent,' she thought. 'I should have taken him to Ezarhédine's if I had wanted him. He has had too much sugar, he needs the whip.'

All that was most cruel, most intolerant, most tyrannical in her, came with a cold hard look upon her delicate features; the temper of those of her people who had thrust their swords into the body of Paul began to awake in her. She was in the humour to hurt something, the first thing she saw; her eyes were full of scorn and of command as they looked haughtily at Seliedoff, and arrested him by a glance as he sprang towards her.

'Who told you that I sent for you?' she said, with that chill contemptuous gaze which froze the [196] boy and magnetised him in the same moment.

'No one,' he said piteously; 'I thought,—I imagined——'

'You imagined you were always welcome!' she replied. 'A very erroneous imagination. You may be so to Prince Napraxine, you are his cousin; but as the house is mine, I shall prefer that you shall await my invitation.'

She spoke slightingly, and with a coldness like the New Year ice of Russia.

Boris Seliedoff stood and gazed at her helplessly, fascinated by the anger of the gaze which swept over him in such supreme contempt. He had before offended, before had seen what her caprices and her unkindness could become when she was displeased; but all those previous moments had been as summer showers compared with this glacial censure which froze all his hot young blood. So often she had been content to see him; so often she had laughed at him with indulgence and benignity; so often she had called him ' *beau cousin*,' '*cher enfant*,' and smiled at his haste and eagerness when he had done much more than this. Might not any stranger have [197] waited to see her pass, to hear her speak?

Nadine Napraxine, with that one comprehensive disdainful glance, passed across the marble floor, and entered through the open glass doors of the house. She said nothing more. The young

Seliedoff, who had grown first very red, then very pale, followed her timidly like a chidden hound, and paused upon the threshold, hesitating; he scarcely ventured to enter also without some sign from her. But she gave him none. She passed on through the salons, and ascended the low broad staircase without bestowing on him a single glance. Then he knew that she was gone to her own apartments, where no man living dared follow her. Boris Seliedoff stole into a little *salon* humbly, and threw himself down on the first seat he saw. He covered his face with his hands; there were tears in his eyes, which fell slowly through his clasped fingers.

He was a young dare-devil who had eaten fire and played with death, and had hewed down men and women and children without mercy by Skobeleff's side; but he was a mere frightened, timid, [198] wretched lad beneath the lash of her displeasure. He would have crawled for her pardon like her spaniel, even whilst he groped about in bewilderment and darkness to discover his own offence, and could not tell what it had been. An older man would have told him that it had only been the supreme fault of arriving at the wrong moment.

How long he sat there he never knew; he waited in the vague hope of a gentler word, a more kind dismissal, at least for permission to return. He did not remember that he would only increase his offence, prolong his error. The bright day was shining without on all the gay array of shining marbles, many-coloured azaleas, dancing waves, white sails, blue skies; within, the shaded light fell subdued and roseate on the porcelains, the tapestries, the bronzes, the stands and bowls of flowers, all the fantastic details of modern luxury. He might have been in a peasant's *isba* in the midst of a frozen plain for aught he knew. Two or three clocks chimed five, and the carillon in the stable-tower of La Jacquemerille answered them; for anything he could tell, he might have been [199] there a whole day or only fifteen minutes.

Whilst it was still quite daylight, servants came in and brought lamps with rose-coloured shades and set them down noiselessly and went away. Seliedoff raised his head, but he did not leave his place; he sat like a figure of stone. He heard a sound of voices and of laughter; through the parted curtains of the *portières* he saw the vista of the three drawing-rooms which opened out of the small one in which he was. People were coming in and standing about conversing with one another in the rose-hued light of the lamps, lit whilst the sun was still shining. He then remembered that it was Thursday, her day, on which, from five to seven, the *dessus du panier* could come there and idle and flirt and sip caravan tea, or syrups or liqueurs, and have the honour of a word from her, perhaps even of a word of welcome. As he looked and remembered, she herself entered the little room in which he sat, and which was the nearest to her own apartments. She cast a glance upon him, severe, astonished, then passed through to the larger salons. She wore a pale-mauve-coloured velvet gown, with a *jabot* of old point lace, and the same [200] lace peeping here and there from the folds of its skirts; she had some natural yellow roses at her throat; she had her hair *à l'empire*; she had never looked lovelier, colder, more utterly beyond the imitation of other women or the solicitations of men. He watched her receive the little crowd of people already there, and those who came after them; he heard her sweet chill voice, now and then her laugh; he saw all the men whom he hated gathered about her; and the murmur of the voices, the whispers of the discreet mirth, the scent of the flower-laden air, the rosy gleams of the lamplight, the *frou-frou* of the dresses, the tinkle of the tea-cups, came to his ear as the sounds of the outer world come to a sick man in fever.

Geraldine was not there. She had always prohibited his appearance more than once a month at her *jour*.

'I will have no one seen in my rooms as regularly and certainly as Paul,' she had always said to him. Paul was her groom of the chambers. 'Whenever any man is seen perpetually anywhere, as immovably as though he were a clock or a bracket, he becomes ridiculous; and the woman who [201] allows him to be there, still more so.'

Geraldine had been forced to obey, with whatever reluctance; usually he had consoled himself, as well as he could, with the *tripot*. A man is not often jealous of a day in which he knows there exists for him, in his absence, that safety which lies in numbers.

Boris Seliedoif sat on where he was with dogged persistence, his eyes riveted on those pretty salons in which the comedy of society was being acted, and where he perceived nothing save that one form, when it came within his sight, with the grace of movement, the charm of attitude, which were especial to Nadine Napraxine. He thought the coming and going of her many guests would never end; that the buzz of the many voices would never cease. Once or twice men and women whom he knew came into the little room, and sat down there for a few moments; then he was forced to rise and speak to them, to say he knew not what. But he took his seat again immediately, and resumed his silent vigil. Some of them looked at him in surprise, for his expression was strange, and his black Georgian eyes were misty yet fierce; but he was not [202] conscious of the notice he excited, he was only conscious that she never glanced towards him, never summoned him, once.

The two hours seemed to him endless. When seven had struck, the last carriage rolled away from before the windows, the last lingering visitor, the Duc de Prangins—he who had killed young d'Ivrea—made his profound bow over her hand, and took himself and his elegant witticisms and his admirable manners back to the Hotel de Paris at Monte Carlo. When the doors had closed on him, Nadine Napraxine stood a moment alone in the centre of her salon; then swiftly turned, and came towards Seliedoff. He rose, and awaited her sullenly.

Her right hand was clenched as though it grasped the handle of a knout, and was about to use it; a terrible anger shone from the lustre of her eyes; her lips were pale with the force of her displeasure.

‘How dare you! how dare you!’ she said between her teeth.

So might an empress have spoken to a moujik.

To have waited unbidden in her room, seen by all the world, sulking there as though he were a lover once favoured, now dispossessed; making of himself a spectacle, a ridicule, a theme for the comment and chatter of society—it seemed to her such intolerable presumption, such infinite insolence, that she could have struck him with her clenched hand if her dignity had not forbade her. For all her world to see this love-sick boy half-hidden in an inner room, as though by her welcome and authority! She, who had dismissed kings as others dismiss lackeys when she had found them too presuming, could find no chastisement vast enough for such a sin against her authority and her repute. [203]

Seliedoff was but a spoilt child; he had had his own will and way unchecked all his short life, and all his companions and servants had existed only for his pleasure. A foolish and doting mother had never bridled his wishes or tamed his passions. Before Nadine Napraxine alone had the arrogant young noble become submissive, suppliant, and humble. Now, in his torture and his sense of wrong, the natural self-will and fury of a spoilt child crossed, of an adoring youth checked and repudiated, broke away from the bonds of fear in which she had always held them. He answered her with a torrent of words, unconsidered and unwise, beyond all pardon. [204]

‘You have treated me like a dog!’ he said in conclusion, his voice choked in his throat, the veins of his forehead injected. ‘You have caressed me, called me, allowed me every liberty, been pleased with my every folly; and now you turn me out of your house as you would turn the dog if he misbehaved himself. But I am not a dog, I am a man, and that you shall know, by God——’

He came nearer to her, his eyes red and covetous, his boyish face inflamed with fiercest passion, his arms flung out to seize her.

She looked at him, such a look as she would have given to a madman to control, and awe him; he paused, trembled, dared not draw nearer to her.

She was deeply, implacably offended by what had passed. For him to permit himself such language and such actions, seemed to her as intolerable an insult as if the African boy in her service had dared to disobey her. It was the first time that anyone had ever ventured to insult her; it irritated all her delicacy, infuriated all her pride. She never paused to think what provocation she had given; she would have struck him dead with a glance had she been able. [205]

‘You are unwell, and delirious,’ she said in her serenest, chillest tones. ‘You know neither what you do or say. I have been kind to you, and you have presumed to misinterpret my kindness. Your cousin would treat you like a hound, if he knew. But you are ill, so there is excuse for you. Go home, and I will send you my physicians.’

Then she rang; and when a servant entered from the antechamber she turned to him:

‘M. le Comte Seliedoff desires his carriage.’

The boy looked at her with a terrible look in his eyes—pitiful, baffled, imploring, delirious.

‘Nadine, Nadine,’ he whispered hoarsely, ‘will you send me away like that—to die?’

But she had passed, with her slow soft grace, into the adjoining room. He heard her say to Melville, who had been asked there:

‘You are after my hours, Monsignore, but you are always welcome.’ [206]

Seliedoff, with a mist like blood before his eyes, staggered out of the little salon into the mild primrose-scented evening air, hearing, as in a dream, the voices of the servants who told him that his horses waited.

‘She will never forgive; she will never forgive,’ he thought, with a sickening sense that this one moment of insanity had severed him for ever from the woman he worshipped. ‘She will never forgive; I shall never enter her house again!’

All the lovely scene stretching before him in its peace and luxuriance, as the stars came out in the deep blue skies and the daylight still lingered upon shore and sea, was blotted out for him by a red haze as of blood and of tears.

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[207]

CHAPTER XXVI.

Meanwhile Melville, who had come to take his leave before proceeding to Paris under orders from the Vatican, found his hostess evidently *ennuyée*; she was not in her usual serene humour.

'What has irritated you, Princess?' that very observant person presumed at last to ask. 'Have you actually discovered that doubled rose-leaf of whose existence you have been always sure and I always sceptical?'

'The doubled rose-leaf is that enormous nuisance, *la bêtise humaine*,' she replied with ennui, breaking off some blossoms of an odontoglossum standing near her. 'It is like the fog in London, it penetrates everywhere, you cannot escape it; there has been no rose-glass made which could shut it out. If Balzac had written for centuries, he would never have come to an end of it. Do you ever find any variety in your confessional? I never do in my drawing-rooms.' [208]

'And yet who should find it, if not Madame Napraxine?' said Melville, who, when in his worldly moods, did not especially care to be reminded that he was a churchman.

'I do not know who should,—I know that I never do,' she replied. 'I have made *la chasse au caractère* ever since I was old enough to know what character meant; and my only wonder is how, out of such a sameness of material, St.-Simon and La Bruyère and Ste.-Beuve, and all those people who write so well, ever were able to make such entertaining books. I suppose it is done by the same sort of science which enables mathematicians to make endless permutations out of four numbers. For myself, I should like other numbers than those we know by rote.'

'Good heavens!' thought Melville, 'when men have died because she laughed! Is that so very commonplace? or, is it not tragic enough?'

Aloud he said, in his courtliest manner:

'Princess, I fear the sameness of human nature tries you so greatly because of the sameness of [209] the emotions which you excite in it; I can imagine that too much adoration may cloy like too much sugar. Also, in your *chasse au caractère* you have, like all who hunt, left behind you a certain little bourgeois quality called pity; an absurd little quality, no doubt, still one which helps observation. I am sure you have read Tourguenieff's little story of the quail?'

'Yes; but one eats them still, you know, just the same as if he had never written it. Pity may be a microscope, I do not know; besides, you must admit that a quail is a much lovelier little life than a man's, and so can excite it so much more easily. A quail is quite a charming little bird. Myself, I never eat birds at all; it is barbarous.'

'What I meant to say was,' suggested Melville, 'that, in that tiny tale, Tourguenieff, like a poet, as he was, at heart, describes precisely what sympathy will do to open the intelligence to the closed lives of others, whether bird or man. Perhaps, madame, sympathy would even do something to smooth the creases out of your rose-leaf—if you tried it.'

'I suppose I am not sympathetic,' said Nadine Napraxine, stripping the petals of the [210] odontoglossum; 'they all say so. But I think it is their own fault; they are so uninteresting.'

'The quail,' said Melville, 'to almost everybody is only a little juicy morsel to be wrapped in a vine-leaf and roasted; but Tourguenieff had the vision to see in it the courage of devotion, the heroism of maternity, the loveliness of its life, the infinite pathos of its death. Yet, the exceptional estimate of the student's view of it was quite as true as the general view of the epicure.'

'Am I an epicure?' said Nadine Napraxine, amused.

'Spiritually, intellectually, you are,' replied Melville; 'and so nothing escapes the fastidiousness of your taste; yet perhaps, madame, something may escape the incompleteness of your sympathies.'

'That is very possible; but, as I observed to Lady Brancepeth when she made me a similar reproach, one is as one is made. One is Tourguenieff or one is Brillat-Savarin, all that is arranged beforehand for one—somewhere.'

Melville had learned the ways of the world too well not to know how to glide easily, with closed [211] eyes and averted ears, over such irreverences; but he ventured to say:

'One cannot dispute the fact of natural idiosyncrasy and inclination, of course; but may not one's self-culture be as much of the character as of the mind? Might it not become as interesting to strive and expand one's moral as one's intellectual horizon? It seems so to me, at the least.'

She laughed, and rang a little silver bell for Mahmoud to bring them some fresh tea.

'My dear Monsignore,' she said, with amusement and admiration; 'for enwrapping a kernel of religious advice in an envelope of agreeable social conversation, there is not your equal anywhere—you may well be beloved of the Propaganda! But, alas! it is all wasted on me.'

Melville reddened a little with irritation:

'I understand,' he answered. 'I fear, Princess, that you are like Virschow or Paul Bert, who are so absorbed in cutting, burning, and electrifying the nerves of dogs that the dog, as a sentient creature, a companion, and a friend, is wholly unknown to them. Humanity, poor Humanity, is [212] your dog.'

'Will you have some tea?' she said, as Mahmoud brought in her service made by goldsmiths of the Deccan, who sat on mats under their banana trees, with the green parrots flying over the aloes and the euphorbia, and who produced work beside which all the best which Europe can do with

her overgrown workshops is clumsy, inane, and vulgar.

'What you suggested was very pretty,' she continued, pouring out the clear golden stream on the slices of lemon; 'and I had no right to laugh at you for wrapping up a sermon in *nougat*. Of course the character ought to be trained and developed just like the body and the mind, only nobody thinks so; no education is conducted on those lines. And so, though we overstrain the second, and pamper the third, we wholly neglect the first. I imagine that it never occurs to anyone out of the schoolroom to restrain a bad impulse or uproot a bad quality. Why should it? We are all too busy in trying to be amused, and failing. Do you not think it was always so in the world? Do you suppose La Bruyère, for instance, ever turned his microscope on himself? And do you think, if he [213] had done, that any amount of self-scrutiny would have made La Bruyère Pascal or Vincent de Paul?'

'No; but it might have made him comprehend them, or their likenesses. I did not mean to moralise, madame; I merely meant that the issue of self-analysis is sympathy, whilst the issue of the anatomy of other organisations is cruelty even where it may be wisdom.'

