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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK OTHMAR ***

OTHMAR

BY

OUIDA

'*I fear Life's many changes; not Death's changelessness*'
LYTTON

A NEW EDITION

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[1]

OTHMAR.

CHAPTER I.

Under the forest-trees of a stately place there was held a Court of Love, in imitation and revival of those pretty pageantries and tournaments of tongues which were the chief social and royal diversion of the Italy of Lucrezia Borgia and the France of Marguerite de Valois.

It was a golden August afternoon, towards the close of a day which had been hot, fragrant, full of lovely lights and shadows. Throned on a hill a mighty castle rose, aerial, fantastic, stately, with its colonnades of stone rose-garlanded, and its stone staircases descending into bowers of foliage and foam of flowers. Its steep roofs were as sheets of silver in the sun, its many windows caught the red glow from the west, and its bastions shelved downward to meet smooth-shaven lawns and thickets of oleanders luxuriant with blossom, crimson, white, or blush-colour. In the woods around, the oaks and beeches were heavy with their densest leafage; the deer couched under high canopies of bracken and osmunda; and the wild boars, sunk deep in tangles of wild clematis and beds of meadow-sweet, were too drowsy in the mellow warmth to hear the sounds of human laughter which were wafted to them on the windless air. In the silent sunshiny vine-clad country which stretched around those forests, in '*le pays de rire et de ne rien faire*,' from many a steep church-steeple and many a little white chapel on the edge of the great rivers or in the midst of the vast wheat-fields, the vesper-bell was sounding to small townships and tiny hamlets.

It was seven o'clock, and the Court of Love was still open; the chamber of council, or throne-room, being a grassy oval, with grassy seats raised around it, like the seats of an amphitheatre; an open space where the forest joined the gardens, with walls, first of clipped bay, and then of dense oak foliage, around it; the turf had been always kept shorn and rolled, and the evergreens always clipped, and a marble fountain in the centre of the grass, of fauns playing with naiads, bore an inscription testifying that, in the summer of the year of grace 1530, the Marguerite des Marguerites had held a Court of Love just there, using those same seats of turf, shadowed by those same oak-boughs.

'Why should we not hold one also? If we have advanced in anything, since the Valois time, it is in the art of intellectual hair-splitting. We ought to be able to argue as many days together as they did. Only, I presume, their advantage was that they meant what they said, and we never or seldom do. They laughed or they sighed, and were sincere in both; but we do neither, we are *gouailleurs* always, which is not a happy temperament, nor an intellectually productive one.'

So had spoken the mistress of that stately place; and so, her word being law, had it been in the sunset hours before the nine o'clock dinner; and it was a pastime well suited to the luminous evenings of late summer in

The hush of old warm woods that lie
Low in the lap of evening, bright
And bathed in vast tranquillity.

She, herself, was seated on an ivory chair, carved with Hindoo steel, and shaped like a curule chair of old Rome. Two little pages, in costumes of the Valois time, stood behind her, holding large fans of peacock's plumes.

'They are anachronisms,' she had said with a passing frown at the fans, 'but they may remain, though quite certainly the Valois did not know anything of them any more than they knew of blue china and yellow tea.'

But the gorgeous green and gold and purple-eyed plumes looked pretty, so she had let them stay.

'We shall have so many jarring notes of "modernity" in our discussions,' she had said, 'that one note the more in decoration does not matter;' and, backed by them, she sat now upon her ivory throne, an exquisite figure, poetic and delicate, with her cream-white skirts of the same hue as her throne, and her strings of great pearls at her throat. Next her was seated an ecclesiastic of high eminence, who had in vain protested that he was wholly out of place in such a diversion. 'Was Cardinal Bembo out of place at Ferrara and Urbino?' she had objected; and had so successfully, in the end, vanquished his scruples, that the late sunbeams, slanting through the oak-leaves and on to that gay assemblage, had found out in it his handsome head and his crimson sash, and his blue eyes full of their and keen witty observation, and his white hands folded together on his knee.

In a semicircle whose wings stretched right and left were ranged the gentlemen and ladies who formed momentarily the house party of the château; great people all; all the women young and all the men brilliant, no dull person amongst them, dulness being the one vice condemned there without any chance of pardon. They were charming people, distinguished people, handsome people also, and they made a gay and gracious picture, reclining or sitting in any attitudes they chose on these grassy slopes, which had seen the court of Francis and of both Marguerites:

Above their heads floated a silken banner, on which, in letters of gold, were embroidered the wise words, '*Qu'on m'aime, mais avec de l'esprit!*'

'To return to our original demand—what is the definition of Love?' asked their queen and president, turning her lovely eyes on to the great ecclesiastic, who replied with becoming gravity:

'Madame, what can a humble priest possibly know of the theme?'

She smiled a little. 'You know as much as Bembo knew,' she made answer.

'Ah no, Madame! The times are changed.'

'The times, perhaps; not human nature. However, this is the question which must be first decided by the Court at large: How is the nature of Love to be defined?'

A gentleman on her left murmured:

'No one can tell us so as well you, Madame, who have torn the poor butterfly in pieces so often *sans merci*.'

'You have broken the first rule of all,' said the sovereign, with severity. 'The discussion is to be kept wholly free from all personalities.'

'A wise rule, or the Court would probably end, like an Italian village *festa*, in a free use of the knife all round.'

'If you be not quiet you will be exiled for contempt of court, and shut up in the library to write out Ovid's "Ars Amatoria." Once more, I inquire, how are we to define Love?'

'It was never intended to be defined, but to be enjoyed.'

'That is merely begging the question,' said their Queen. 'One enjoys music, flowers, a delicate wine, a fine sunset, a noble sonnet; but all these things are nevertheless capable of analysis and of reduction to known laws. So is Love. I ask once more: How is it to be defined? Does no one seem to know? What curious ignorance!'

'In woman, Love may be defined to be the desire of annexation; and to consist chiefly in a passionate clinging to a sense of personal property in the creature loved.'

'That is cynical, and may be true. But it is not general enough. You must not separate the love of man and the love of woman. We speak of Love general, human, concrete.'

'With all deference I would observe that, if we did not separate the two, we should never arrive at any real definition at all, for Love differs according to sex as much as the physiognomy or the costume.' [4]

'Real Love is devotion!' said a beautiful blonde with blue eyes that gazed from under black lashes with pathetic tenderness.

'Euh! euh!' murmured one impertinent.

'Oh, oh!' murmured another.

'*Ouiche!*' said a third under his breath.

The sovereign smiled ironically:

'Ah, my dear Duchesse! all *that* died out with the poets of 1830. It belongs to the time when women wore muslin gowns, looked at the moon, and played the harp.'

'If I might venture on a definition in the *langue verte*,' suggested a handsome man, seated at the feet of the queen, 'though I fear I should be turned out of Court as Rabelais and Scarron are turned out of the drawing-room——'

'We can imagine what it would be, and will not give you the trouble to say any more. If the definition of Love be, on the contrary, left to me, I shall include it all in one word—Illusion.'

'That is a cruel statement!'

'It is a fact. We have our own ideal, which we temporarily place in the person, and clothe with the likeness, of whoever is fortunate enough to resemble it superficially enough to delude us, unconsciously, into doing so. You remember the hackneyed saying of the philosopher about the real John—the John as he thinks himself to be, and the John as others imagine him: it is never the real John that is loved; always an imaginary one built up out of the fancies of those in love with him.'

'That is fancy, your Majesty; it is not love.'

'And what is love but fancy?—the fancy of attraction, the fancy of selection; the same sort of fancy as allures the bird to the brightest plumaged mate?'

'I do not think any love is likely to last which is not based on intellectual sympathy. When the mind is interested and contented, it does not tire half so fast as the eyes or the passions. In any very great love there is at the commencement a delighted sense of meeting something long sought, some supplement of ourselves long desired in vain. When this pleasure is based on the charm of some mind wholly akin to our own, and filled for us with ever-renewing well-springs of the intellect, there is really hardly any reason why this mutual delight should ever change, especially if circumstances conspire to free it from those more oppressive and irritating forms of contact which the prose of life entails.'

'You mean marriage, only you put it with a great deal of unnecessary euphuism. Tastes differ. Giovanni Dupré's ideal of bliss was to see his wife ironing linen, while his mother-in-law looked on.' [5]

'Dupré was a simple soul, and a true artist, but intellect was not his strong point. If he had chanced to be educated, the good creature with her irons would have become very tiresome to him.'

'What an argument in favour of ignorance!'

'Is it? The savage is content with roots and an earth-baked bird; but it does not follow, therefore, that delicate food does not merit the preference we give to it. I grant, however, that a high

culture of taste and intelligence does not result in the adoration of the primitive virtues any more than of the earth-baked bird.'

'Is this a discussion on Love?'

'It is a discussion which grows out of it, like the mistletoe out of the oak. The ideal of Dupré was that of a simple, uneducated, emotional and unimpassioned creature; it was what we call essentially a *bourgeois* ideal. It would have been suffocation and starvation, torture and death, to Raffaelle, to Phidias, to Shelley, to Goethe. There are men, born peasants, who soar into angels; who hate, loathe, and spurn the *bourgeois* ideal from their earliest times of wretchedness; but there are others who always remain peasants. Millet did, Dupré did, Wordsworth did.'

The queen tinkled her golden handbell and raised her ivory sceptre.

'These digressions are admirable in their way, but I must recall the Court to the subject before them. Someone is bringing in allusions to cookery, flat-irons, and the *bourgeois* ideal which I have always understood was M. Thiers. They are certainly, however interesting, wholly irrelevant to the theme which we are met here to discuss. Let us pass on to the question next upon the list. If no one can define Love except as devotion, that definition suits so few cases that we must accept its existence without definition, and proceed to inquire what are its characteristics and its results.'

'The first is exigence and the second is *ennui*.'

'No, the first is sympathy and the second is happiness.'

'That is very commonplace. Its chief characteristic appears to me to be an extremely rapid transition from a state of imbecile adoration to a state of irritable fatigue. I speak from the masculine point of view.'

'And I, from the feminine, classify it rather as a transition (regretted but inevitable) from amiable illusions and generous concessions to a wounded sense of offence at ingratitude.'

'We are coming to the Italian *coltellate*! You both only mean that in love, as in everything else which is human, people who expect too much are disappointed; disappointment is always irritation; it may even become malignity if it take a very severe form.' [6]

'You seem all of you to have glided into an apology for inconstancy. Is that inevitable to love?'

'It looks as if it were; or, at all events, its forerunner, fatigue, is so.'

'You treat love as you would treat a man who asked you to paint his portrait, whilst you persisted in painting that of his shadow instead. The shadow which dogs his footsteps is not himself.'

'It is cast by himself, so it is a part of him.'

'No, it is an accompanying ghost sent by Nature which he cannot escape or dismiss.'

'My good people,' said their sovereign impatiently, 'you wander too far afield. You are like the group of physicians who let the patient die while they disputed over the Greek root from which the name of his malady was derived. Love, like all other great monarchs, is ill sometimes; but let us consider him in health, not sickness.'

'For Love in a state of health there is no better definition than one given just now—sympathy.'

'The highest kind of love springs from the highest kind of sympathy. Of that there is no doubt. But then that is only to be found in the highest natures. They are not numerous.'

'No; and even they require to possess a great reserve-fund of interest, and a bottomless deposit of inexhaustible comprehension. Such reserve-funds are rare in human nature, which is usually a mere fretful and foolish chatterbox, *tout en dehors*, and self-absorbed.'

'We are wandering far from the single-minded passion of Ronsard and Petrarca.'

'And we have arrived at no definition. Were I to give one, I should be tempted to say that Love is, in health and perfection, the sense that another life is absolutely necessary to our own, is lovely despite its faults, and even in its follies is delightful and precious to us, we cannot probably say why, and is to us as the earth to the moon, as the moon to the tides, as the lodestone to the steel, as the dew of night to the flower.'

'Very well said, and applicable to both men and women, as descriptive of their emotions at certain periods of their lives. But——'

'For all their lives, until the ice of age glides into their veins.'

'You are poetical enough for Ronsard. Well, let us pass to another question. Does Love die sooner of starvation or of repletion?'

'Of repletion, unquestionably. Of a fit of indigestion he perishes never to rise again. Starved, he will linger on sometimes for a very long while indeed, and at the first glance of pity revives in full vigour.' [7]

'Why, then, do women usually commit the error of surfeiting him? For I agree with you that a surfeit is fatal.'

'Because most women cannot be brought to understand that too much of themselves may bring about a wayward wish to have none of them. They call this natural and inevitable reaction ingratitude and inconstancy, but it is nothing of the kind; it is only human nature.'

'Male human nature. The wish for pastures new, characteristic of cattle, sheep and man.'

'"*La femme est si souvent trompée parce qu'elle prend le désir pour l'amour.*" Someone wrote that; I forget who did, but it is entirely true. *Une bouffée de désir*, an hour's caprice, a swift flaming of mere animal passion which flares up and dies down like any shooting star, seems to a woman to be the ideal love of romance and of tragedy. She dreams of Othello, of Anthony, of Stradella, and all the while it is Sir Harry Wildair, or Joseph Surface, or at the best of things Almaviva. She is ready for the tomb in Verona, but he is only ready for the *chambre meublée*, or at most for the *saison aux eaux*.'

'Is she always ready for the tomb in Verona?' asked a sceptical voice. 'Does she not sometimes, even very often, marry Paris, and "carry on" with Romeo? If I may be allowed to say so, there are a few impassioned and profound temperaments in the world to many light ones; the bread and the sack are, as usual, unevenly apportioned, but these graver and deeper natures are not all necessarily feminine. It is when you have two great and ardent natures involved (and then alone) that you get passion, high devotion, tragedy; but this conjunction is as rare as the passing of Venus across the sun. Usually Romeo throws himself away on some Lady Frivolous, and Juliet breaks her heart for some fop or some fool.'

'That is only because all human life is a game of cross purposes; one only wonders who first set the game going, to amuse the gods or make them weep.'

'That question will scarcely come under the head of amatory analysis. Besides, the world has been wondering about that ever since the beginning of time, and has never received any answer to its queries.'

'If a quotation be allowed,' suggested the ecclesiastic, 'in lieu of an original opinion, I would beg leave to recall the Prince de Ligne's "*Dans l'amour il n'y a que les commencements qui sont charmants*." In the middle of the romance I see you all yawn, at the end you usually quarrel. Some wise man—I forget who—has said that it requires much more talent and much more feeling to break off an attachment amiably than to begin it.'

'Because we all feel so amiable at the beginning that it is easy to be so.' [8]

'Admit also that there are very few characters which will stand the test of intimacy; very few minds of sufficient charm and originality to be able to bear the strain of long and familiar intercourse.'

'What has the mind to do with it?'

'That question is flippant and even coarse. The mind has something to do with it, even in animals; or why should the lion prefer one lioness to another? When d'Aubiac went to the gallows kissing a tiny velvet muff of Margaret de Valois, or when young Calixte de Montmorin knelt on the scaffold pressing to his lips a little bow of blue ribbon which had belonged to Madame de Vintimille, the muff and the ribbon represented a love with which certainly the soul had far more to do than the senses.'

'It was a sentiment.'

'A sentiment if you will, but strong enough to overcome all fear of death or personal regret. The muff, the ribbon, were symbols of an imperishable and spiritual devotion; these trifles, like Psyche's butterfly, were representative of an immortal element in mortal life and mortal feeling.'

'M. de Béthune would go to the scaffold like that himself,' said the sovereign lady with a smile of approval and of indulgent derision.

'And our lady,' hinted the Duc de Béthune, 'forgets her own rule, that all personalities are forbidden.'

'It is of no use to have the power to make laws if one have not also the power to transgress them. Well, if immortality is to enter into love, let wit also enter there. One is not beheaded every day, but every day one is liable to be bored. *J'aime qu'on m'aime, mais avec de l'esprit.* Every intellectual person must exact that. To worship my ribbon is nothing if you also fatigue my patience and my ear. The majority of people divorce love and wit. They are very wrong. It is only wit which can tell love when he has gone too far, or is losing ground, has repeated himself *ad nauseam*, or requires absence to restore his charm.'

'*Ah, Majesté!* by the time he has become such a philosopher has he not ceased to be love at all?'

'Oh no. That motto was chosen as the legend of this Court expressly for the truth it contains. Why does most love end so drearily in a sudden death by quarrelling or in a lingering death by tedium? Because it has had no wit, no judgment, no reserve, no skill. By way of showing itself to be eternal, it has hammered itself into pieces on the rock of repetition. *Qu'on m'aime, mais avec de l'esprit!* What a world of endured *ennui* sighs forth in that appeal!'

'No woman upon earth has had so much love given her as the châtelaine of Amyôt, and no woman on earth ever viewed love with such unkind and airy contempt.' [9]

She smiled. She neither denied nor affirmed the accusation.

'She has a crystal throne of her own from which she looks down on the weaknesses of mortals and cannot be touched by them,' said the Duc de Béthune.

She replied again, '*Qu'on m'aime, mais avec de l'esprit.*'

'It is the motto of one who sets much greater store upon amusement than upon affection. Who can say, moreover, what may have the good fortune to be considered "*esprit*" by her? I fear she finds us all very dull to-day.'

'Dull, no. Sentimental perhaps.'

'Your heaviest word of censure!'

'To return to our theme: do you not punish inconstancy?'

'Certainly not. In the first place, inconstancy is a wholly involuntary, and therefore innocent, inclination. In the second, if any one be so stupid that he or she cannot keep the affections they have once won, they deserve to lose them, and can claim no pity.'

'Surely they may be the victims of a sad and unmerited fate?'

'Unmerited—no. They have not known how to keep what they had got. Probably they have worried it till it escaped in desperation, as a child teases a bird in a cage till the bird pushes itself through the bars, preferring the chance of losing itself on the road to the certainty of being strangled in prison.'

'Who would not prefer it?'

'The difficulty in most cases is that, in all loves, the scales of proportion are weighted unevenly: there is generally one lighter than the other. Say it is a poor nature and a great nature; say it is a strong passion and a passing caprice; say it is a profound temperament and a shallow one; in some way or other the scales are almost always imperfectly adjusted. When they are quite even—which happens once out of a million times—then there is a great and felicitous love; an exquisite and imperishable sympathy.'

'But who holds these magical scales? It is the holder who is responsible.'

'The holder is Fate.'

'Chance.'

'Opportunity.'

'Destiny.'

'Predestination.'

'Circumstance.'

'Affinity.'

'Affinity can only hold them on that millionth occasion when a perfect love is the result.'

'Usually Chance and Circumstance fill the scales, and they are two roguish boys who like to make mischief. Affinity is the angel; perhaps the only angel by which poor humanity is ever led into an earthly paradise.' [10]

'That is worthy of Philip Sydney.'

'Or of the Earl of Lytton.'

'And is so charming that we will not risk having anything coarse or commonplace said after it. Let us adjourn the debate till to-morrow.'

'Nay, *Majesté*; let us pass to another question: What is the greatest dilemma of Love?'

'To have to galvanise itself into an imitation of life when it is dead.'

'Is it worse to be the last to love, or the first to grow tired?'

'In the former case one's self-esteem is hurt; in the latter one's conscience.'

'The wounds of conscience are sooner cured than those of vanity.'

'Whoever loves most loves longest.'

'No, whoever is least loved loves longest.'

'How is that to be explained?'

'The contradictions of human nature will usually suffice to explain everything.'

'But there may be another explanation also; the one who is least loved is the least cloyed, and the most apprehensive of alteration.'

'Love is best worked with egotism, as gold is worked with alloy.'

'Surely the essential loveliness of love is self-sacrifice?'

'That is a theory. In fact, the only satisfactory love is one which gives and receives mutual pleasure. When there is self-sacrifice on one side the pleasure also is one-sided.'

'Then the revellers of the Decamerone knew more of love than Dante?'

'That is approaching a theme too full of dangers to be discussed—the difference between physical and spiritual love. I do not consider that you have satisfactorily answered the previous question: What is the greatest dilemma of Love?'

'When, in the open doorway of its house of life, one passion, grown old and grey, passes out limping, and meets another passion newly come thither, and laughing, with the blossoms of April in its sunny hair.'

'What a sonnet in a sentence! What is Love to do in such a case? Shall he detain the grey-haired crippled guest?'

'He cannot. For the more he shall endeavour to retain him the thinner and paler and more impalpable will the withered and lame passion grow.'

'And the newly-come one?'

'Oh, he will enter, smiling and strong, and will fill the house with the music of his pipe and the odour of his hyacinths for awhile, until he too shall in turn pass outwards, when his music is silent and his flowers are dead.' [11]

'Is Love then always to be mourned like Lycidas?'

'He is in no sense like Lycidas; Lycidas died, a perfect youth. Love, with time, grows pale and wan and feeble, and a very shadow of itself, before it dies.'

'There are some who say, if he have not immortality he is not Love at all; but only Caprice, Vanity, Wantonness, or faithless Fancy, masquerading in his dress.'

'How can that be immortal which has no existence without mortal forms?'

'Here is one of the notes of modernity! The sad note of self-consciousness; the consciousness of mortality and of insignificance; the *memento mori* which is always with us. And yet we do not respect death, we only hate it and fear it; because it will make of us a dreary, ugly, putrid thing. That is all we know. And the knowledge dulls even our diversions. We can be *gouailleur*, but we cannot be gay if we would.'

'There is too great a tendency here to use *gros mots*—devotion, death, immortality, &c. They are a mistake in a disquisition which wishes to be witty. They are like the use of cannon in an opera. But I think, even in France, the secret of lightness of wit is lost. We have all read too much German philosophy.'

'We will endeavour to be gayer to-morrow. We will wake all the shades of Brantôme.'

'Well,' their sovereign declared, as she rose, 'we have held our Court to little avail; some pretty things have been said, and some stupid ones, but we have arrived at no definite conclusion, unless it be this: that love is only respectable when it is unhappy, and ceases to exist the moment it is contented.'

'A cruel sentence, Madame!'

'Human nature is cruel; so is Time.'

When the sun had wholly set, and only a warm yellow glow through all the west told that its glory had passed, the Court broke up for that day, and strolled in picturesque groups towards the house as the chimes of the clock tower told the hour of dinner.

'How very characteristic of our time and of our world,' said the queen, as she drew her ivory-hued, violet-laden skirts over the smooth turf. 'We have talked for three whole hours of Love, and nobody has ever thought of mentioning Marriage as his kinsman!'

'He who has had the honour to marry you might well have done so, had he been here to-day,' murmured a courtier on her right.

She laughed, looking up into the deep-blue evening sky through the network of green leaves: [12]

'But he was not here, so he was saved the difficulty of choice between an insincerity and a rudeness, always a very serious dilemma to him. Marriage is the grave of love, my dear friend, even if he be buried with roses for his pillow and lilies for his shroud.'

'But Love may be stronger than Death. Solomon has said so.'

'What is stronger than Death? Death is stronger than all of us. *Tout cela pourrira.* It is the despair of the lover and the poet, and the consolation of the beggar when the rich and the beautiful go past him.'

She spoke with a certain melancholy, and absently struck the tall heads of seeding grasses with her ivory sceptre.

'We have only wearied you, I fear,' said her companion, with contrition and mortification.

'That is the fault of Love,' she answered, with a smile.

As they left the shadow of the trees, crossing the grassland was a herd of cows and calves already passing away in the distance, going to their byres; far behind them, lingering willingly, were the herdsman and his love; he a comely lad in a blue blouse and a peaked cap, she a smiling buxom maiden with dusky tresses under a linen coif, and cheeks glowing like a 'Catherine pear, the side that's next the sun.'

'Lubin and Lisette,' said Béthune with a smile, 'practically illustrating what we have been spoiling with the too fine wire-drawing of analysis. I am sure that they come much nearer than we to the story-tellers of the Heptameron.'

The châtelaine of Amyôt looked at the two rustic lovers with a little wistfulness and a good-natured contempt.

They had passed out of the shade of the woods, and the rose-glow of evening illumined their interlaced figures as they followed their cows.

'"To know is much, yet to enjoy is more,"' she quoted. 'I suppose that is what you mean. Yet I rather incline to think that love as a sentiment is the product of education. The cows know almost as much of it as your Lubin and Lisette.'

'Brandès says,' observed one of her party, 'that love as a sentiment was always unknown in a state of nature, and was only created with the first petticoat. Petticoats have invariably been responsible for a great deal. They ruined France, according to the Great Frederic; but if they have raised us from the level of the cattle they have redeemed their repute.'

'Poor cattle! They have as much poetry in their eyes as there is in the Penseroso. Lubin and Lisette are *Naturkinder*; but when both a cow and Lisette become the property of Lubin, he will assign the higher place to the first, both in life and in death.' [13]

'Well, he shall have both of them, for having met us at so apropos an instant,' she answered with, a little smile. 'Perhaps the only word of truth that has been said in the whole discussion was the quotation: "*Il n'y a que les commencements qui sont charmants!*"'

The great woodland which they traversed as she spoke opened into an avenue of beeches, long and straight, the branches meeting and interlacing overhead until the opening at the farther end looked like an arched doorway closing a cathedral aisle. The archway was filled with dim golden suffused light, and within that archway of twilight and golden haze there rose the snowy column of a high-reaching fountain; it was the first of the *grandes eaux* of the garden of Amyôt. And the sovereign of the Court of Love was she who had once been the Princess Napraxine.

CHAPTER II.

As they entered on the smoother sward of the stately gardens a figure came out of the deep shadow of clipped walls of bay and approached them.

'Is the Court over? At what decision has it arrived?' said the master of Amyôt as he saluted the party and kissed the hand of his wife with a graceful formality of greeting.

'It will have to sit for half a century if it be compelled to come to any,' returned the châtelaine. 'We have said many pretty things about love, Béthune in especial; but we met Lubin with Lisette loitering behind their cows, and I fear the living commentary was truer to nature than all our doctrines.'

'The only issue of its resolutions is that you are to give away a cow and a maiden to the admirable lover,' said M. de Béthune. 'He crossed our path just in time to point a moral for us: we were all sadly in want of one.'

'Could you not agree then? Surely you chose a very simple subject?'