'That may be true in general, and I daresay is so; but the exception proves the rule, and I am the exception. Whenever I do think about myself I only arrive at two conclusions; the one, that I am not as well amused as I ought to be considering the means I have at my disposal, and the other is that, if I were quite sure that anything would amuse me very much, I should sacrifice everything else to enjoy it. Neither of those results is objective in its sympathies; and you would not, I suppose, call either of them moral.'

'I certainly should not,' said Melville, 'except that there is always a certain amount of moral health in any kind of perfect frankness.'

'I am always perfectly frank,' said the Princess Nadine; 'so is Bismarck. But the world has made [214] up its mind that we are both of us always feigning.'

'That is the world's revenge for being ruled by each of you.'

'Is it permitted in these serious days for churchmen to make pretty speeches? I prefer your scoldings, they are more uncommon.'

'The kindness which permits them is uncommon,' said Melville, as he took up his tea-cup.

'Ah! I can be kind,' said Nadine Napraxine. ' Ask Mahmoud and my little dog. But then Mahmoud is dumb, and the dog is—a dog. If humanity were my dog, too, as you say, I should make it *aphone*!'

'Poor humanity!' said Melville, with a sigh. 'If it would not offend you, Princess, there are two lines of Mürger which always seem to me to exactly describe the attitude, or rather the altitude, from which you regard all our sorrows and follies.'

'And they are?'

'They are those in which he thinks he hears:

"Le fifre au son aigu railler le violoncelle, [215]
Qui pleure sous l'archet ses notes de crystal;"

only we must substitute for *aigu* some prettier word, say *perlé*.'

She laughed, thinking of Boris Seliedoff, with more perception of his absurdities than of his offences, as her first movement of wrath subsided into that ironical serenity which was most natural to her of all her varying moods.

'The violoncello does not know itself why it weeps,' she replied, 'so why should the fife not laugh at it? Really, if I were not so impious a being, I would join your Church for the mere pleasure of confessing to you; you have such fine penetration, such delicate suggestion. But then, there is no living being who understands women as a Catholic priest does who is also a man of the world. Adieu! or rather, I hope, *au revoir*. You are going away for Lent? Ours will soon be here. I shock every Russian because I pay no heed to its sanctity. Did you ever find, even amongst your people, any creatures so superstitious in their religion as Russians? Platon is certainly the least moral man the sun shines on, but he would not violate a fast nor neglect a rite to save his life. It is too [216] funny! Myself, I have fish from the Baltic and soups (very nasty ones) from Petersburg, and deem that quite concession enough to Carême. My dear Monsignore, why *should* there be salvation in salmon and sin in a *salmis*?'

Melville was not at all willing to enter on that grave and large question with so incorrigible a mocker. He took his leave, and bowed himself out from her presence; whilst Nadine Napraxine went to her own rooms to dress for dinner and look at the domino which she would wear some hours later at a masked ball which was to take place that night in her own house in celebration of the last evening of the Catholic Carnival.

'Le masque est si charmant que j'ai peur du visage,'

she murmured inconsequently, as she glanced at the elegant disguise and the Venetian costume to be worn beneath it which had been provided for her. 'That is the sort of feeling which one likes to inspire, and which one also prefers to feel. Always the mask, smiling, mysterious, unintelligible, seductive, suggestive of all kinds of unrealised, and therefore of unexhausted [217] pleasures; never the face beneath it, the face which frowns and weeps and shows everything, is unlovely, only just because it is known and must in due time even grow wrinkled and yellow. How agreeable the world would be if no one ever took off their masks or their gloves!'

CHAPTER XXVII.

On the following day as she returned from her drive, she was met, to her great surprise, by Napraxine, who descended the steps of the house with a face unusually pale, and a manner unusually grave.

'What can possibly be the matter, Platon?' she said, with a vague sense of alarm, but with her inevitable mockery of him dominating her transient anxiety. 'Have you had a *culotte* yonder? Has Athenais gone away with my jewel-safe? Or have our friends the Nihilists fired Zaraizoff?'

Napraxine gave her his hand to help her to alight.

'Do not jest,' he said simply. 'Boris has shot himself.'

'Boris?—Boris Fédorovitch?'

She spoke in astonishment and anger rather than sorrow: an impatient frown contracted her [219] delicate brows, though she grew ashen pale. Why would men do these things?

Napraxine was silent, but when they had entered the house he spoke very sadly, almost sternly.

'This afternoon he had lost a hundred thousand francs; no doubt on purpose to have an excuse. The ruse can deceive nobody. A Count Seliedoff could lose as much all day for a year, and make no sign. He shot himself in the gardens, within a few yards of us all.'

He paused and looked at his wife. A shadow passed over her face without changing its narcissus-like fairness; she shrugged her shoulders ever so slightly, her eyes had had for a moment an expression of awe and regret, but, beyond any other sentiment with her, were her impatience and irritation.

'Why will men be so stupid?' she thought. 'As if it did any good! The foolish boy!'

'Nadine,' murmured her husband in a voice that was timid even in its expostulation and reproach. 'I am sorry for Boris; for the other I have never cared, but for Boris;—you know that I promised his mother to take what care I could of him—and now—and now—and so young as he was!—and [220] how shall I tell her?—My God!'

She was silent; a genuine pain was on her face, though still mingled with the more personal emotion of impatience and annoyance.

'It was no fault of yours!' she said at last, as she saw two great tears roll down her husband's cheeks.

'Yes, it was,' muttered Platon Napraxine. 'I let him know you.'

The direct accusation banished the softer pain which had for the minute moved her; she was at all times intolerant of censure or of what she resented as a too intimate interference; and here her own surprise at an unlooked-for tragedy, and her own self-consciousness of having been more or less the cause and creatress of it, stung her with an unwelcome and intolerable truth.

'You are insolent,' she said, with the regard which always daunted Napraxine, and made him feel himself an offender against her, even when he was entirely in the right.

'You are insolent,' she repeated. 'Do you mean to insinuate that I am responsible for Seliedoff's [221] suicide? One would suppose you were a journalist seeking *chantage*!'

The power which she at all times possessed over her husband making him unwilling to irritate, afraid to offend her, and without courage before her slightest sign of anger, rendered him timid now. He hesitated and grew pale, but the great sorrow and repentance which were at work in him gave him more resolution than usual; he was very pale, and the tears rolled down his cheeks unchecked.

'Every one knows that Boris loved you,' he said simply. 'All the world knows that; he was a boy, he could not conceal it; I cannot tell what you did to him, but something which broke his heart. You know I never say anything; you give me no title. I am as much of a stranger to you as if we had met yesterday; and do not fancy I am ever—jealous—as men are sometimes. I know you would laugh at me, and besides, you care for none of them any more than you care for me. I should be a fool to wish for more than that;—if it be always like that, I shall never say anything. Only you might have spared this lad. He was so young and my cousin, and the only one left to his [222] mother.'

He paused, in stronger agitation than he cared to allow her to see. It was the first time for years that he had ventured to speak to her in any sort of earnestness or of upbraiding. She had allotted him his share in her life, a very distant one; and he had accepted it without dispute or lament, if not without inward revolt; it was for the first time for years that he presumed to show her he had observed her actions and had disapproved them, to hint that he was not the mere lay figure, the mere good-natured dolt, '*bon comme du pain*,' and as commonplace, which she had always considered him.

She looked at him a little curiously; there was a dangerous irritation in her glance, yet a touch of emotion was visible in her as she said with impatience, 'You are growing theatrical. It does not become you. Boris was a boy, foolish as boys are; he had no mind; he was a mere spoilt child; he was grown up in inches, not in character; so many Russians are. If he have killed himself, who can help it? They should have kept him at home. Why do you play yourself? He is not the first.' [223]

'No, he is not the first,' said Napraxine, with a curt bitterness. 'He is not the first, and it was not

play; he only played to have an excuse. He thought of your name, perhaps of mine; he did not wish the world to know he died because you laughed at him.'

'Laughed! I used to laugh; why not? He was amusing before he grew tragical. I rebuked him yesterday, for he deserved it. Everyone scolds boys. It is good for them. No one supposes——' her tone was impatient and contemptuous, but her lips quivered a little; she was sorry that the boy was dead, though she would not say so. It hurt her, though it annoyed her more.

'Did he—did he suffer?' she asked, abruptly.

Napraxine took out of the breast-pocket of his coat a sheet of note-paper, and gave it her.

'He died instantly, if you mean that,' he answered. 'He knew enough to aim well. They brought me that note; he had written it last night, I think.'

In the broad, rude handwriting of the young Seliedoff there was written:— [224]

'Pardonnez-moi, mon cousin: je l'adore, et elle se moque de moi; je ne peux pas vivre, mais j'aurai soin que le monde n'en sache rien. Soignez ma pauvre mère. Tout à vous de cœur

'Boris Fédorovitch.'

She read it with a mist before her eyes, and gave it back to him without a word.

Napraxine looked at her wistfully; he wondered if he had killed himself whether she would have cared more than she cared now—no, he knew she would have cared as little, even less.

'You say nothing?' he murmured wistfully.

'What is there to say?' she answered. 'It was a boy's blunder. It was a grievous folly. But no one could foresee it.'

'That is all the lament you give him?'

'Would it please you better if I were weeping over his corpse? I regret his death profoundly; but I confess that I am also unspeakably annoyed at it. I detest melodramas. I detest tragedies. The world will say, as you have the good taste to say, that I have been at fault. I am not a coquette, and a reputation of being one gives me no satisfaction. As you justly observed, no one will believe [225] that a Count Seliedoff destroyed his life because he lost money at play. Therefore, they will say, as you have been so good as to say, that the blame lies with me. And such accusations offend me.'

She spoke very quietly, but with a tone which seemed chill as the winter winds of the White Sea, to Napraxine, whose soul was filled with remorse, dismay, and bewildered pain. Then she made him a slight gesture of farewell and left him. As usual, he was entirely right in the reproaches he had made, yet she had had the power to make himself feel at once foolish and at fault, at once coarse and theatrical.

'Poor Boris!' he muttered, as he drew his hand across his wet lashes.

Had it been worth while to die at three-and-twenty years old, in full command of all which the world envies, only to have that cruel sacrifice called a boy's blunder? His heart ached and his thoughts went, he knew not why, to his two young children away in the birch forests by the Baltic Sea. She would not care any more if she heard on the morrow that they were as dead in their [226] infancy as Boris Seliedoff was in his youth, lying under the aloes and the palms of Monte Carlo in the southern sunshine.

Platon Napraxine was a stupid man, a man not very sensitive or very tender of feeling, a man who could often console himself with coarse pleasures and purchasable charms for wounds given to his affections or his pride; but he was a man of quick compunction and warm emotions; he felt before the indifference of his wife as though he stretched out his hand to touch a wall of ice, when what he longed for was the sympathetic answering clasp of human fingers. He brushed the unusual moisture from his eyes, and went to fulfil all those innumerable small observances which so environ, embitter, and diminish the dignity of death to the friends of every dead creature.

Meanwhile, Nadine passed on to her own rooms, and let her waiting-woman change her clothes.

A momentary wish, wicked as a venomous snake, and swift as fire, had darted through her thoughts.

'Why had not Othmar died like that? I would have loved his memory all my life!' she thought, with [227] inconsistency.

Though she had almost refused to acknowledge it, the suicide of Seliedoff pained and saddened her. Foremost of all was her irritation that she who disliked tragedies, who abhorred publicity, who disbelieved in passion, should be thus subject to having her name in the mouths of men in connection with a melodrama which, terrible as it was, yet offended her by its vulgarity and its stupidity. The hour and the scene chosen were vulgar; the transparency of the pretext was stupid. It was altogether, as she had said, a boy's blunder—a blunder, frightful, irreparable, with the horror of youth misspent and life self-destroyed upon it—still a blunder. She thought, with impatience, that what they called love was only a spoilt child's whim and passionate outcry which, denied, ended in a child's wild, foolish fit of rage, with no more wisdom in it than the child has.

All Europe would say that, indirectly, she had been the cause of his death; every one had seen him, moping and miserable, in her rooms the previous day. She disliked a sensational triumph, [228] which was fit for her husband's mistresses, for Lia, for Aurélie, for la belle Fernande. Men were always doing these foolish things for her. She had been angry certainly: who would not have been

so? He had been ridiculous, as youth and intense emotion and unreasonable suffering constantly are in the sight of others.

There had been only one man who had not seemed to her absurd when passion had moved him, and that had only been because he had remained master of himself even in his greatest self-abandonment. If it had been Othmar who had been lying dead there with the bullet in his breast, she would have felt—she was not sure what she would have felt—some pleasure, some pain. Instead, he was at Amyôt finding what pleasures he might in a virginal love, like a spring snowdrop, timid and afraid. She, who always analysed her own soul without indulgence or self-delusion, was disgusted at the impulses which moved her now.

'After all,' she thought, 'Goethe was right; we are always capable of crime, even the best of us; only one must be Goethe to be capable of acknowledging that.'

She sat alone awhile, thoughtful and regretful; indisposed to accept the blame of others, yet not [229]
unwilling to censure herself if she saw cause. But she saw no cause here; it was no fault of hers if men loved her as she passed by them without seeing they were there. True, she had been annoyed with the youth; she had been irritated by him; she had treated him a little as some women treat a dog,—a smile one day, the whip the next; but she had thought so little about him all the time, except that his high spirits were infectious and his face was boyishly beautiful, and that it had diverted her to annoy Geraldine. But who could have supposed that it would end thus? And amidst her pain and her astonishment was foremost a great irritation at his want of thought for her.

The journals, with their innuendoes, their initials, their transparent mysteries; the condolences and the curiosities of her own society; the reproaches of his family; the long ceremonious Russian mourning and Russian rites—' *Quelle corvée!*" she murmured impatiently, as at some pebble in her embroidered shoe, at some clove of garlic in her delicate dinner.

After all, were the great sorrows of life one-half so unendurable in themselves as the tiresome [230]
annoyances with which the foolish habits of men have environed them?

That our friend dies is pain enough, why must we have also the nuisance of following his funeral?

'Men only think of themselves!' she said irritably, in her own unconscious egotism. If Boris Seliedoff had considered her as he should have done, he would not have killed himself within three miles of her garden terrace, at a moment when all their own gossiping world was crowding on the sunny shores of the Mediterranean. A sense of the wrong done to herself divided the regret, tinged almost with remorse, which weighed on her.

As she moved through her boudoir to write the inevitable and most difficult letter which must be penned to his mother far away in the province of the Ekaterinoslaf, a photograph, in a frame of blue plush, caught her eye as it stood amongst all the pretty costly nothings of her writing-table. It was a photograph of Seliedoff; it had been tinted with an artist's skill, and the boyish [231]
handsome mouth smiled tenderly and gaily at her.

For almost the first time in her life she felt the tears rise to her throat and eyes. She laid the picture face downward, and wept.

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[232]

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A few days later when the remains of Boris Seliedoff had been removed to Russia, there to find their last home in the sombre mausoleum of his family on their vast estates in Ekaterinoslaf, Geraldine, who was one of the few who were admitted to La Jacquemerille in these days of mourning, coming thither one afternoon to find her in the garden alone and to entreat for permission to follow her in the various travels which she was about to undertake, since the Riviera had grown distasteful to her, was accosted by her abruptly, if in her delicate languor she could ever be termed abrupt:

'My dear Ralph,' she said briefly, 'why do you not go home?'

Geraldine drew his breath quickly, and stared at her.

'Go home!' he repeated stupidly.

'Well, you have a home; you have several homes,' she said, with her usual impatience at being [233] questioned or misunderstood by wits slower than her own. 'You are an Englishman; you must have a million and one duties. It is utterly wrong to live so much away from your properties. We do it, but I do not think it matters what we do. Whether we be here or there, it is always the stewards who rule everything, but in your country it is different. Your sister says you can do a great deal of good. I cannot imagine what good you should do, but no doubt she knows. I do not like England myself. Your châteaux are very fine, but the life in them is very tiresome. You all eat far too much and far too often, and you have lingering superstitions about Sunday; your women are always three months behind Paris, and never wear shoes like their gowns; your talk is always of games, and shooting, and flat-racing. You are not an amusing people; you never will be. You have too much of the Teuton, and the Hollander, and the Dane in you. Your stage makes one yawn, your books make one sleep, your country-houses make one do both. Your women clothe themselves in Newmarket coats, get red faces, and like to go over wet fields; your men are well [234] built very often, but they move ill; they have no *désinvolture*, they have no charm. The whole thing is tiresome. I shall never willingly go to England; but you, as a great English noble, ought to go there, and stay there——'

'And marry there!' said Geraldine, bitterly. 'Is that the medicine you prescribe for all your friends?'

'Of course you will marry some time,' she said indifferently. 'Men of your position always do; they think they owe it to their country. But whether you marry or not, go home and be useful. You have idled quite too much time away in following our changes of residence.'

He turned pale, and his eyes grew dark with subdued anger.

'You want to be rid of me!'

'Ah, that is just the kind of rough, rude thing which an Englishman always says. It is the reason why Englishmen do not please women much. No Italian or Frenchman or Russian would make such a stupid, almost brutal, remark as that; he would respect his own dignity and the courtesy of words too greatly.'

'We are unpolished, even at our best; you have told me so fifty times,' he said sullenly. 'Well, let [235] me be a savage, then, and ask for a savage mercy; a plain answer. You want me away?'

Nadine's eyes grew very cold.

'I never say uncivil things,' she answered, with an accent that was chill as the mistral. 'But since for once you divine one's meaning, I will not deny the accuracy of your divination.'

She blew a little cloud from a tiny cigarette as she paused. She expressed, as clearly as though she had spoken, the fact that her companion was as little to her as that puff of smoke.

'Does sincerity count for nothing?' he muttered stupidly.

'Sincerity!' she echoed. 'Ah! English people always speak as if they had a monopoly of sincerity, like a monopoly of salt or a monopoly of coal! My dear Lord Geraldine, I am not doubting your sincerity in the very least; it is not *that* which is wanting in you——'

'What is?' he asked in desperation.

'So much!' said the Princess Napraxine with a little comprehensive smile and sigh.

'If you would deign to speak definitely—' he murmured in bitter pain, which he strove clumsily to [236] make into the likeness of serenity and irony.

'Oh, if you wish for details!—It is just that kind of wish for details which shows what you fail in so very much; tact, finesse, observation, flexibility. My dear friend, you are thoroughly insular! Everything is comprised in that!'

He was silent.

'I have not the least wish to vex you,' she continued. 'I am quite sorry to vex you, but if you will press me——A painter teased me the other day to go to his studio and see what he had done for the salon. I made him polite excuses, the weather, my health, my engagements, the usual phrases, but he would not be satisfied with them, he continued to insist, so at last he had the truth. I told him that I detested almost all modern art, and that I did not know why anyone encouraged it at all when it was within everyone's power to have at least line-engravings of the old masters. He was not pleased—take warning. Do not be as stupid as he.'

Geraldine understood, and his tanned cheek grew white with pain. He was a proud man, and had [237]
been made vain by his world. He was bitterly and cruelly humbled, but the love he had for her
made him almost unconscious of the offence to him, so overwhelming in its cruelty was the
sentence of exile which he received.

He did not speak at once, for he could not be sure to command his voice, and he shrank from
betraying what he felt. She rose, and threw the cigarette over the balustrade into the sea, and
turned to go indoors. She had said what her wishes were, and she expected to have them obeyed
without more discussion. But the young man rose too, and barred her way.

He had only one consciousness, that he was on the point of banishment from the only woman
whom he had cared for through two whole years. It had become so integral a part of his life that
he should follow Nadine Napraxine as the moon follows the earth, that exile from her presence
seemed to him the most terrible of disasters, the most unendurable of chastisements.

'After all this time, do you only tell me to go away?' he muttered, conscious of the lameness and [238]
impotency of his own words, which might well only move her laughter. But a certain anger rather
than amusement was what they stirred in her; there was in them an implied right, an implied
reproach, which were both what she was utterly indisposed to admit his title to use.

'All this time!' she echoed; 'all what time? You are leading a very idle life, and all your excellent
friends say that you leave many duties neglected; I advise you to return to them.'

'Is it the end of all?' he said, while his lips trembled in his own despite.

'All? All what? The end? No; it is the end to nothing that I know of; I should rather suppose that
you would make it the beginning—of a perfectly proper life at home. Evelyn Brancepeth says you
ought to reduce all your farmers' rents; go and do it; it will make you popular in your own county.
I know you good English always fancy that you can quench revolutions with a little weak tea of
that sort. As if people who hate you will not hate you just the same whether they pay you half a [239]
guinea, or half a crown, for every sod of ground! Our Tsar Alexander thought the same sort of
thing *en grand*, and did it; but it has not answered with him. To be sure, he was even sillier—he
expected slaves to be grateful!'

'You really mean that you are tired of my presence?' he said, with no sense of anything except the
immense desolation which seemed suddenly to cover all his life.

'You *will* put the dots on all your i's!' she said impatiently. 'That kind of love of explanation is so
English; all your political men's time is wasted in it. Nobody in England understands *à demi-mot*,
or appreciates the prettiness of a hint.'

'I understand well enough—too well,' he muttered, with a sigh that was choked in its birth. 'But—
but—I suppose I am a fool; I did not think you really cared much—yet I always fancied—I suppose
I had no right—but surely we have been friends at the least?'

His knowledge of the world and of women ought to have stopped the question unuttered; but a
great pain, an intense disappointment, had mastered him, and left him with no more tact or [240]
wisdom than if he had been a mere lad fresh from college. It cost him much to make his reproach
so measured, his words so inoffensive. He began to understand why men had said that Nadine
Napraxine was more perilous in her chastity and her spiritual cruelty than the most impassioned
Alcina.

She looked at him with a little astonishment mingled with a greater offence.

'Friends? certainly; why not?' she said, with entire indifference. 'Who is talking of enmity? In
plain words, since you like them so much, you do—bore me just a little; you are too often here;
you have a certain manner in society which might make gossips remark it. You do not seem to
comprehend that one may see too much of the most agreeable person under the sun. It is,
perhaps, a mistake ever to see much of anyone; at least, I think so. Briefly, I do not wish to have
any more stories for Nice and its neighbourhood; this one of Boris Seliedoff is quite enough! They
are beginning to give me a kind of reputation of being a *tueuse d'hommes*. It is so vulgar, that
kind of thing. They are beginning to call me Marie Stuart; it is absurd, but I do not like that sort [241]
of absurdities. I had nothing to do with the folly of poor Boris, but no one will ever believe it; he
will always be considered my victim. It is true you are certain not to kill yourself; Englishmen
always kill a tiger or a pig if they are unhappy, never themselves. I am not afraid of your doing
any kind of harm; you will only go home and see your farmers and please your family; and you
will give big breakfasts in uncomfortable tents, and be toasted, and your county newspapers will
have all sorts of amiable paragraphs about you, and sometime or other you will marry—why not?
Please stand back a little and let me pass; we shall meet in Paris next year when you take a
holiday on your reduced rents.'

She laughed a little, for the first time since Seliedoff's suicide; her own words amused her. Those
poor English gentlemen, who fancied they would stem the great salt tide of class hatred, the
ever-heaving ocean of plebeian envy, by the little paper fence of a reduced rental! Poor Abels,
deluding themselves with the idea that they could disarm the jealousy of their Cains with a silver
penny!

But the thoughts of Geraldine were far away from any political ironies with which she might [242]
entertain her own discursive mind.

'Nadine, Nadine,' he said stupidly, 'you cannot be so cruel. I have always obeyed you; I have
never murmured; I have been like your dog; I have been content on so little. Other men would
have rebelled, but I—I——'

Her languid eyes opened widely upon him in haughty surprise and rebuke.

'Now you talk like a *jeune premier* of the Gymnase!' she said, contemptuously. 'Rebelled? Content? What words are those? You have been a pleasant acquaintance—amongst many. You cannot say you have been ever more. If you have begun to misunderstand that, go where you can recover your good sense. I have liked you; so has Prince Napraxine. Do not force us to consider our esteem misplaced.'

She spoke coldly, almost severely; then, with an enchanting smile, she held out her hand.

'Come, we will part friends, though you are disposed to *bouder* like a boy. You know something of the world; learn to look as if you had learned at least its first lesson—good temper. Affect it if you [243]
have it not! And—never outstay a welcome!'

He looked at her and his chest heaved with a heavy sigh that was almost a sob. Passionate upbraiding rose to his lips, a thousand reproaches for delusive affabilities, for patiently-endured caprices, for wasted hours and wasted hopes, and wasted energies, all rose to his mouth in hot hard words of senseless, irrepressible pain; but they remained unuttered. He dared not offend her beyond pardon, he dared not exile himself beyond recall. He was conscious of the futility of any reproach which he could bring, of the absence of any title which he could allege. For two years he had been her bondsman, her spaniel, her submissive servant in the full sight of the world, yet looking backward he could not recall any sign or word or glance which could have justified him in the right to call himself her lover. She had accepted his services, permitted his presence—no more; and yet, he felt himself as bitterly wronged, as cruelly deluded, as ever man could have been by woman.

There is a little song which has been given world-wide fame by the sweetest singer of our time: [244]
the little song which is called, '*Si vous n'avez rien à me dire*.' Just so vague, and so intense, as is the reproach of the song, was the cry of his heart against her now.

If she had never cared, had never meant, why then——?

But he dared not formulate his injury in words; he knew that it would condemn him never to see her face again except in crowds as strangers saw it. He had never really believed that she would care for him as he cared for her, but it had always seemed to him that habit would in the end become affection, that the continual and familiar intercourse which he had obtained with her would become in time necessary to her, an association, a custom, a friendship not lightly to be discarded. He had believed that patience would do more for him than passion; he had endured all her caprices, followed all her movements, incurred the ridicule of men, and, what was worse, his own self-contempt, in the belief that, with her, *Festina lente* was the sole possible rule of victory. And now she cast him aside, with no more thought than she left to her maids a fan of an old [245]
fashion, a glove that had been worn once!

She gave him no time to recover the shock with which he had heard his sentence of exile, but, with a little kindly indifferent gesture, passed him and went into the house.

He had not the courage of Othmar; he had never had as much title as Othmar to deem himself preferred to the multitude; looking back on the two years which he had consecrated to her memory and her service, he could not honestly recall a single word or glance or sign which could have justified him in believing himself betrayed.

She had accepted his homage as she accepted the bouquets which men sent her, to die in masses in her ante-chambers.

His pain was intolerable, his disappointment was altogether out of proportion to the frail, vague hopes which he had cherished; but he felt also that his position was absurd, untenable; he had never been her lover, he had none of the rights of a lover; he was only one of many who had failed to please her, who had unconsciously blundered, who had committed the one unpardonable sin of wearying her.

Resistance could only make him ridiculous in her eyes. She had plainly intimated that she was [246]
tired of his acquaintance and companionship. It was an intense suffering to him, but it was not one which he could show to the world, or in which he could seek the world's sympathy. If he had failed to please her—failed, despite all his opportunities, to obtain any hold upon her sympathies—it was such a failure as is only grotesque in the esteem of men, and contemptible in the sight of women.

'*A qui la faute?*' she would have said herself, with a pitiless amusement, which the world would only have echoed.

It was late in February, but already spring in the Riviera; a brilliant sun was dancing on all the million and one pretty things in her boudoir, for she liked light, and could afford, with her exquisite complexion and her flower-like mouth, to laugh at the many less fortunate of her sex, who dared not be seen without all the devices of red glass and rose-coloured transparencies and muffled sunbeams. She caressed her little dog, and bade the negro boy bring her some tea, and stretched herself out on a long low chair with a pleasant sense of freedom from a disagreeable [247]
duty done and over.

'I will never be intimate with an Englishman again,' she thought. 'They cannot understand; they think they must be either your Cæsar or *nullus*: it is so stupid; and then, when you are tired, they grumble. Other men say nothing to you, but they fight somebody else,—which is so much better. It is only the Englishman who grumbles, and abuses you as if you were the weather!'

The idea amused her.

Through her open windows she could see the sea. She saw the boat of Geraldine, with its red-capped crew pulling straightway to the westward; he was going to his yacht; the affair was over peaceably; he would not kill himself like Seliedoff. Her husband would miss him for a little time, but he was used to men who made themselves his ardent and assiduous friends for a few months or more, and then were no more seen about his house, being banished by her; he was wont to call such victims the Zephyrs after that squadron of the mutinous in the Algerian army, which [248] receives all those condemned and rejected by their chiefs. He would ask no questions; he would understand that his old companion had joined the rest; he had never cared for the fate of any save for that of young Seliedoff. There were always men by the score ready to amuse, distract, and feast with Prince Napraxine.

She drank her yellow tea with its slice of lemon, and enjoyed the unwonted repose of half an hour's solitude. She was conscious at once of a certain relief in the definite exile of her late companion, yet of a certain magnanimity, inasmuch as she would enable other women to presume that he had grown tired of his allegiance.

But the latter consideration weighed little with her; she had been too satiated with triumph not to be indifferent to it, and she was at all times careless of the opinions of others. She would miss him a little, as one misses a well-trained servant, but there would be so many others ready to fill his place. Whenever her groom-of-the-chambers told her hall-porter to say 'Madame reçoit,' her rooms were filled with young men ready to obey her slightest sign or wildest whim as poodles or [249] spaniels those of their masters. There were not a few who, like Geraldine, regulated their seasons and their sojourns by the capricious movements of the Princess Napraxine, as poor benighted shepherds follow the gyrations of an ignis-fatuus. Whether north, south, east, or west, wherever she was momentarily resident, there was always seen her *corps de garde*.

As she sat alone now for the brief half-hour before her usual drive, her past drifted before her recollection in clear colours, as though she were quite old. She remembered her childhood, spent at the embassies of great cities, where her father was the idol of all that was distinguished and of much that was dissolute; the most courtly, the most witty, the most elegant, of great diplomatists. She remembered how, sitting in her mother's barouche in the Bois or the Prater, or petted and caressed by sovereigns and statesmen in her mother's drawing-rooms, she had seen so much with her opal-like eyes, heard so much with her sea-shell-like ears, and had, at ten years old, said to Count Platoff, '*Je serai honnête femme; ce sera plus chic*;' and how his peal of laughter had *[250]* disconcerted her own serious mood and solemnity of resolve. Then she remembered how, when she was seventeen years old, her mother had advised her to marry her cousin; and how her father, when she had been tempted to ask his support of her own adverse wishes, had twisted his silken white moustaches with a little shrug of his shoulders, and had said: 'Mais, mon enfant, je ne sais—nous sommes presque ruinés; ça me plaira—et un mari, c'est si peu de chose!'

'*Si peu de chose!*' she thought, now; and yet a bullet that you drag after you, a note of discord always in your music, a stone in your ball slipper, dance you ever so lightly—an inevitable ennui always awaiting you!

'If they had not been in such haste, I should have met Othmar and have married him!' she mused, with that frankness which was never missing from her self-communion. 'Life would have looked differently;——I would have made him the foremost man in Europe; he has the powers needful, but he has no ambitions; his millions have stifled them.'