'It might be simple in the days of Philemon and Baucis. It is sufficiently complicated now. Is the sentiment which sent d'Aubiac to the scaffold, pressing a little blue velvet muff to his lips, the same thing as the unpoetic impulse which makes the *femelle de l'homme* sought by Tom, Dick, and Harry? You will admit that a vast field of the most various emotions separates the two kinds of passion?'

'Certainly: there is a great difference between Montrose's Farewell and Sir John Suckling's verses.' [14]

'Precisely: so we came to no decision. We have all too much of the terrible modern tendency to hesitation and melancholy. I do not know why; unless it come from the conviction of all of us that love is always melancholy when it is not absurd.'

'What a cruel sentiment!'

'A perfectly true assertion. The only loves respectable in tradition are those which have ended wretchedly. Suppose Romeo had been happy; or Stradella; what do you think the poets could have made of them? Love must end somehow: if it end in tragedy its dignity is saved like Cæsar's.'

'But why need it end? You, at least, have seen that through all disappointments it can endure,' murmured he who had cited the love of d'Aubiac for Marguerite.

She looked at him and shrugged her shoulders ever so slightly.

'Love is, so unhappily, like a comet. It mounts to its perihelion, increasing in splendour as it goes, and then slowly, little by little, the glory departs, the sovereign of the skies grows less and less, until at last there is no more sign of it anywhere, and all is darkness. But the comet is not really gone; it has only gone—elsewhere.'

Her slight delicate laugh robbed the speech of the melancholy which it would otherwise have possessed.

'My wife believes in no constancy,' said Othmar.

She looked at him with her mysterious smile:

'I believe in Romeo's, I believe in Stradella's, because the kindness of death saved them from the ridicule of forswearing themselves. What a pity you did not come home a little sooner. You would have been an invaluable ally to the sentimentalists headed by Béthune. He was eloquent, but his cause was weak.'

'My cause was strong,' said the Duc de Béthune; 'it was my tongue which lacked persuasiveness.'

'No, you were very poetical; you were only not convincing. My dear friend, we are too scientific in these days for sentiment to have any abiding place in us; we are pessimists, it is true, but we mourn for ourselves, not for others. We are neither gay enough nor sad enough to do justice to such discussions as this which we have tried to revive; we are only bored. We do not take our fooling joyously or our sorrows deeply. We are uneasily conscious that we are childish and unreal in both. Then there is the incurable modern tendency to end everything with a laugh *en gouailleur*, yet with tears in our eyes. We are always ridiculing ourselves, yet we are always vexed that, ridiculous as we are, we must still die.'

'At the present moment we must still eat,' said Othmar, as the boom of a silver-toned gong came over the gardens in deep waves of sound. [15]

It was nine o'clock, and that repast which had been used to be called in the Valois Amyôt *arrière-grand-souper*, and was now called 'dinner,' awaited them.

There were some twenty-five guests then staying there; she did not approve of immense house parties, and she restricted her house list to the very choicest of her favourites and associates; she always asked double the number of men to that of women, but she was proportionately careful that the latter should be those whom men most liked and admired; she was wholly above the petty envies and jealousies of her sex. Her vanity rather consisted in having it said that she feared no rivals.

As the deep boom of the gong sounded from the house, she and her guests passed onward, and in their Valois dresses were soon seated in the summer banqueting-room: a modern addition to the

château, an open loggia in the Italian style, with marble floor and marble columns, one side open to the air, the other sides rich in white marble bas-reliefs by French sculptors; the ceiling had been painted by Puvis de Chavannes with the story of Europa. In each corner there were tall palms in large square cases of white porcelain; the white columns were garlanded by passion-flowers, which grew without; at either end there was a fountain, their basins filled with gold fish and water-lilies; through the columns the whole enchanting view of the west gardens was seen stretching far away to where the Loire waters spread wide as a lake and mirroring the newly-risen moon.

'I had it built,' she said, in answer to some one who complimented her upon it. 'There is a great dining-hall and a small dining-room indoors, but neither are fitted for summer evenings. It is a barbarism to be shut up within four walls just as the moon rises and the nightingales sing. The matter of food is always a distressingly coarse question; nothing can really spiritualise or redeem it, but at least it may be divested of some of its brute aspects. A delicate cuisine does that for us in some measure, and the scene we have around us may do more. The London and Paris habit of sitting in mere boxes, more or less well decorated, is horrible. Perfect ease, vast space, and soft shadowy distances are absolutely necessary to preserve illusions as we dine.'

And to that end she had caused to be built the loggia of Amyôt, with as much celerity and breathless obedience to her commands as the architects of the East showed a sultan of Bagdad or Benares when he bade a palace of marble uprise from the sand. Her fine taste would not have allowed her to hurt the architecture of Amyôt with any incongruity, however much her caprices might have desired it; but the marble loggia accorded in exterior with the Renaissance outline of the château, and the tone of Primaticcio and the epoch of Jean Goujon had been faithfully followed in its internal decoration.

'What a perfect place it is!' said one of her guests to her after dinner.

She smiled.

'In August, yes. When the terraces are hung with ice, and the forests black with winter storm, it is not so perfect. All places have their season, like all lives.'

'There are some places, like some lives, which can never lose their beauty.'

'Do you think so? I have never found them. When one knows every leaf, every stone, every fence, the beauty of the place fades for us as it does when one knows every impulse, every prejudice, every fault, and every virtue of the life.'

'A melancholy truth—if it be a truth. Perhaps it is only half a one. There are people who love their homes.'

'There are prisoners who have loved their cells! Amyôt is delightful in many ways, but I have no more sense of home in it than a swallow has in the eaves it builds under for one summer. You must go to the vinedresser's wife in the cliff cabin on the river for *that*.'

'Then the vinedresser's wife has a jewel which the great châtelaine's crown is without?'

'A jewel? Are you sure it is a jewel? I think there is much to be said in favour of the restlessness of our world, it saves us from rust and reflection; it makes us unprejudiced and cosmopolitan; it annihilates nationalities and antipathies. I imagine, if Horace had lived now, he would never have been still; he would have seen the farm in its pleasantest season, and that only. He would have carried with him the undying lamp of his enchanting temperament, and he would have been happy anywhere.'

'But is it really incomprehensible to you, the love of home?'

'I think so. I have lived in too many places. We are a few months here, a few months in Paris, a few weeks in the Riviera, a few weeks in Russia, or Vienna, or London. It is impossible to carry about the sense of home peripatetically with you as the snail carries his shell. The sparrow feels it, the swallow does not. I have always had a number of houses in which I spend a number of months, of weeks, of days. I like each of them to be perfect in its own way, and I like each to have copies of my favourite books in it: the sight of Goethe, of Molière, of Horace makes one feel *chez soi*. That is as near "home" as I approach. I imagine all happiness is much more a matter of temperament than of place or of circumstance.'

'I do not believe you are happy even now!'

It was a personal speech, and too bold a one to be justified even by intimate and privileged friendship. But she was moved to it by that ever ready and pitiless self-analysis which made her as severe a critic of herself as of others.

'Happy? Oh, I must be,' she said with a smile. 'Who on earth should be happy if I am not? I have all the vulgar attributes of happiness in profusion and all the more delicate ones too. If I am not so, it can only be because my temperament is the very opposite of a *porte-bonheur* like Horace's. I have always expected too much of everything and of everybody, and yet I am not at all what you would call an imaginative person. I ought to be prosaically contented with the world as it is. But I am not.'

It was a sultry and lovely August night. The sky was radiant and the white lustre of the full moon shone over all the scene, making the gardens, the terraces, the fountains, the parterres of flowers light as day, and leaving the masses of the great forest which surrounded them in deepest shadow. It was haunted ground, this stately and royal place where both Marguerites had passed in turn summers dead three centuries ago; where the one, witty, wise and faithful, had read the

tales of her Heptameron beneath its spreading oaks; and the other, lovely, perilous and faithless, had gathered its roses and ruffled them, murmuring the '*un peu—beaucoup—passionnément,*' as one passion hotly chased another from her fickle breast, each scarce living the life of the gathered rose.

The present châtelaine of Amyôt, leaning against one of the marble columns of her summer dining-hall, and listening to the words of a friend who dared tell her truths, looked out into the wide white moonlight, on to the trellised rose walks, the turf smooth as velvet, bordered with ground ivy; the marble statues standing against the high walls of close-clipped evergreens; the deep and sombre forests which held the heart of so many secrets, the story of so many lives and of so many deaths, safe shut away for ever, dumb and dead in the eternal mystery of its vernal solitudes. If she were not happy who should be?

But happiness—what an immense word!—or what a little one! A poet's dream of paradise, or the peasant's contentment in the chimney-corner and the pot of soup! Which you will—but never both at once.

She was as happy as a very analytical and fastidious nature can possibly be, but at times her old enemy dissatisfaction looked in over the flowers and through the golden air. She was pursued by her old consciousness that the human race was after all exceedingly limited in its capabilities, and the lives of men on the whole very wearisome. There was with her that vague disappointment and dissatisfaction which come to most of us when we have done what we wished to do. There is [18] a monotony even in what is most agreeable, which makes all happiness dull after awhile. Priests tells us that this unpleasant weariness is intended to detach us from the joys of earth, and philosophers are content to find its solution in the physiology of the senses. But whether explained sentimentally or scientifically, the result is the same: that expectation makes up so large a component part of pleasure that, when there is nothing new to expect, pleasure becomes so attenuated as to be scarcely visible.

All loves which have been constant and become famous have been those to which immense difficulties arose, where perils supplied the element of an unending interest. It is when they can only behold each other in the stolen hours of the moonlight, that Romeo and Giulietta are to each other divinely fair. Were they condemned to face each other at dinner every night for ten years, what divinity would be left for either in the eyes of the other?

Habit and love cannot dwell together. As well ask the rose to flower beneath a slab of stone.

'Happiness is not of this world,' she said, with a little dreamy lingering smile. 'Is not that what your brethren are always telling us?'

Melville answered with a sigh:

'May this not prove that we may at least hope for it in some other?'

'Yes, I think,' she replied, rather to herself than to him, 'I think with you; the strongest argument (if any are strong) in favour of the future development of the soul, is the absolute impossibility for anybody with any average mind to be content with what he or she finds in human existence. Life is a pretty enough picture for people like ourselves; it is sometimes a pageant, it is sometimes even a poem, but it is all wonderfully unproductive and circumscribed. Except in a few hours of passion or exultation, we are sensible of the flatness and insufficiency of it all. We have ideals which may be only remembrance, but if not must surely be prevision; ideals which, at any rate, are larger and of another atmosphere than anything which belongs to earth.'

Her voice grew soft and dreamy, and had a tone in it of wistful regret. It was not the mere dissatisfaction of the *ennuyée* which moved her. She had had her own way in life, and the success of it had become monotonous.

'Yes,' she repeated with a little laugh, which was not very gay; 'I suppose it must be the soul in us; that odd, unquiet, dissatisfied, nameless thing inside us, which is always crying, "Give, give, give!" and never gets what it wants. Our discontent must be the proof of something in us meant for better things, just as the eternal revolutions of Paris are the proof of its people's genius. What [19] a night it is! It wants Lorenzo and Jessica, but they are not here. There are flirtations and intrigues enough indoors, but Lorenzo and Jessica are not of our world. It is a pity. The moon seems to look for them.'

Then she left the marble loggia and went amongst her guests, who were gathering together in the silver drawing-room, as the sounds of music, in the ever-youthful 'Invitation à la Valse,' called them, with midnight, to the ball-room. Gervase Melville strayed away by himself through the moonlit aisles of roses.

'Always the pebble of *ennui* in the golden slipper of pleasure,' he thought. 'Perhaps life is, after all, more evenly balanced than the wooden shoe and the ragged stocking will ever believe. Perhaps in life, as they said to-day that it is in love, hunger is a happier state than satiety. Perhaps, if Lorenzo had never married Jessica, he would have written sonnets to her all his life, as Petrarca wrote them to Laura! The Lady of Amyôt is the most interesting woman I have ever known, but she is the one person on earth capable of making me doubt the faith that I have lived and hope to die for; when I am amongst the green savages of Formosa or the drunken Indians of Ottawa, I can still believe in the human soul; but when I am with her I doubt—I doubt—I doubt! She is as exquisitely organised as this gloxinia which is full of dew and of moonbeams; but she believes that she will have only her one brief passage on earth like the gloxinia—the glory of a day—and alas! who shall prove that she is wrong? When she holds my creed in the hollow of her white hand and smiles, it grows small and shrunken as a daisy that is dead!'

CHAPTER III.

'Bulwer has said that none preserve imagination after forty; does anyone preserve illusions after thirty?' said a very pretty woman on her thirty-second birthday.

Her husband chivalrously replied, 'Any one who lives beside you will preserve them until he is a hundred.'

She looked at him dubiously, curiously, with a slight smile which was a little cynical and a little pensive.

'I was never famous for the culture of them,' she said, a little regretfully. 'I do not know why you should have found me so favourable to yours—if you have found me favourable,' she added, after a pause.

As the most eloquent and comprehensive answer he could give, he kissed her hands.

She glanced at her face in the mirror; she was certainly thirty-two years old on this last day of February. She did not like it; no woman likes it. The way is not actually longer because the traveller reads on a milestone the cipher which tells him how many thousands of yards he has traversed and has still to traverse, but the milestone suddenly and distastefully testifies to distance, and increases the sense of fatigue which the road has given. [20]

'If women had all a happy Euthanasia,' she said dreamily, 'when they reach the age I am now, what a good thing it would be for the world. On her thirtieth birthday every woman ought to be put to death; mercifully, poetically, as the girl dies in the "Faute de l'Abbé Mouret," stifled in flowers, but securely put to death.'

'The world,' said Othmar, smiling, 'would certainly be rid of its most perilous enchantresses if your proposal became law.'

'And how much prettier our drawing-rooms would look, and how much effort and heartburning would be spared, if every woman died before she began to "make up!" Do you know last night, in the mirror figure of the cotillion, as the men looked over my shoulder one by one, I forgot all about them. I only looked at my own face; it seemed to me that there was a sort of dimness in it, as there is on a photograph which has been some years done; not age exactly, but the shadow of age which was coming up behind me as the men were coming, and was looking over my shoulder as they looked. Why do you laugh? It was not agreeable to me. I was startled when the voice of Hugo de Rochefort came behind my ear, "Ah, Madame, is it possible? Do you reject us all?" I had quite forgotten where I was, and why they were all waiting. Perhaps Age only meant to say to me, "Do not stay for the cotillions any more!"'

'If Age did, it certainly found no man living to agree with it,' said her companion. 'If you will allow me to say so, I do not recognise you in this unusual phase of self-depreciation. What bee has stung you to-day?'

'Self-knowledge, I suppose. Whatever philosophers may declare to the contrary, it is a very uncomfortable companion.'

'Surely that depends on one's mood?'

'Everything in life depends on one's mood. When I am in another mood I shall say to myself that I have ten years left in which I shall be agreeable to myself and other people; that the young girls do not understand men and do not influence them; that a woman is always young so long as she retains her power to please and to be pleased. There are five hundred sophisms with which I can console myself, but just now I am not in a humour to be consoled by them. I am only sensible of what is very frightful to think of—that a woman is allotted threescore and ten years as well as a man, but that he may enjoy himself to the end of them, if only he keep his health; she comes to the close of her pleasures before her life is half lived. With her, the preface is exquisite, the poem is delightful, but the colophon is of such preposterous and odious length and dulness, that it is out of all proportion to the brevity of the romance.' [21]

He smiled. 'I know that it is always hopeless to convince you when you are in a pessimistic humour.'

'Oh yes; into one's character, as into the characters of others, one gets little flashes of real light here and there, now and then; the moments are not agreeable; they are the flashes of a policeman's lanthorn; while they are shining disguise is not possible.'

'What do you see when they flash upon me?'

'Not very much that I would have changed except your sentimentalities.'

'I am grateful.'

She looked at him curiously. 'Did you doubt it?'

He answered, 'Well, no; not precisely. But with such a character as yours one never knows.'

'Is not that the charm of my character?'

'I think it is the secret of your ascendancy. No one can be wholly, absolutely sure of what you are thinking far down in the recesses of your immense thoughts.'

'That was what people use to say of Louis Napoleon, and there never was a shallower creature. I think I have more profundity than he; but I have not so much as I had. Happiness is not intellectual; it tends to make one content, and content is stupidity; that is why Age looked into

the cotillion mirror to-night to remind me that I was getting stupid. No, you are not to pay me any compliments, my dear; after ten years of them they have a certain *fadeur*, though I am sure you are sincere when you make them.'

She smiled and rose.

This was her thirty-second birthday. That unpleasant and unpoetic fact shadowed life to her for the moment. She was still young enough, and had potent charm enough, of which she was fully conscious, to own it frankly. The world was still at her feet. She could afford to confess that she foresaw the time when it would not be so. True, in a way she would have a certain empire always. She would never altogether lose her power over the minds of men when she should lose it over their passions. But it would be a pale-grey kingdom, a sad shore, with sea-lavender blowing above silvery sand instead of her own Ogygia, with its world of roses and its smiling suns.

Face it with what courage and charm she may, the thought of age must always appal a woman. It takes so much; it offers nothing. True, some of the greatest passions the world has seen have been born after youth had long passed, and have burned on till death with deeper fires of sunset than ever dawn has seen. But a woman is not consoled by that possibility as morning slides past her and the shadows grow long. [22]

Othmar, without other reply, opened the door of her dressing-room, and there entered two small children, a boy and a girl with faces like flowers, and sweet rosy mouths, carrying a large gilded basket between them, filled with white lilac and gardenia. They came up to her hand in hand, not very certain upon their feet or in their speech, and bowed their little golden heads with pretty reverence, and stammered together with birdlike voices, '*Bonne fête, maman*.'

'Here are your eternal courtiers,' said their father. 'Time will make no difference in their worship of you.'

She smiled again, and took them together on her lap, and kissed them with tenderness, her hand playing with their soft, light curls.

But she said perversely, and a little sadly: 'My dear, how can one tell? That is only a phrase also. One never knows what children may become. In fifteen or twenty years' time Otho may send me a *sommation respectueuse*, because he wants to marry a circus-rider, and Xenia may hate me because I make her accept a grand-duke whilst she is in love with an attaché. One never can tell. They are fond of me now, certainly.'

'They will as certainly love you always.'

'What an optimist you have grown! It is flattering to me,' she answered, as she caressed the children and gave them some crystals of sugar. 'I cannot help seeing things as they are; you know I never could help it; and the relations of parents with their children, which are pretty and idyllic to begin with, are often apt to alter to very grim prose as time goes on, and separate interests arise to part them. Why does no sovereign who ever lived like his or her immediate heir? Why is the crown prince always arrayed against the crown?'

'I am very fond of my crown prince,' said Othmar, as he drew his young son to him.

'He is not a crown prince yet; he is a baby. Wait until he does want to marry that circus-rider, or until you see him take an opposite side in European politics to yourself. It is when the distinct Ego asserts itself in your child, in opposition to your own entity, that the separation begins and the antagonism rises.'

'You will always analyse so mercilessly!'

'I can never be content with the world's commonplaces and sophisms, if you mean that. And on this day, when I am thirty-two years old, no persuasion on earth would convince me that, when the time should come which will make me twice that age, I shall be anything but an unhappy woman. It will not console me in the least that my grandchildren may wish me *bonne fête*.' [23]

'I wonder if you are serious?'

'I was never more so, I assure you. Life is a series of losses; but a woman's losses outweigh a man's by a million. From the first little line she sees between her eyebrows or about her mouth, existence is nothing but a *dégringolade* for her. To say that she is compensated for the loss of her empire by becoming a grandmother is wholly absurd.'

'You always allot such a small space to the affections!'

'Madame de Sévigné allotted the largest that any clever woman ever did or could. Do you think the chill philosophies of Madame de Grignan rewarded her? Myself, *je n'ai pas cette bosse là*. You know it very well. I am fond of these children, because they are yours; but I do not think them in the least a compensation for growing old!'

'As if years mattered to a woman of your wit!'

She smiled.

'That is so like a man's clumsy idea of consolation. True, wit, in theory, is very much admired, but, practically, nobody cares much about it, unless it comes out of a handsome mouth. Men prefer white shoulders. And——'

'And your shoulders?' said Othmar, with a smile. 'Are they not of snow, and fit for Venus' self?'

'Oh, they are white as yet,' she cried indifferently.

'For myself,' he added, 'I shall be delighted when the faces of no aspirants are reflected in your

cotillion mirror. I detest all those men——'

'Oh no, you do not,' she said tranquilly. 'If there were none of them you would say to yourself, "Really, she is very much aged." A man's love is always so made up of pride and prejudice that if no one envy him what he has he soon ceases to value it. On the whole, men go much more by the opinion of the world than women do. A woman, if she take a fancy to a cripple, or a hunchback, or a *crétin*, makes herself ridiculous over him, without any regard to how she may be laughed at; but a man is always thinking of what they say at the clubs. In his most headlong follies he is always nervous about the opinion of the *galerie*.'

'You always think us such fools,' said Othmar, with some ill humour.

'Oh, no,' she said again with a smile, 'only I think you are, in a way, more conscientious than we are, and in another way more nervous. A woman, when she has a fancy for a thing, would burn down half the world to get at it; a man would hesitate to sacrifice so many cities and people, and would also be preoccupied with the idea that he would be badly placed in history for his exploit.'

'Then he is no true lover.' [24]

'Are there any true lovers?'

'I think you should be the last woman who could doubt it.'

'You want a compliment, but I shall not give it you. Or if you mean the others—well, perhaps they have been, or they are, true enough; but then that is only because a passion for me has always been thought *d'un chic incroyable*. I should believe in the love of a man if I were a milkmaid, but when to be in love with one is a mere fashion like the height of your wheels or the shape of your mail, one may question its single-mindedness. I have never, either, observed that the most devoted of them eat their dinner less regularly, or smoke less often when they were unhappy. Even you, yourself, when you were wasting with despair, did not refuse to dine or smoke.'

'Do not speak of that time,' said Othmar, with a look of distress. 'As for your complaint against us, we are mere machines in a great deal; the machine goes on mechanically in its daily exercise for its daily necessities; that movement of mechanism has nothing to do with the suffering of the soul. Nothing can be more unjust than to confuse the one with the other. You say a man cannot be a poet or a lover because he eats a truffled beefsteak. I say it is the mechanical part of him which eats the beefsteak, and eating it impairs neither his sensitive nerves nor his passions. As for smoking, it is a consolation because it is a sedative.'

'Admirably reasoned,' said Nadine, 'but you do not convince me. I am certain that the conventionalities and habits of modern life do diminish the forces of passion. When Tityæus was forsaken by Musidora, and had only the primæval woods, the *fons sylvæ*, the mountain solitudes, and the silent sheep, his grief could reign over him undivided; but nowadays, when he dines out every evening, is made to laugh whether he will or no, finds a hundred engagements waiting for every hour, and has the babble of the world eternally in his ear, his remembrance is of a very attenuated sort. I do not say that he suffers nothing, but I do say that he often forgets that he suffers.'

'I am not at all sure of that,' said Othmar, 'and what is more, I am almost disposed to think that the effort to affect indifference which Society compels, is much more suffering than the delightful permission which Nature gave your shepherd to be as miserable as he pleased, unchecked and unremarked. The world may cause the most excruciating torture to a man who is compelled to be in it and of it, while some great preoccupation makes every thought except one alien and hateful.'

'If the man have a great nature, perhaps. But how many have?'

'As many, or as few, as in the days of the shepherds. The ordinary Tityæus, I imagine, did not weep long for the ordinary Musidora, but soon tuned his pipe afresh and put new ribbons on his crook.' [25]

'I do not quite think that; I think all feelings were stronger, warmer, deeper, more concentrated in the earlier ages of the world. Nowadays we contrive to make everything absurd—our heroes, our poets, our sorrows, our loves, all are dwarfed by our treatment of them. Even death itself we have managed to make ridiculous, and strip of all its majesty. Ulysses' self would have looked grotesque if buried with the civil rites which attended Gambetta to his tomb, or the religious rites which mocked the prince of mockers, Disraeli. Whenever I die, I hope you will let me be carried by young children clad in white to some green grave in your own woods, where only a stag will come or a pretty hare. Will you be unconventional enough for that? Or will you be afraid of the French municipalities and the Russian popes? I should have courage to execute your last wishes so, but whether you will have the courage to execute mine——Men are so much more timid than women!'

'Do not talk of death!' said Othmar, with a passing shudder.

'Did I not say that men are cowards?'

'Not for ourselves; for those we love we are.'

She smiled a little contemptuously, a little sadly.

'Ah, my dear! who knows! Death would not be so dreadful to me as if I lived to incur Horace's reproach to Lyce. What is it? "*Fis anus, et tamen*," &c., &c., though that reproach perhaps belongs to a more unsophisticated age than our own. Nowadays the *perruquiers* let nobody get grey, and there are a great many grandmothers, even great-grandmothers, who are entirely charming—more charming than the girls who are just out.'

'I do not think you will ever go to the *perruquiers*, but you will always be charming, and you will never be old.'

'One would think you were my lover!'

'Why will you never believe that I am still so?'

'Because I do not believe in any miracles; I go to no Loretto. Love is a volatile precipitate, and marriage a solvent in which it disappears. If we are exceptions to that rule of chemistry and life, we are so extraordinarily exceptional that fate must have some dreadful punishment in store for us.'

'Or some exceptional reward.'

'Is not virtue always punished!' she said, with her enigmatical smile. 'You are a very handsome man, and have been the most poetic of lovers. But in the nature of things I grow used to your good looks, and in the nature of things you do not make love to me any longer. Love may be the most delightful thing in the world, but it cannot resist the pressure of daily intercourse. It is doomed when it has to look over a common visiting list, and scold the same house-steward about [26] the weekly expenditure. "*Ah—ouiche*, Madame!" said one of the peasants at Amyôt to me once, "where is love when you dip two spoons in one soup-pot?—you only quarrel about the onions." That is always the fault of marriage. It is always putting two spoons in one pot. Whether it is an earthen pitcher or a Cellini vase does not make the least difference. Poor love runs away from the clash of the spoons.'