She thought, with something that was almost envy, of the fate of Yseulte, and with a [251] remembrance, which was almost disgust, of the early hours of her own marriage, when all the delicacy and purity of her own girlhood had revolted against the brutality of obligations which she had in her ignorance submitted to accept.

How could she care for the children born of that intolerable degradation to which no habit or time had had power to reconcile her?

In her own eyes she had been as much violated as any slave bought in the market.

'If I had daughters, they should at least know to what they surrendered themselves before they were given away in marriage,' she had often reflected, with a bitter remembrance of the absolute innocence in which she herself had repeated the vows, and broken the glass, which had indissolubly united her to her cousin Platon.

Then, with the irony even of herself, and the doubt even of herself, which were stronger than any other instincts in her, she laughed at her own momentary sentiment.

'I dare say I should have been tired of him in six months,' she thought, 'and very likely we should [252] have hated one another in another six. He would not have been as easy as Platon; he would have had his prejudices——'

Before her mind there rose the vision of a place she had once seen as she had sailed in a yacht down the Adriatic one cool autumnal month; a place not far from Ragusa, somewhat farther to the southward; a fantastic pile, half Greek, half Turkish, with an old Gothic keep built by Quattrocentisto Venetians rising in its midst; gardens of palms and woods of ilex sloping from it to meet the lapis-lazuli-hued sea, cliffs of all the colours of precious stones towering up behind it into the white clouds and the dazzling sunshine. Fascinated by the aspect of the place, she had asked its name and owner, and the Austrians with her had answered her, 'It is called Zama, and it belongs to the Othmars.'

She had often remembered the Herzegovinian castle, lonely as Miramar after the tragedy of Quetaro.

‘I would not have lived at Amyôt, but at Zama,’ she thought now; then, angry and impatient of herself, she dismissed her fancies as you banish with a light clap of your hands a flock of importunate birds, which fly away as fast as they have come. [253]

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[254]

CHAPTER XXIX.

‘Are you very happy?’ said Baron Fritz to Yseulte in his occasional visits to Amyôt. And she answered without words, with a blush and a smile which were much warmer than words. He saw that she was perfectly happy, as yet; that whatever thorns might be beneath the nuptial couch, they had not touched her.

He did not venture to put the same question to Othmar. There were times when he would no more have interrogated his nephew than he would have put fire to a pile of powder; he had at once the vague fear and the abundant contempt which a thoroughly practical, artificial, and worldly man has for one whose dreams and desires are wholly unintelligible to him.

‘Otho,’ he said once to her, ‘is like an Eastern sorcerer who holds the magic ring with which he can wish for anything under heaven; but, as he cannot command immortality, all his life slips [255] through his fingers before he has decided on what is most worth wishing for. Do you understand?’

Yseulte did not understand; to her this sorcerer, if not benignant to himself, had at least given all her soul desired. He treated her with the most constant tenderness, with the most generous delicacy, with the most solicitous care; if in his love there might be some of the heat of passion, some of the ardours of possession, lacking, it was not the spiritual affection and the childish innocence of so young a girl which could be capable of missing those, or be conscious of their absence. To Yseulte, love was at once a revelation and a profanation: she shrank from it even whilst she yielded to it; it was not to such a temperament as hers that any lover could ever have seemed cold.

She did not understand her husband; physical familiarity had not brought much mental companionship. She adored him; the distant sound of his step thrilled her with excitement, his lightest touch filled her with delight; the intense love she bore him often held her silent and pale with an excess of emotion which she would have been afraid to render into speech even if she [256] had been able to do so; and she was utterly unable, for the strength of her own feelings alarmed her, and the mode of her education had made her reticent.

He was to her as a god who had suddenly descended upon her life, and changed all its poor, dull pathways into fields of light. That she gave, or that she might give him, much more than he gave her, never occurred to her thoughts. That any ardour of admiration, or force of emotion, might be absent in him towards her, never suggested itself to her. Such love as he bestowed on her, indifferent though it was in reality, seemed to her the very height of passion. She could not tell that mere sensual indulgences mingled with affectionate compassion, may produce so fair a simulacrum of love for awhile that it will deceive alike deceiver and deceived.

Othmar knew that nothing tenderer, purer, or nearer to his ideal, could have come into his life than this graceful and most innocent girl. She satisfied his taste if not his mind; she was as fresh as a sea-shell, as a lily, as a summer-dawn; and he felt an entire and illimitable possession in her such as he had never felt in any living woman; she was so young, it seemed like drinking the very [257] dew of morning; and yet he could not have told whether he was most restless or most in peace at Amyôt.

‘Love me a little, dear; I have no one,’ he had said to her on the day of their betrothal, and it had always seemed to him that he had no one; all his mistresses had never cared for him, but only for the golden god which was behind him; or, he had thought so. And now, she loved him with an innocence and a fervour of which he could not doubt the truth; and he was grateful, as the masters of the world are usually grateful, for a handful of the simple daily bread of real affection; and she gave him all her young untouched loveliness in pledge of that, as she might have given him a rosebud to pluck to pieces. And he felt the sweetness of the rosebud, he resigned himself to the charm of the dawn, and endeavoured to believe that he was happy; but happiness escaped him as the vermilion hues of the evening sky may escape the dreamer watching for them, who looks too closely or looks too far.

Yet he remained willingly at Amyôt through these winter weeks; as willingly as though he had [258] been the most impassioned of lovers. Amyôt was as far from the world, if he chose, as though its pastures and avenues had been an isle in the great South Ocean; he wished to forget the world with the ivory arms of Yseulte drawn about his throat: he would gladly have forgotten that any other woman lived beside this child, on whose innocent mouth, sweet as the wild rose in spring, he strove to stay the fleeting fragrance of his own youth.

‘No man had ever sweeter physician to his woes,’ he thought as he looked at her in her sleep, the red glow from the angry winter sunrise touching with its light the whiteness of her sculptural limbs. But what drug cures for long?

Friederich Othmar often went to the château for a few hours on matters of business, and was persuaded that the shining metal roofs of the great Valois house of pleasure sheltered a perfect contentment.

‘But you must not remain for ever here,’ he said to his nephew. ‘They will give you some foolish name which will run down the boulevards like magic; they will say you are in love with your wife, [259] or that you are educating her; we all know what comes of that latter attempt.’

‘I stay at Amyôt,’ answered Othmar, ‘because I like it, because we both like it.’

‘My dear Otho, since you have pleased yourself persistently all your life, it is improbable that you

will cease to do so at an age when most men are only just able to begin. Amyôt is an historic place, very old, admirably adapted for a museum; but since it is to your taste, well and good; only none will comprehend that you stay here *filant le parfait amour* for two months. If you continue to do so, Paris will believe that your wife has a club-foot or a crooked spine.'

'You think she must show the one in a cotillon, or the other in something *très collant*?' said Othmar.

'Are you afraid of that?' said the Baron, who knew by what means to attain his own ends.

'I am not in the least afraid,' replied Othmar, with impatience. 'But I confess Amyôt, with the cuckoo crying in its oak woods, seems a fitter atmosphere for her than the *endiablement* of [260] Paris.'

'You could return to the cuckoo. I am not acquainted with his habits, but I should presume he is a stay-at-home, countryfied person.'

'You do not understand the spring-time,' said Othmar, with a smile.

'It has always seemed to me the most uncomfortable period of the year,' confessed the Baron. 'It is an indefinite and transitory period, such as are seldom agreeable, except to poets, who are naturally unstable themselves.'

'I suppose you were never young?' said Othmar, doubtfully.

'I must have been, pathologically speaking,' replied Friederich Othmar. 'But I have no recollection of it; I certainly never remember a time when I did not read of the state of Europe with interest: I think, on the contrary, there was never a time in which you took any interest in it.'

'Europe is such a very small fraction of such an immeasurable whole!'

'It is our fraction at least; and all we have,' said the Baron; all the gist of the matter seemed to [261] him to lie in that. 'You would like to live in Venus, or journey to the rings of Saturn, but at present science limits us to Earth.'

'Can you not persuade him to take any interest in mankind?' he continued to Yseulte, as she approached them at that moment. He was about to leave Amyôt after one of his brief and necessary visits, and stood smoking a cigarette before his departure in the great central hall, with its dome painted by Primaticcio.

'In mankind?' she repeated with a smile. 'That is very comprehensive, is it not? I am sure,' she added with hesitation, for she was afraid of offending her husband, 'he is very good to his own people, if you mean that?'

'He does not mean that at all, my dear,' said Othmar. 'He means that I should be very eager to ruin some states and upraise others, that I should foment war and disunion, or uphold anarchy or absolutism, as either best served me, that I should free the hands of one and tie the hands of another; do not trouble your head about these matters, my child; let us go in the woods and look for primroses, which shall remind you of the green lanes of Faïel.' [262]

Yseulte, whose interest was vaguely aroused, looked from one to another.

'If you really can do so much as that,' she said timidly, 'I think I would do it if I were you; because surely you might always serve the right cause and help the weak people.'

Othmar smiled, well pleased.

'My dear Baron, this is not the advocate that you wish to arouse. Remember Mephistopheles failed signally when he entered a cathedral.'

'I do not despair; I shall have Paris on my side,' said the Baron, as he made his farewells.

The day was bright, and a warm wind was stirring amidst the brown buds of the trees and forests; the great forests wore the purple haze of spring; from the terraces of Amyôt, where once Francis and the Marguerite des Marguerites had wandered, the immense view of the valleys of the Loire and of the Cher was outspread in the noon sunlight, white tourelle and grey church spire rising up from amid the lake of golden air like 'silver sails upon a summer sea.' From these stately terraces, raised high on colonnades of marble, with marble statues of mailed men-at-arms [263] standing at intervals adown their length, the eyes could range over all that champaign country which lies open like a chronicle of France to those who have studied her wars and dynasties.

Yseulte loved to come there when the sun was bright as when it was at its setting, and dream her happy dreams, whilst gazing over the undulations of the great forests spreading solemn and hushed and shadowy, away, far away, to the silver line of the vast river and to the confines of what once was Touraine.

'What do you find to think so much of, you, with your short life and your blameless conscience?' asked Othmar that day, looking at her as she leaned against the marble parapet.

She might have answered in one word, 'You,' but love words did not come easily to her lips; she was very shy with him still.

She answered evasively: 'Does one always think at all when one looks, and looks, and looks, idly like this? I do not believe reverie is real thinking; it is an enjoyment; everything is so still, so peaceful, so bright—and then it cannot go away, it is all yours; we may leave it, it cannot leave [264] us.'

'You are very fond of the country?'

‘I have never been anywhere else, except when I was a little child in Paris. I love Paris, but it is not like this.’

‘No woman lives who does not love Paris; but I think Amyôt suits you better. You have a Valois look; you are of another day than ours. I should not like to see you grow like the women of your time; you are a true patrician—you have no need of *chien*.’

He put a hothouse rose in her bosom as he spoke, and kissed her throat as he did so. The colour flushed there at his touch. She stooped her face over the rose.

‘I do not think I shall ever change,’ she said, hurriedly. ‘It seems to me as if one must remain what one is born.’

‘The ivory must; the clay changes,’ said Othmar. ‘You are very pure ivory, my love. I robbed you from Christ.’

He was seated on one of the marble benches in the balustrade of the terrace; she stood before him, while his hand continued to play with the rose he had put at her breast. She wore a white [265] woollen gown, which fell about her in soft folds, edged with ermine; a broad gold girdle clasped her waist, and old guipure lace covered her heart, which beat warm and high beneath his touch as he set the great crimson rose against it. In an innocent way she suddenly realised her own charm and its power which it gave her over any man; she lost her timidity, and ventured to ask him a question.

‘What is it that the Baron wishes you so much to do?’ she said, as she stood before him. ‘I did not understand.’

‘He wishes me, instead of putting roses in your corsage, to busy myself with setting the torch of war to dry places.’

‘I do not understand. What is it you can do?’

‘I will try and tell you in a few words. There are a few men, dear, who have such an enormous quantity of gold that they can arrange the balance of the world much at pleasure. One man, called Vanderbilt, could, for instance, make such a country as England bankrupt if he chose, merely by throwing his shares wholesale on the market. The Othmar are such men as this. My [266] forefathers made immense fortunes, mostly very wickedly, and by force of their own unscrupulousness have managed to become one of these powers of the world. I have no such taste for any such power. It is with my indifference that my uncle reproaches me. He thinks that if I bestowed greater attention to the state of Europe I could double the millions I possess. I do not want to do that; I do not care to do that; so a great chasm of difference yawns for ever between him and me.’

‘He loves you very much?’

‘Oh, in his way; but I irritate him and he irritates me. We have scarcely a point in common.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Yseulte, amazed at her own boldness in suggesting a fault in him, ‘perhaps you have not quite patience with his difference of character?’

‘That is very possible,’ said Othmar, himself astonished at her insight. ‘I could pardon anything if he would not speak of the Othmar as Jews speak of Jehovah. It is so intolerably absurd.’

‘But they are your people.’

‘Alas! yes. But I despise them; I dislike them. They were intolerably bad men, my dear; they did [267] intolerably bad things. All this,’ he continued, with a gesture of his hand towards the mighty building of Amyôt, with its marble terraces and its many towers dazzling in the sunlight, ‘they would never have possessed save through hundreds of unscrupulous actions heaped one on the other to make stepping-stones across the salt-marsh of poverty to the yellow sands of fortune. Oh, I do not mean that Amyôt was not bought fairly. It was bought quite fairly, at a very high price, by my great grandfather, but the wealth which enabled him to buy it was ill-gotten. His father was a common Croat horse-dealer, which is a polite word for horse-stealer, who lived in the last century in the city of Agram. There are millions of loose horses in the vast oak woods of Western Hungary and the immense plains of Croatia, and to this day there are many men who live almost like savages, and steal these half-wild horses as a means of subsistence. There were, of course, many more of these robbers in the last century than in this. Marc Othmar did not actually steal the horses, but he bought them at a tenth part of their value from these rough men [268] of the woods and plains when stolen, and the large profits he made by this illegal traffic laid the foundations of the much-envied fortunes which I enjoy, and which you grace to-day.’

He had spoken as though he explained the matter to a child, but Yseulte’s ready imagination supplied the colour to his bare outlines. She was silent, revolving in her thoughts what he had said.

‘I would rather your people had been warriors,’ she said, with hesitation, thinking of her own long line of crusaders.

‘I would rather they had been peasants,’ he returned. ‘But being what they were, I must bear their burdens.’

‘Then what is it he wishes you to do that you do not?’

‘He wishes me to have many ambitions, but as I regard it, the fortunes which I have been born to entirely smother ambition; whatever eminence I might achieve, if I did achieve it, would never appear better than so much preference purchased. If I had been as great a soldier as Soult, they

would have said I bought my victories. If I had had the talent of Balzac, they would have said I [269]
bought the press. If I had written the music of the “Hamlet” or the “Roi de Lahore,” they would have said that I bought the whole musical world for my claque. If I could have the life that I should like, I should choose such a life as Lamartine’s, but a rival of the Rothschilds cannot be either a poet or a leader of a revolution. The *monstrari digito* ruins the peace and comfort of life: if I walk down the boulevard with the Comte de Paris the fools cry that I wish to crown Philippe VII., if I speak to M. Wilson in the *foyer* of the Français they scream that there is to be a concession for a new loan; if the Prince Orloff come to breakfast with me a Russian war is suspected, and if Prince Hohenlohe dine with me I have too German a bias. This kind of notoriety is agreeable to my uncle. It makes him feel that he holds the strings of the European puppet show. But to myself it is detestable. To come and go unremarked seems to me the first condition of all for the quiet enjoyment of life, but I have been condemned to be one of those unfortunates who cannot drive a phaeton down to Chantilly without the press and the public becoming nervous [270]
about the intentions of M. d’Aumale. Last year, one very hot day, I was passing through Paris, and I asked for a glass of water at a little café at the barrière. They stared, and brought me some. When I told them that I only wanted water, the waiter said, with a smile, “Monsieur ne peut pas être sérieux! nous avons l’honneur de le connaître.” The world, like the waiter, will not let me have plain water when I wish for it. I dare say my wish may be perversity, but, at any rate, it is always thwarted by the very people who imagine they are gratifying me with indulgences.’