Othmar laughed, but he was irritated. 'I should be miserable if I believed you were in earnest,' he said impatiently. 'But I know you would sacrifice your own life to an epigram.'

'I am entirely in earnest,' she replied. 'But if you do not believe me that shows that you are a less changeable man than most, or I a wiser woman. Ah, my dear,' she added, with a smile and a sigh, 'when men do not admire me any longer then you will not admire me either, I imagine; I wonder you do as it is—you see so much of me!'

'I shall adore you all my life,' said Othmar, with almost as much fervour as when he had been the most impassioned and the most hopeless of her lovers.

'You fancy so; and that is very pretty in you, after so many years; but it does not follow that you will think so still in twelve months' time,' said his wife, with the smile of her incurable scepticism upon her lips. 'And do not insist on it too much. Things which are insisted on too much have a knack of making themselves tiresome, and you know of old that repetition has no great charm for me, and say what you will you cannot prevent me from feeling that very soon I shall grow old!'

She rose and looked over her shoulder at the silver-framed mirror with its three glasses, showing her profile to her as she turned.

'I could not brave the sunrise after a ball *now*,' she thought, with a little pang.

'Has not a poet said,' she added aloud:

I fear
Life's many changes; not Death's changelessness?'

There was a touch of graver sadness in the tone with which she quoted the line of verse, which forbade reply either by persiflage or compliment.

Othmar kissed her hand with almost the same emotion as when he had declared to her a passion hopeless, and therefore for the time changeless; and he remained mute.

'The same poet says:

Love's words are weak, but not Love's silences,'

she added, with a smile. 'Well, I will believe you——as yet.'

[27] She had in nowise resigned the power of, and the diversion afforded her by, what in a lesser person would have been called endless flirtation. She amused herself constantly with the follies of men and their subjugation.

'If you do not make yourself attractive to others, the man to whom you care to be attractive will soon not find you so,' she was wont to say. 'Those women who make themselves a statue of fidelity, like the Queen in the "Winter's Tale," will soon be left alone on their pedestals. Be as faithful as you please, but show him that you have every temptation and opportunity to be unfaithful if you did please.'

It was on those lines that she had traced her conduct, and whilst her world knew that she was unaltered in coquetry, if coquetry her languid charm and domination could be called, it also saw that she was equally unaltered in profound and universal indifference to all those whom she subjugated. Othmar, as he said, would have preferred that she should subjugate none. But she frankly told him that it was of no use to wish for subversion of the laws of nature. 'I am as nature made me,' she said once to him. 'If you did not like the way I was made, why did you not leave me alone? You had plenty of time to study me. I am like Disraeli, I like power. Now the only power possible to a woman is that which she possesses over men. If men were more interesting, the power would be more interesting too. But then it is not our fault. It is perhaps the fault of the millions of stupid women who swallow up the occasional originality of men as sand swallows up the bits of agate and cornelian on the shore. It is the fashion to say that it is the wicked, clever women who hurt men. That is not the case; it is the good silly ones who make of life the sahara of commonplaces and of blunders which it is. Talent will at least always understand; blameless

stupidity understands nothing.'

She was somewhat more, rather than less, of a *charmeuse* than she had been. It was so natural to her to charm the lives of men that she could have as soon ceased to breathe as to cease to use her power over them. There were times when Othmar grew irritated and jealous, but she was unmoved by his anger.

'It is a much greater compliment to you that men should admire me,' she said to him, 'and it would look supremely absurd if I lapsed into a *bonne bourgeoise*, and always went everywhere arm-in-arm with you. I should not know myself. You would not know me. Be content. You are aware that I think very little about any one of them; they are none of them so interesting as you used to be. But I must have them about me. They are like my fans; I never scarcely use a fan or look at one, but still a fan is indispensable; it is a part of one's toilette.'

Othmar, who retained for her much of the imperious and perfervid passion which he had had as a lover, resigned himself with a bad grace to her arguments. Something of the old tyrannical feeling with which he would once have liked to bear her out of sight and hearing of the world for ever still moved in him at times, though he had grown diffident of displaying it, having grown afraid of her delicate ironies. [28]

'It is so good for him,' she said to herself; 'that sort of irritation and jealousy keeps his affections and his admirations alive: they are not allowed to go to sleep, as both have a knack of going to sleep in marriage. Anything is less dangerous than stagnant water. If a man be not made jealous he must drift imperceptibly into indifference. Monotony is like a calm at sea; everyone yawns, and in time even a shark would be welcomed as a delightful interruption. To avoid sameness is the first requisite for the endurance of love. If he love me as much as he did nine years ago—and I think he does—it is only because at the bottom of his heart he never feels absolutely sure of me. He has always a faint unacknowledged sense that I may any day do something entirely unexpected by him; may even fly away, as a bird does, off a bough which it has tired of. I am like a book of alchemy to him, of which he has mastered all the secrets save just one or two lines, but in which those lines always remain in unintelligible abracadabra to perplex and interest him. He will never tire of the book till he thinks he can decipher those lines. It is a mistake to suppose that men are only allured by their senses; there is an intellectual mystery which fascinates them, and which is not so easily exhausted. All men are amused by me, all men are more or less attracted by me. I should not wish my husband, alone of all men, to become tired of me. Of course it is very difficult to prevent it when he is so used to me, but I think it is possible.'

A feeble woman, a dull woman, a woman of that kind of self-complacency which goes with stupidity, would not have allowed so much even in her own thoughts; but she, who was deemed the vainest of her kind, had no such vanity wherewith to deceive herself. Her high intelligence and her unerring penetration were glasses forever turned upon herself no less than upon others. Othmar was at times surprised and almost irritated that she left him so often to go on her own visits or travels, or sent him alone upon his. But she knew very well what she did.

'Frequent absences are like those pauses in the music which in French we call *silences*, and in German *Pausen*,' she said to herself. 'They make us care for the music more than we should do if it were always on our ear. Monotony is the most terrible enemy that affection or enjoyment ever has. Unfortunately, most women are so eternally monotonous that they can never understand why men are not as pleased with the defect as they are themselves. Lord Beaconsfield was not an apostle of love, but he was a shrewd observer of mankind, and I always think that he suggested the most admirable phase of modern love possible, when he depicted two people who were fond of one another as going their different ways every evening to different houses, and meeting again to talk it all over with champagne and chicken at dawn. If people are always together in the same places, what have they left to tell one another in their own house? Myself, I don't like either champagne or chicken, but that is a mere matter of detail. You can say, Rhine wine and green oysters, or yellow tea and Russian cigarettes. It is, no doubt, only another form of vanity; but I wish our lives not to break down and drift away in little bits of wreck wood, as most peoples' lives do. It is not goodness in me; it is only *amour propre*.' [29]

She had more sympathy for him than she would in other years have supposed herself capable of feeling, but with her regard for him there was mingled that habit of analysis which was so inveterate in her, and that indulgence to his weaknesses which arose from her condescending comprehension of them. She, as yet, made the preservation of his admiration her study, but in her study there was blended the sense of amusement and disdain, which always came to her before the inconsistencies and the unwisdom of men. She loved him perhaps; but she never failed to weigh him accurately. To Yseulte, he had been as a lord and a god; to her he was dearer than other men, but not more imposing. Even when the first winelike fumes of awakened passion had touched her, she had been clear of judgment and unerring in vision. She had said to herself: 'He looked larger than others once, through the mists of my preference, but he is not so really.'

CHAPTER IV.

When he saw the beauty of her children, Friedrich Othmar relented in that unsparing bitterness which he felt against her. As a woman he still hated her intensely, unspeakably, unchangeably, but as their mother he had respect for her, and almost pardon.

'He will be childless all his days,' he had said with certainty and scorn. 'That bloodless *mondaine*, that ethereal coquette will leave the name barren; she is all brain and nerve; she will never give birth to anything save an epigram.'

When his words had been disproved, he had rendered her a sullen honour. He would take no joy in the children as he would have taken joy in Yseulte's; but they were there to bear the name he [30] thought so precious, and he was forced to confess that no lovelier or stronger or healthier creatures than the young Otho and his sister Xenia ever could have played beneath the oak-boughs of Amyôt.

But the old man was faithful to the one innocent affection which had ever lived in his selfish breast; with an aching heart he would often turn from watching these children tumble amongst the daisies in the sunshine, and find his way to a solitary tomb made in white marble in the mausoleum of Amyôt, in memory of her whose slender crushed body lay buried amongst the violets by the sea of the southern shore.

'All that weight of marble!' he thought, 'and not one little sigh of regret!'

Not one; unless he gave it.

'I hate this Russian woman, but I am bound to say that the children are beautiful,' he said once to Melville. 'I am bound to say, too, that she has made a change for the better in Otho. Since he has discovered (doubtless) that every *grande passion* has its perihelion and its decline, he has become more like other men. He has interested himself in the welfare of the House. He has condescended to be conscious that Europe exists. He has lived the natural life of the world, and has, I think, ceased to wish himself a wandering Wilhelm Meister, a François Villon without a rag to his back. My poor dead child only loved him, and could do nothing to attach him to life or to detach him from his fantastic preoccupations and morbid demands for the impossible. This woman has made him so in love with the actual, with the real, that he has ceased to dream of the ideal. He has even grown aware that his own fate is an enviable one, which for thirty years of his life he obstinately denied.'

'It is a questionable benefit to make a man abandon the ideal,' said Melville. 'I think, however, that Othmar's feeling was always rather impatience of existing facts than thirst of any impalpable perfection. You believe that a discontented man is necessarily an imaginative man. It does not follow. Imagination may perhaps create discontent; but then, on the other hand, it may console it. If he had had imagination enough, he would have found out a thousand idealised ways of using his great wealth.'

'Thank heaven, then, that he has so little,' said Friedrich Othmar. 'Myself, I always considered that he had a great deal too much. I do not underrate imagination in its proper place. None of the great events of the world would have taken place without it: every great revolutionist, every great conqueror, every great statesman, even, must possess it; but it is a perilous quality, singularly similar to nitro-glycerine; you can never be certain of the hour and the sphere of its action; it may pierce a new road for humanity to use after it, or it may wreck nations and send [31] humanity backward by a thousand years.'

'I should not mind going back a thousand years,' murmured Melville. 'Basil was living, and Augustine.'

Since the death of Yseulte these two men, so dissimilar, even so inharmonious, had become in a manner friends. Their mutual pain had drawn them together. The thought which was the same in the minds of each, and which each understood in the other without speech, made a link of union between them. Both divined the secret of her death. Neither ever spoke of it.

'He is a priest, but he is a man,' said Friedrich Othmar of Melville, who in turn said of him:

'He is encrusted all over with gold, egotism, and disbelief; but beneath that crust there is the heart of humanity.'

And they shook hands across the profound gulf of sentiment and opinion which divided them.

'I think that, for once, the wise Baron is mistaken,' reflected Melville, without saying his thoughts aloud. 'Othmar may have grown less imaginative, because most men do as they grow older, unless they be truly poets. But I do not think he is a whit more contented. I believe, if he could see into his heart, that he has found his apple of paradise not very much richer in flavour than a common rennet!'

But he forbore to say so. What business was it of his? Only, being the profound student of the comedy and tragedy of humanity that he was, he could not help feeling a keen interest in watching the issues of this marriage of love.

Melville, like all persons of fine penetration and quick sympathies, was deeply interested in all characters which were out of the common lines of human nature, and whenever his busy years had any leisure he spent it where he could observe all those who interested him most.

Of all these the Lady of Amyôt had the most powerful interest for him. But for his years and his priest's frock, it might have been a more tender and profound sentiment still with which she

inspired him. For Melville, as for all men of intellect, the very despondency she cast over them, the very intricacy and unsatisfying changeability of her character, possessed the most powerful charm. But whether these were qualities which would make *bon ménage* in the familiarity and the triviality of daily life—of this he was not so sure.

CHAPTER V.

She, who had been so exacting as a friend, was not in any way exacting as a wife. There were a generosity and a breadth of thought in her, which made her accord freedom in proportion to what lesser minds would have considered her right to deny it. She held the whole ordinary mass of womanhood in too absolute a disdain for her ever to stoop to the same ways and weaknesses as theirs. She might have been the most despotic of mistresses: she was the most lenient of wives. Tyranny, which would have seemed, did still seem, to her natural and amusing when used over lives which in no way belonged to her, would have appeared to her *bourgeois* and ridiculous exercised over her husband: that sort of thing was only fit for two shopkeepers of Belleville. She had too supreme a scorn for the Penelopes of the world, whose jealousy was as impotent as their charms, not to let the reins which she drew so tightly over others lie loose and unfelt on the shoulders of Othmar.

'Penelope thinks that no object in all created nature is more lovely and important than her distaff; naturally Ulysses gets sick of the sight of it,' she said once. 'Why are all women, in love with their husbands, much more miserable than those who detest them? Only because they insist upon giving so much of themselves, that the men grow to view them with absolute terror, as the Strasbourg goose views the balls of maize paste. Love is an art, and ought to be dealt with artistically; in marriage, it has to contend with such insuperable difficulties that it needs to be most delicate, most sagacious, most forbearing, most intelligent, to surmount them. Instead of which, women, usually, who have any love for their husbands at all, look on them as so much property inalienably assigned to them, and treat them as Cosmo dei Medici treated Florence: "*Mi piace più distruggerla che perderla!*"'

Othmar himself had changed little; men at his years do not alter physically, though great changes, moral and mental, may in brief time transform their feelings and their ambitions.

Women looked at him inquisitively many a day, to try and see whether that great wonder-flower of romantic passion, which had astonished his world in a generation in which such passions are rare, had brought forth contentment or disenchantment. But they could not be sure. No one had ever succeeded in making him unfaithful to this great love, which had been merged in marriage, but no one had ever penetrated his confidence sufficiently to satisfy themselves whether any disillusion had followed on the fulfilment of those dreams and desires, to which he had been willing to sacrifice his life, his honour, and his soul. All that society in general, or his most [33] familiar friends could see, was the outward pageantry of a life in the great world; that life which leaves so little space for thought, so little time for regret, so little leisure for conscience to speak or memory to waken. If he were not entirely content he allowed no one to suspect so; and he did not even like to admit it to his own reflections: yet there were times when life did not seem to him much more complete than it had done before he had attained the supreme desire of his heart; there were times when the old vague indefinite dissatisfaction came back to him—the sense of emptiness which moved the Cæsars of Rome with the world at their feet.

'I suppose it is inevitable,' he said to himself. 'I suppose she is right; nothing on earth is content except a sucking child and an oyster.'

It irritated him that he should be pursued by this foolish and shapeless sense of still missing something, still desiring something, still seeking something unknown and unknowable; but it was there at the bottom of most of his thoughts, at the core of most of his feelings.

'You have had a great misfortune all your life,' Friedrich Othmar said once to him. 'You have always had all your wishes granted you. When a child is indulged in that way he kicks his nurse, when a man is indulged in that way he sulks at destiny. It is human nature.'

'Human nature,' said Othmar, 'according to you and Nadège, is such a consummate fool that it is scarcely worth the bread it eats, much less the elaborate analysis which philosophers have expended on it from Solomon to Renan.'

Friedrich Othmar shrugged his shoulders.

'It is not always a fool,' he made answer; 'but it is, I think, always an ingrate.'

Was he himself an ingrate? Or did he only suffer from that inevitable law of recoil and rebound which governs human life; that cessation of tension which makes a great passion, once satisfied and become familiar, like a bow unstrung?

There is always a pathetic reaction, a curious sense of loss in the midst of possession, which follows on the attainment of every great desire. If anyone had told him that he was not perfectly happy, he would have indignantly denied the accuracy of their assertion. Whenever any misgiving that he was not so arose in his own mind, he repulsed it with contempt as the mere ungrateful rebelliousness of human nature. Yet now and then a vague sense that his life was not much more perfect than it had been before the desires of his heart had been given to him, occasionally came over him, though he always thrust it away.

She herself felt sometimes an almost irresistible inclination to say to him; 'And you, you who set your soul on marriage with me, have you found the lasting joys that you expected, or have you [34] learned that the fulfilment of a dream is never quite the dream itself—has always some glory wanting?'

But she refrained. Women are always so unwise when they ask those questions, she reflected; so like children who pull up the plants in their garden to see what growth or what roots they have.

'We are just like anybody else, after all!' she did say once, with a mingling of despondency and of humour. 'I suppose we cannot escape from the age we live in, which is neither original nor imaginative, nor anything that I know of, except feverish and unhappy. Mr. Lawrence Oliphant, certainly, is gone to live in Syria, and we might do the same, but would it be any better? Do you think life is any larger there? I should be afraid there are only more mosquitoes.'

'I imagine we should only find in Syria what we took there, as Madame de Swetchine said of Rome,' replied Othmar, with some discontent. 'Life is an incomplete thing; unsatisfactory because its passions are finite, its years few, and its time of slow development and of slow decline wholly disproportionate, as you said just now, to its short moment of attainment and maturity; and also because habit, routine, prejudice, human stupidity, have all contrived to weight it with unnecessary burdens, to bind it with needless and intolerable laws, to take all the glow and spontaneity and rebound out of it. Conventionality is its curse.'

'And marriage!' said his wife. 'Oh, my dear, I do not mean to be unpleasant, but you know it is indisputably true that I should have been much fonder of you, and you of me, if we had never married each other. There is something stifling in marriage; it confounds love with property. I often wonder how the human race ever contrived to make such a mistake popular or universal.'

'It is not I who say that,' said Othmar with a touch of embarrassment.

'Oh no; but you think it. Every man thinks it,' she replied tranquilly. 'I often wonder,' she continued more dreamily, 'how it will be when you love some other woman. You will some day—of course you will. I wonder what will happen——'

'How can you do such injustice to me and to yourself? I shall never care for any other living thing.'

She looked at him through the shadow of her drooped lids.

'Oh yes, you will,' she repeated. 'It is inevitable. The only thing I am not sure about is how I shall take it. It will all depend, I think, on whether you confide in me, or hide it from me.'

'It would be a strange thing to confide in you!'

'Not at all. That is a conventional idea, and the idea of a stupid man. You are not stupid. I should certainly be the person most interested in knowing such a fact, and if you did tell me frankly, I think—I think I should be unconventional and clever enough not to quarrel with you. I think I should understand. But if you hid it from me, then——' [35]

The look passed over her face which the dead Napraxine had used to fear as a hound fears the whip, and which Othmar had never seen.

'Then, I give you leave to deal me any death you like with your own hand,' he said with a laugh, which was a little forced because a certain chill had passed over him.

She laughed also.

'Well, be wise,' she said as she rose; 'you are warned in time. Oh, my dear Otho, you grant yourself that every passion is finite. I think it is; but I think also that the wise people, when it fades, make it leave friendship and sympathy behind it, as the beautiful blowing yellow corn when it is cut leaves the wheat. The foolish people let it leave all kinds of rancour, envy, and uncharitableness, as the brambles and weeds when they are burnt only leave behind them a foul smoke. But it is so easy to be philosophic in theory!'

'Your philosophy far exceeds mine,' said Othmar with a little impatience. 'I have not yet reached the period at which I can calmly contemplate my green April fields laid sear to give corn to the millstones; they are all in flower with the poppy and the campion.'

'Very prettily said,' replied his wife. 'You really are a poet at heart.'

Othmar went out from her presence that day with a vague sense of depression and of apprehension.

He had never wavered in his great love for her; the great passion with which she had inspired him still remained with him ardent and profound in much; the charm she had for his intelligence sustained the seduction for his senses; he loved her, only her, as much and as exclusively as in the early days of his acquaintance with her; she still remained the one woman upon earth for him. He could not hear her calmly speak of any future in which she would be less than then to him without a sense of irritation and offence. It seemed to him that such deliberate and unsparing analysis as hers could not exist side by side with any very intense feeling. Certainly he was used to it in her; he was accustomed to her delicate and critical dissection of every human motive and impulse, his, her own, or those of others; but it touched him now with a sense of pain, as though the scalpel had penetrated to some open nerve. His consciousness of his own devotion to her made him indignantly repulse the suggestion that he could ever change; yet his own knowledge of the nature of humanity and of the work of time told him that she had had truth on [36] her side when she had said that such a change might come, would come; and he thrust the consciousness of that truth away as an insult and affront. Was there nothing which would endure and resist the cruel slow sapping of the waves of time? Was there no union, passion, or fidelity, strong enough to stand the dull fallings of the years like drops of grey rain which beat down the drooping rose and change it from a flower of paradise to a poor, pale, scentless wreck of itself?

CHAPTER VI.

On this the unwelcome anniversary of her birth, she was at St. Pharamond, which had been connected with the grounds of La Jacquemerille by the purchase, at great cost, of all the intervening flower-fields and olive-woods. It had been her whim to do so, and Othmar had not opposed it, though he would have preferred never again to see those shores; but, although she never spoke to him on that subject, she herself chose to go there with most winters, for the very reason that the world would sooner have expected her to shun the scenes of Yseulte's early and tragic death. She invariably did whatever her society expected her not to do, and the vague sense of self-blame with which her conscience was moved, whenever she remembered the dead girl, was sting enough to make her display an absolute oblivion and indifference which, for once, she did not feel.

She never remained long upon the Riviera; she seldom stayed long anywhere, except it were at Amyôt; but she went thither always when the violets were thick in the valleys, and the yellow blossoms of the butterwort were flung like so many golden guineas over the brown furrows of the fields. The children spent the whole winter there. This day, when they had wished her *bonne fête*, and brought her their great baskets of white lilac and gardenias, she was indulgent to them, and took them with her in her carriage for a drive after her noonday breakfast. She was not a woman to whom the babble and play of children could ever be very long interesting; her mind was too speculative, too highly cultured, too exacting to give much response to the simplicity, the ignorance, and the imperfect thoughts of childhood. But in her own way she loved them. In her own way she took great care of their education, physical and mental. She wished her son to become a man whom the world would honour; and she wished her daughter to be wholly unlike herself.

As yet they were hardly more than babies; lovely, happy, gay, and gentle. 'Let them be young as long as they can,' she said to those entrusted with their training. 'I was never young. It is a great loss. One never wholly recovers it in any after years.' [37]

It was a fine day, mild, sunny, with light winds shaking the odour from the orange buds; such a day as that on which Platon Napraxine had died. She did not think of him.

Several years had gone away since then; the whole world seemed changed; the dead past had buried its dead; there were the two golden-haired laughing children in symbol and witness of the present.

'Decidedly, however philosophic we may be, we are all governed at heart by sentiment,' she thought, as the carriage rolled through the delicate green of the blossoming woods. 'And by beauty,' she added, as her eyes dwelt on the faces of Otho and Xenia, who were the very flower and perfection of childish loveliness; ideal children also, who were always happy, always caressing, always devoted to each other, and whose little lives were as pretty as those of two harebells in a sunny wood. Why were they dear to her, and sweet and charming? Why had the physical pain of their birth been forgotten in the mental joys of their possession? Why did her eyes delight to follow their movements, and her ear delight to listen to their laughter?

The other children had been as much hers, and she had always disliked them; she disliked them still, such time as she went to their Russian home to receive their annual homage, and that of all her dependents.

Othmar was devoted to the interests of Napraxine's two little sons; an uneasy consciousness, often recurrent to him, that he had not merited the frank and steady friendship of the dead man, perpetually impelled him to the greatest care of their fortunes and education. They were kindly, stupid, vigorous little lads, likely to grow into the image of their dead father; but all that could be done for them in mind and body, for their present and their future, he took heed should be done; and placing them under wise and gentle teachers, endeavoured to counteract the fatal instincts to vanity and overbearing self-esteem which the adulation and submission they received everywhere on their estates had implanted in them long before they could spell. He never saw them come into his presence without painful memories and involuntary repugnance; but he repressed all signs of either, and the children, if they feared him, liked him. Of their mother they saw but very little: a lovely delicate vision, in an atmosphere scented like a tea rose, with a little sound in her voice which made them feel they must tread softly and speak low, looked at them with an expression which they did not understand, and touched them with cool fragrant lips lightly and distantly, and they knew she was their mother because they had always heard so: but Othmar seemed nearer to them than she did, and when they wished for anything, it was to him that they addressed their little rude scrawled notes. For the rest, they were always in Russia: it was the only stipulation with which their father had hampered their mother's guardianship of them. [38]

'Let them be Russians always,' he had said in his last letter to her. 'Let them love no soil but Russia. The curse of Russians is the foreign life, the foreign tongue, the foreign ways, which draw them away from their people, make their lands unknown and indifferent to them, and lead them to squander on foreign cities and on foreign wantons the roubles wrung by their stewards in their absence from their dependents. Paris is the *succursale* of Petersburg, and it is also its hell. When the Russian nobles shall live in their own homes, the Nihilist will have little justification, and the Jew will be unable to drain the peasantry as a cancer drains the blood. I preach what I have not practised. But if I could live my life again, I would spend my strength, and my gold, and my years amongst my own people.'

'Poor Platon!' she had thought, more than once remembering those words. 'He thinks he would have done so, but he would not. The first *drôlesse* who should have crossed the frontier would have taken him back with her in triumph. It is quite true what he says; an absent nobility leaves an open door behind them, through which Sedition creeps in to jump upon their vacant chairs. But so long as ever they have the power, men will go where they are amused, and the Russian *tchin* will not stay in the provinces, in the snow, with the wolves, and the Jews, and the drunken villagers all around his house, when he can live in the Avenue Joséphine, and never hear or see anything but what pleases him. Absenteeism ruined Ireland, and will ruin Russia; but, *tant que le monde est monde*, the man who has only one little short life of his own will like to enjoy it.'

Nevertheless, she and Othmar both respected his wishes, and his boys were brought up in the midst of the vast lands of their heritage, with everything done that could be done by tuition to amend their naturally slow intelligence and outweigh the stubbornness and arrogance begotten by centuries of absolute dominion in the race they sprang from. She herself only saw them very rarely, when, in midsummer weather, the flowering seas of grass and the scent of the violets in the larch woods brought life and warmth even to North-eastern Russia. They were unpleasant to her: always unpleasant. They were the living and intrusive records of years she would willingly have effaced. They were involuntary but irresistible reproaches spoken, as it were, by lips long dumb in death.