‘But some of the people love you,’ she insisted. ‘Did not the workmen of Paris give you that beautiful casket the other day? Was it not bought by a two-sous subscription?’

‘That was more a compliment to the Maison d’Othmar than to myself. We have always been popular in Paris; so was Louis Napoléon—once. We have much the same titles as he had; we have committed many crimes, and caused immeasurable misery.’

‘Not you,’ she said softly.

‘I inherit the results,’ said her husband. [271]

‘But you have done great things,’ she said timidly. ‘The curé here was telling me yesterday of all you have done for the poor of Paris. He says that the hospitals you have founded, the charities you maintain——’

‘The curé knows his way to your heart and your purse! My dear, the Emperor Napoléon Trois thought that he did a great thing for the poor of Paris when he pulled down their rookeries and built them fine and healthy *cités ouvrières*; there was only one thing the Emperor could not do: he could not make the poor live in them; and the Convalescent Home he erected at Vincennes did not save him from Sedan, or Paris from the Commune. We who are rich shall always have the Emperor’s fate; we shall build as much as we like, and spend as much as we like, but we shall never reach the hearts of the great multitudes, who all hate us. It is very natural they should. Never say a word about what they call my charities. They are blunders like the Emperor’s, many of which seem now to be very absurd ones. If I ever come to my Sedan, they will not be remembered for an hour. The one thing I can do, and will do, is, that I will prevent, as long as I [272]
live, the use of the great mill of gold which we grind being turned to immoral purposes—such purposes, for instance, as the oppression of peoples, as the barter of nationalities, as the supply of the sinews of unjust and unholy wars, as the many intolerable iniquities which, whilst professing Christianity, modern statesmen employ under spurious names to most intolerable ends. So much I can do; and, for doing it, I am thought a fool. All the rest is wholly indifferent to me. The machine swings on as it will; it is so admirably organised that it requires little guidance, and, that little, Baron Friederich gives, whilst I am free, my dear, to stay at Amyôt and gather you another rose, for I have spoilt this one.’

He had spoken more gaily, frankly, and fully than was his wont, and kissed her softly on the throat once more.

Yseulte’s thoughts were with his earlier words; her eyes were moist, and very serious. It was the first time that he had ever alluded before her to his family or his position; she had never at all understood what they had meant around her when they had spoken of la Finance; she had seen [273]
that he was *très grand seigneur*, and was treated, wherever he moved, with the greatest marks of deference. It seemed very strange to her that so much power and state should be possible without unblemished descent: it was outside of her creed and her comprehension. If she had loved him less, it would have shocked her.

‘I am sorry,’ she said softly, ‘it must have troubled you so much. I understand why you are sometimes sad. It must be like holding lightning in your hands; and then there is the fear of using it ill——’

‘My greatest fault has been to be too careless of it,’ he answered. ‘To have used my power neither way, neither for good nor ill. I have comforted myself that I have done no harm;—a negative praise. Come, let us go and choose another rose for you; or shall we go into the woods? You like them better. Do not trouble your soul with the gold or the crimes of the Othmar. You are come to purify both; and you will make your children in your own likeness out of that consecrated ivory of which heaven has made you!’

‘She is the first woman of them all,’ he thought, as they descended the marble stairs towards the [274]
glades of the park, ‘the first who has had any sympathy with me. They have all thought me a fool for not turning round like the sluggard, and lying drugged in my golden nest. She understands very little because she does not understand the world; but she can imagine how all which the vulgar think so delightful drags me down like a wallet of stones.’

‘Yseulte,’ he said aloud, ‘do you know what all my millions cannot buy, and what I would give them all to be able to buy? Well, something like the *mort sur le champ d’honneur*, which was said for a hundred and fifty years when the name of Philippe de Valogne was called in the roll-call of the Grenadiers.’

The memory he recalled was one of the most glorious of her race; one of those traditions of pure honour which are common enough in the nobility of France. The Counts de Valogne had been behind none in high courage and lofty codes; and the local history of their province was studded with the exploits and the martial self-sacrifice whereby they had continually redeemed their extravagance and their idleness as courtiers and men of pleasure. [275]

She turned to him with her brightest smile, and her hand touched his with a gesture caressing and timid.

‘He is mine; I will give him to you,’ she said, with a child’s abandonment and gaiety. ‘I am so glad that I have something to give!’

‘You will give his blood to my sons,’ said Othmar. ‘So you will give it to me.’

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[276]

CHAPTER XXX.

Melville came one day to Amyôt.

‘You have followed my advice,’ he said to Othmar. ‘You have made yourself a home. It is the nearest likeness to heaven that men get on earth. Believe a homeless man when he tells you so.’

Othmar smiled.

‘It is odd that you, the purest priest I know, and my uncle, the worldliest of philosophers and money-makers, should coincide in your counsels. Perhaps to make a home is as difficult as to make a discovery in astronomy or mathematics, or to appreciate a sunrise or sunset.’

‘Do you mean to say?——’

‘I mean to say nothing in especial; except that one’s life, as the world goes, does not fit one to be the hourly companion of a perfectly virginal mind. My dear Melville, she makes me ashamed; my society seems infinitely too coarse for her. I have never seemed to myself such a brute.’ [277]

‘That is, I fear, because you are not very much in love, and so are at liberty to analyse your own sensations: a lover would not feel those scruples,’ reflected Melville; but he merely said aloud: ‘If a woman have not a little of the angelic, she goes near to having something of the diabolic. Women are always in extremes.’

‘Her soul is like a crystal,’ said Othmar. ‘But in it I see my own soul, and it looks unworthy.’

He could not say even to Melville, tried physician of sick souls as he was, that there were moments when the perfect purity of the young girl wearied him, when her innocent tenderness fretted him, and failed to supply all the stimulant to his senses that women less lovely but more versed in amorous arts could have given, when he was, in a word—the most fatal word love ever hears—wearied.

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[278]

CHAPTER XXXI.

'*Othmar cueillant les marguerites aux bois!*' said Nadine Napraxine, with her most unkind smile, when she heard that he remained under the Valois woods until autumn.

She herself was in Russia; forced also to gather daisies in her own manner, which always wearied her. It was necessary to be seen awhile at Tsarkoe Selo, or wherever the Imperial people were; and then to visit for a few months the immense estates of Prince Napraxine. They had gone thither earlier than usual through the suicide of Boris Seliedoff, which had cast many noble northern families into mourning, and had for a moment chilled the feeling of Europe in general towards herself.

'It was so inconsiderate of him!' she said more than once. 'Everyone was sure to put it upon me!'

It seemed to her very unjust.

She had been kind to the boy, and then had rebuked him a little as anybody else would have [279] done. Who could imagine that he would blow his brains out under the palms and aloes, like any *décavé* without a franc?

She was exceedingly angry that the world should venture to blame her. When her Imperial mistress, receiving her first visit, gave some expression to this general sentiment, and presumed to hazard some phrases which suggested a hint of reproof, Nadine Napraxine revolted with all the pride of her temper, and did not scruple to respond to her interlocutor that the Platoff and the Napraxine both were of more ancient lineage and greater traditions in Russia than those now seated on the throne.

To her alone would it have been possible to make such a reply and yet receive condonation of it, as she did. There was in her a force which no one resisted, a magnetism which no one escaped.

She was, however, extremely angered, both by the remarks made to her at Court, and about her in European society, and withdrew herself to the immense solitudes of the province of Kaluga in an irritation which was not without dignity. Men who adored her, of whom there were many, [280] noticed that her self-exile to Zaraïzoff coincided with that of Othmar to Amyôt; but there was no one who would have dared to say so. Geraldine had gone to North America, which had amused her.

'*He* will not shoot himself,' she thought. 'He will shoot a vast number of innocent beasts instead. Seliedoff was the manlier of the two.'

Zaraïzoff was a mighty place set amongst the endless woods and rolling plains of the north-eastern provinces; a huge rambling structure half fortress, half palace, with the village clustering near as in other days when the Tartars might sweep down on it like vultures. The wealth of the Napraxines had made it within almost oriental in its luxury; without, it had much of the barbaric wildness of the country, and it had been here in the first two intolerable years after her marriage that she had learned to love to be drawn by half-wild horses at lightning speed over the snow plains, with the bay of the wolves on the air, and the surety of fatal frost-bite if the furs were incautiously dropped a moment too soon.

At Zaraïzoff, when she established herself there for the summer, she brought usually a Parisian [281] household with her, and inviting a succession of guests, filled with a great movement and gaiety of life the sombre courts, the silent galleries and chambers, the antique walls all covered with vivid paintings like a Byzantine church, the long low salons luxurious as a Persian harem. But this summer it saw her come almost alone. Her children came also from southern Russia, and Platon Napraxine at least was happy.

'Is it possible to be uglier than that; not surely among the Kalmucks!' she thought, looking in the good-tempered little Tartar-like faces of her two small sons.

They were absurdly like their father; but, as they promised to be also, like him, tall and well-built, would probably, as they grew up, find many women, as he had found many, to tell them they were handsome men; but that time was far off, and as yet they were but ugly children. Sachs and Mitz (Alexander and Demetrius) were respectively five and six years old, big, stout, ungainly little boys, with flat blunt features, in which the Tartar blood of the Napraxine was prominently visible. [282] They had a retinue of tutors, governesses, bonnes, and attendants of all kinds, and had been early impressed with the opinion that a Napraxine had no superior on earth save the Gospodar.

'*Ils ont pris la peine de naître!*' quoted their mother with contempt as she beheld their arrogant little pomposities: she could never forgive them that they had done so. It was natural that when she looked in her mirror she could scarcely bring herself to believe that they had been the issue of her own life.

'I suppose I ought to adore them, but I certainly do not,' she said to Melville, who, having been sent on a mission to Petersburg by the Vatican in the vain hope of mitigating by the charm of his manner the hard fate of the Catholic Poles, had paused for a day at Zaraïzoff to obey the summons of its mistress, travelling some extra thousand versts to do so. It was to him that she had made the remark about the daisies.

Melville, though he was a priest whose vows were truly sacred obligations in his eyes, was also keenly alive to those enjoyments of the graces and luxuries of life which his frequent employment [283] in diplomatic missions for the head of his Church made it not only permissible but desirable for him to indulge in at times. His brief visit to Zaraïzoff, and other similar diversions, were agreeable episodes in months of spiritual effort and very serious intellectual work, and he

abandoned himself to the amusement of such occasional rewards with the youthful ardour which sixty years had not tamed in him.

Nadine Napraxine was not only charming to his eyes and taste, as to those of all men, but she interested him with the attraction which a complicated and not-easily-unravelled character possesses for all intellectual people. He had perceived in her those gifts mental and moral which, under suitable circumstance, make the noblest of temperaments, and he also perceived in her an indefinite potentiality for cruelty and for tyranny; the conflict between the two interested him as a psychological study. He could not but censure her intolerance of Napraxine; yet neither could he refuse to sympathise with it. The Prince was the last man on earth to have been able to attain any power over that variable, contemptuous, and subtle temperament and over an intelligence [284] refined by culture to the utmost perfection of taste and hypercriticism of judgment. He adored her indeed, but *c'est le pire défaut* in such cases; and a hippopotamus in his muddy sedges might have done so, with as much hope as he, of exciting anything more than her impatience and contempt.

'I certainly do not,' she repeated, as she lay on a divan after dinner, in a grand hall imitated from the Alhambra, with a copy of the Lion fountain in white marble in the centre, and groves of palms in white marble vases lifting their green banners against the deep glow of the many-coloured fretwork and diapered gold of the walls. 'They are two quite uninteresting children, stupid, obstinate, proud, already convinced that a Prince Napraxine has only to breathe a wish to see it accomplished. At present they are good tempered and are fond of each other, but that will not last long; they will soon feel their claws and use them. They are quite wonderfully ugly;—an ugliness flat, heavy, animal, altogether Tartar. I imagine I could have been fond of a child like any other woman, but then I think with any mother it must be always the child of a man she loves; it [285] must be the symbol of sympathy and the issue of joy——'

She spoke dreamily, almost regretfully, her delicate head lying back amongst the pillows of golden silk, while she sent a little cloud of smoke into the air.

Melville looked at her: he thought that there were persons who were like the Neva river; the Neva does not freeze of itself, but it has so many huge blocks of ice rolled down into it from above that it looks as if it did.

He hesitated a moment; he was too sagacious a man of the world to intrude his own beliefs where they would only have met with unbelief.

'What can I say?' he murmured. 'Only that I suppose maternal love, after all, like all other love, does not come at command; human nature has always been under the illusion that it was a spontaneous and irresistible growth.'

'Human nature has so many illusions,' said Nadine Napraxine. 'But I have never heard that much reason underlies any one of them.'

'But does not our happiness?' said Melville.

She laughed a little.

'Do you believe much in happy people? I think there are passions, vanities, titillations, desires, [286] successes—those one sees in full motion on the earth, like animalculæ in a drop of water; but happiness, I imagine, died with Paul et Virginie, with Chactas and Atala. To be happy, you must be capable of being unhappy. We never reach that point; we are only irritable, or grow *anémique*, according to the variety of our constitutions.'

'I knew a perfectly happy woman once,' said Melville; 'happy all her life, and she lived long.'

'Oh, you mean some nun,' said Nadine Napraxine, with impatience. 'That is not happiness; it is only a form of hysteria or hypogastria.'

'Not a nun,' replied Melville, making himself a cigarette, while the sun played on the red sash of his gown, the gown which Raffael designed for Leo. 'Not a nun. The woman I mean was a servant in a little dirty village near Grenoble; she had been in the service of two cross, miserly people ever since she was fifteen. At the time I knew her first she was forty-seven. The old people had a small shop of general necessaries; she attended to the shop, cooked, and cleaned, and washed, [287] and spun, dug, too, in a vegetable garden, and took care of a donkey, and pigs, and fowls. When she was about thirty, the old man first, and then the old woman, became incapable, from paralysis. Rose—her name was Rose—worked on harder than ever. She had many offers of better service, even offers of marriage, for she was a famous housewife, but she refused them; she would not leave the old people. They were poor; they had never been good or grateful to her; they had even beaten her when she was a girl; but she would never leave them. She had been a foundling, and theirs had been the only form of human ties that she had ever known. She was perfectly happy all the day long, and she even found time to do many a good turn for neighbours worse off than herself. She had never had more than twenty francs a year in money, but then "you see, I live well, I want nothing," she said to me once. And such living! Black cabbage and black bread! Well, she was perfectly happy, as I say. You do not seem to believe it?'

'Oh, yes; so is a snail,' said the Princess Nadine. 'Besides, you know, if she had been a pretty [288] woman——'

Melville felt almost angry.

'You are very cruel. Why will you divorce beauty and virtue?'

'I do not divorce them, nature usually does,' she answered, amused. 'Perhaps they divorce

themselves. Well, what became of this paragon?'

'She was no paragon,' said Melville, annoyed. ' She was a hard-working, good, honest woman, perfectly content with a horrible lot, and loyal unto death to two tyrannical old brutes who never thanked her. When they died they left all the little they had to a nephew in the Jura, who had taken no notice of them all their days—a rich tradesman. Poor Rose, at fifty-three years old, was sent adrift on the world. She cried her heart out to have to leave the house, and the ass, and the chickens. I got her the grant from the Prix Montyon, and she was set up in a tiny shop of her own in her own village, but she did not live long. "*Quand on a été heureuse, après—c'est long*," she said in her dying hour. She was afraid to seem ungrateful, but "*sans mes vieux*," as she said, apologetically, her life was done. It seems a terrible life to us, but I can solemnly declare that it [289] was one of the few happy ones of which I have ever been witness. There is a sustaining, vivifying force in duty, like the heat of the sun, for those who accept it.'

'For those who accept it, no doubt,' said Nadine Napraxine, drily; 'but then, you see, my dear and reverend Melville, it requires some organ in one's brain—superstition, I think, or credulity—before one can do that. Every one is not blessed with that organ. Pray believe,' she resumed, with her softer smile, perceiving a vexed shadow on his face, 'I am not insensible to the quiet unconscious heroism of those lowly lives of devotion. They are always touching. Those revelations which the *discours* of the Prix Montyon give from time to time always make one envious of so much belief, of so much endurance, of so much unobtrusive and unselfish goodness. But, though I dare say you will be very angry, I cannot help reminding you that what makes the sparrow very happy would have no sort of effect on the swallow, except that he would feel restless and uncomfortable; and also that—pray forgive me, for you are a priest—to be contented with doing one's duty one must believe in duty as a Divine ordinance. To do that one must have—well, just [290] that bump of credulity of which I spoke—of easy, unquestioning, unintelligent, credulity. Now, that it is a happy quality I am certain, but is it,—is it, an intellectual one?'

She spoke very sweetly, but with a demure smile, which made Melville feel that there was a great deal more which she did not say out of respect for his sacred calling and his position as her guest.

'Do not repeat over to me all the stock arguments,' she said quickly, as he opened his lips; 'I have heard them all ten thousand times. I have the greatest possible regard for your doctrines, which have satisfied Chateaubriand, Lacordaire, Montalembert, Manning, Newman, and yourself, but I have always failed to understand how they did satisfy any of you. But we will not discuss theology. Your poor Rose proves, if she prove anything, that Heaven is not in a hurry to reward its servitors. Perhaps, after all, she might have been wiser if she had married some Jeannot, all over flour or coal dust, and had half a dozen children and fifty grand children.'

'There is common brute enjoyment all over the earth,' said Melville, almost losing his temper. 'It [291] must be well that it should be leavened here and there with lives of sublime self-sacrifice; one heroic or unselfish act raises the whole of human nature with it.'

Nadine Napraxine took a cigarette.

'There are ten thousand such acts in Russia every year, but they do not produce much effect. Juggernauth rolls on,——'

Melville looked at her quickly.

'You have a certain sympathy with the people, though you deride my poor Rose.'

'I do not deride her; I admire her within certain limits. Only, I ascribe her actions more to ignorance and to superstition, whereas you ascribe them entirely to a clear-eyed devotion. Yes; I could have been a revolutionist, I think, only all the traditions of the Platoff and the Napraxine forbid it; and then, as I said to you once before, I do not like *Pallida Mors* carried about in a hat-box or a sardine-case. It is grotesque. Without jesting,' she continued, 'I think if I saw my way to do something truly great or of lasting benefit, I should be ready to sacrifice my life to it; but there is nothing. If a Princess Napraxine joined the Nihilists, she would only cause an intolerable [292] scandal and set an example which would be very injurious to the country at large. Some day, Russia will be in revolt from one end to another, but the day is not yet, and I doubt much that any good will be done when it comes. The evil lies too deep, in the drunkenness, in the lying, in the bestiality——'

She saw a look of surprise on Melville's face, and continued quickly:

'Do you suppose I never think? I believe I have read every socialistic writer from Rousseau to Bakounine. They do not convince me of anything except of the utter improbability that any real liberty will ever be obtainable from any congregation of men. Humanity is tyrannical and slavish at once; its governments are created in its own likeness, it makes little difference what they are called, they are human offspring, so they are narrow and arrogant.'

'Poor humanity!' said Melville. 'It is only we priests who can lend it wings.'

'Because you say to it, like Schiller, "Cheat yourself, and dream,"' she replied. 'But even there [293] how narrow still! You say to each unit, "Save yourself!"'

'Well,' said the Englishman with good temper, 'if every one sweep out his own little chamber, the whole city will be clean.'

'The city will be for ever unclean. You know that as well as I do. Only, all Churchmen can hide their eyes ostrich-like in the sand of sonorous phrases. Your Christianity has been toiling for eighteen centuries, and, one may say, has accomplished nothing. It mouths a great deal, but

practical result it has scarcely any. Its difficulty has always been that, being illogical in its essence and traditions, it must be restrained to words. Reduced to practice, all the modern world would fade away, riches would disappear, effort would be impossible, and the whole machinery of civilisation come to a standstill and entire disuse. You are as aware of that as I am, only you do not like to say so.'

She rose, amused at his discomfiture, and lighted another cigarette. She smoked as gracefully as a bird pecks at the dew in a rose.

'She is the only woman who makes me irritable,' the courtly Gervase Melville had once said of her, and he might have said also, 'the only woman who reduces me to silence.' [294]

'Allow, Princess,' he said irritably now, ' that whether we accredit Christianity with it or not, the life of poor Rose in her wooden shoes was much more useful than yours is in those pearl-embroidered *mules*.'

'Ah,' she answered with a smile. 'You are indeed worsted in your logic if you must descend to personalities! Certainly I grant that; my life is of a most absolute inutility. It is, perhaps, now and then useful to my tailors, because I give them ideas they would not have without me. But to no one else. *À qui la faute?* I arrived in this world without any option. As Mr. Gladstone said when he was an Eton boy, responsibilities which are thrust upon us do not exact our obedience. It is the only sentiment of Mr. Gladstone with which I have ever been able to agree. Life is clearly thrust upon us. We none of us seek it, that is certain. If we are able to disport ourselves in it, like butterflies in a south wind, it says much in praise of the lightness of our hearts.'

'Or of the levity of our consciences,' said Melville, a little gloomily.

'Conscience is only the unconscious cerebral action of transmitted influence, is it? Oh, I have read the Scientists as well as the Socialists. They are not much more convincing, if one goes to them with an unprejudiced mind——' [295]

'Does your conscience never tell you that you have done any harm, Princess?'

'Oh, very often—a great deal,' she answered candidly. 'But it does not tell me that I ought not to have done it. I suppose my chain of transmitted influences is not as strong as it should be. Seriously,' she continued, 'I do not think hereditary influences are nearly sufficiently allowed for at any time. Think what my people were for ages and ages; the most masterful of autocratic lords who had no single law save their own pleasure, and who, when they helped slay a Tzar, were washing out some blood-feud of their family; pleasure, vice, bloodshed, courage no doubt, rough justice perhaps, were all their lives knew; they lived in the saddle or beside the drinking-horn; they rode like madmen; they had huge castles set in almost eternal snows; they were the judge and the executioner of every wrong-doer in their family or their province; it was not until Letters [296] came in with the great Catherine that the least touch of civilisation softened them, and even after Catherine they were amongst the slayers of Paul; for though they could read Bossuet and Marmontel, their culture was but the merest varnish still. Now, I come from these men and women, for the women were not better than the men. Do you suppose their leaven is not in me? Of course it is, though I am—perhaps as civilised as most people.'

Melville looked at her with a smile.

'Yes, certainly civilisation has in you, Princess, reached its most exquisite and most supreme development; the hothouse can do no more. You are its most perfect flower. Are we really to credit that you have beneath all that the ferocity and the despotism of a thousand centuries of barbaric Boyars?'

'I have no doubt something of it,' said Nadine Napraxine, whilst the dark velvet of her eyes grew sombre and her delicate hand clenched on an imaginary knout. 'I could use *that* sometimes,' she said with significance: Melville understood what she meant.

'You can hurt more than with the knout, Princess,' he answered.

Nadine Napraxine smiled. The suggestion pleased her. [297]

Then a certain regretfulness came upon her face.

'I think I might have been tender-hearted,' she said involuntarily and inconsistently, with a pathos of which she was unconscious. 'I do not know—perhaps not—I am not compassionate.'

She forgot that Melville was seated on a divan near her in the great golden room of Moorish work, whose arches opened on to the marble court of the Lion. She thought of her spoilt, artificial, frivolous childhood, spent in great drawing-rooms listening to political rivalries and calumnious stories and wit that was always polished but not always decent; she thought how her keen eyes had unravelled all the threads of intrigue about her, and how her heart had scorned the duplicity of her mother; when she had been only eight years old, she had known by intuition her mother's secrets and had shut them all up in her little silent soul with vague ideas of honour and dishonour, and never had said anything to her father—never, never—not even when he lay on his deathbed.

And then they had married her to Platon Napraxine as *si bon garçon*. 'Oh, *si bon garçon*, no doubt!' she had thought contemptuously then as she thought now—only he had outraged her, revolted her, disgusted her. Her marriage night still remained to her a memory of ineffaceable loathing. [298]

She looked up to see the intelligent eyes of Melville fixed on her in some perplexity.

She laughed and walked out on to the marble pavement of the great court, above which shone the blue of a northern sky; beyond its colonnades were immense gardens, and beyond those stretched the plains like a green sea covered with forests of birch and willow.

'I think I should have liked to be your Rose,' she said, as she did so. 'After all, she must have been content with herself when she died. A philosopher can be no more.'

'A philosopher can rarely be as much,' said Melville. 'He may be resigned, but resignation and content are as different as a cold hand and a warm one. My poor Rose was certainly content whilst she lived, but not when she died, for she thought she had not done nearly enough in return [299] for all the blessings which she had received throughout her life.'

'Now you cannot get that kind of absurdly grateful feeling without pure ignorance,' said Nadine Napraxine, a little triumphantly. 'It would be impossible for an educated person to think that misery was comfort; so you see, after all, ignorance is at the bottom of all virtue. Now in your heart of hearts, you cannot deny that, because, though you are a priest, you are beyond anything a man of the world?'

Melville did not dislike to be called a man of the world, for he was one, and liked to prove, or think he proved, that worldly wisdom was not incompatible with the spiritual life.

At that moment Napraxine crossed the court. It was the first of the brief hours between sunset and sunrise; there was a full moon in the midsummer skies; he was smoking a cheroot, and talking with some young men, neighbouring gentlemen, who had dined there; he looked big and coarse, and his face was red; his wife gazed at him with an intolerant dislike; he could have a grand manner when he chose, but in the country he 'let himself go;' he did not remember that he [300] was in the presence of the most inexorable of his critics, of the most implacable of his enemies, of the one person in the whole world whom it would have been most desirable, and was most impossible, for him to propitiate.

'Sachs turned the knife round and round in the wolf's throat; he did, on my honour, while it was alive; we blooded him at five years old, and the child never winked. When the blood splashed him he shouted!' he was saying audibly, with much pride, to one of his guests, as he lounged across the marble court. Sachs was his eldest son. He was relating a hunting exploit, crowned by the presence of his heir.

Nadine glanced at Melville with an expression of sovereign contempt.

'Butchers before they can spell!' she said, with ineffable distaste.

'Shall I venture to say anything?' he murmured.

'It would be of no use. Slaughter is the country gentleman's god. Prince Napraxine is just now wholly *fourré* in his character of a country gentleman. It is perhaps as useful as that of a Monte [301] Carlo gamester. Only here the beasts suffer—there, the fools. I prefer that the fools should do so.'

The young men gathered about her; Napraxine approached Melville.

'How does the Othmar marriage succeed?' he asked. 'I suppose you have seen them?'

'I have been once to Amyôt,' returned Melville. 'You know Amyôt? A magnificent place. They appeared very happy. She seems to have grown years in a month or two.'

'That of course,' said Napraxine, with his loud laugh. 'She is very handsome. Why on earth do they stay on in the provinces?'

'She is fond of Amyôt,' replied Melville. 'Probably he thinks that as she is so young, there is time and to spare for the world.'

'Perhaps Nadine will believe now that it is a love marriage?' insisted her husband, turning towards her.

'Did I ever say it was not?' she replied, with a little yawn.

'I do not see, if it were not, why it should possibly have taken place,' said Melville. 'Othmar is lord of himself.'

'With a slave for his master?' she murmured, too low to be heard by the not quick ears of her [302] husband.

Melville heard, and the doubt crossed him whether Othmar might not have been the lover of the Princess Napraxine, and the marriage arranged by her, as great ladies often arrange such matters to disarm suspicion; for Melville, despite the acumen on which he prided himself, did not by any means wholly understand the very complicated character of his hostess, in which a supreme courage was to the full as strong as were its disdain and its indifference.

She shook off the importunities of the young nobles, who seemed rustic and tiresome enough to a woman to whom the wittiest society of Europe had seemed dull and too tame, and strolled by herself through the half wild gardens, which reached and touched the virgin forests of the East. Her Kossack Hetman, who never lost her from sight when she was out of doors, paced at a respectful distance behind her, but he was no more to her than a big dog would be to others. The high seeding grass which grew in the unused paths screened him from sight.

As she looked back, the moonlit mass of the vast house gathered a dignity and austerity not its [303] own by daylight, but to her it only resembled a prison. She hated it: she would have liked to raze it to the ground and make an end of it. There were so many prisons in Russia!

She laughed a little to herself, not mirthfully, as she strolled through the intense light of the

Northern night, her Kossack following like her shadow. A poor drudge like that servant woman in Jura had been content with her life, whilst she, the Princess Napraxine, in all the perfection of youth, beauty, and great rank, was often so dissatisfied with it that she could have drugged herself out of it with morphine from sheer ennui!

What was the use of the highest culture, if that was all it brought you? A whimsical fancy crossed her that she wished her Kossack would try and assassinate her; it would be something new, it might make her life seem worth the having, if somebody would try and take it away. She was only three-and-twenty years old, and her future seemed so immensely long that she felt tired at the very prospect of it, as one feels tired at the sight of a long dull road which one is bound to follow. [304]

The eternal monotony of the great world would be for ever about her. She had too great rank, too great riches, for ambition to present any prizes to her. To attempt to thrust Platon Napraxine into high offices of the State would have been as absurd as to make a bear out of Finland a magistrate or a general. He was a very great noble, but he would never have wit enough even to play a decent hand at whist, much less to conduct a negotiation or sway a Council.

'One might have had ambition for Othmar,' she thought involuntarily, as his image rose unsummoned from the sea of silvery shadows around her; 'he had none for himself, but he might have been spurred, stimulated, seduced, by a woman he had loved. There would have been many things possible to him; the financier is the king, the Merlin, of the modern world, and might become its Arthur also.'

She thought with impatience of that summer night, as it was shining on the towers and woods of Amyôt. She felt as if something of her own had been stolen from her, some allegiance due to her [305] unlawfully transferred. He should have had patience, he should have waited on her will, he should have accepted her rebuffs, he should have followed her steps through life as the Kossack was following them through the dewy grass.

Poor stupid Geraldine would have been grateful to do so much, or Seliedoff, or so many others. Othmar alone had dared to say to her, 'I will be nothing or all.'

Therefore his memory abided with her and moved her, and had power over her, and at times an irritable gnawing sense of something which might have been stole upon her. What could that child give him at Amyôt?—white limbs, clear eyes, a rose-bloom of blushes; but besides? what sympathy, comprehension, inspiration? what of the higher delights of the passions?

The thought of him irritated her. There was a defiance, an insolence, in his assumption of being able to command his destiny in independence of herself, which offended her; it was unlike what others did. She was aware that it was done out of bravado, or so she believed; but it was not thus that the fates on which she had deigned to lay her finger had usually been closed. Something [306] even of contempt for him at seeking such a refuge from herself mingled with her irritation. It seemed to her weak and commonplace.