Living, their father had never had power to do otherwise than offend, irritate, and disgust her: the least active sentiment against himself that he had ever roused in her had been a contemptuous pity. But dead, there were moments when Platon Napraxine acquired both dignity and strength in her eyes: the silence of his death and its cause had commanded her respect: he had been wearisome, stupid, absurd, troublesome, in all his life; but in his death he had gained a certain grandeur, as features quite coarse and commonplace will look solemn and white on their bier. [39]

He had died to defend her name, and she could not remember ever once having given him one kind word! There had been a greatness in his loyalty and in his sacrifice to its demands which outweighed the clumsiness of his passion and the grotesqueness of his ignorance. 'If he were living again, I should be as intolerant of him as I ever was,' she thought at times; 'he would annoy me as much as ever, he would be as ridiculous, he would be as odious; and yet I should like for once to be able to say to him "*Pauvre ours! vous êtes mal léché, mais vous avez bon cœur!*"'

It was a vague remorse, but a sincere one; yet in her nature it irritated and did not alter her. It was an intrusive thought, and unwelcome as had been his presence. She thrust it away as she had used to bid her women lock the doors of her chamber; and the poor ghost went away obediently, timid, wistful, not daring to insist, as the living man had used to do from the street door.

Remorse is a vast persistent shadow in the poet's metrical romance and the dramatist's tragic story; but in the great world, in the pleasant world, in the world of movement, of distraction, of society, it is but a very faint mist, which at very distant intervals clouds some tiny space in a luminous sky, and hurries away before a breath of fashion, a whisper of news, a puff of novelty, as though conscious of its own incongruity and want of tact.

When their drive was over this day she dismissed the young Otho and his sister to their nurses and teachers, and remained on the sea-terrace of St. Pharamond with some friends about her. It was the last day in February, a day of warm winds and full sunshine and fragrant warmth. The air was penetrated with the sweet breath of primroses and the scented narcissus which were blossoming by millions under the woods of St. Pharamond. The place had been beautiful before, and under her directions had become as perfect a sea palace as the south coast of Europe could show anywhere. She had had a terrace made; a long line of rose-coloured marble overhanging the sea, backed by palms and araucarias, with sheltered seats that no angry breeze could find out, and wide staircases descending to the smooth sands below. Here, lying on the cushions and white bearskins, and leaning one elbow on the balustrade, she could watch all the width of the waters as they stretched eastward and westward, and see the manœuvres in the cupraces of her friends' vessels without moving from her own garden. To the sea-terrace, when it was known that she would receive them, came, on such sunny afternoons as this, all those whom she deigned to encourage of the pleasure-seekers on the coast. [40]

To see the sun set from that rose-marble terrace, and to take a Russian cigarette or a cup of caravan tea beneath those araucaria branches, was the most coveted distinction and one of the surest brevets of fashion in the world. She refused so many; she received so few; she was so inexorable in her social laws; mere rank alone had no weight with her; ambassadors could pass people to courts, but not up those rose-coloured stairs; princes and princesses, if they were dull, had no chance to be made welcome; and, in fine, to become an *habitué* there required so many perfections that the majority of the great world never passed the gates at all.

'The first qualification for admittance is that they must find something new to say every day,' she said to the Duc de Béthune, who was in an informal way her first chamberlain. 'The second is, that they must always amuse me.'

'The first clause a few might perhaps fulfil; but who shall attain to fulfilment of the second?'

'That will remain to be seen,' she said with a little yawn, while she reclined on the white furs and the Eastern tissues, her feet on a silver globe of hot water and her hands clasped idly on a tortoiseshell field-glass. It was five o'clock; the western sky was a burning vault of rose and gold; the zenith had the deep divine blue that is like nothing else in all creation; the sea was radiant,

purple here, azure there, opal elsewhere, as the light fell on it; delicate winds blew across it violet-scented from the land; the afternoon sun was warm, and as its light deepened made the pale rose of the marbles glow like the flowers of a pomegranate tree. She forgot her companions; she leaned her head against her cushions and dreamily thought of many things; of the day she had first come thither most of all. It had been nine years before.

Nine years!—what an eternity! She remembered the bouquet which Othmar had given her on the head of the sea-stairs. What a lover he had been!—a lover out of a romance—Lelio, Ruy Blas, Romeo—anything you would. What a pity to have married him! It had been commonplace, *banal*, stupid—anybody would have done it. There had been a complete absence of originality in such a conclusion to their story.

If Laura had married Petrarca, who would have cared for the sonnets?

[41] She laughed a little as she thought so. Her companions hoped they had succeeded in amusing her. She had not heard a word they were saying. She gazed dreamily at the sea through her eyelids, which looked shut, and pursued her own reflections.

Her companions of the moment were all men; the most notable of them were Melville, the Duc de Béthune, and a Russian, Loris Loswa.

Melville, on the wing between Rome and Paris, loitered a week or two in Nice, doing his best to shake alms for good works out of the sinners there, and lifting up the silver clarion of his voice against the curse of the *tripot* with unsparing denunciation.

The Duc de Béthune was there because for twelve years of his still young life he had been uneasy whenever many miles were between him and the face of his lady, whom he adored with the hopeless and chivalrous passion of which he had sustained the defence at the Court of Love at Amyôt. He would have carried her muff or her ribbon to the scaffold, like d'Aubiac and Montmorin, whom he had cited there. He had been almost the only one of her lovers whom she had deigned to take the trouble to preserve as a friend. He had been inspired at first sight with an intense passion for her, which had coloured and embittered some of the best years of his life. On the death of Napraxine he had been amongst the first to lay the offer of his life at her feet. She had rejected him, but without her customary mockery, even with a certain regret; and she had employed all the infinite power of her charms and tact of her intelligence to retain him as a companion whilst rejecting him as a suitor. Such a position had seemed at first impossible to him, and had been long painful; but at last he chose rather to see her on those distant terms than never, and gradually, as time passed on, he grew familiarised to the sight of her as the wife of Othmar, and the love he bore to her softened into regard, and lost its sting and its torment.

In person he was handsome and distinguished-looking to a great degree; he resembled the portrait of Henri Quatre, and bore himself like the fine soldier he was; he had a grave temperament and a romantic fancy; the cradle of his race was a vast dark fortress overhanging the iron-bound rocks of Finisterre, and his early manhood had been ushered in by the terrible tragedies of the *année terrible*. As volunteer with the Army of the North, Gui de Béthune had seen the darkest side of war and life; he had been but a mere youth then, but the misfortunes of his country had added to the natural seriousness of his northern temper. The most elegant of gentlemen in the great world of Paris, he yet had never abandoned himself as utterly as most men of his age and rank to the empire of pleasure; there was a certain reserve and dignity in him which became the cast of his features and the gravity and sweetness of his voice. [42]

But he never loved any other woman. And unconsciously to herself she was so used to consider that implicit and exclusive devotion to her as one of her rights, that she would have been astonished, even perhaps annoyed, had she seen that he took his worship elsewhere. Her remembrance had spoiled twelve years of the promise of his manhood, but if anyone had reproached her with that, she would have said sincerely enough, 'I cannot help his adoring me.' She would have even taken credit to herself for the unusual kindliness with which she had endeavoured to turn the sirocco of love into the mild and harmless breeze of friendly sympathy.

The Duc de Béthune was one of those conquests which flattered even her sated and fastidious vanity; and she had been touched to unwonted feeling by the delicate, chivalrous, and lofty character of the loyalty he gave her so long.

She jested at him often, but she respected him always; occasionally she irritated Othmar by saying to him, half in joke and half in earnest:

'Sometimes I almost wish that I had married Béthune!'

That he remained unmarried for her sake was always agreeable to her.

Loris Loswa was, on the contrary, one of the gayest of her many servitors. By birth noble and poor, he had been early compromised in a students' revolt at Kieff, and through family influence had been allowed self-exile instead of deportation to Tobolsk. He had turned his steps to Paris, and, possessing great facility for art, had pursued the study seriously and so successfully, that before he was thirty he had become one of the most noted artists in France.

He had a wonderful talent for the portraiture of women. No one rendered with so much grace, so much charm, so much delicate flattery, running deftly in the lines of truth, the peculiar beauties of the *mondaine*, in which, however much nude nature may have done, art always does still more. All that subtle, indescribable loveliness of the woman of society, which is made up of so many details of tint and costume, and manner and style, and a thousand other subtle indescribable things, was caught and fixed by the brush or by the crayon of Loris Loswa with a power all his own, and a fidelity which became the most charming of compliments. Ruder artists, truer perhaps

to art than he, grumbled at his method and despised his renown. '*Faiseur de chiffons*' some students wrote once upon his door; and there were many of his brethren who pretended that his creations were nothing more than audacious, and unreally brilliant, trickeries.

But detraction did not lock the wheels of his triumphal chariot; it glided along with inconceivable rapidity through the pleasant avenues of popular admiration. And his art pleased too many connoisseurs of elegant taste and cultured sight not to have in it some higher and finer qualities than his enemies allowed to it. He had magical colouring, and as magical a touch; a woman's portrait, under his treatment, became gorgeous as a sunbird, delicate as an orchid, ethereal as a butterfly floating down a sunbeam. Then he was at times arrogant in his pretensions, fastidious in his selections of sitters; he was given to call himself an amateur, which at once disarmed his critics and increased his vogue; he was an aristocrat, and very good-looking, which did not diminish his popularity with any class of women; and what increased it still more was, that he refused many more sitters than he accepted. Not to have been painted in water colours, or drawn in pastel by Count Loris Loswa, was to any *élégante* to be a step behindhand in fashion; to have a pearl missing from her crown of distinction. [43]

'If anyone could paint dew on a cobweb it would be Loswa,' a great critic had said one day. 'Have you never seen dew on a cobweb? It is the most beautiful thing in the world, especially when a sunbeam trembles through it.'

His present hostess had a high opinion of his powers, mingled with a certain depreciation of them. 'Perhaps it is only a trick,' she admitted; 'but it is a divine trick—a trick of Hermes.'

He leaned now over the balustrade of the terrace of St. Pharamond, the warmth of the western sun shining on his fair curls and straight profile.

'A coxcomb can never be a genius,' murmured the Duc de Béthune, glancing towards him with sovereign contempt and dislike.

'You are always very *porté* against poor Loris,' returned his hostess with a smile. 'Yes, he has genius in a way, the same sort of genius that Watteau had, and Coustou and Boucher; he should have been born under Louis Quinze; that is his only mistake.'

'He is a coxcomb,' repeated Béthune.

'He seems so to you, because all your life has been filled with grave thoughts and strong actions. All artists are apt to seem mere triflers to all soldiers. Who is that girl he is looking at?—what a handsome face!'

She raised herself a little on her elbow, and looked down over the balustrade; a small boat with a single red sail and two women under it were passing under the terrace; one of them was old, brown and ugly, the other was young, fair, and with golden-brown hair curling under a red woollen fisher's cap. The water was shallow under the marble walls of St. Pharamond; the boat was drifting very slowly; there was a pile of oranges and lemons in it as its cargo; the elder woman, with one oar in the water, was with her other hand counting copper coins into a leathern bag in her lap; the younger, who steered with a string tied to her foot, was managing the sail with a practised skill which showed that all maritime exercises were familiar to her. When she sat down again she looked up at the terrace above her. [44]

She had a beautiful and uncommon countenance, full of light; the light of youth, of health, of enjoyment; she wore a gown of rough dark-blue sea-stuff much stained with salt water, and the sleeves of it were rolled up high, showing the whole of her bare and admirably moulded arms. The memories of Melville and of his hostess both went back to the day when they had seen another boat upon those waters with the happy loveliness of youth within it.

Loris Loswa, full of outspoken admiration, exhausted all his epithets of praise as he watched the little vessel drift by them, slowly, very slowly, for there was no wind to aid it, and the oar was motionless in the water.

'Stay, oh stay!' he cried to the boat, and began to murmur the 'Enfant, si j'étais roi——'

'If you were a king you could hardly do better than what, I am quite sure, you will do as it is,' said Nadine. 'Find out where she lives, and make her portrait for next year's Salon. She is very handsome, and that old scarlet cap is charming. Let us recompense her for passing, and astonish her.'

As she spoke she drew a massive gold bracelet off her own arm, and leaning farther down over the marble parapet, threw it towards the girl. Her aim was good; the boat was almost motionless, the bracelet was very weighty; it fell with admirable precision where it was intended to fall—on the knees of the girl as she sat in the prow behind the pile of golden fruit.

'How astonished and pleased she will be!' said Loswa. 'It is only you, Madame, who have such apropos inspirations.'

Even as he spoke the maiden in the boat had taken up the bracelet, looked at it a moment with a frown upon her face, then without a second's pause had sprung to her feet to obtain a better attitude for her effort, and with a magnificent sweep of her bare arm upward and backward cast the thing back again on high on to the balustrade, where it rolled to the feet of its mistress.

Without waiting an instant, she plucked the oars up, one from the hand of the old woman the other from the bottom of the boat, and with vigorous strokes drove her sluggish old vessel past the terrace wall, never once looking up, and not heeding the cries of her companion. In a few moments, under her fierce swift movements, the boat was several yards away, leaving the

shallow water for the deeper, and hidden altogether from the gaze of her admirers by the red sail flaked with amber and bistre stains, where wind, and sun, and storm had marked it for their own. [45]

'What has happened?' said Melville, who had not understood the episode of the bracelet, rising and coming towards them.

'We are in Arcadia, Monsignor!' cried Nadine. 'A peasant girl rejects a jewel!'

'Is she a peasant? I should doubt it,' said Béthune.

Melville looked through one of the spy-glasses.

'No, no! It is Damaris Bérarde,' he said as he laid it aside. 'She is by no means a peasant. She is a great heiress in her own little way, and as proud as if she were dauphine of France.'

'Damaris! What a pretty name!' said Loswa. 'It makes one think of damask roses, and she is rather like one. Where does she live, Monsignor?'

'She lives with her grandfather on a little island which belongs to him. He is a very well-to-do man, but a great brute in many ways; he is not cruel to the girl, but were she to cross his will I imagine he would be. Krapotkine is his hero and Karl Marx his prophet; he is the most ferocious anarchist. You know the sort of man. It is a sort very common in France, and especially so in the South. Did you give her a jewel, Madame Nadège? Ah, that was a very great offence! She must have been mortally offended. When that child is en fête she has a row of pearls as big as any in your jewel-cases.'

'She looked a poor girl, and I thought I should please her,' said Nadine, with impatience. 'Who was to tell that the owner of pearls as big as sparrows' eggs was rowing in a fruit-boat, bare-armed and bare-headed?'

'Where did you say that she lived?' asked Loswa, curious and interested.

'Oh, on an island a long way off from here,' said Melville, regretting that he had spoken of this source of dissension.

'Take me to that island, Monsignor,' murmured Loris Loswa in his ear.

'Oh, indeed no,' said the priest hastily. 'You are a "cursed aristocrat;" the old man would receive you with a thrust of a pike.'

'I would take my chance of the pike,' said Loswa, 'and I would assure him that the future lies with the Anarchists, for I believe it, and I would not add that I also think that their millennium will be most highly uncomfortable.'

'Will you take *me* to that island, Monsignor?' said Nadine. 'It will not be favourable to fashionable impressionists like Loris.'

Loswa coloured a little with irritation; he had not thought she would overhear his request. He was, besides, despite his vanity, always vaguely sensible that her admiration of his powers was tinged with contempt. [46]

'You, Madame!' cried Melville, cordially wishing that the island of Damaris Bérarde was far away in the Pacific in lieu of a score of leagues off the shores of Savoy. 'Would I take the world incarnate, the most seductive and irresistible of all its votaries, into a convent of Oblates to torture all the good Sisters condemned to eternal seclusion? That poor little girl is a little recluse, a little barbarian, but she is happy in her solitude, in her *sauvagerie*. Were she once to see the Countess Othmar she would know peace no more.'

'She must see many very like me if she live a mile or so off these shores,' said Nadine, dismissing the subject with indifference. 'I am sure it is she who is to be envied if she can find any entertainment in rowing about in a boat full of oranges. I would do it this moment if it would amuse me, but it would not. That is the penalty of having sophisticated and corrupted tastes. How old is your paragon?'

'Did I say she was a paragon? She is a good little girl. Her age? I should think fifteen, sixteen; certainly not more. Her birth is rather curious. Her mother was an actress, and her father the master of a fruit-carrying brig; dissimilar enough progenitors. Her father was drowned, and her mother died of nostalgia for the stage; and Damaris was left to the care of her grandfather, the fierce old Communist I have described to you. However, he is not so terrible a bigot after all, for he allowed her to be taught by the Sisters at the Villefranche Convent, as a concession to me when I knew him first, in return for a little service I had done him. He thinks it does not much matter what women do; to him they are only beasts of burden; he likes to see his hung with pearls only as he puts tassels and ribbons on his cows when they are taken to market.'

'And what service did you render him?'

'Oh, nothing worth mentioning; a trifle,' said Melville, who never spoke of his own deeds of heroism, which were many. The old man's younger and only remaining son had lain dying of Asiatic cholera, brought to the coast in some infected load of Eastern rags, with which they had manured the olives one hot August day. Not a soul had dared to approach the plague-stricken bed, except the courtly churchman whose smile was so sought by great ladies and whose wit was so prized at dinner-parties. He had not abandoned it until all was over, and with his own hands had aided Jean Bérarde to lay the body of his boy in mother-earth. When the grave was filled up, the old socialist, to whom priests had been as loathliest vermin, gave his knotted work-worn hand to the slender white hand of Melville:

'The only one that had the courage!' he muttered. 'Do not try to do anything with me, it would be [47]

no use; but do what you like about the child. I will say nothing. You alone stayed by me to see her uncle die.'

So the girl Damaris had been allowed to go in her boat to learn of the Sisters on the mainland, and had been allowed to go also to Mass on high days and holy days. But Melville saw no necessity to say all this to his worldly friends upon the sea-terrace of St. Pharamond. Nay, he even reproached himself that, in a momentary unconsidered impulse, he had given the name of the girl to Loswa. Loswa was not perhaps a man to go in cold blood on a seducer's errand, but he was conceited, sensual, egotistic, and accustomed to take his own way without much consideration for its consequences, whether to himself or to others. And the worldly wisdom of Melville told him he had committed an imprudence.

'Jean Bérarde,' he continued, 'of course, abhors priests, and would have a general massacre of the Church. But I chanced to do him a service, as I said, some time ago, and so he allows me now and then to go and sit under his big olives and talk to the child, and even, grudgingly, lets her go to Mass now and then. His past is written clearly enough in the history of Savoy, but he either does not know or does not care anything about his descent. All he does care about are his profits from olives and oranges, and also, I suspect, from smuggling. What is infinitely droll is, that the principles which slew his forefathers and destroyed the cradle of his race have become his own. Perhaps the fury of the *Ça ira* got into him, being begotten, as he was, in that time of blood and flame through which his progenitors passed. Anyhow he is the fiercest of socialists now.

'The Counts de la Bérarde were very mighty people; almost as great as their suzerains and neighbours, the Counts of Dauphiné. The cradle of their race, of which you may see one tower standing now, was set amongst the glaciers and gorges of the Val St. Christophe; it stood above the Romanche on a great slope of gneiss, with the snow mountains at its back. Up to the time of Richelieu the Bérardes were omnipotent, and they had sway as far down as the sea coast, and it is said that sea piracy, as well as stoppage of land travellers going on their horses and sumpter mules through the passes, swelled their wealth and their power not a little. All these mountain lords were robbers in those days. If you have never been up as far as the St. Christophe valley, you should go as soon as the weather opens and the roads are passable; all the *cols* and the *combes* are fine, well worth a little Alpine climbing; and the Pointe des Écrins may hold its own with the peaks of the Engadine.

'Well, to revert to the Counts de Bérarde: Richelieu broke the back of their power—it is odd that a Churchman, doing all he could to strengthen the hands of a king, did in truth lay the first stone of what became centuries after the Revolution!—their chiefs were beheaded on the ramparts of Briançon, their castle in the Alps was razed, and only two or three of their younger scions survived the general destruction of the race. From one of these distant branches, Jean de la Bérarde, who had a small stronghold on the sea, and who became, by all these executions, the head of the family, this old man who owns Bonaventure, and is the rudest and roughest of cruisers and farmers, is lineally descended. I have been at pains to make out his genealogy. These matters always have interest for me, and it is curious to trace how the old patrician strain comes out in the girl, his grand-daughter, though he himself is nothing more than a boor. The Bérardes never recovered the massacres and confiscations of the reign of Louis XIII., though they were small suzerains on the sea-coast up to the days of Louis XV. They then fell into poverty, and lost their hold over their neighbours; the Terror extinguished them entirely; they were swallowed up in the night of anarchy. But Jean Bérarde of Bonaventure is legally heir of the Count Alain de la Bérarde, who was taken to Toulon, and shot there by the Maratists of Freron and Barras. His only son, being a lad at the time, was saved by disguising himself as a fisherman, and, being utterly beggared by the Jacobins, took to the coasting trade, and in time saved money, married a peasant, and bought the island: my socialist friend was *his* son. [48]

'That is the story of these people, who in two generations have dropped the very memory of the fierce nobles they sprang from so entirely that the old man on Bonaventure is as rabid a Communist as any man can be who has property and clings to it. There—I have been terribly prosy, and Madame will say that all this genealogy is of no earthly interest to her; and, indeed, it cannot be to any of you, only that to a student of human nature it is always, in a measure, interesting to see how old races look under new hoods.'

'In this instance,' said Nadine smiling, 'the old race looks very pretty under the Phrygian cap. The girl is unusually handsome. You would be wild to paint her, Loswa, if only she were a duchess!'

'I would ask no better fate as it is,' he replied. 'But perhaps it might not be so easy. The grandfather Bérarde is sure to be a Cerberus.'

'You must air your destructive doctrines before him; he will be fascinated; he will not know that you live with the duchesses, and would not trouble yourself actually to walk the length of a boulevard to save All The Russias.'

'I am not a political hypocrite, Madame, though you are pleased to ridicule me as an artistic impostor,' said Loswa, with an angry flush on his face. [49]

She cast the end of her cigarette into the sea.

'Oh no; you are not a hypocrite; you would very much like to see the destruction of the whole world, provided only that your own armchair should withstand the shock. There are so many anarchists of that type; and, indeed, why should you die for politics or creed when you can live and paint such charming pictures? For your pictures are very charming, though they are all pearl-powder and point-lace, all satins and brocades, and we are all going to Court in every one of them.'

'Vandyke did not paint beggars,' said Loswa, who would have lost his temper had he dared.

She looked at him with amusement.

'But you are not Vandyke, my dear Loris; you are, at most, Lely or Boucher, and the pearl-powder has got into your brushes a little more than it should have done. You have only one defect as an artist, but it is a capital offence, and you will not outgrow it—you are *never natural*!'

He was silent from vexation.

He had an exaggerated opinion of his own genius, and saw in himself a mingling of Clouet and Boucher, Leonardo and Largillière, and was often restless and nervous under his sense of her depreciative criticism; but he was very proud of the intimacy he was allowed to enjoy with her, and usually bore her chastisement with a spaniel's humility; a quality rare in him, spoilt and courted darling of high dames as he was.

'If you do take a portrait of that child,' she pursued, pointing to the distant boat, 'you will be utterly unable to portray her as she is; you will never give the sea-stains on her gown, the sea-tan on her face, the rough dull red of that old worn sea-cap. You will idealise her, which with you means that you will make her utterly artificial. She will become a goddess of liberty, and she will look like a maid of honour frisking under a republican disguise to amuse a frisky Court. The simple sea-born creature yonder, rowing through blue water, and thinking of the sale of her oranges or the capture of her fish, will be altogether and forever beyond you. It is always beyond the Lelys and the Bouchers, though it would not have been beyond Vandyke. Do you think you could paint a forest-tree or a field-flower? Not you; your daisy would become a gardenia, and your larch would be a lime on the boulevards.'

'Am I to understand, Madame, that you have suddenly become a patroness of nature? Then surely even I, poor creature of the boulevards though I be, need not despair of becoming *natürlich*?'

[50] 'You mistake,' said Nadine with a little sadness. 'I have lived in a hothouse, but I have always envied those who lived in the open air. Besides, I am not an artist; I am a mere *mondaine*. I was born in the world as an oyster is in its shallows. But an artist, if he be worthy the name, should abhor the world. He should live and work and think and dream in the open air, and in full contact with nature. Do you suppose Millet could have breathed an hour in your studio with its velvets and tapestries and lacquer work, with its draperies and screens and rugs, and carefully shaded windows? He would have been stifled. Why is nearly all modern work so valueless? Because it is nearly all of it studio-work; work done at high pressure and in an artificial light. Do you think that Michel Angelo could have endured to dwell in Cromwell Road? Or do you think that Murillo or Domenichino would have built themselves an hotel in the Avenue Villiers? Why is Basil Vereschaguin, with all his faults and deformities, original and in a way sublime? Because he works in the open air; in no light tempered otherwise than by the clouds as they pass, or by the leaves as they move.'

'For heaven's sake!' cried Loswa with a gesture of appeal.

She laughed a little.

'Ah, my poor Court poodle, with your pretty tricks and graces!—of course, the very name of our wolf of the forests is terrible to you. But I suppose the Court has made the poodle what he is; I suppose it is as much your duchesses' fault as your own.'

Then she turned away and left this favourite of fortune and great ladies to his own reflections. They were irritated and mortified; bitter with that bitterest of all earthly things, wounded vanity.