'Madame,' said the voice of Melville through the shadows, 'is it quite safe to ramble so late, despite the trusty Kossack and his lance?'

She turned; her head enwrapped in gossamer, till he saw nothing but the cloud of lace and the two dusky, jewel-like eyes.

'I was just wishing, almost wishing,' she answered, 'that the trusty Kossack were of the new doctrines, and would take advantage of the opportunity to make away with his *barina*. I am not sure that I would have called out; it would have saved one a great deal of sameness. When my chocolate comes to my bedside I always think of Pierre Loti's childish protest, "Toujours se lever, toujours se coucher, et toujours manger de la soupe qui n'est pas bonne!" Our soup is good, perhaps. It is rather the appetite which is lacking.'

'Your generation is born tired,' said Melville. ' Mine was happier; it believed in the possibility of [307] enjoyment—an illusion, no doubt, but one which cheers life considerably. Princess, I wish you would pardon me an indiscretion; you are always so merciful to me, you make me over-bold; but I have always so much wanted to know whether a story that I heard, of a winter's journey of yours across Russia, was true. It was in the newspapers, but one never knows what is true there, and I was in India at the time.'

She smiled. 'Oh! I know what you mean. Yes, it was true enough. That was nothing; nothing at all. I had all kinds of people to help me. There was no difficulty of any sort. It was amusing——'

'It was a very heroic thing to do,' said Melville gravely.

'Not at all,' she interrupted quickly. 'There was no heroism about it. The Tzar was always very kind to me. I had every assistance, every comfort on my journey. You, imaginative being, have a picture instantly in your mind of me as enduring all the dangers of poor Elizabeth in the French classic; on the contrary, I slept nearly all the way, and read a novel the rest.'

'All the same,' said Melville, 'no one but yourself will deny that it was a very noble thing to travel [308] in November, the most hideous part of the year, through mud and snow, right across Russia, to have a few facts reach the Emperor in their true aspect, and then post to Tobolsk with his pardon, that a dying mother might know her son was free before she died——'

Nadine Napraxine shrugged her shoulders slightly, with a gesture of indifference.

'It amused me. I had a fancy to see Siberia in winter. The pity was that Fedor Alexowitch Boganof was an ugly and uninteresting fellow—with plenty of brains, indeed, which brought his ruin, but quite ugly, rather misshapen, and blessed with five children. If the hero of my journey had only

been a fine officer of cuirassiers, or a romantic-looking revolutionist, the story would have been delightful, but poor Boganof no one could turn into a *jeune premier*; not even the gossips of Petersburg. He was only a clever writer, with a mother and a wife who idolised him. The truth is, I had read his novel and liked it; that is why, when his people came to me, I did what I could. [309] Anybody who knew the Tzar as well as I could have done as much. As for going to Siberia—well, I went myself because I have a profound distrust of Russian officials. Even an Imperial pardon has a knack of arriving too late when it is desirable that it should do so. It was certainly a disagreeable season of the year, but behind strong horses one does not mind that. Very soon Siberia will have lost its terrors and its romance; there will be a railway across the Urals, and all chance of the little excitements attendant on such a journey as mine will be over. When the Governor saw me actually in Tobolsk, he could not believe his eyes. If his beard had not been dyed, it would have turned white with the extremity of his amazement. I think he could have understood my taking the trouble if it had been for a Tchin; but for a mere scribbler of books, a mere teller of stories! I told him that Homer, and Ariosto, and Goethe, and ever so many others had been only tellers of stories too, but that produced no impression on him. He was compelled to let Boganof go, because the Tzar ordered him, but he could not see any valid reason why Boganof should not be left to rot away, brain downwards, under the ice.' [310]

She laughed a little at the recollection of it all; it had been called an eccentric hair-brained thing at the time by all her world, but she had taken Boganof back with her in triumph, and had not left him until she had seen him seated by the stove of his own humble house in Odessa.

It had been one of the best moments of her life—yes, certainly—but it did not seem to her that she had done anything remarkable. It had been so absurd to send a man to dwell amidst eternal snows and semi-eternal darkness because he had written a clever novel in which the wiseacres of the third section had seen fit to discover revolutionary doctrines, that when the wife and mother of Boganof, knowing her influence at Court, and having chance of access to her through her steward, threw themselves at her feet one day, and besought her compassion and assistance, she had been surprised into promising her aid, from that generosity and sympathy with courage which always lived beneath the artificiality and indifference of her habits and temper. No doubt they had succeeded because they had come upon her in a *bon moment*; no doubt they might have [311] found her in moods in which they might as well have appealed to the Japanese bronzes in her vestibule; but, having been touched and surprised into a promise, she had kept it through much difficulty and with an energy which bore down all opposition.

'She looks as frail as a reed, but she has the force of a lance,' the autocrat to whom she appealed, and who was at the onset utterly opposed to her petition, had thought as he had answered her coldly that Boganof was a dangerous writer.

'So were all the Encyclopædists; but the great Catherine was not afraid of them; will you, the Father of your people, refuse to one of those the protection which she was proud to grant to Frenchmen?' she had said to the Emperor, with many another persuasive and audacious argument, to which he had listened with a smile because the lovely mouth of the Princess Napraxine had spoken them.

'It was a very noble thing to do,' repeated Melville.

'Oh, no,' she also repeated; 'it amused me. It frightened everybody else. The Tzar was at Livadia [312] unusually late; there was first to go to him from here; when I reached Livadia, he was everything that was kind to me personally, but I found him terribly angered against the poor novelist, and all his courtiers were of course ready to swear that Boganof was Satan; poor innocent Boganof, with his tender heart always aching over the sorrows of the poor, and the mysteries of animal suffering! I told the Emperor that Boganof was, on the contrary, a type of all that was best in the Russian people; of that obedience, of that faith, of that fortitude, which the Russian possesses in a stronger degree than any other of the races of man. Where will you find as you find in Russia the heroic silence under torture, the unwavering adherence to a lost cause, the power of dying mute for sake of an idea, the uncomplaining surrender of youth, of beauty, of all enjoyment, often of rank and riches, to a mere impersonal duty? They are all sacrificed to dreams, it is true; but they are heroic dreams which have a greatness that looks fine in them, beside the vulgar greeds, and the vulgar content of ordinary life. I said something to that effect to the Tzar. "You fill your [313] mines and prisons, sir, with these people," I said to him. "Greece would have raised altars to them. They are the brothers of Harmodius; they are the sisters of Læna." I suppose it is wonderful that he did not send me to the prisons; I dare say, if I had been an ugly woman he would have done; he was, on the contrary, very indulgent, and, though he was hard to move at first, he ended with the utmost leniency.

'I was really quite in earnest at the time,' she continued, now, with a little wondering astonishment at such remembrances of herself. ' I urged on the Tzar the truth that, when the intellect of a nation is suppressed and persecuted, the nation "dies from the top," like Swift. I think I convinced him for the moment, but then there were so many other people always at his ear to persuade him that universal convulsion was only to be avoided by corking all the inkbottles, and putting all the writers and readers down the mines. Prince Napraxine, by the way, was in a terrible state when he heard of it all. He was away in Paris at the time, and you may imagine that I did not telegraph to ask his consent. Indeed, he first learnt what I had done from [314] the Russian correspondent of *Figaro*, and took the whole story for one of *Figaro's* impudent fictions. He went to the bureau in a towering rage, and, I think, broke a Malacca cane over a sub-editor. Then he telegraphed to me, and found it was all true enough; he might more wisely have telegraphed first, for the sub-editor brought an action for assault against him, and he had a vast deal of money to pay. He abhors the very name of Boganof. Last New Year's day I had all

Boganof's novels in the Russian text, bound in vellum, as a present from him; I thought he would have had an apoplectic fit.'

Her pretty, chill laughter completed the sentence.

'My honesty, however, compels me to confess,' she continued, 'that for an unheroic *boulevardier* and a strongly conservative *tchin* like my husband, the position was a trying one. He abhors literature, liberal doctrines, and newspaper publicity; and the story of my journey for and with Boganof met him in every journal, in every club, in every city of Europe. The publicity annoyed me myself very much. I think the way in which journalists seize on everything and exaggerate it [315] to their own purposes will, in time, prevent any action, a little out of the common, ever taking place at all. People will shut themselves up in their own shells like oysters. I should have left Boganof to the governor of Tobolsk, who was so anxious to keep him, if I had ever foreseen the annoyance which the Press was destined to cause me about him. When I met the Tzar afterwards he said, "Well, Princess, are you still convinced now that the ink-bottle contains the most harmless and holy of fluids?" and I answered him that I granted it might contain a good deal of gas and a good deal of gall, yet still I thought it wiser not to cork it.'

'Princess,' said Melville, with a little hesitation, 'one cannot but regret that a person capable of such fine sympathy and such noble effort as yourself should pass nearly the whole of her time in sedulously endeavouring to persuade the world that she has no heart and herself that she has no soul. Why do you do it?'

She gave a little contemptuous gesture. 'I do not believe I have either,' she said. ' When I was a [316] tiny child, my father said to me, "Douchka, you will have no dower, but you will have plenty of wit, two big eyes, and a white skin." The possession of these three things has always been the only fact I have ever been sure of, really! Do not begin to talk theologically; you are delightful as a man of the world, but as a priest you would bore me infinitely. One thinks out all that sort of thing for oneself: ostensibly, I am of the Greek Church; actually, I am of Victor Hugo's creed, which has never been able to find a key to the mystery of the universe, "*Quelle loi a donné la bête effarée à l'homme cruel?*" The horse strains and shivers under the whip, the brutal drunkard kicks him in his empty stomach: God looks on, if He exist at all, in entire indifference throughout tens of thousands of ages. You say the patient animal has no soul, and that the sodden drunkard has one. I do not admire your religion, which enables you placidly to accept such an absurdity, and such an injustice, as a Divine creation. Do not say that poets do no good; they do more than priests, my dear friend. I had been reading that poem of Hugo's, the *Melancholia*, at the moment [317] when Boganof's wife and mother brought their petition to me. It had made me in a mood for pity. You know that is the utmost a woman ever has of any goodness—a mere mood. It is why we are so dangerous in revolutions: we slay one minute, and weep the next, and dance the next, and are sincere enough in it all. If they had come to me when I had been annoyed about anything, or when I had had a toilette I disliked, or a visit that had wearied me, I should have said "No," and left Boganof in Siberia. It was the merest chance, the merest whim—all due to the *Melancholia*.'

'Whim, or will, I am sure Boganof was grateful?' asked Melville.

Her voice softened: 'Oh yes, poor soul! But he died six months afterwards of tubercular consumption, brought on by exposure and bad food in Siberia. You see, imperial pardons may arrive too late, even if one carry them oneself!'

'But he died at home,' said Melville; 'think how much that is!'

'For the sentimentalists,' she added, with her cruel little smile, but her eyes were dim as she [318] glanced upward at the stars in the north.

'Poor Boganof!' she said, after a pause, with a vibration of unresisted emotion in her voice. 'There is another problem to set beside your Rose. The world is full of them. Your Christianity does not explain them. He was the son of a country proprietor, a poor one, but he had a little estate, enough for his wants. He was a man of most simple tastes and innocent desires: he might have lived, as Tourguenieff might have lived, happy all his humble days on his own lands; but he had genius, or something near it. He believed in his country and in mankind; he had passionate hopes and passionate faiths; he knew he would lose all for saying the truth as he saw it, but he could not help it; the truth in him was stronger than he, he could not restrain the fire that was in him—a holy fire, pure of all personal greed. Well, he has died for being so simple, being so loyal, being so impersonal and so unselfish. If he had been an egotist, a time-server, a sycophant, he would have lived in peace and riches. Your Christianity has no explanation of that! Musset's "*être immobile qui regarde mourir*" is all we see behind the eternal spectacle of useless suffering and *[319]* unavailing loss.'

She turned and drew her laces closer about her head, and passed quickly through the shadows to the house.

Melville in answer sighed.

That night, when Melville stood at his windows looking over the immense flat landscape, green with waving corn and rolling grass lands and low birch woods which stretched before him silvered by the effulgence of a broad white moon, he thought of Nadine Napraxine curiously, wistfully, wonderingly, as a man who plays chess well puzzles over some chess problem that is too intricate for him. The explanation we give of ourselves is rarely accepted by others, and he did not accept hers of herself; that she was the creature of the impression of the moment. It seemed to him rather that hers was a nature with noble and heroic impulses crusted over by the habits of the world and veiled by the assumption rather than the actuality of egotism. She, too,

could have been a sister of Læna, he thought.

What waste was here of a fine nature, sedulously forcing itself and others to believe that it was worthless, wearied by the pleasures which yet made its only kingdom, cynical, lonely, incredulous, whilst at the height of youth and of all possession! [320]

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[321]

CHAPTER XXXII.

Othmar, faithful to his word, remained at the château of Amyôt throughout the spring and summer months, indifferent to the laughter of the world, if it did laugh. He divined very accurately that one person at least laughed and made many a satiric sketch to her friends of himself *filant le parfait amour*, and gathering wood violets, wood anemones, wood strawberries, beneath the shadows of his Valois trees in glades which had been old when the original of Jean Goujon's Diane Chasseresse had been young.

Amyôt seemed to him to suit the youth, the grace, and the gravity of Yseulte better than any babble of the great world;—Amyôt, which was like a stately illuminated chronicle of kingly and knightly history, which was as silent as the grave of a king in a crypt, and which was shut out from the fret of mankind by the screen of its Merovingian forests.

He was scarcely conscious that he lingered in this seclusion from an unacknowledged [322] unwillingness to go where he would see and hear of another woman; he persuaded himself that he chose to stay on in the provinces partially because the tumult of the world was always vulgar, noisy, and offensive to him, chiefly because nowhere else in the world so surely as in one of his own country houses could he be certain not to meet the woman who had wounded him mortally, yet whom he loved far more than he hated her.

'It is absolutely necessary that you should be seen in Paris, and that you should receive there; it is absolutely necessary that you should sustain your position in the world,' said Friederich Othmar, with much emphasis as he sat at noon one day on the great terrace of Amyôt. Othmar laughed a little, and shrugged his shoulders.

'Amyôt is magnificently kept up—that I admit,' continued the elder man. 'It is a place that it is well to have, to spend six weeks of the autumn in, to entertain princes at; it is quite royal, and was one of the best purchases that my father ever made. But to bury yourself here!—when the [323] Kaiser comes to Paris, to whom you owe by tradition every courtesy——'

'The Othmars were never received at the Court of Vienna.'

The Baron made an impatient gesture.

'We are Parisians, but we are Croats before all. Sometimes you are pleased to insist very strongly that we are Croats, and nothing else. If we are so, the Emperor is our sovereign.'

'It is disputed in Croatia, which has never been too loyal!'

'Croatia be——,' said Friederich Othmar, with difficulty restraining the oath because Yseulte was seated within hearing; and he returned to his old arguments, which were all brought to bear upon the fact that at the approach of winter Othmar owed it as a duty to society and to himself to throw open the doors of that vast hotel on the Boulevard S. Germain, which had always seemed to him the most hateful embodiment of the wealth, the unscrupulousness, and the past history of his race.

The hotel had been purchased from the Duc de Coigny during the White Terror by Marc Othmar [324] for a nominal price; and under the reign of Louis Philippe, Stefan Othmar, deeming it neither grand nor luxurious enough, had had it changed and redecorated in the worst taste of the epoch, and, in the early days of the Second Empire, had farther enlarged and overloaded it, until to his son it was as a very nightmare of gilding, marble, and allegorical painting, a Cretan labyrinth of enormous and uninhabitable chambers, fit for such motley crowds as cram the Elysée in the days of Grevy.

It was one of the show-houses of Paris, and had, indeed, many real treasures of art amidst its overloaded luxury, but Othmar hated it in its entirety, from its *porte-cochère*, where the arms which the heralds had found for Marc Othmar had replaced the shield and crown of the Ducs de Coigny, to the immense library, which did not contain a single volume that he cared to open; an 'upholsterer's library,' with all its books, from Tacitus to Henri Martin, clad in the same livery of vellum and tooled gold.

'Absolutely necessary to sustain your position in the world!' repeated Othmar when his uncle had left him. 'That is always the incantation with which the fetish of the world obtains its sacrifices. [325] Translated into common language, he means that as I have a great deal of money, other people expect me to spend much of it upon them. I do not see the obligation, at least not socially.'

'Do you desire the life of Paris?' he added abruptly to Yseulte, who hesitated, coloured slightly, and said with timidity:

'I should prefer S. Pharamond.'

'S. Pharamond is yours,' said Othmar with some embarrassment, knowing why every rood of that sunny and flowering shore seemed to him nauseous with sickening memories. 'S. Pharamond is yours, my dear; but I scarcely think that we can pass this winter there. There are tedious duties from which we cannot escape; to entertain in Paris is one of them.'

An older woman would have perceived that he contradicted himself, but Yseulte was blinded to such anomalies by her adoration of him; an adoration as intense as it was meek, dumb, and most humble.

'I am so perfectly happy here,' she answered, with hesitation; 'but——'

She was not actuated by the sentiment which he attributed to her hesitation; she infinitely [326]

preferred the country to the city, as all meditative and poetic tempers do, and the little she had seen of the great world at Millo made her dread her entry into it in Paris. What she wished, but lacked the courage to say, was, that she perceived that the country did not satisfy him himself. She was not so dull of comprehension that she did not see the melancholy of her husband, the listless indifference, the unspoken ennui, which spoiled his years to him, and left him without energy or interest in life. She could discern the wound she knew not how to cure, and Friederich Othmar in his conversations with her had repeatedly assured her that the *vie de province* stifled the intelligence of a man as moss grows over the trunk of a tree.

'I am so happy here,' she answered now with hesitation, 'but still——'

'But still you are a daughter of Eve,' he added with indulgence. 'My poor child, it is quite natural, you are so young; all young girls long for the life of the world. It robs them of their lilies and roses, it draws bistre shadows under their eyes, it makes them old before they are twenty, but [327] still they kiss the feet of their Moloch! I do not think, though, that you will ever be hurt by the world yourself. You are too serious, and have at once too much humility and too much pride: they are safe warders at the door of the soul; you will not easily become a *mondaine*.'

'What is the difference?'

'In the world, when she belongs to it, a woman crushes her soul as she crushes her waist; she is a butterfly, with the sting of an asp; she wastes her brain in the council-chambers of her tailors, and her time in a kaleidoscope of amusements that do not even amuse her; she would easily make the most hideous thing beautiful if she put it on once, and the most flagrant vice the fashion if she adopted it for a week; she has given the highest culture possible to her body and to her brain, only to spend her years in an ennui and an irritation beside which the life of the South Sea islanders would seem utility and wisdom; she has the clearest vision, the finest intelligence, the shrewdest wit, only to set her ambition on having a whole audience of a theatre forget the [328] stage because she has entered her box, or the entire journals of a city chronicle the suicide of some madman who has taken his life because she crossed out his name on her tablets before a cotillon——'

He paused abruptly, becoming suddenly conscious that he was speaking in no general terms, and had only before his thoughts the vision of one woman.

'No, my dear,' he said kindly, passing his hand over the shining tresses of Yseulte; 'I am not afraid that you will become a coquette or a lover of folly; you will not learn the slang of the hour, or yellow your white skin with *maquillage*; you will always be the young patrician of the time of the Lady of Beaujeu. You shall go to Paris if you wish, and do just as you like there; you must not blame me if it do not suit you better than it suits those roses which your foster-mother sends up in moss from her garden.'

'Poor child!' he thought, with a pang of conscience. 'She has a right to enjoy any amusement she can. She is young; the world will be a play-place to her; if she can make for herself friends, interests, pastimes, I should be the last to prevent her. Sooner or later she will find out that she [329] is so little to me. She is content now because she takes kindness for love, and because, in her innocence, she cannot conceive how one's senses may be roused while one's heart may lie dumb and cold as a stone. But when she is older she will perceive all that, and then the more friends she has found, and the less she leans on me, the less unhappy she will be. I will give her everything that she can wish for; all women grow contented and absorbed in the world.'

So he argued with himself, but he knew all the while that he was to blame in desiring that sort of compensation and consolation for her; and that delicacy of taste, which has over some temperaments a stronger control than conscience, made him feel that there was a kind of vulgarity in thus persuading himself that material gifts and material triumphs would atone to her for the indifference of his feelings and the absence of his sympathy.

It was something better than mere material possessions and indulgences which he had meant to give the child whose lonely fate had touched him to so much pity under the palm trees of S. [330] Pharamond and the gilded roofs of Millo. But he dismissed the rebuke of this memory with impatience. The world had so repeatedly told him that his gold was capable of purchasing heaven and earth, that, though he found it of no avail for himself, he fell instinctively into the error of imagining that with it at least he could heal all wounds not his own. She should have all her fancy could desire. His experience of women told him that she would be very unlike them if, in all the pleasure of acquisition, emulation, and possession, she did not find at least a fair simulacrum of happiness. She would be one out of a million—but if she were that one? Then her soul might starve in the midst of all her luxuries and pageants, like a bird in a golden cage that dies for want of the drop of water which the common brown sparrow, flying over the ploughed brown field, can find at will. But he did not think of that.

He knew that it was unworthy to speculate upon the power of the lower life to absorb into itself a soul fitted by its affinities to discover and enjoy the higher. He shrank from his own speculations as to the possibility of the world replacing himself in her affections. He had honestly intended, [331] when he had taken her existence into his charge, to study, reverence, and guide this most innocent and docile nature; and endeavour, beside her, to seek out some trace of the purer ideals which had haunted his youth. And he felt, with remorse, that the failure to do so lay with himself, not with her. She remained outside his life; she had no sorcery for him. She was a lovely and almost faultless creature, but she was not what he loved. He realised, with bitter self-reproach, that in a moment of impulse, not ignoble in itself, but unwise, he had burdened his own fate and perhaps unconsciously done a great wrong to her, since, in the years to come, she would ask at

his hands the bread of life and he would only be able to give her a stone.

She herself had as yet no idea that she was not beloved by Othmar with a lover's love. She knew nothing of men and their passions. She had not the grosser intuitions which could have supplied the place of experience. She did not perceive that his tenderness had little ardour, his embraces nothing of the fervour and the eagerness of delighted possession. She had no standard of [332] comparison by which to measure the coldness or the warmth of the desires to which she surrendered herself, and it was not to so spiritual a temperament as hers that the familiarities of love could ever have seemed love. But her nerves were sensitive, her perceptions quick; and they made her conscious that mentally and in feeling Othmar was altogether apart from her; that in sorrow she would not have consoled him, and that in his meditations she never had any place.

'When I am older he will trust me more,' she reflected, in her innocence, and she had been so long used to repression and obedience that it cost her much less than it would have cost most women of her years to accept, uncomplainingly, that humble place before the shut doors of his life.

She was too modest to be offended at a distraction which would have been certain to excite the offence and the suspicion of a more selfish or self-conscious nature; and she was too young to be likely to penetrate by intuition the secret of that evident joylessness which might well have excited her jealousy. It was rather the same sense of pity which had come to her for him in the [333] weeks before her marriage which grew strongest in her as the months passed on at Amyôt. He enjoyed and possessed so much, yet could not enjoy or possess his own soul in peace.

'I do not think he is happy, and it is not I who can make him happy,' she said once, very timidly, to Friederich Othmar, who answered with considerable impatience:

'My love, the fault does not lie with you. Otho, who believes himself, like Hamlet, out of joint with his time, is in reality a man of his times in everything; that is, he is a pessimist; he has a mental nevrose, to borrow the jargon of scientists; he has so cultivated his conscience at the expense of his reason, that I sometimes believe he will be satisfied with nothing but the abandonment of all he possesses; and no doubt he would have tried this remedy long since, only he has no belief in any Deity who would reward him for it. The misfortune of all the thoughtful men of Otho's generation is, that they combine with their fretful consciences an entire disbelief in their souls, so that they are a mass of irritable anomalies. The mirthful sceptics of Augustan Rome, of [334] Voltairian France, and of Bolingbroke's England, were all consistent philosophers and voluptuaries; they disbelieved in their souls, but they believed in their bodies, and were amply content with them. They never talked nonsense about duty, and they passed gaily, gracefully, and consistently through their lives, of which they made the best they could materially, which is only reasonable in those who are convinced that the present is the sole sentient existence they will ever enjoy. But the tender-nerved pessimists of Otho's kind and age are wholly inconsistent. They believe in nothing, and yet they are troubled by a multitude of misgivings; they think the soul is merely a romantic word for the reflex action of the brain, and yet they distress themselves with imagining that the human animal has innumerable duties, and should have innumerable scruples, which is ridiculous on the face of it, for, religion apart and Deity denied, there is no possible reason why man should have any more duties than a snail has, or a hare. The agnostics of the present generation do not perceive this contradiction in themselves, and that is why they look so inconsistent and so entirely valetudinarian beside the robust Atheism of the past century, and [335] are, indeed, the mere *malades imaginaires* of the moral hospital.'

'If I could only make him as happy as I am myself,' she said again; but she had not the talisman which the woman who is beloved in return holds in the hollow of her hand.

'She is too young,' thought Friederich Othmar, angrily. 'She is too innocent; she is a daisy, a dove, a child. She knows nothing of persuasion or provocation; she is not even aware of her own charms. She waits his pleasure to be caressed or let alone; she knows neither how to deny herself or make herself desired. She wearies him only because she does not know how to torment him. He will drift away to someone else who does, while he will expect her—at seventeen!—to be satisfied with bearing him children and owning his name!'

A few months before, the Baron himself would have emphatically declared that no living woman could or should ever need more. But his nephew's wife had touched a softer nerve in him; something which was almost tenderness and almost regret smote him when he saw the tall, [336] graceful form of Yseulte like a garden lily, standing alone in the warmth of the sunset on the terraces at Amyôt, or saw Othmar, when he approached after a day's absence, kiss her hand with the calm and serious courtesy which he would have displayed to any stranger, and turn away from her with an indifference which all his deference of manner and careful *prévoyance* of thought for her could not conceal from the keen eyes of the elder man.

'He gives her his caresses, not his companionship,' thought the old man, angrily, but he was too prudent and too wise to draw her attention to a fault against herself of which she was unconscious.

A few months earlier he would have said with Napoléon, *'Qu'elle nous donne des marmots; c'est le nécessaire.*' But before this young mistress of this stately place as she moved, in her white gown, with her great bouquet of roses in her hand and her clear eyes smiling gravely on these men who so brief a while before had been unknown to her, and now held all her destiny in their hands, Friederich Othmar for the first time in his life saw a little way into a soul unsoiled, and [337] began to dimly comprehend some desires not wholly physical, some necessities sheerly of the mind and heart. The impression came to him—a purely sentimental one for which he chid himself

—that this child was entirely alone; more alone in her wedded life perhaps than she would have been in the monastic. She was surrounded with every species of material indulgence; day after day her husband gave her new pleasures, as people give children new toys; if she had wished for the impossible he would have endeavoured to obtain it for her; but Friederich Othmar twice or thrice in his hurried visits to Amyôt had found her in solitude, and walking alone in the stately gardens or sitting alone in some little rustic temple in the woods, and the fact, though insignificant enough, seemed to him indicative of a loneliness which would certainly become her fate unless she learned as so many other women have learned, to console herself for neglect by folly.

'And that she will not do,' the old man said to himself. 'She is a pearl; but a pearl thrown, not before swine, but wasted on a pessimist, an *ennuyé*, a *délicat* whom nothing pleases except that [338] which he cannot possess.'

He pitied her for what he foresaw would befall her in the future, rather than for any thing which troubled her at that present time, for although vaguely conscious of a certain discordance and dissatisfaction in her husband's life, Yseulte was, in her own, as happy as a very young girl can be to whom kindliness seems love and the external beauty surrounding her appears like a lovely dream.

Othmar left her often to shut himself in his library, to lose himself in his forests, or to go for the affairs of his House to Paris; but he was always gentle, generous, and kind; he was even prodigal of caresses to her, because they spared him words in whose utterance he felt himself untrue; and if the reflex of his own sadness fell at times across herself, it became a light soft shadow without name, such as seemed to suit better than mere vulgar joys the silence of the gardens and the grandeur of the courts, where a life of the past, once so gracious, so vivid, so impassioned in love and so light in laughter, had been extinguished like a torch burned out in the night. A riotous or [339] exuberant happiness would not have so well pleased her nature, made serious beyond her years whilst yet so mere a child, by the pains of poverty, the companionship of old age, and the sights and sounds of the siege of Paris. The long, light, warm days of spring and summer at Amyôt, with all the floral pomp around her, and the château itself rising, golden and silvery in the brilliant air, historic, poetic, magnificent, airy as a madrigal, martial as an epic, were days of an ecstatic but of an almost religious joy to her.

'What have I done that all this should come to me?' she said often in her wonder and humility, and Othmar seemed ever to her as a magician, at whose touch the briars and brambles in her path had blossomed like the almond and the may.

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[340]

CHAPTER XXXIII.

With October days an accident as her boat crossed the Loire water, when the autumn currents were rolling strong and wide, brought on the premature delivery of a child, who barely breathed for a few moments, and then took with him into darkness the hopes of the Maison d'Othmar. The fury and the grief of Friederich Othmar were so great that they far surpassed the moderate regret shown by his nephew, who appeared to him intolerably cold and little moved save by his sympathy with the sorrow of the child's young mother.

'You would care, I believe, nothing if there were no one to succeed you when you die!' said the elder man with indignation.

Othmar gave a gesture of indifference.

'I hope I should care for my sons as much as most men care for theirs,' he replied. 'But the "succession" does not seem to me to be of vital importance. If you would only believe it, we are [341] not Hohenzollerns nor Guelfs, and even they would be easily replaced, though perhaps Moltke or Wolseley would not be so.'

'Why do I, indeed, care so little?' said Othmar to himself when he was alone. 'I am neither inhuman nor heartless. I used to be quickly touched to any kind of feeling; but the whole of life seems cold to me, and profitless. I was dry-eyed whilst that poor child wept over that little, frail, waxen body which was so much to her; would have been so much to her if it had lived to lie on her breast. It is the most pathetic of all possible things—a girl still sixteen sorrowing for her offspring which has perished before it had any separate existence; has died before it lived; and yet, I feel hardly more than if I had seen a bird flying round an empty nest, or a brood of leverets wailing in an empty form. I think she took my heart out of my chest that day she fooled me, and put a stone there——'

He meant Nadine Napraxine, who remained the one woman on the earth for him.

A woman of unstable impulses, of incalculable caprices, of an infinite intelligence, of as infinite an egotism; absorbed in herself, save so far as her merciless eyes scanned the whole world as [342] players, whilst her fastidious taste found them the poorest players, and judged them inexorably as dunces and as fools; a woman who had treated the tragedy of his own passion as a mere comedy, and had listened to it seriously for a moment only the better to turn it into jest.

Yet the one woman upon earth whom he adored, whom he desired.

For love is fate, and will neither be commanded nor gainsaid.

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