Good heavens! he thought, with a sharp stinging sense of a woman's base ingratitude, was it for this that he had painted her portrait in such wise that season after season each succeeding one had been the centre of all eyes in the Paris Salon? Was it for this that he had immortalised her face looking out from a cloud of shadow like a narcissus in the mists of March?—that he had drawn her in every attitude and every costume, from the loose white draperies of her hours of langour to the golden tissues and crowding jewels of her court-dress at imperial palaces? Was it for this that he had composed that divinest portrait of them all, in which, with a knot of stephanotis at her breast and a collar of pearls at her throat, she seemed to smile at all who looked on her that slight, amused, disdainful smile which had killed men as surely as any silver-hilted dagger lying in an ivory case, which once was steeped in *aqua Tofana* for Lucrezia or Bianca? Was it for this!—to be called opprobrious, derisive names, and have Basil Vereschaguin, the painter of death, of carnage, of horror, of brown Hindoos and hideous Tartars, vaunted before him as his master!

[51] He hated Vereschaguin as a Sèvres vase, had it a mind and soul to hate, might hate the bronze statue of a gladiator; and his tormentor, in a moment of mercilessness and candour, had wounded him with a weapon whose use he never forgave.

'He is a coxcomb! Béthune is quite right,' she said of him when Melville hinted that she had been too cruel. 'He has marvellous talent and *technique*, but he dares to think that these two are genius. If he had not likened himself to Vandyke I might perhaps never have told him what I think of his place in art. He is a pretty painter, a very pretty painter, and his portraits of me are charming; but if they be looked at at all in the twentieth century they will hardly rank higher than we rank now the pastels of Rosalba; certainly not higher than we rank the portraits of Greuze.'

'If I were a painter I would be content to be Greuze,' said Melville with a smile.

'No you would not,' said Nadine; 'you would not be content to be a d'Estrées in your own profession, nor any other mere Court cardinal.'

CHAPTER VII.

The following morning Loris Loswa rose much earlier than his wont, and went out of the gilded gate of the pretty little villa which he had taken for the season at St. Raphael; a coquettish place with large gardens and trellised paths overhung with creepers; and down below, a small cutter ready for use in a nook of the bay where the aloes and the mimosa grew thickest. It all belonged to a friend of his, who was away in distant lands to escape his creditors, and by whose misfortunes Loswa had profited with that easy egotism which had been so advantageous to him throughout his life, and which looked so good-natured that no one resented it. He descended this morning to the shore by the winding cactus-lined path which led down to it, and asked the sailors if they knew of an island called Bonaventure. They knew nothing about it; they, however, consulted the admiralty maps and found it: a tiny dot some leagues to the south-westward.

A fisherman who was on the beach at the time told him more. He knew the island, everybody knew it; but nobody ever was allowed to land there; its owner was an odd man, morose and suspicious; the demoiselle was good and kind; the islet belonged to Jean Bérarde, who owned every inch of it. He would leave it to the girl of course. It was small, but of very considerable profit. Loswa listened with impatience, and told his skipper to make for the isle as fast as he could. He himself knew nothing of the sea, and hated it; but he was *piqué au jeu*. Melville had [52] almost forbidden him to go thither, and the great lady who had ridiculed him had doubted his power to paint the picture of a peasant-girl. The irritation of antagonism had aroused all the obstinacy and all the capricious self-will of an undisciplined and vain nature.

'To Bonaventure!' he said with triumph, as in the glad and cloudless morning air his little vessel danced over the waves, the great seagulls wheeling and screaming in her wake. There were a buoyant sea and a favouring breeze.

Loswa detested both sea and country, and was never at heart content off the asphalte of the boulevards. But since it would have looked very vulgar to spend his whole winter in Paris, he selected the south coast usually for the colder months, because the world went with him there, because he saw so many faces that were familiar, and because on this shore so thickly set with châlets and villas, so artificially adorned, so trimmed, and trained, and levelled, and planted by architect and landscape gardener, it was possible for him to forget that he was not in Paris; the very sea itself, so blue, so tranquil, so idly basking in broad light and luminous horizons, seemed like the painted sea of an operetta by Lecocq.

Besides, though he had no pleasure in rural or maritime things, found no joy in solitude and no consolation in nature for the loss of the movement of the world, he could not have been the fine colourist he was without possessing a fine sense of colour, and the power to appreciate beautiful lines, and all the changeful effects of light and shade. He did not see Nature as Millet or Corot saw it, but as Lancret or Coypel saw it. It was only a background for a nymph or a goddess to him as to them; but he was not insensible to the forms which made up that background: the sunlit vapour, the blue mountain, the golden woodland, or the shadowy lake.

The sea was full of life: market-boats, fishing-boats, skiffs of all kinds, with striped curved lateen sails, were crossing each other on it. There were a few yachts, French, English, American, at anchor in the bays, in waiting for the cup-races; there were some merchant ships afar off, brown-canvased brigs bearing in from Genoa or Ajaccio, and the ugly black smoke of a big steamer here and there defaced the marvellous blue and rose of the air at the birth of day. The sea was buoyant but not rough, his light cutter few airily as a curlew over the azure plain. There were mists to the southward, lovely white mists, airy and suggestive as the veil of a bride, but they floated away before the sun, so rapidly as the day grew on, that the bold indented lines of Corsica became visible, bathed in a rosy and golden warmth. He had enough soul in him to feel the beauty of the morning though he had been playing baccarat at the club till an hour or two [53] previously; to be conscious of the charm of this full clear sunrise which bathed the world of waters in its radiance, of the silver-shining wings of the white gulls dipping in the hollow of the wave, of the grandeur of the land as he looked back at it with its semicircles of snow-capped hills towering to the skies. But he would not have cared for them had there been no human interest beside them.

After sailing steadily some two hours or so they sighted, and in another two hours neared, a little island which was certainly the one marked on the French chart as Bonaventure, lying all alone far out to the south-west. Loswa did not need the positive assertion of his crew to tell him that he had arrived at his desired goal. It was small, conical-shaped, high, and steep, with a broad reef of sand to the northward. It rose aloft in the air, grey with olives, green with orange-trees. No habitation was visible upon it; but on the sand there was drawn up high and dry an old boat with a sail of Venetian red stained brown by wear and tear.

The island had evidently been made fruitful at the cost of many centuries of labour; the natural rock of it was terraced with many ridges rising one above another, each planted with productive trees; the soil had no doubt been carried up load by load with infinite trouble; but the effect of the whole was luxuriant and picturesque, as the conelike mass of verdure, here silver-grey and there emerald green, towered upward in the thin sun-pierced vapours of the early day.

The soundings showed deep water almost up to the rock itself.

'I am going to sketch,' said Loswa to his skipper as he pointed to the level strip of sand. 'Let me land there.'

Their assertions that no one ever did land there he disregarded. A small boat was rowed up to the

strip of beach, and he got out, bidding his sailors wait round the edge of a jutting rock, which would give them shade as the day should advance.

He glanced at the old red coble drawn up on the shore. It was the same he had seen three days before; he felt sure of it by its colour and its build.

He looked about him and around him for a means of ascent, and saw a zigzag path that wound up through the hanging orchards of olive, of lemon, and of orange, and higher still the rope-ladder called *passerelle*, so often used in the Riviera to climb steep rocks. The air was full of the intense perfume of the trees, which were starred all over with their white blossoms. He thought of Sicily, where you have to shut your door against the fragrance of the fields in spring, lest you should faint and sleep for ever from their fragrance.

The path and the *passerelle* would certainly, he reasoned, lead up to any house there might be at the summit. He slung his sketching things over his shoulder and began to mount the crooked rocky road of moss-grown stone with cyclamen growing in its crevices, and the rose-hued flowers of the leafless cereus springing up here and there. [54]

But he was not allowed to ascend unchallenged; high above him there was a rustling sound, then a deep angry growl, and in a moment or two a great white Pyrenean dog showed himself, stared down at him with frank hostility, and bounded headlong from ridge to ridge underneath the boughs, with full intent to reach him and devour him. But a voice called aloud: 'Tò, tò, Clovis!' and Loswa smiled. He knew he had succeeded.

Through the labyrinth of branches, springing after the dog, came the girl who had thrown back the gold bracelet to the lady of St. Pharamond.

'The dog will not hurt you whilst I am here,' she called out to him. 'But he might kill you if I were not. Do you want my grandfather? Why have you landed here? It is private ground. He has gone to Grasse for two days to see an oil merchant.'

Loswa felt that he could not have timed his visit more felicitously.

'Good heavens! what a handsome child,' he thought, as he bowed to her with his easy grace and that eloquent glance which had power to stir the most languid pulses of his patrician sitters.

'I landed in hopes that I might be allowed to paint the view from this exquisite little spot,' he said with well-acted hesitation in his manner. 'A friend of mine, who is, I think, a friend of yours too, a priest of the name of Melville, has spoken to me so often of the beauty of your island.'

Standing above him, holding the big dog by the collar, she smiled at the name of Melville, and came a few steps nearer with more confidence. She never for a moment doubted the entire truth of what he said.

Her blue-and-brown-striped linen gown was but a wisp; it had been drenched through in its time with sea-water, and had the stains of grasses, and dews, and sands, and fruits upon it; it was bound round her waist by a leathern belt, and its short sleeves were pulled up to the shoulder, as they had been the day before. But no artist would have wished for a better dress, and even a sculptor would not have desired to remove it from the limbs that it clung to so closely that it hid nothing of their perfect shape and the curves of the throat and breast that had the indecision and softness of childhood with the fulness of feminine growth. Her hair was tucked away under a red fisher cap, a veritable *bonnet rouge*; and her large brilliant eyes, of an indescribable colour, were shining, as if the sun was imprisoned in them, under level, dark delicate eyebrows. Her skin was fair, her hair auburn. He thought he had seen nothing so perfectly lovely in all his life: it was a living Titian, a virgin Giorgione. [55]

'Anyone who knows Monsignor Melville is welcome to Bonaventure,' she said frankly. 'It is a pity my grandfather is away. He does not like strangers, but a friend of Monsignor's would not seem so to him. No one has ever been here to paint anything before. What is it you want to paint—the house?'

Loswa knew that he had done a dishonourable thing, and a mean one, in using Melville's name as a passport to a place where Melville would never have allowed him to go had he known it; but, like everyone else, having begun on a wrong course he went on in it. He had succeeded so well at the commencement that he would not listen to that delicacy of good breeding which represented conscience to him.

'Do not be afraid of Clovis. He will not hurt you now he sees that I speak to you; he is so sensible. Will you come now or another day?' she asked him with the frankness of a boy.

'We have a Latin poet who tells us that to-day alone is our own,' said Loswa with a smile. 'I will come now at once, and most gladly. Clovis is a grand dog and a good guard for his young mistress,' he added; thinking to himself, 'how lovely she is, and she knows it no more than if she were a sea anemone on the shore; and she looks at me and speaks to me with no more embarrassment than if I were but the wooden figure of a ship!'

'I will come up most gladly,' he said again, with more ardour than he showed in a duchess's drawing-rooms. 'It is so very kind of you. I am sure the view from the summit must be magnificent. I fear though,' he added, with hypocritical modesty, 'that it will be beyond my powers.'

'I hope not. I shall like to see anyone paint,' she said with cordiality; and added, a little ashamed, 'I have never seen anyone paint; I have heard of such a thing of course, and there are the pictures in the churches and chapels which one knows were painted by men; but I have no idea of

how it is done.'

'You should have been shown by Raphael himself,' said Loswa.

'Raphael?' she echoed. 'Oh no, he is our fruit-packer; he would not know how to do it any better than I do,' she said as she turned and began to ascend to show him the way.

'Can you climb?' she added, looking at him doubtfully. 'I mean climb where it is like a stone wall?'

She had taken him under her protection and into her favour, but he felt that he would have preferred to this frank innocent friendliness a certain hesitation and embarrassment such as would have indicated a different kind of sentiment as possible. She was as kind to him, as simple and frank and candid with him, as if he were any old fisherman that she had known from her birth. It was not what he desired, yet it had a certain charm; it was so childlike, so honest, so free from all affectation or self-consciousness, or lurking suspicion or intention of any sort. [56]

'Clovis is so good,' she pursued, all unconscious of his reflections. 'His wife (she is called Brunehildt) had four puppies yesterday. Two were drowned; it was such a pity! I am going to give one of the two left to Monsignor; he is always fond of dogs. Take care how you come up, it is very steep; for me I am used to it. I run up and down a dozen times a day; but a person not used to it may slip.'

It was, indeed, steep, and often there were ledges of rock in the way which had to be jumped over or scrambled over in any handiest fashion, whilst on others the perpendicular face of the cliff could only be ascended by the rope-ladder so often in use in the Riviera; but Loswa, in an indolent way, was athletic; he had in his youth been skilled in gymnastic exercises, and though now enervated by his life in cities, he kept apace with her, and soon had gained the level summit of the island, a broad green tableland planted with olives and oranges, with here and there a great stone pine, relic of the wild pine woods which, before the *petite culture* had stepped thither with axe and spade, had clothed doubtless the whole of Bonaventure down to the water's edge.

There was some ground planted with cabbages and artichokes, some place where maize would be planted later in the season, but the chief of the land was orchard; and in the midst of it stood a long, low whitewashed house, with pink shutters and a tiled roof.

'Now look!' she said, with a little pride in her voice as she stretched her hand out to the northward view.

Everywhere far below them, stretching out to infinite indefinite horizons, was the blue sea studded with various sails; and the beautiful coast stretched likewise away into endless realms of sparkling light; the range of the mountains rose blue and snow-crowned behind that fairy shore; and this enchanted paradise was always there to call men's thoughts to nature, and they in it only thought of the hell of the punters, the caress of the *cocotte*, the shining gold rolling in under the croupier's rake!

Familiar as he was with this sea and land, he could not restrain an exclamation of wondering admiration.

'No wonder you have become the beautiful thing you are, looking on all that beauty from your birth!' he said in an impulse of frank admiration, mingled with his habitual language of flattery.

The girl laughed. [57]

'Do you think I am beautiful? Everybody always says that. But grandfather grumbles; he says it is the devil's gift. Myself, I do not know; the flowers are beautiful, but I do not think that human beings are so.'

'And you have grown up like a flower——'

'How did you know about me?' she interrupted him. 'Did Monsignor Melville speak so much of me? He was with my uncle in his last illness, you know, and whenever he is on this coast he comes to us. You like the view?' she continued with satisfaction and a sense of possession of it. 'Yes; it is good to see, is it not? But I am happier when I am down on the shore.'

'Indeed! Why?'

'Because there one only wants to swim, and here one wants to fly. Now, one does swim; one cannot fly.'

'To covet the impossible is the only divine thing in man,' said he with a smile. 'It is just because we have that longing to fly that we may hope we are made to do something more than walk.'

'Do you mean that discontent is good?' she said with surprise.

'In a certain measure, perhaps.'

'Content is better,' she said sturdily.

'I hope you will always be blessed with it. It is like a swallow, it brings peace where it rests,' said her guest with a little sigh; and he thought: 'My lady yonder is never content; it is the penalty of culture. Will this child be so always in her ignorance? Will she marry the skipper of a merchant-ship or the owner of an olive-yard, and live happily ever afterwards, with a tribe of little brown-eyed children that will run out into the road with flowers for the carriages? I suppose so; why not? Melville said in her little way she was an heiress. Of course, all the louts that own a fishing-coble or an acre of orange-trees will be eager to annex her and her island.'

She was walking by his side under the gnarled olives which had been stripped a month before of their black berries. She was looking at him frankly, curiously, with doubtful glances.

'I am afraid you are of the *noblesse*,' she said, abruptly stopping short within a yard of the house.

'What makes you think that?' he said, aware that he received the prettiest of indirect compliments which a much flattered life had ever given him.

'You look like it,' she answered. 'You have an air about you, and your linen is so fine, and your voice is soft and slow. It is only the noble people who have that kind of music in their voices.'

'I wish I were a peasant if it would please you better,' he said gallantly. [58]

She answered very literally:

'That is nonsense. You cannot wish such a thing; no one ever wishes to go down. And, for myself, I do not mind; it is my grandfather who hates the aristocrats.'

'So I have heard,' said Loswa. 'But he is out to-day, you say. Will you not let me sketch this superb view?'

'Yes, if you like. I never saw anyone paint, as I told you; I shall be glad to see it. But will you not come in and eat and drink something first? I have heard that the nobles, when they are not dressing and dancing, are always eating and drinking.'

'Nothing more cruel was ever said of them by all their satirists,' answered Loswa. 'It will be very kind indeed if you will give me a glass of water; I need nothing else.'

'You shall have some of Catherine's cakes,' said the girl, 'and some coffee and a fresh egg. Catherine—she is our servant—makes beautiful cakes when she is not cross. Why are people who are old so often cross? Is it the trouble of living so long that makes them so? If it be that, I would rather die young. I think one ought to be like the olive-trees; the older they are the better fruit they bear.'

Then she called aloud, 'Catherine! Catherine! here is a stranger who wants some breakfast,' and ran across the bit of rough grass before the house, where cocks and hens, pigeons and rabbits, a tethered ass and a pet kid, were enjoying the fine morning together in harmony.

An old woman in a white cap showed herself for a moment in the doorway, grumbled inarticulately, and disappeared.

'She is gone to get it,' said Damaris. 'She is very cross, as I tell you, but she is very good for all that. I have known her all my life. Her honey is the best in the country. She always prays for the bees. My grandfather does not know it, but when it is swarming time she says a paternoster over each hive, and the honey comes so yellow, so smooth, so fine; its taste is like the smell of thyme. Come through the house to my terrace; you shall have your breakfast there.'

He followed her through the house, an ugly whitewashed place, with nothing of grace or colour about it, though cleaner than most such dwellings are upon the mainland; it smelt sweetly, too, from the flood of fragrant, orange-scented air which poured through past its open doors, and the odour from the bales of packed oranges which were stored in its passages and lumber-rooms, awaiting transport to the beach below. In the guest-chamber there was some old oaken furniture of which he recognised the age and value, and some chairs of *repoussé* leather, which would have fetched a high price; but it was all dreary, dull, stiff, and the figure of the girl, with her [59] brilliant, luminous beauty, and her vividly-coloured clothes, looked like a pomegranate flaming in a dusky cellar.

'Come out here,' she said to him, and led him out on to a little terrace.

It was whitewashed, like all the stone of the house, but it was gay and bright. Its gallery was covered with a Canadian vine still red; it seemed to hang above the sea, so steeply did that side of the island slope downward beneath it; it had some cane chairs in it and a little marble table, a red-striped awning was stretched above it.

'This is all mine,' she said, with pride. 'You shall eat here. Take that long chair: it came off one of the great ships that go the voyages to India; the mate of the ship gave it me. I made that awning myself out of a sail. I bring my books here and read. Sometimes I sit here half the night instead of going to bed—that is, when the nightingales are singing in the orange-trees. My grandfather will always have the house-door shut and bolted by eight o'clock, even in summer. So I come here; it seems such folly to go to bed in the short nights, they are as bright as day. The time to sleep then is noon. You rest, and I will go and bring Catherine, and your breakfast.'

He caught her hand as she was about to go away.

'Pray, stay,' he murmured. 'It is to hear you talk that I care; I want nothing else, not even that glass of water; I only made it an excuse to come into your house.'

She drew her hand from him and frowned a little.

'Why should you make an excuse? If you had said you wished to come I would have let you; if you do not want to eat there is nothing to come for; I am never indoors except to eat, or if it rain very heavily.'

Then she went, and he dared not detain her lest he should alarm her. She seemed to him like a bird which alights near a stranger so long as there is no movement, but at a single sound takes flight. Left alone he sat still in the chair she had assigned to him, and gazed over the sea; there was nothing except sea visible from this little terrace.

CHAPTER VIII.

In a little while she returned, bearing in her strong grasp an old silver tray, with coffee, cream, and sugar in old silver pots.

The servant followed her, cross, wrinkled and suspicious, carrying bread and honey and oranges, and a pile of sweet flat cakes. Damaris set down her tray on the marble table.

'We have a few things like this,' she said, touching the old silver. 'We were noble, too, once, very, very long ago, they say; but my grandfather does not believe it. I like to believe it. It may be nonsense, but one likes to fancy that ever, ever so long ago one's forefathers were fighting men, not labourers; it seems to make one ready to fight too. It must make a difference, I think, in oneself whether they were soldiers or slaves. Not, you know,' she added, after a moment's pause, 'that I do not think *la petite culture* the happiest life in the world; but the labourer is narrow, mean, horribly fond of money, and very rough to his women, and I suppose the poor were still worse in that distant time.' [60]

She poured him out his coffee as she spoke, and filled up the cup with foaming milk, and pressed on him the rolls, the cakes, the honey. The china was the heavy earthenware which rustic people use, and did not suit the old silver of the tray and of the vessels; but Loswa, for once, was not critical; he thought he had never tasted anything more delicious than was this island fare.

Damaris, having served him, ate and drank herself, sitting on a wooden stool beside the balustrade covered with the reddened creeper. She did not want anything, but not to break bread with a guest seemed to her bad manners. She had pulled her sleeves down and put on shoes and stockings. She had thrown aside her woollen cap; her silky, golden curls shone in the sun; her eyes looked at him with honest inquisitiveness and astonishment. Suddenly she said aloud:

'Ah! I remember now! It was you who were with that lady yesterday when she threw me the gold bracelet over the wall.'

Loswa assented, but he would have preferred to forget his friend at that moment, being uneasily conscious of the contempt with which his present position on this terrace would be regarded by her did she ever know of it.

'Did she take me for a beggar?' said Damaris, with anger glistening under her long lashes.

'Oh no, she only wished to please you—to surprise you. You see, she could not tell who you were.'

The girl's cheeks grew a deeper rose.

'That is true,' she said, with her first touch of embarrassment; 'I was rowing, and one cannot row in fine clothes. Perhaps, if she saw me at Mass——'

'If she saw you now!' said he, with a glance of meaning thrown away upon her. 'Remember, she hardly saw you at all; only an old boat, a pile of oranges, a ragged sail——'

'My sail *is* very shabby,' said Damaris with shame. 'I took the new one to make this awning, and my grandfather was angry and would not let me have another. Who is that lady? She looked very pretty. Is she your wife?'

'She is the Countess Othmar.'

'The Countess Othmar!' she repeated in a little awe. Even she in her solitude had heard that name of power. The narrative was very vague to her; she had never known more than the bare outline of it, but she remembered, when she was a child sitting amongst the daffodils and plucking them on the grass before the house on Bonaventure one evening in the springtime, hearing Catherine, who had been with a load of fruit to the mainland, cry aloud to Raphael: [61]

'Holy Virgin, what think you? The *petiote* of Nicole, the wife of Othmar, is dead!'

And the child, pausing with the daffodils lying in tumbled gold upon her lap, had listened and heard all that was known of that early death, which only the swallows had witnessed and the blind house-dog had mourned. She had always remembered it, and often, when she had seen the daffodils yellow in the grass of March, had thought of it again, and her imagination had been busy with it, creating bodily forms for the people of whom she knew naught but the names. Therefore, when the word 'Othmar' fell now upon her ear, it moved her with a certain thrill, almost as of personal pain.

'You have heard of her?' said Loswa.

'Not of her,' said Damaris gravely; 'of the one who died—who killed herself, they say, because he loved another woman.'

'Bah!' said Loswa, with the light contempt for all such tragic follies which the boulevardier always affects, even when he does not feel it.

'They said so,' repeated Damaris, with her eyes very large and serious.

'Do you like this lady very much?' she asked, after a pause.

'She is a charming person; yes.'

'Is she a very great lady? Does she reign over anything?'

'Over everyone she approaches, if she can,' said he with some impatience; 'and nearly always she can, for she is a person of very strong will, and influences others more than she knows or they know.'

'And what does she do when she has influenced them? Monsignor says that to possess influence is to have the ten talents, and that we shall have to account for the use of every one of them.'

'That is just the chief mischief,' said Loswa, gloomily thinking of himself, not of his auditor. 'It is the getting the influence that amuses her; that she cares about. When once she has got it you are nothing at all to her; no more than a glove she has worn.'

'She must be a very cruel woman,' said Damaris.

'Oh no,' he protested, with a sudden sense of his disloyalty, 'she is not cruel at all, she is only indifferent.'

'Indifferent? That is to neither like nor dislike? I do not understand how one can be like that. One must either have good weather or bad; one must either love or hate.' [62]

'She does neither,' said he with a sigh; then, with a sense that it was altogether wrong to blame a great lady and a countrywoman of his own to a little country girl whom he had never seen before, he changed the subject abruptly.

'Are you not very dull on your island? It is a long way off the mainland.'

'Dull? Oh, people must be very stupid who are ever dull. There is always so much to do out among the fruit-trees or down by the beach. The days are always too short for me.'

'That is the charm of being fifteen. Are you always on this island? Do you never go to Nice?'

'I have never seen Nice. I did want to see the Carnival last year, but my grandfather would not hear of it. It was Raphael told me about it. It must have been very fine; but, of course, we have nothing to do with the mainland, that is only for the rich idle people. I hear they sleep all the day and buzz about all the night, like moths or like bats. What a strange life it must be!'

Loswa thought of the great gaslit glittering Salle des Jeux which was not more than a dozen leagues off this primitive orange-island.

'You are happier here, in the middle of your blue water, putting out your oil lamps as the moon rises,' he replied. 'Chateaubriand might have lived on Bonaventure. Who would have believed there was anything so solitary and so innocent as this within a few hours' sail of the Blanc paradise?'

'What is that?' said Damaris, who, although she could see afar off the palms and domes of Monte Carlo gleaming in the sun on the northward horizon every time she sailed that way, was as profoundly ignorant of the *tripot* and its works as if Bonaventure had been in the Pacific.

'I have heard,' she continued, 'that there are very strange things and people over there, that it is a feast-day every day with them, and all their life like a fair. My grandfather always says he would shoot them all down as they shot the hostages in the Commune, but I do not think that would be right. If they are silly, one should pity them.'

'They are silly indeed, and I fear your sweet pity would not avail to save them. The feast-day is a sorry affair at its close.'

'Oh, I know. I have seen Raphael come home drunk and beat Jacqueline (that is his wife) because she cried; and he is as good as gold when he is sober, and as gentle as a sheep when there is no drink.'

'In some way we all drink, we unfortunates,' said Loswa; then, seeing her look of surprise, he added, 'I did not speak literally, my dear; your Raphael's drink is a *petit vin bleu*, and ours is a costly thing we call Pleasure, but it comes to the same result; only, I suppose, Raphael has some five or six days in the week that he is good for work, and we cannot say as much as that. We are all the week round at the fair.' [63]

She ruffled her pretty loose short locks that hung over her forehead, and her brilliant eyes looked at him perplexedly.

'I am glad I live on the island,' she said as the issue of her perplexity.

'And I too am glad you do,' said he, with more sincerity than he usually put into his pretty speeches.

He felt that before he approached the great object of his voyage he must justify his pretences and win her confidence by painting something which would please her fancy. To his facility of touch it was easy and rapid work to sketch on his block of paper the sea view, the terrace wall, the interior of the sitting-room, the old chairs, and the silver tankards. Sheet after sheet was filled and cut off and sent fluttering into her eager hands. To her it seemed the work of magic. Just a little water and a few pans of colour could make all the sea and sky, all the plants and stones, all the pots and pans and household things, seem real again on fragments of paper! She did not heed or even know that he was a man, young and handsome, whose eyes spoke a bold and amorous language; she was absorbed in his creations; he seemed to her the most marvellous of sorcerers. With delighted cries of recognition she welcomed the likeness of all the places and the objects so familiar to her; she was filled with a rapture of childish ecstasy. She hung over his work and watched him with a wonder which was only not awe, because it was such frank and childish delight.

Whilst he sketched, he let her talk at her will, in her own fashion, putting a few careless questions now and then. She was by nature gay and communicative; the seclusion and severity of her rearing had not extinguished the natural buoyancy and originality of her temper, and it was a pleasure to her to have anyone to speak to of other things than the land labours and the

household work.

In a few brief phrases she had described to him all her short simple life; how her mother had died at her birth, they said, and her father when she had been eight years old; how she had never been baptised 'or anything,' until, to please Melville, her grandsire had allowed her to enter the Church's fold like a little stray sheep; how she had been brought up by old Catherine, and taught to read by her, and how she had managed to read all the books her mother had left: Corneille, Racine, Lamartine, Lamotte, Fouquet, La Fontaine, and knew them almost all by heart, for she had no new ones; she told him all about the culture of the olive and the various kinds of oranges, [64] and all the different methods of pruning, tending, packing them; the big fragrant golden balls were much nearer to her heart than the black oily olives, but she was learned about both; she told him also all about the poor people she knew on the coast, of the young men whom the conscription had taken just as they were of use to their people, of the old women who took the flowers into the towns, of the children who could swim and dive like little fish, and were her playmates when she had time to play; the boat-builders, the fisherfolk, the flower-sellers, the toilers of the working world of whom all the fashionable world that flocks to the Riviera knows nothing, unless it throws them a few pence in the dust of the road, or thinks they form a pretty point of colour against the white walls and the flower-filled grass, or bids them make a *bouillabaisse* for a picnic in some little wooden cabin high up upon the red rocks, amongst the cactus spikes and the sea-pinks.

All this simple talk interested Loswa as it would never have done had not the mouth which uttered it been as lovely to look at as a half-opened damask rose.

'How came Monsignor Melville to speak of me to you?' she asked once with a persistency which was a strong trait of her character.

'He recognised you,' he answered her. 'He told us that you were prouder than any princess of them all, and that where we had meant but a joke you had, very naturally, seen an affront. He is much attached to you, I am sure, and felt quite as angry as you were.

'I was very angry,' she said passionately, with the colour hot in her cheeks. 'I thought the lady took me for a beggar. When one goes in a boat one cannot be *endimanchée*. I was taking the oranges to the Petite Afrique; there is a little old woman who keeps a little old shop there, and has nothing but what she makes by the sale of the fruit people give her. There are three trees here that are my own; my father planted them when he was home from a voyage, and to all their fruit I have a right. Grandfather lets me sell it or give it away.'

'And I am sure you do always the latter?'

'Oh, not quite always. Sometimes I want money for something, and then I sell the oranges; but it is only if there be a wreck, or a boat lost at sea, or a death or a birth. Of course I want nothing for myself; grandfather does not let me want, but he is not fond of giving to others, he likes to keep money locked up, and see it grow slowly bit upon bit like the coral. Do you like that? Myself, I think there is no pleasure at all in money except to give it away.'

'But whom do you give it to? You are all alone on your island.'

'There are the people who work for us; and then I know so many on the coast. I have come and [65] gone between this and the mainland so many many times, ever since I was a baby. It is such a good life being on the sea; so long as I have the water I never want anything else. Some of them call me *la mouette.*'

'It is the best of all lives. I am much on the sea myself,' said her companion, who hated the sea.

'You have a boat then?'

'I have a yacht; yes.'

'All to yourself?'

'Yes; to go about in as I fancy. I shall be delighted if you will sail in it some day.'

'Ah! it is a pleasure-ship then? I see those little ships racing often; they are beautiful. You must be very rich to have one all to yourself, not trading anywhere, or even dredging. How much money have you? And how do you keep it? In boxes, in coffers? Some of my grandfather's is down the well; he took bricks out of the side of the well, put the money in the hole, and then put back the bricks again. He did it at night; no one knows it but me. Do you keep your money like that?'

'No; in our world we give it to other men to take care of for us.'

'That seems very stupid. Why not take care of your own?'

She was sitting on the parapet of the terrace, her feet hung down; she leaned one hand on the stone she sat on; behind her was the broad blue of the sky, and about her all the shining of the effulgent light. She looked like a rhododendron flower growing up into the sunshine out of a corner of a dusky old garden.

'You have not told me how much money you have,' she pursued. 'If you let other folks take care of it for you, it is no wonder that you gentle people come to poverty so often.'

'We have too many caretakers, no doubt,' said Loswa, 'and they feather their own nests. But I am not a very rich man; pray do not think I am. I am only an artist. Nobody is rich now except the Jews here, and the rogues across the Atlantic. Would you let me make a sketch of yourself just as you sit now? It would be charming.'

'Will you give it to that lady?'

'No, on my honour. I will give it to you, and make a copy for myself.'

'Well, if you like; but would it not be better if I put on my Sunday frock?'

'Not for worlds. Sunday frocks have no affinity with art, my dear; yours is, no doubt, a very pretty one, but I should prefer to make your portrait as I have seen you first.'

[66] 'Oh, I do not mind; only this gown is very shabby and old. I am grown too big for it. I am always growing. Monsignor says that if I grew in grace as I do in centimètres I should soon be a saint like our St. Veronica.'

'It is not for me to disparage the saints,' said Loswa, 'but I think you will have another mission in this life than to be of their community. Keep still a little while; I will not detain you long. So!—that is just right. I wish I were Raffaelle and Leonardo in one, to be worthier of the occasion.'

'Who are they?' said Damaris, as he set his folding easel straight before him and began to sketch in the flowerlike figure on the wall, fresh and wholesome as the sea-lavender that grew in the sand below. He who was all his life in a hothouse recognised the value and fragrance of that sea-born plant, though it was too homely and simple for him; recognised it with his mind, though not with his soul.

The girl knew nothing of all that made up the world to him; the names most common to him in modern literature and art were to her dead letters that said nothing; the allusions familiar to him would have been to her phrases without meaning; all that constitutes modern culture was to her as an unknown country, and the only whisper she had ever heard of all that poets and artists tell the world was what she had felt rather than understood of the read and re-read pages of 'Athalie,' and of 'Attila,' of 'Cinna,' and of 'Sintram.' Yet there was a certain richness, as of virgin soil, in that absolute freedom from conventional education, and from received ideas; she expressed herself with simplicity and vigour, and this unworn, untrained mind, only nurtured on the high thoughts of great poets, had escaped all the bondage of tradition and of secondhand knowledge, and remained what it had been made by nature.

It required a higher intelligence than Loswa's was wholly to appreciate this charm; he was too conventional to be greatly attracted by unconventional things; he was too used to all the artificial attractions of artificial women, and too artificial himself to enjoy and admire all this freshness of fancy. It would have needed a poet to have done so, and he had nothing of the poet in him. But he was enough of a student of human nature to understand that with which he scarcely sympathised, and she was so handsome that her physical beauty created in him a compassion for the solitude in which it dwelt, such compassion as her intellectual solitude, and her half-unconscious longing for wider worlds than her own, would have failed to awaken.

'Is it possible that all that is to go to a *gros bourgeois* who builds boats?' he thought, as he looked at the beautiful lines of her features and her form, and that fairness of her skin just warmed by sun and air into the bloom as of a peach, which he strove in vain to reproduce to his own satisfaction in his drawing. [67] A face that would turn all Paris after it like sunflowers after the sun, to be left to pass from the glow of youth to the greyness of age on a little island in mid-sea! It seemed impossible—it would become impossible if she once learned her own charms.

'Your isle is worthy of Paul and Virginia,' he said to her, speaking to her in the phrase that she could understand, for she knew every line of Bernardin de St. Pierre. 'But where is Paul? Is there no Paul?'

'No, there is nobody at all like Paul,' she answered, with a little laugh at the idea. 'The youngest man is Raphael, and he has a fat wife and five children. They live down on the other side of the cliffs.'

'But Paul will come,' said Loswa. 'He always comes. Would you let me substitute myself for him?' he added with that somewhat impertinent audacity which had made his success so great amongst women of the world.

It did not please Damaris. Her brows drew together in that instantaneous and tempestuous anger which her face had expressed as the bracelet had fallen on her lap.

'You are not at all like Paul,' she said a little contemptuously. 'You are not young enough, and you have wrinkles about your eyes.'

Loswa reddened with irritation. He was still young, but life in the world ages fast, and he was conscious that to this child, in the first flush and sunrise of her earliest girlhood, he might well seem old.

'You are cruel,' he said humbly, 'and I am unhappy; I can only envy the Paul of the future.'

'Oh,' said Damaris very tranquilly, 'I know all about my future. I am to marry my cousin, Louis Roze; he has a *chantier* at St. Tropez; he is quite rich; he is very ugly and stout; he builds boats and barques; myself, I would sooner sail in them.'

She said all the sentences in the same even voice; marriage seemed to her to be hardly of as much interest as the boats.

'Good heavens!' said Loswa involuntarily. 'Athene to a Satyr!'

He could imagine the shipwright of St. Tropez without much effort of imagination; a black-browed son of the soil, smoking a short pipe, supping up prawn-soup noisily on feast days; a Socialist, no doubt, and an argumentative politician when he had drunk his glass of brandy, or he would not be to the taste of the Sieur Bérarde, her grandfather. This her future! As well might a

young nightingale, singing under acacia flowers in spring, talk of its future when it should be roasting on the spit to give a mouthful to a boor!

'Do you not intend to refuse?' he said abruptly, without thinking whither such suggestion might lead her.

She turned quickly and looked at him with astonished eyes; her breath came and went more quickly. [68]

'Refuse!' she repeated. 'Refuse! oh no; what would be the use? No one refuses to do what my grandfather has decided for them.'

'But you cannot be willing to make such a marriage?'

She was astonished and troubled by the rebellious suggestion.

'I do not think about it,' she replied at last, shaking the hair out of her eyes. 'It is a thing which is to be, you know. What is the use of thinking I am not to leave Bonaventure. I should not like to marry anyone who would not live on Bonaventure; but if I stay here and live as I always have done, it will not make any difference at all.'

He was silent. This absolute ignorance of what she talked about seemed to him pathetic and sacred. He did not wish to be the one to break away the wall which stood between her and the realities of life.

'He thinks of making a *chantier* here,' she explained; 'the only doubt is whether anyone will ever come such a distance to order a boat or a brig; and whether it would really pay to bring the timber out so far as this——'

'Good heavens!' said Loswa again.

'Why are you so surprised?' she said, looking at him in perplexity.

'How can you think about timber and shipwrights?' he said, irrationally enough he knew. 'What a life for you! I thought you loved Racine and Corneille.'

'But there is no one else here who loves them,' she answered with a little sigh. 'It is only making money that they care about—money—always money—and when it is made nobody enjoys it.'

'But who can oblige you to marry this man of St. Tropez?'

She ruffled her hair, not very well knowing what to reply.

'It is decided so,' she answered at last.

'But many things are decided for us which we do not accept. No one has any right to dispose of our own future against our own will.'

She looked vaguely troubled: the sense of herself as of an independent entity had never before presented itself to her.

'All those things are settled for one,' she said with some impatience. 'It is not worth talking about. Whether it is Gros Louis or another, it is the same to me. They are all stupid, they all smoke, they all drink when they can, they all say there is no God, and that there must never be any kings. They are all just alike.'

She was not conscious of the sombre revolt and vague contempt which were at work in her as the heat of the distant thunder cloud dulls slightly the sunny blue of a June sky.

'But there is another world than theirs,' said Loswa. [69]

'Out of the books?'

'Yes, beside the dreamland of the books. All the earth is not peopled with shipwrights and skippers. There is a world——'

He hesitated, for he was afraid of alarming her; it seemed to him that, were she displeased, she would send him spinning down the cliff with short ceremony.

'There is a world where life is always *en fête*, where women are treated not as goods and chattels and beasts of burden, but as sovereigns and sorceresses; where you yourself——'

'I shall never go there,' she said, abruptly interrupting him. 'Do not talk about it. It makes me restless. I feel as I do when I look over there.'

She pointed northward, where the unseen shore was.

'I see the sun shine on the mountains, and I see a dazzle of gold, a gleam of white, a long low line under the blue of the hills, and I know that is what they call the world, the big world; but I never land there; it is not for me.'

'Let me take you,' he said softly.

'No,' she said with petulance and resolution. 'Grandfather does not allow me ever to see the mainland without him; he says it is accursed, that the people are all mad. And now, as you have eaten and drunk all you will, it will be best that you should go: he may return any time, and he does not love strangers.'

'But I may come back and bring you your portrait?'

Her eyes smiled, but she said carelessly, 'That can be as you like. You are very welcome to what you have had. I will show you the way to the shore, though I dare say you would find it again by

yourself.'

He endeavoured to linger, but she gave him no leisure to do so. She escorted him to the edge of the steep descent, and there bade him a decided adieu.

Loswa, with all his grace and ease and habits of the world, felt at a loss before this child. He would have kissed her hand in farewell, but her arms were folded on her chest as she stood on the rock above him, and nodded to him a good-humoured good-bye; cheerfully, indifferently, as any boy of her years might have done.

'It is easy to see that you come from Paris!' she called after him, watching his descent along the *passerelle* with a kindly little laugh at the hesitation of his steps.

'Let her marry Gros Louis!' he thought angrily as that clear childish laughter echoed through the sunlit air from above his head. 'I have her portrait—that is all that matters.'

What a feature of the next year's Salon would be that brilliant, bold head when it should be hung in the full light of a May day, for all Paris to gaze upon, marked '*D'après Nature*,' and signed Loswa! [70]

He soon, despite his indolent limbs, which were more used to the boulevards than the sand and the shingle, regained his boat, and pushed it in deep water.

Damaris Bérarde stood above on the brow of the cliff, amongst the olive-boughs and the great leaves of the fig-trees, looking towards that pale golden far-off shore where 'the world' was a world with other men than Raphael and Gros Louis, with other fruits than the round orange and the black olive, with other music than the tinkle of the throat-bells of the goats.

CHAPTER IX.

Two days later Loswa entered the drawing-rooms of St. Pharamond, bearing with him a covered panel, which, after his ceremonious salutation of his hostess, he uncovered and placed on an unoccupied easel before her.

'Ah! my charming sea-born savage!' said Nadine as she approached it.

It still looked only a sketch, but it is a very sincere man who will display a sketch without touching it up and embellishing it, and Loswa was not sincere in that way, or in many others. He had copied his original drawing done upon the island, enlarging and improving it, and, though the portrait had the look of an impromptu creation, an *impression* vivid and masterly, it was in reality the product of many hours of painstaking labour and elaborate thought. Produced however it might be, it was one of the most brilliant studies which had ever come from his hand. It was not idealised or made artificial; it was the head of the girl as he had seen it in the full light of the morning on Bonaventure. The eyes had the frank, fearless, childish regard which hers had, and the whole face seemed speaking with courage, ardour, health, and imagination.

There was a chorus of admiration from all the great people who were there; it was her *jour*, and the rooms were full. Anything drawn by Loswa instantly elicited the homage of that world of fashion in which his powers were deemed godlike, and this sketch had qualities so rare and true that even his enemies and hostile critics would have been forced to concede to it a great triumph of art.

'You have succeeded,' said Nadine, as she put out her hand to him with a smile. 'You were right and I was wrong. You have painted the portrait without spoiling it by any affectations. No living painter could have done it better, and few dead ones.'

Loswa inclined his graceful person to the ground before her, and murmured his undying gratitude for the condescension of her praise. [71]

'*Tout de même, elle me le paiera*,' he thought, remembering the words she had spoken to him on the sea-terrace.

'And how did Perseus find Andromeda?' she asked. 'It must be a story to be told in verse in the old fashion. Relate it!'

'There has been very little romance about it,' said Loswa, 'and Andromeda, alas! is contentedly going to marry a boat-builder, stout, ugly, and old!'

'My dear Loris, that will be for you to prevent,' said Nadine, still gazing at the sketch. 'I have never seen a face with more character or more suggestion. *C'est un type*, as the novelists say. If she do marry the boat-builder, he will have a stormy existence. There are daring and genius in her face. Come—sit there and narrate your adventures with her.'

Never unwilling to be the hero of his own stories, Loswa seated himself where she bade him, and, becoming the centre of a circle of lovely ladies, he embellished and heightened the narrative of his expedition to Bonaventure as he had done the sketch, making his own part in it more romantic, and the reception of Damaris warmer than either had been. He had a very picturesque fashion of speech, and the little incident, under his skilful treatment, obtained the grace and the colour of a story of Ludovic Halévy's. The portrait could not open its lips and contradict him. Only his hostess thought to herself, with amusement: 'I wonder how much of all that is true!'

Whilst he was talking and drawing towards a close in his admirably-coloured narrative, Melville and Othmar together entered the room behind him, and the former caught the name of his favourite of the isle.

He listened in silence till Loswa paused to take breath at the end of a sentence; then, with a very angry gleam in his clear eyes, he interposed:

'So, M. Loswa, you have found the latitude and longitude of Bonaventure without a pilot! Your portrait on that easel is very like, but I confess I do not recognise the same verisimilitude in your narrative.'

Loswa, who had paused to meditate on the end of his adventure, which he felt could not be told with the tame finale which it had had in real life, was disconcerted, and for a moment silent.

'I have seen your heroine this morning,' pursued Melville; 'I am distressed to disturb your romance, but she is not the mingling of Gretchen and Graziella you have just described. I left her busied in feeding the pigs.'

'I dare say Gretchen and Graziella both fed pigs,' said Loswa with some ill-humour. 'At least, Monsignor, you will admit that I have proved to the Countess Othmar that I was capable of making a study of the betrothed of Gros Louis.' [72]

'That is feeding the pigs with pearls indeed,' said Nadine.

'The pigs are a better destiny than many another,' said Melville.

'You cannot seriously think so?'

'I do, indeed. If you had seen the dark side of life, Madame, as I have done, you would think so too.'

'No, never. That young girl has genius, or something very like it, in her face. I will send for her, and show her that there are other fates possible for a young Hebe with the brows of Athene.'

'That would be a cruel kindness if you like,' said Othmar, who had been attentively studying the portrait.

'And that is for once a commonplace remark, my dear Otho. Nothing which takes the band off the eyes is really unkind.'

'I do not know,' said Othmar. 'Great ladies like you have pets which are not the happier fated for the petting; the dog is shaved and frizzed, the bird is caged and killed, the marmoset is adored and neglected; if they were all left to their natural fates they would be less honoured but longer lived. Yonder palms are honoured too, no doubt, by being allowed to stand in a corner of your room behind a lacquered screen and in a gilded basket, but they have neither light nor air, and will be dead, and when they are so, will be replaced in a month.'

She smiled. 'How little you know about it! and what perilous things metaphors always are! The palms go back to their glass-houses and thrive as well as they did before, while other palms take their place in my rooms. You talk a little like a Socialist lecturer; your arguments are all invectives and—what is the logician's word?—pathetic fallacies!'

'Which is the glass-house to which you could send any human being whom you had taken from obscurity and contentment?'

'The glass-house is the world, which is always ready for novelties as the hothouses are ready for new seedlings. How can you tell that this handsome child may not be destined to make the world her slave? Besides, even in the interests of Gros Louis himself, it is as well that the consciousness should come before instead of after.'

'And certainly,' said Loswa, 'no one can say that Gros Louis is a fate meet for this exquisite child?'

Melville hesitated: 'Gros Louis is not a very admirable person; he is an unbeliever, of course very avaricious, and of a rough coarse exterior; but he is a good-tempered man and a very laborious worker. On the whole, worse things might happen to Damaris Bérarde than to live always on her island and rear her children there, as she now rears her *poussins* and her puppies.' [73]

'That is looked at from a very low plane, Monsignor; unusually low for you.'

'I can imagine so many things worse for her, that is all,' said Melville, with an apology in his tone. 'Certainly she ought to have a mate like a shepherd in Theocritus' pastorals, but as those shepherds exist not, at least this side of the Alps——'

'Why a shepherd at all?'

'Because they are better than hunters,' said Melville curtly.

Loswa smiled.

'Monsignor is prejudiced to-day,' said his hostess. 'Decidedly this Galatea must be worth seeing, and the island itself sounds idyllic. I did not know there was anything so near us still so like Bernardin de St. Pierre. Dear Melville, go and bring your treasure to us just as she is; just as Loswa has sketched her, red cap, bare feet, and striped sea-gown. The moment these people are *endimanchées* they are horrible.'

'She does not belong to "those people,"' said Melville, a little impatiently. 'Her mother was an actress of Paris. I think you might dress her how you would, she would look well. She has a patrician look like those girls of Magna Grecia, who are as ignorant as the stones they tread, but have the port of goddesses.'

'I will see this especial young goddess,' said Nadine, who never relinquished a whim when it encountered opposition.

Melville was seriously annoyed.

'Will you make Gros Louis more acceptable to her?' he said angrily.

'No; we shall make him impossible.'

'You will create one more *déclassée*, then, when there are already so many!'

'What? By seeing her once?'

'Yes,' replied Melville with a certain sternness. 'Once is enough. Discontent is born at a touch. Content is a thing which no one can create; but discontent almost anyone can bring about with a word. Merely to see you, Madame, would be to render this poor child wretched and ashamed all the rest of her days. I mean no compliment; only a fact. You float in the very empyrean of culture; you can only make this young barbarian conscious of her barbarianism. What is the curse of our age? That every class is wretched because it is straining forever on tiptoe, striving to reach into the class above it.'

'Dear Monsignor, I think they always did. Colbert stretched the draper's yard measure till it reached the throne, and Wolsey stood on the chopping-block till he was tall enough to touch hands with king and pope. It is nothing new, though modern democracy thinks it is.' [74]

'The just ambition of the man of genius is not the restless monomania of the *déclassée*.'

'Who can tell what ambition may lie under this Phrygian cap?' said his tormentor, as she looked once more at the sketch of Damaris. 'Dear Monsignor, I am so delighted when you become a little cross! It makes us feel that, after all, you are really human!'

'I am exceedingly cross,' said Melville; 'or, to speak more truly, infinitely distressed.'

'After all, Monsignor, it is not absolutely just to this involuntary recluse never to give her an occasion to estimate Gros Louis at his actual worth. According to what you and Loswa say, there are the gases of revolt already smouldering in her; surely it will be better for them to take flame before than after.'

'There are a great many lives,' said Melville, with a tinge of personal bitterness, 'in which those gases are never extinct, yet in which they are, nevertheless, not allowed to come to the surface and take fire. It may very well be so with hers.'

'Oh, the cruelty of a priest! Decidedly you will not let her come to us if you can help it. Well, we will go to her. I owe her an apology.'

Melville trusted to his usual experience of his hostess; he knew that with her, very often, a caprice ardently desired at sunset was forgotten by sunrise; that, in default of opposition, such a mere whim as this would most likely expire as soon as conceived. He said nothing more to her, and Loswa took his sketch down from the easel.

'I fear you are angry with me, Monsignor,' he murmured to Melville, to whom he was always courteous and deferential. 'Indeed, but for the challenge that Madame Nadège cast at me, I should not have ventured to find out your inviolate isle.'

'There is no harm done,' said Melville curtly. 'You will not find there either Gretchen or Graziella.'

Othmar had no sympathy with this new fancy.

'With all the world at your feet, what can you want with a fisher-girl?' he said, when they were alone, to his wife, who replied:

'She may be original and amuse me. There is hardly anything original in these days. One never sees anything; and I do not think she is a fisher-girl. She may even be a genius—an Aimée Desclée—a Rachel.'

'And do you think it is better to be a Desclée than to live and die, a happy wife and mother, *en bonne bourgeoise*?'

'Oh, my dear, it is you who are *bourgeois* if you see anything enviable in the prose of Fate! You may be sure that, if she be a genius, and I help to open her prison doors, I am only the instrument of Destiny. Someone else would open them if not I.' [75]

'I thought you always ridiculed the idea of Destiny?'

'For ordinary mortals-yes. But genius is accompanied by the Parcæ. It cannot escape them. Men may kill the body of Chatterton, but they cannot prevent the dead boy being greater than they.'

'I think your project cruel,' said Othmar. 'If you go to this child, or bring her here, you will interfere unwarrantably with her peace and quietude, you will take her out of her sphere; and you can never make a *déclassée* happy. Melville is quite right.'

'A *déclassée*! My dear Otho, what a very conventional reply. A *déclassée* is a person uprooted from her own sphere, to be placed in, or to long to be placed in, one for which she is not the least adapted. Genius is much more than adapted, it is armed in advance for any world it choose to take as its own. Rachel was an unlettered and unwashed Jewess, and Desclée was a tattered little Bohemian: but the one ruled the world, and the other made it weep like a child!'

'But I do not know why you should suppose this little girl on her island is necessarily destined to possess genius?'

'It is in her face, and it would be amusing to discover it. It would give one a Marco Polo sort of feeling.'

'It is a dangerous kind of exploration. You cannot tell what mischief may not come out of it.'

'And you do not understand that the supreme charm of a caprice lies precisely in never knowing in the least what one may come out of it.'

'But where your toys are human souls——'

'There are no such things as human souls. It is an exploded expression. There are only conglomerates of gases and tissues, moved by automatic action, and adhering together for a few years, more or less. That is the new creed. It is not an exhilarating one, but *il en vaut bien un autre*.'

'All this does not explain why you have taken a fancy to disturb the destiny of a little girl whom you have seen once in a boat.'

'Because, I think it may amuse me; all original creatures and unconventional types are amusing for a little time at any rate.'

'Oh,' said Othmar, half in jest and half in earnest, 'when you have once taken the idea that anything is amusing, I know cities may burn and men may die, you will not relinquish your idea till you have exhausted it.'

'No. I do not think I easily relinquish my ideas; it is only weak people who do that. It is true few ideas live long; they are all *belles du jour*, the bloom of a day.'

[76] Melville had for once erred in his estimate of his hostess. As tenacious when she was opposed as she was indifferent when unopposed, she that evening announced her intention of taking Loswa as her pilot, and of going in person to Bonaventure.

The opposition of Melville, and of her husband, the attraction of something new, and that charm which always existed for her in the discovery and examination of anything unusual in human nature, all contributed to make her dwell on an idea which, had it not been opposed, might probably have never taken serious shape.

The master passion of her temperament remained the pleasure she took in the excitation and the analysis of character. She had always liked to bring about singular scenes, unusual situations, strange emotions, merely for the sake of observing them with the same subtle and intellectual pleasure, as a writer of romance feels in the complications and characters which he creates at will, and at will destroys. She had always brought about a perilous position when she could do so, because to enter upon one was as agreeable to her as it is to a good mountaineer to ascend to perilous heights. She had been often tempted to regret her own physical coldness, which rendered such heat of emotion and of danger as d'Aubiac's royal mistress had known impossible to her. It was less the tragedy of passion than the psychological intricacies of character which interested her. '*Tous les amoureux sont bêtes*,' she had so often said, and so continually thought. Of all things which had bored her throughout her life the love of the male human animal had bored her the most.

But a complicated situation, a set of emotions on an ascending scale—a spectacle of troubled consciences and of disturbing elements—these it had always diverted her to watch, calm and untouched by them as any marble statue which looks from a glass window upon a storm at sea. In the language which she used the most, she said to herself that she would have given nearly all she possessed to be for once '*empoignée*' by an intense emotion.

Sometimes she would look at Othmar and think: 'It is not his fault; it has certainly not been his fault, and yet there has never been a second when my heart beat really any quicker for his coming.' In the highest heights of his own exaltation and ecstasy he had always left her irresponsive. 'You want Mignon or Juliet for all that,' she had said to him once.

It amused her now; this fancy of that unknown little island lying hidden in these gay and crowded seas. She had a fancy to see it and to divert herself with the human creature on it who she had said was '*un type*.' In the afternoon of the following day she sailed thither. Who could have hoped for an undiscovered isle on these crowded seas? She was accompanied by Béthune, Loswa, and three other of her courtiers. Othmar refused to condone what he did not approve; and Melville had been suddenly called away to Rome.

'To the new Desclée!' she said, as her yacht glided out of its harbour and bore southward through smooth sparkling sapphire waters.

'A name of melancholy omen,' said Gui de Béthune. 'Sometimes I think Aimée Desclée is the most pathetic figure of our century.'

'She was a sensitive, and she was a *poitrinaire*,' answered Nadine with her sceptical little smile. 'What does physiology tell us? That genius is only a question of brain tissue and blood-globules, and that the *Mois de Mai* and the *Prometheus Unbound* are only the consequence of a kind of disease. It is so consoling for us; who have no disease, perhaps, but have also, alas, no genius! That is why the world is so fond of the physiologists. They are the great consolers of all mediocrity.'

CHAPTER X.

Damaris was gathering oranges and carrying them to the packing-sheds. She was bearing an empty skip upon her head, and kicking one of the golden balls before her through the grass, when a woman, unlike any woman that she had seen before, appeared to her astonished eyes amidst the emerald foliage of the orange-boughs and the lilac of the hepaticas which filled the grass.

'I am sure you know me again?' said the sweetest and coldest of voices. 'I am come to apologise to you for my rudeness. Here is Loswa, who is afraid to approach you; he will vouch for me.'

Damaris stood still and mute; she put the basket off her head, and looked in blank stupor at her visitant; her colour came and went painfully; all in a moment she seemed to herself to grow ugly, awkward, coarse, foolish, everything which was hideous and painful. She had no words at her command, she might have been born dumb. No man had any power to confuse her, but this beautiful woman paralysed her every nerve.

'I am come to apologise to you for my involuntary rudeness,' said her visitant in her sweetest manner. 'Your rebuke was apt and very deserved, but you may be sure that, had I really seen you I should not have incurred it.'

'It was I who was rude,' said Damaris, with her cheeks scarlet.

[78] Loswa had been unable to embarrass her, but a cruel confusion possessed her before this woman, who was so unlike herself, who was so languid, so delicate, so marvellous.

'Not that she is so very beautiful either,' thought the child even in her bewilderment. 'But she is—she is—wonderful! She is like those gauze-winged dragon-flies, all silver and gossamer; she is like the delicate white lilies of the tree datura; she is like, like——I did not think a woman could be like that!'

'Do you forgive me?' said her visitor with her sweetest smile. 'I did not really see you, or I should not have made such a blunder—I who detest such mistakes.'

'I was rude,' stammered the girl again, with difficulty finding her tongue, whilst her colour came and went with violence.

'Oh no, you were justly on the defensive. You were offended, and took a just reprisal; the only one in your power. My dear child, M. Loswa has shown me the sketch he made of you, and told me of your hospitality to him. Will you not be as hospitable to me? I want much to make friends with you.' The words were spoken with all the exquisite charm and graciousness in which she could put such magic, when she chose, that no one living would have resisted them, and all such little courage or such vague prejudice as might have moved Damaris against her melted before them like little snowflakes in spring before the sun amidst the lilac-buds.

'If Madame will honour me,' she stammered, not even seeing the men who were present, only thinking of her own rough gown, of her tumbled hair, of the state of the house filled with wood smoke, as the oven was getting ready for the baking; of the lines of washed linen that were stretching from one wall to another.

'How did Clovis let you pass?' she said, struck with a sudden thought.

'Clovis knew me again,' said Loswa. 'Besides, a man was at the foot of the *passerelle*, and brought us up to you.'

'He did not do his duty,' said the girl with a little frown, which drew together her pencilled eyebrows.

'The man or the dog?' asked Nadine, amused.

'Neither,' said Damaris. She was angered, though she did not divine how many napoleons had passed into Raphael's hand, who had been pruning olives, and had had much trouble to hold back the faithful Clovis, for whom gold had no charm.

'If Brunehildt had not been shut up with her puppies,' she added regretfully; 'she is much more savage than Clovis.'

'You seem very sorrowful that we did not all have the fate of Penelope's suitors,' said Nadine, much amused. 'We are the friends of Monsignor Melville; may not that fact protect us? Is your grandfather at home?'

[79] No; he was away in the sloop; gone to St. Jean with a cargo. Damaris did not add that he would have been much worse to pass than even Brunehildt.

'But I pray you come into the house, Madame,' she added, her natural courtesy gaining the ascendancy over her embarrassment. 'It is a poor place, but there is a fine view, and if I had only known——'

'You would have been *endimanchée* and hideous,' thought Nadine, as she answered with her sweetest grace that she would go willingly to that balcony of the beauties of which she had heard so much from Loswa.

'All her eyes are for me,' she whispered to Béthune. 'She does not see that any of you exist.'

'I suppose,' rejoined Béthune, 'that we, after all, do not differ so very much from Raphael and Gros Louis; but between a woman and a woman of the world there is as much difference as between a raw egg and a *soufflé*, between a hen and a peahen.'

'You might find a more poetic comparison; say a poppy and a gardenia,' said Nadine smiling. 'She is not at the age to think of you. Have patience; *ça viendra*. She is really very handsome, lovelier than Loswa's sketch.'

Damaris, meanwhile, was thinking with agony that there were ready no cakes, no cream, no white bread, nothing which this delicate and ethereal visitant would be able to touch—thinking of the linen swinging in the wind, and of the bacon grey with smoke, and of Catherine, who, on washing-days, was in her crossest mood!

Nadine, with that swift intuition into, the thoughts of others which made her the most sympathetic of companions where she deigned to be sympathetic at all, guessed what was passing through the girl's mind, and hastened to relieve her embarrassment by asking to be permitted to remain out of doors, alleging that the air was so soft and the scent of the orange-blossoms so sweet, that she was reluctant to leave either.

'Will Madame really prefer it?' said Damaris, unable to conceal her relief.

'There is the same view to be seen from here,' she added as she opened a door in the wall and showed them the southern sea stretching far away, shining blue and violet through arches of olive-boughs lying all hushed and bright and warm in the glow of the afternoon sun.

Then she caught a little boy by the shoulder, the son of Raphael, who was looking on stupidly.

'Run and bring some wine and some fruit,' she whispered to him, 'and ask Catherine to send the old silver.'

Her sense of the obligations of hospitality was stronger than the dread of her great lady.

'It is not because she is great,' she told herself, angry with her own timidity. 'But she is so wonderful, so wonderful!'

That supreme distinction in the wife of Othmar, which, when she walked down a throne-room, made half the other women there look vulgar, had its charm even for this child, who could not have given a name to the superiority which awed and fascinated her, even whilst it made her ready to hide her head beneath the stones like the lizards. [80]

Nadine, pleased with everything, or so professing herself, sat on a stone bench within sight of the sea and quartered a mandarin orange with her white fingers, whilst the sun played on the jewels of her great rings.

'Of all your many conquests, perhaps you have had none more flattering than the adoration and amazement of this child,' whispered Béthune to her.

She smiled.

'And I should not think,' she answered, 'that she was by nature easily daunted or easily impressed. She has reigned here, the innocent Alcina of a bucolic paradise. She has character, whether she have genius or no. Look how coolly she puts poor Loswa aside! As he discovered Alcina, it will be hard on him if he be not her Rinaldo!'

'You are kinder to him than to her,' said Béthune.

'You always think ill of him.'

'I think of his character much as I do of his art.'

'Surely his art is admirable?'

'It is clever; it is not sincere.'

'My dear Duke, is not that a little hypercritical? You mean that it is a mannerism.'

'And what is a mannerism but an affectation? And what is an affectation but a want of truth?'

'That is a wide subject. I cannot discuss it with you just now, because I want to speak to this child.—My dear, I am a neighbour of yours; I live on the coast which you see every day; will you come and stay a few hours with me? We would show you things which would amuse you.'

'Stay with you?'

The eyes of Damaris opened to their fullest, her face flushed scarlet; she was so amazed that she forgot her awe of the speaker.

'Why should you want me?' she said bluntly.

'When you are older you will know that people want many things without knowing why they want them. But I can give you very good reasons: Monsignor Melville has interested me in you, and I think it a pity anyone so gifted as you are by nature should never see anything better than your yard-dogs and—what is your *fiancé's* name?—Gros Louis? My poor child, how can you know what it is you do with yourself? You cannot tell what the world is like.'

'I am very happy,' said Damaris.

The world was a name of magic to her. How often had she not looked over the strip of sea which severed her from that dazzling shore where amethystine hills and ivory snows and silvery olive woods spoke of a world from which she was forever severed! [81]

'I would come to you if I were ever alone,' she said after a pause.

'Well, come with us,' said her temptress smiling. 'It is three o'clock only now. We will take you with us for a while and send you back by twilight. Loris has told you who I am.'

The name of Othmar was, even to the ears of Damaris, a spell of might upon those shores. She was flattered, amazed, touched to intense emotion, but she stammered out that, although she was most grateful, yet she dared not; her grandfather would kill her if she left the island; he was most severe; he never forgave.

'I promise to disarm your grandfather if that is all your fear,' said Nadine, as she thought to herself, 'These good Communists, *je les connais*! They would string us all up to the lamp-posts, if they could, and yet, when we speak to them, they are in heaven!'

The more terrified and resolute in resistance Damaris grew, the more decided was her visitant to carry her point and succeed in her caprice.

'It is really cruel,' murmured Béthune. 'The child is happy: oh Madame! why pluck this wild rose only to droop in your glass-house, and be good for nothing ever afterwards? You cannot put it back upon its stem if once you break it off——'

'Do you think to flower for Gros Louis's buttonhole is a better fate?' said Nadine with amusement. 'I think you all are very hard to please. Usually I never notice anybody, and you say I am cruel; when I do notice anybody you say that is cruel also! I am just in the mood to play at being a benefactress, and you all oppose my charitable inclinations. To-morrow I may not be in the humour.'

'Precisely,' said Béthune. 'To-morrow you will wonder what you ever saw in a hedge rose, but that will not put the rose back in bloom on the hedge again.'

'The rose will cease to bloom certainly anywhere, and that is nature's fault, and not mine.'

'I hear you love the old poets,' she said, turning to Damaris. 'Will you recite something to me? I love them too.'

'And you yawn before every stage in Paris!' murmured Béthune. But Damaris did not hear him.

'I shall say it very ill, Madame,' she murmured. She was diffident, terrified indeed; yet her vague consciousness that she had some sort of power in her, as the lark had, as the nightingale had, made the old remembered poetry come thronging in her brain and trembling on her lips as she spoke of it.

'If, after all, I have talent?' she thought, her heart seeming to beat up to her throat.

'Give us something from Esther,' said her visitor; 'that is the one play permissible to young girls.'

Damaris smiled, as if at the name of a dear friend. Those verses, which generation after generation of children have spoken since the young disciples of the early years of St. Cyr first wept over the perils of the Jewish heroine, were amongst those which most touched her heart and pleased her imagination. Unknown to herself, she had something of the sense of loneliness of an exile, of an alien, on this little island, which yet she loved so well.

'*Voyons, voyons!*' said Nadine impatiently, not accustomed to, or tolerant of, being made to wait. 'Do not be afraid. I will tell you frankly whether you have any artistic aptitude, or whether you had better stay and gather oranges and never open a poem all your life. These gentlemen will flatter you, but I shall not. *Voyons!*'

She spoke imperatively, and with the imperial air of her most resolute will. Damaris grew very pale, even to her lips, but she did not dare refuse to obey. She opened her mouth once, twice, with a deep-drawn, fluttering, frightened breath; then she began to recite, with tremulous voice, the

Notre ennemi cruel devant vous se déclare:
C'est lui, c'est le ministre infidèle et barbare
Qui, d'un zèle trompeur à vos yeux revêtu,
Contre notre innocence arma votre vertu.
Et quel autre, grand Dieu! qu'un Scythe impitoyable
Aurait de tant d'horreurs dicté l'ordre effroyable?

and passed on to the passage,

O Dieu, confonds l'audace et l'imposture!

At first her timidity was so great that she was almost inaudible, but at the fifth and sixth lines the charm which the words possessed for her began to absorb her thoughts, to take her out of herself into the region of poetic feeling, to spur and stimulate and strengthen her. Nature had given her tones full of tenderness and power, and capable of many varying emotions, and the dramatic instinct, which was either inherited or innate in her, made her give wholly unconsciously the just expression, the true emphasis, the accent which best aided the meaning of the verse, and best shaped its harmonies and grace.

Her first embarrassment once passed, the animation and spirit natural to her returned; her intuitive perception made her lend the required force and feeling to each verse; she could have recited the whole of the play with ease, so familiar to her were the lines of all the few volumes she possessed. Night after night, in her little balcony, when everyone slept except herself and the nightingales, she had declaimed the speeches *sotto voce* for her own delight, living for the hour in the scenes they suggested, and forgetting all the more sordid details of the existence which surrounded her, seeing only the moon and the sea and the orange flowers. At any other time her meridional accent, her childish exaggeration of emphasis, and southerner's excess of gesture, would have incurred the ridicule of her hypercritical auditor. But now the critic was in the mood

to be kind and to be easily pleased. She closed her ears to the defects, and only noted with approbation the much there was to praise and to approve in the untaught recitation of a girl of fifteen, who had never seen a stage or heard a recital in the whole of her short life.

Damaris paused abruptly, and with a startled look, like one awakened out of dreamland into rough reality.

'I beg your pardon, I forgot myself,' she said stupidly, not well knowing what she meant and hardly where she was.

She did not hear the eager praises of the gentlemen about her; she only heard the sweet cool voice of the woman who was her judge, and who had listened in impassive silence:

'My dear, you have talent,' said that voice. 'Perhaps you have even genius. With all that music in your shut soul you must not marry Gros Louis.'

Damaris looked at her wistfully, with all the colour hot in her face, and her heart beating visibly. Then, she could not have told her why, she burst into tears.

'*Une sensitive!*' murmured her visitant a little impatiently. 'You see, my dear Duke!—it is Aimée Desclée, not Rachel; Adrienne Lecouvreur, not Mlle. Mars.'

'The greater pity then to take her from her orange-groves,' answered Béthune. 'What will Paris or the world give that will compensate for all her loss!'

Damaris did not hear. With shame at her own emotion, and unwillingness that it should be pitied or observed, she had turned away, and had been sobbing silently over the uplifted head and questioning face of Clovis, who had come upward to inspect the strangers.

'If Esther can move her so greatly,' said Nadine with her little ironical smile, 'what will Dona Sol do and Marion de l'Orme?'

'I do not think,' said Béthune, 'that it is Esther which moves her now; it is your abrupt revelation to her of her own powers. Surely to discover you have genius must be like discovering that you have a snake in your breast and eternal life in your hand.'

She laughed, and went to where Damaris stood with the dog, striving to conquer her weakness.

'My dear child, surely you cannot weep for Gros Louis? Nay, I understand; I startled you because I told you that if you study and strive you can do great things. I believe so. If you wish I will help you to do them.'

The girl was silent. So immense was the vision which opened before her, and so enormous to her fancy were the perils and difficulties which stretched between her and this promised land, that she was mute from awe and from amazement.

Always to dwell on Bonaventure, always to steer and sail on the sea, always to gather the olives and oranges, always to see the sun rise over the wild shores of Italy and set over the coast of Spain far away in immeasurable golden distances, always to run up and down the rocks like the goats, and swim like the dolphins, and go to bed with the birds and get up with them—this had been the only life she had known. For the moment she could attain no conception of any other. She had seen the churches at Villefranche and Eza, and she had seen the building yards of Villefranche and St. Tropez, and that was all; her only idea of the great world was of a perpetual fête-day, with the priests always in their broidered canonicals, and the church bells always ringing, and the people always thronging in holiday attire, and going up and down sunny streets noisily and laughing.

That was all she could think of; and yet Imagination, that kindliest of all the ministers of humanity, had told her there must be more than this somewhere; had filled her mind with many dim, gorgeous, marvellous pageantries which grew up for her from the black printed lines of 'Sintram' and 'The Cid.' There must be something better than the Sundays of the mainland—— And yet to leave her island seemed to her like leaving life itself!

All these conflicting thoughts striving together in a mind which was vivid in its fancies and childish in its ignorance moved her to an emotion which she could neither have controlled nor have described; she could find no words with which to answer this great lady, who seemed to her to have thrown open great golden gates before her, and let in a flood of light which dazzled her, streaming on her from unknown skies. And at last she yielded.

'Catherine, I am going on the sea,' she cried, as she ran indoors, blushing to the roots of her hair at the subterfuge, for she was very truthful.

The old woman, invisible for the smoke as she stooped over the great oven, with the handle of its door in her hand, grumbled some cross words which were neither assent nor dissent. Damaris took them as the former, and waited for no more; she passed half her life on the sea, the old servant would find nothing strange in her absence if she were out till sunset.

'You are sure I shall be back by Ave Maria?' she said timidly to her temptress.

'Certainly,' said Nadine, who knew well that it was not possible.

'I am sure I ought not to come,' said the girl wistfully.

Her temptress smiled a little.

'Oh, my dear, if you be as feminine as you look, that consideration will only add *la pointe à la sauce*.'

Damaris gazed at her with pathetic, impassioned eyes. She did not understand; she said nothing; she only sighed.

'Come,' said the enchantress.

'I think Othmar was right. It is cruel,' murmured Béthune.

'Men are always so timid,' said Nadine with her customary indulgent contempt for them. 'Ignorance is not bliss, my dear friend, although the copybooks say so.—Come, my pretty demoiselle, come and see our enchanted coasts; we will not harm you, and we will only give you a little spray of moly such as Ulysses gathered; and perhaps a magic ring and a wishing-cap, nothing worse.'

The child hesitated still; she knew that she was doing very wrong; she knew that if what she was doing were discovered, her grandfather's chastisement would be pitiless; but curiosity, imagination, interest, were all enlisted on the side of disobedience, and she had a certain turbulence and ardour of self-will in her nature which had brought her many hard words from Catherine, and even blows from Jean Bérarde. All these together conquered her conscience, her judgment, and her prudence; the gates of the enchanted world stood open; she might never pass through them, or see what was beyond them unless she went now.

With that reasoning she sprang down the first ledges of the stone staircase, and as lightly as a kid would have done leaped from one step to the other till she reached the edge of the sea.

She allowed her feet to be guided into the barge, and felt it dance beneath them with a strange thrill; it seemed all to be as unreal as a chapter of 'Sintram;' the lovely lady who wooed and tempted her appeared like a being from another world; the gilded prow, the embroidered flag, the rich awnings fringed with silver wavered before her in the sunlight.

Before she had known what she had actually done, the oars of the men cleft the sunshiny water, letting it flow in streams of diamonds off their blades, and the vessel had already glided away from her home.

Clovis, who was accustomed never to leave the island, but never failed to give voice to his grief when he saw her leave him for the sea, either by swimming or sailing, stood on the strip of sand beneath the rocky steep of Bonaventure and howled in dismal solitude. She put her hands to her ears not to hear him; it seemed as if he reproached and rebuked her.

Soon he became but a little white speck beneath the red sandstone of the cliff, and the boat had reached the side of the stately schooner which awaited them in the midst of gay sunshine and azure water, whilst a flute-player discoursed sweet music from some unseen retreat.

When the island also began to recede from sight she then, and only then, began to realise what she had done.

'*C'est Bernardin de St.-Pierre tout pur*,' said Nadine, surveying with diversion the amazement and the awe of her captive.

Nothing could be more enchantingly kind than her manner, or more gentle and encouraging in its patience with the girl's stupor and timidity. She had gratified her caprice, she had won her wager, and she was sweet and gracious to the object of it. Obedience had always found her benignant if at times it had found her as quickly oblivious. This had been a little thing indeed; a very little thing; but she would have been irritated if it had escaped or beaten her; would almost have been mortified.

All her world had told her that to bring the girl thither would be a folly if not a cruelty; and for that reason beyond all others she had persevered.

Damaris, seated in the prow of the barge, had the charm for her of representing the triumph of her own will. So might some young slave, hardly acquired, on whom her fancy had been strongly and waywardly set, have represented hers to Cleopatra.

CHAPTER XI.

Othmar was leaning over the balustrade of the sea-terrace as the vessel returned. He looked and saw the captive from Bonaventure. A sort of vague pity mingled with irritation as he did so. Why had Nadine brought this hapless child from her safe sea silences and solitudes? It was a jest, but the jest was cruel; as cruel as that which ties the little living bird on to the bouquet that is tossed from hand to hand in jests of Carnival.

The poor sea-born curlew would do well enough left to its own nest upon the rocks, but once taken prisoner its day was done.

There were moments when the caprices of her wayward and dominant will irritated him; when her profound indifference to the consequences of any action which amused herself, and compromised others, repelled him by its coldness. What could this poor little peasant be to her? A toy for five minutes, a plaything sought out of mere contradiction, and destined to be cast aside ere the day was done! [87]

He watched the graceful shape of the schooner as it bore down upon the coast with a sense of regret as from some definite misfortune which might have been averted by exercise of his own will. But he had never used his will in any opposition to his wife.

Wisely or unwisely, he had never made the slightest opposition to her desires or even her fancies. Begun in the blind adoration of a lover, the habit of deference to her had continued with him, not out of feebleness or uxoriousness, but out of that gradual growth of custom which is one of the most potent influences of life. She had power over him to make him relinquish many a project, abandon many a desire, but this power was not reciprocal; it seldom or never is so between two human beings. The old proverb, that of any twain one is booted and spurred and the other saddled and bridled, has a rough truth in it.

Othmar knew nothing of, and cared as little for, this girl whose face looked with so frank an audacity, so wistful an innocence, out of the brilliant drawing of Loswa. But he was sorry that she was not let alone. He had suffered many a bitter moment, even since his marriage, from the uncertainty of his wife's moods, from the mutability of her fancies. Constant in his own tastes, and very unwilling to wound others, her rapid changes from interest to weariness, and her profound indifference for the bruises she gave to the *amour propre* of her fellow-creatures, frequently troubled and distressed him. He was often kind to persons he disliked, to compensate them for her unkindness, or to prevent them from perceiving it.

Nadine, he knew, would think this poor child of no more account than the briar-rose to which he had likened her; but to him it seemed wanton and cruel to have disturbed the peacefulness of her life, merely as a child casts a stone at a bird, and then runs on, not even looking to see whether the bird be bruised or has fallen.

'Life is but a spectacle,' she had once said to him. 'When you go to the Gymnase do you distress yourself as to whether the actors catch cold at the wings or take a contagious disease in a cab as they go home? Of course you do not? Then why not view life in the same manner? People bore us or please us; that is all we are concerned with. We do not follow them home in fact; we need not, even in imagination.'

But Othmar did not agree with her. Life seemed to him much more often tragedy rather than comedy; he could not divest himself of a compassion for the players, with which much fellow-feeling mingled. [88]

'Since I married him he has become very amiable,' she once said jestingly. 'It is due to the spirit of contradiction which always exists in human nature, and which is never so strongly developed as in marriage.'

It was a jest; but there was a truth in the jest. Often he felt so much irritated at his wife's indifference, that it stimulated him to more interest or sympathy than he would otherwise have felt on many subjects and in many persons.

As he saw the yacht approach the sea-wall now, he turned away impatiently and went into the house to his books. He did not choose to assist at the festive procession which was conducting this poor little wild goat of the cliffs to be offered upon the altars of caprice and flattery.

As if, he thought, a life out of the world were not such an enviable thing that we should be as afraid to destroy it as we are afraid to break a Tanagra statuette!

Meanwhile, unretarded by his displeasure, the schooner approached as nearly as the draught of water would permit, and the boat from it landed Damaris Bérarde at the foot of the rose-marble stairs. Béthune would have assisted her, but she sprang from the boat to the landing-stair with the assured and graceful agility of one who passed all her life in the open air, and was practised in the free exercise of all her muscles. Her eyes gazed in delighted wonder at the beauty of the place.

'It is like Alcina's palace,' she said with a quick breath of admiration.

'What do you know of Alcina?' asked her hostess, amused.

'I have read Ariosto,' she answered, and then, with her extreme care for perfect truthfulness, added, 'I mean I have read his poems, translated.'

'It is rather your island which is like Alcina's,' said her hostess.

Then they led her through the gardens, which seemed all a maze of rose, of yellow, and of white from the innumerable thickets of azalea which were in bloom. Here and there, out of their gorgeous glow of colour, there rose the white form of a statue or the white column of a fountain. The sun was still high in the west; the gardens seemed to laugh like children in its warmth.

It was all so beautiful, so magical, so strange; the child whose imagination had been fed on poets' fancies, and had grown unchecked in an almost complete solitude, expected some marvellous message, some wondrous destiny to meet her there on this threshold of a new life.

She found herself the centre of attention and of homage; everyone looked at her, spoke to her, strove to gain her notice. A vague fancy came into her mind—perhaps she was a king's daughter after all, like the Goose Girl in Grimm's stories, of whom Melville had told her once. Anything would have seemed possible to her, and nothing too incredible to happen at the close of this astonishing day. [89]

They led her into the house, which was entered from the garden through conservatories filled with Asiatic and South American plants and gaily peopled by green paroquets and rose-crested cockatoos, and scarlet cardinals, which flew at their will amongst the feathery foliage.

They were all kind to her; full of compliment and of thoughtfulness for her; even her hostess took trouble to interest her, to explain things to her, to make her feel that she was welcome and admired. In her serge frock and her thick shoes, with her rope of pearls twisted round her throat, and her face in a rose glow of surprise and of innocent vanity and pleasure, she sat the centre of their interest, their approval, and their praise. She was a very picturesque figure with her short blue rough gown and her scarlet worsted cap. She had twisted her big pearls round her throat, and she had slipped on her Sunday shoes. She was tall, and lithe, and erect; she looked astonished, but not intimidated. If a smile were exchanged between them at her expense she did not see it, and if they looked at her much as they would have done at a ouistiti or a topaza pyra from wild woods, she was unconscious of it.

The whole scene was enchantment to her eyes. Her natural sense of the beauties of form and of colour was at once soothed and excited by the beauty of these chambers, which had all the subdued glow of old jewels. It was still daylight, but rose-shaded lamps were burning there, and shed a mellow hue over all the brilliant colours. They brought her tea, and ices, and bonbons, things all as strange to her as they would have been to a savage from South Sea isles.

Her ignorance, her simplicity, her frank surprise amused them, and the natural shrewdness and pertinence of her replies stimulated them with the sense of a new intellectual distraction. But when they pressed her to recite, she grew shy and silent. She was not a machine to be set in action by pressure of a spring; and a certain suspicion that she had only been brought here as a plaything dawned upon her; the idea suddenly came to her that these great people were amusing themselves with her ignorance and astonishment, and when once that sting of mortified doubt had come into her mind, peace fled, and pride kept her mute and still.

Other persons came in, pretty women, and handsome men; there was a murmur of laughter and a confusion of voices in all the rooms. She began to feel less at her ease, less satisfied, less sure of her own self. Some of the new-comers stared at her and sauntered away laughing; her one little hour of triumph was already over; she had been seen, she had ceased to be a novelty. [90]

But it was too late to repent. She could not ask such strangers to retrace their steps for her; and she felt by intuition that this lovely sovereign, with her delicate face and her gracious smile, could have become as chill as the north wind and as terrible as the white storms, were she offended by caprice or ingratitude.

Damaris had strong natural courage, and all the hardiness of a resolute and defiant youth; but she felt a vague fear of Nadine Napraxine, which only served to intensify the fascination by which she was subdued in her presence.

Her hostess still spoke kindly to her from time to time, but soon ceased to think much about her: having once been captured and brought thither, she had ceased to be an object of great interest.

It was five o'clock; more people had driven over from other villas; great ladies, with their attendant gentlemen. There were the usual laughter and murmurs of conversation, and general buzz of voices; the rose-shaded lamps were shining through the daylight; the sounds of a grand piano magnificently played came from the music-room; the air was full of the scent of roses and gardenias, of incense and perfume. Damaris, after a few glances cast at her, a few smiles caused by her, was forgotten and left to herself. Her head turned; her breath seemed oppressed in this atmosphere so different to her own; she felt lonely, ashamed, miserable; she shrank into a corner behind some palms and gloxinias, it was the saddest fall to pride and expectation.

Othmar and Béthune, watching her, both thought, 'She has found out she is only a plaything, and she is resentful.' Othmar thought, in addition, 'If only she knew how very little time she will even be as much as that!'

They saw without surprise, but with contempt, that Loswa, through whose imprudence she was there, avoided her, was evidently ashamed to seem acquainted with her, and devoted himself assiduously to two or three of the great ladies. Loswa wished to show her that if he had sought her for sake of his art, he had better interests and occupation than a little peasant in knitted stockings could afford him. In himself he was angered against her for the slightness of the impression he had made on her, and the indifference with which she had treated him after he had honoured her by taking her for a model.

'She is a little sea-mouse that came up in Miladi's deepwater net to-day,' he said with a slighting [91]

laugh to the great ladies who asked him about her.

Damaris overheard, and her child's heart burnt with rage and scorn against them.

'He broke bread with me yesterday, and he ridicules me to-day!' she thought, with her primitive islander's notions as to the sanctity of the rites of hospitality. She hated this soft-eyed, soft-voiced man, who had made an effigy of her with his colours, and had brought to her these cruel strangers, who had in a single hour made such havoc of her peace. And they had told her that she should be back at Ave Maria, and it was now night; deep night, she thought it; for she did not know that though these rooms were all lit artificially, and the windows had now been long closed, behind these thick draperies of golden plush the last glow of daylight had scarcely then faded from the western skies.

What would they think on the island?—and what would Catherine and Raphael do?

No one now noticed her since they had ceased to stare at her as a young barbarian; no one now remembered her, sought her, or cared for her; she seemed likely to pass the whole afternoon in a corner, undisturbed and unremembered, like a little sea-mouse, as he called her, too insignificant even to be expelled!

On her island nothing could have daunted her, silenced her, troubled her; she was mistress there of the soil and of herself; she was proud and intrepid as any sovereign in her own tiny kingdom; but here all her courage deserted her; she only realised how utterly she was unlike all these people around her; she was only conscious of the rude texture of her gown, of the rough wool of her hose, of the sea-brown on her hands and arms, of the red on her cheeks blown there by the wind and the weather.

All these women were delicate and pale as the waxen bells of the begonia, as the creamy column of the tuberose.

She had been innocently vain, unconsciously proud of herself; everybody had told her she was handsome, and her own sense had told her that she was born with finer mind and higher organisation than were possessed by those who were her daily companions. And now she felt that she was nothing—nothing—only an ignorant and common peasant. She was well enough at Bonaventure, but she was a poor little savage here.

Suddenly there was a general murmur of excitation and a general movement of personages, and from where she had been placed she saw the mistress of the house going forward to greet a young man who had entered as various voices had exclaimed:

'Prince Paul is come!' [92]

They all surrounded this new-comer with murmurs of ardent congratulation. He was the Rubenstein of the great world, a rare and most sympathetic genius, and, *ce qui ne gâte rien*, he was the son of a grand duke, though he held it as a much higher title that he had been also the pupil of Liszt and the beloved of Wagner. He was one of the innumerable cousins which Nadine could claim here, there, and everywhere in the pages of the Almanach de Gotha, and he was a person whose visits were always agreeable to her.

This visit was unexpected, and was, therefore, all the more welcome. In the reception of Paul of Lemberg she altogether forgot her poor little bit of seaweed off Bonaventure, and everyone did the same.

Othmar, coming through his rooms to welcome his new and unlooked-for visitor, who was a great favourite with himself, caught sight of the figure so unlike all others there, which was seated forlorn and alone on a low couch, with a group of palms and some draperies of Ottoman silks behind her.

'So soon abandoned!' he thought with compassion. 'Poor child; she looks sadly astray. She is very handsome—as handsome as Loswa's sketch,' he thought also, with a few swift glances at her.

When he too had greeted Prince Paul he turned to his wife and said in an undertone:

'Have you forgotten another guest whom you have left there all alone?'

She looked fatigued and annoyed at the suggestion.

'My dear Otho, go and console her; you were always a squire of distressed damsels.'

Othmar turned away and passed back through the apartments to the place where he had seen Damaris.

'Poor little *déclassée*!' he thought pitifully. 'You have no power to amuse them for more than five minutes. It was cruel to bring you away from your own orange and olive shadows into a world with which you have no single pulse in common!'

With his gentlest manner he addressed her:

'May I present myself to you, mademoiselle? My wife, I understand, persuaded you to favour us by leaving your solitudes. I am afraid we have not much to offer you in return.'

Damaris was silent. She was grateful for the kindness, but she was too offended and pained by the position in which she had been placed to be easily reconciled to herself.

'You are Count Othmar?' she asked abruptly.

She was thinking of the story told her, when she was a child, by Catherine.

'That is what men call me,' said he. 'Believe me, I am your friend no less than my wife is so, and I

am most happy to see you beneath my roof. I first made your acquaintance through Loswa's sketch.' [93]

'He was not honest about that,' she said angrily.

Othmar smiled.

'No artists are honest when they are tempted by beautiful subjects. He will make you the admiration of all the Paris art world next year.'

She did not reply at once. Then she repeated:

'It was not honest. I did not think he was going to show it, and bring people to me.'

'No; in that I think he took unfair advantage of your hospitality.'

'That is what I mean. I shall not let him ever go back.'

'Poor Loswa! The punishment will perhaps be greater than the offence.'

She was again silent. She knew nothing of the light give and take of social intercourse. To her the things of life were all very serious.

He felt an extreme compassion for her, and with great patience, kindness, and tact, strove to overcome her half-fierce shyness. He talked to her in a way which she could understand and of things she knew; of the life of the sea, of the fruits and their seasons, of dogs and their ways, of old poets and simple writers such as she loved and reverenced. Little by little her sullenness gave way, her face lightened with its natural smile; she felt confidence in him and spoke to him with that candour and directness which were as common to her as its blue tint to the sea-water; but all the while she thought with sinking heart:

'I wonder if I might ask him how late the hour is? I wonder if I might tell him how much I do want to go home?'

But she did not dare to do so; she thought it would be rude.

Othmar placed before her some volumes of Doré's illustrations to beguile her time, and rejoined his wife, who was still occupied with the Prince of Lemberg. He was at all times one of her favourites, and he had just come from Vienna, and had many *chroniques scandaleuses* of that patrician court to tell.

'What is to be done with this unhappy child?' Othmar said to her somewhat sternly. 'She is miserable and *dépaysée*.'

'I sent you to amuse her,' replied Nadine. 'If you did not——'

'You must allow me to say,' returned Othmar, 'that it was not worthy of you to bring that poor little peasant here, only to neglect her and make her miserable. I should have thought you were too great a lady to commit such a—will you pardon me the word?—such a vulgarity.'

She was not as angry as he had expected; she even smiled; but she remained as indifferent. [94]

'Vulgarity is indeed a terrible charge! I do not think anybody ever brought it against me before. I thought she was very well entertained. I supposed Loswa took care of her. He is responsible for her.'

'No,' said Othmar, 'we are responsible. She is in our house, and she came here by your invitation; on your insistence. There is surely the law of hospitality——'

'Among savages,' said his wife, amused. 'I believe it exists somewhere still on the Red River, or amongst the Red Indians; I am not sure which. We know nothing about it. We only invite people because we think they will amuse us, and we usually find that they do not. I fancied this girl would be amusing, but she is not at all so here. She is dull, and she is frightened.'

'What else could you expect?'

'I expected—I do not know what I expected. Genius should not be abashed by mere tables and chairs.'

'Perhaps she has no genius. Even if she have any, to be stared at and laughed at by a number of strange people may be sufficiently embarrassing. I confess that I think you have done a very cruel thing.'

She laughed. When men are angry they amuse immeasurably a clever woman whose temper is serene. And it seemed such a trifle to her.

'Pending your arrangements for her future,' said Othmar after a pause of excessive irritation, 'where is she to be this evening? The second gong has sounded.'

She gave a little gesture of impatience.

'How very tiresome you are! Can she not go to the servants?'

'In my house? Certainly not. I will have no guests sent to the servants' hall. This young girl is as well born as any other of your visitors.'

'How odd you are! You will make me insist on separate establishments if you develop such quaint notions! I am sure she would be infinitely happier with the maids, and she would run no risk of becoming *déclassée*.'

'It is the only time in my life that I have found your expressions in bad taste,' said Othmar as he turned to leave the room.

She laughed: 'You had better take her into dinner yourself.'

'I shall do so if she will come.'

The door closed on him, and she looked after him with a frown of impatience and a smile of astonishment.

What a fuss about a little fisher-girl! she thought. As if the girl could not go to the maids—go to the nurseries—go to the still-room—anywhere, anywhere. What could it matter? [95]

She was accustomed to see her playthings no more when once they had passed an idle hour for her. Why could not somebody take away this one? She would not have been here had it not been for Loswa. It was all Loswa's fault, no one else's. And who could tell that the girl would be such a dumb, stupid, frightened creature? On the island she had had force and courage and talkativeness enough.

Why would Otho always take everything *au grand sérieux*? He should have lived on that island.

He was quite capable of taking her in to dinner, though there were high ladies of every degree staying in the house! And she hated the idea of his making himself ridiculous. She would override all customs and conventionalities herself when she chose, but she was too thoroughly a woman of the world not to regard a social solecism, a drawing-room blunder, with much more horror than she would have felt for greater crimes. Anything which made an absurd story for society was to her detestable.

'Murder all your enemies to three generations, like a Montenegrin,' she would say *à propos* of such matters, 'but never make a fault in precedence at your table.'

Othmar meanwhile dressed very hurriedly, and hastened to the drawing-rooms before they could fill again. The latent chivalry of his temper was active; he would have been capable for the moment of any eccentricity to show his honour for this forlorn child.

'What wretched artificial creatures we all are!' he thought. 'No wonder, when any natural life comes amongst us, it feels dazed and astray.'

The existence he led looked to him for the instant supremely absurd. The instincts towards wider freedom and plainer habits, and higher thoughts than those possible in his society, had always been in him from his youth, though they had found no issue and no sympathy; and in his marriage he had tightened around him the bondage of the world.

The brilliant rooms were deserted when he re-entered them: here and there a servant moved, attending to a lamp or carrying away a stray teacup; there was no one else.

In his gentlest tones he again addressed Damaris:

'We are about to go to dinner,' he said to her kindly; 'will you do me the honour to accompany me?'

No hunted antelope could have looked more terrified than she.

'Dinner,' she echoed. 'I dined at noon.'

'But you can dine again? The sea air always gives one an appetite. You must not starve like this in my house.'

'I could not! I could not!' she said with tremulous lips. She glanced in an agony of dread through the rooms where all those gay people were. The idea of dining with them appalled her more than it would have done to find herself on a wrecked vessel, in the midst of the winds and waves. What would they think of her? What errors would she not make? What could she know of their manners and fashions? [96]

'I could not! I could not!' she repeated, her colour changing a dozen times a minute.

He endeavoured to persuade her, but found that it only caused her more pain. After all, he reflected, it was natural enough that she, who had never been at any table save her own, should be appalled at the prospect of dining before a score of fine ladies and gentlemen.

He was sorry for her. He knew the rapidity with which his wife's caprices altered and her preferences evaporated. He had seen so many please her, for an hour, to weary her immeasurably whenever they afterwards presumed to recall to her the fact of their existence.

'Well, you shall do as you please in this house,' he said to her. 'Remain here, and I will tell them to bring your dinner to you.'

'Indeed—indeed I want nothing,' she protested; 'I could not eat.'

She was about to say to him much more than that; to say that the sun had set, the night had come, the hours were passing fast—but she could not find courage. After all, what was she?—a stupid, ignorant little sea-born savage in the eyes of all these people.

She remained where she was, silent, and miserable, yet watching with curious eyes the pageant so new to her of the lighted *salons*, the lovely ladies, the pretty procession that passed out of the drawing-rooms as they went to dinner. Could these be human beings who lived always like this? She wondered—she envied—and yet she longed for her own free life on the waves, under the olives, climbing with the goats, diving with the gannets, rocking in the orange-boughs with the thrush and the greenfinch. It was beautiful here, magical, marvellous, incredible; yet she wanted fresh air, she wanted free movement; like a mountain-born rose shut up in a hothouse, she felt suffocated in this sultry and perfumed air.

CHAPTER XII.

As Othmar had promised, a servant brought to her, served on silver and Japanese porcelain with damask, which she took to be satin, a repast of which the dishes succeeded each other in [97] bewildering rapidity, and looked so ethereal and pretty that it seemed to her quite grievous to break them up and eat them. The fairies themselves might have feasted off these tempting viands, and her appetite, which was the robust one of youth, proved to her that it is possible to dine at noon and yet be ready to dine again at eight. She had satisfied her hunger, however, long before the full complement of the services had been brought to her, and the fruit and bonbons best pleased her childish tastes. She gained courage to leave her corner and come from beyond the palms and move timidly about the rooms, looking now at this picture, now at that statue, and ever confronted by her own likeness in the mirrors, and beholding it with impatience. She touched the flowers embroidered on the plush of the chairs, astonished that the blossoms were not real. She looked with wonder at the grand piano, marvelling that out of its painted panels and ivory keyboard such melodies as she had heard could have been drawn. She gazed at the figures on the Gobelin tapestries in entranced delight, and, with the unerring selection of a nature instinctively artistic, paused enraptured before the marble copy by Clésinger of the Vatican Hermes.

She who had never seen anything but Bonaventure and the fisher-people's cabins on the mainland, and the little dusky shops where the fruit was sold, was dazzled by the beauty of St. Pharamond within and without. Everything around her was strange and wonderful; the very flowers were unfamiliar; gorgeous blossoms to which she could give no names.

But when she caught sight of her own figure in the mirrors, standing amidst all the glow and delicacy of colour of these marvellous chambers, she seemed to herself barbarous, incongruous, grotesque, a blot upon the scene, a savage set amidst civilisation. All the flatteries which had been poured out to her ear had passed by her, making little impression. There were the mirrors, which were truer counsellors than he; they showed her that she was not as these people were. She did not think she had any beauty at all, she only saw that she had none of this grace which was around her, that she was like a bit of ribbon weed from the sea amongst lilies and lilac.

She was so interested and so absorbed that she was startled as by a blow when she saw the double doors at the end of the drawing-rooms thrown open by a man with a silver chain and a white wand, and the figure of her hostess appeared led by the Prince of Lemberg and followed by all the ladies and gentlemen who had dined with her that evening.

With the swift movement of a hunted thing Damaris drew back behind a screen of plush embroidered like the walls and chairs and couches with silken garlands of spring flowers.

No one was thinking of her.

Even Othmar passed by the spot where he had left her without looking for her. He was talking to [98] a very tall slight blonde woman, who was the Princesse de Laon, and had been Blanchette de Vannes. They all went by the screen and passed on into the farthest room of all, where the Erard stood. Damaris, like a forsaken child, crouched down on the stool she had found there, and the big hot tears forced themselves from under her eyelids. It was foolish, she knew; unreasonable, no doubt; but the most piteous sense of mortification and of insignificance was upon her, like a heavy hand crushing her down into the earth.

At Bonaventure, despite the harshness at any disobedience with which she was treated by her grandfather, she had been in much a spoilt child; the few people on the island were all her ministers and servants. On the rare occasions when she visited the mainland, everyone treated with reverence and flattery the heiress to Jean Bérarde's wealth and acres; even when these great people had come to her they had praised her talent, they had suggested wild hopes to her, they had given her honeyed words; unconsciously she had expected something very great to happen to her when she should be seen at this house where her presence was said to be so desired—to realise that she was nothing here, less than the servants, who at least had their place and their duties in it, was the most cruel of disillusions.

Overcome by the unusual warmth and closeness of the atmosphere, which sent her blood to her temples and filled her with a strange drowsiness, she let her head fall back upon the cushion of her couch and fell asleep. She dreamed strange things. There was nothing to distract her. The servants glanced at her contemptuously and let her alone; they had no orders about her, and in the house of Nadine no one ever dared to act without orders.

The perfumed air, the dry warmth from the *calorifères*, the profound stillness, invited slumber; and she slept on as soundly as any tired child that throws itself upon a primrose bank on an April day.

She was roused by a sound of sweet notes like the voices of her nightingales when they sung under the orange-leaves.

In the farthest room of all, where the pianoforte stood, Paul of Lemberg had begun to play; melodies of Tristan and Isolde thrilled through the silence to her ear and awakened her in her hiding-place. She who had never heard any such music in her life listened with a surprised sense of delight so intense that it was also pain. The delicate rain of harmonious notes falling one on another, the strange mystery with which the chords of the instrument repeat and concentrate all the sighs of passion and the woes of feeling, all the inexplicable and marvellous humanity and sympathy with which all perfect music is filled, were heard by her for the first time in their most

exquisite forms. She listened entranced, awed, and penetrated with an ecstasy which was as sharp as suffering. She forgot where she was. When silence followed she was weeping bitterly; all the wounds of her heart at once deepened a thousandfold, yet healed by a touch divine. [99]

All the longing, all the dreams, all the vague desires and unsatisfied fancies which had been in her mind and heart untold to anyone, and misunderstood even by herself, burned to obtain utterance in this the first music she had ever heard. She crouched in her corner unseen; a servant, who had placed a lamp behind the screen, had been too discreet in his office, and too contemptuous of herself, to disturb her. She sat still on her low stool, and listened as the harmonies succeeded each other from the distance.

Paul of Lemberg was in the mood to recall a thousand memories and invent a thousand fancies in music, and his companions were capable of giving him that comprehension and appreciation which the finest scientific knowledge of the tonic art alone can render.

In the pauses which at times ensued, the conversation was animated and absorbing; they spoke of music, always of music, and Othmar, whose greatest interest had always been found in music, forgot as well as others the guest whom his house sheltered.

When at length Lemberg rose and drank a cup of coffee, and lit a cigarette, and proceeded to *faire la cour* to the Princesse de Laon, and four violins in a quatuor of well-known artists were tuning to fill up the blank of silence he had left, Othmar, with a pang of compunction, recalled the hours during which the child had been neither seen nor sought by any one of them. It had been half-past eight when they had gone into dinner; it was now past eleven o'clock.

He went through his drawing-rooms hastily, looking for her in every place, and failing to find her. At length, when he was about to inquire for her of his household, he saw a shadow behind the embroidered screen, and moving the screen aside, discovered her in her solitude.

'My dear child!' he exclaimed, ashamed at his own neglect of her, 'where have you been? I have not seen you for hours. What a dull evening you have passed!'

The tears were dry on her cheeks, but they had left her eyes humid and heavy; her face had grown very pale.

'I have heard all that,' she said with a little gesture towards the distant music-room. 'I did not think there was anything as beautiful in the world.'

'*Une sensitive!*' thought Othmar, recalling his wife's half-unkind and half-compassionate expression as he answered. His knowledge of such sensitive natures induced him now to observe with an instinct of pity the trouble visible on the young girl's face. She had an isolated, pathetic, bewildered look which touched him, and with it there was an expression of anger and hurt pride. No child lost at dark in a wood where it had strayed through disobedience, was ever more bewildered, lonely, or punished for its sin, than she was in those radiant drawing-rooms, surrounded with the light laughter and the, to her, unintelligible chatter in which she had no share; oppressed by this overheated, over-perfumed air in which she felt stifled and sick, abashed, and yet angered by the neglect and obscurity to which they had abandoned her. [100]

'I fear you want to go home, my dear,' he said compassionately. 'Is it not so?'

She hesitated, then answered curtly: 'Yes.'

'How long have you been asked, or have you promised, to stay with us?'

'She said I should go back by sunset.'

'My wife said so?'

'Yes.' She paused, then added with a tremor of terror in her voice, 'If I be out when he comes home my grandfather will kill me.'

'But he will know you have been safe here with us?'

She shook her head. 'That will make no difference, Monsieur. You do not know him. Of course it is all my fault; I did wickedly——'

'You did, as I understand it, a natural childlike piece of disobedience; you ought not certainly to have been tempted by others to do it, but as your grandsire will learn whom you have been with, I cannot see that he can be so very greatly angered, even if you should stay here all night.'

'You do not know him,' said Damaris.

She was nervous and pale; her hands played restlessly with the pearls at her throat; her beautiful eyebrows were drawn together in anger and distress. She did not say so, but more than once her shoulders had felt the stroke of Jean Bérarde's heavy cudgel.

'He must know our name very well,' added Othmar. 'It will surely be voucher enough to him that you have passed your time in safe keeping——?'

'You are "aristos." He hates you.'

He smiled; he had seen many of these red Republicans who hated him furiously in theory, yet were never averse to worshipping the golden calf of the Maison d'Othmar.

'Seriously,' he said, 'do you think that you will be punished cruelly if you should be here all night? Are you sure that your grandfather will not be open to reason?'

'You do not know him, or you would not ask.'

'No; I do not know him, and so I have no right to form any opinion. But I see that what you do know of him makes you miserable at the idea of his anger. Well, then, home you must go in some manner. Our promise to you must in some way or other be kept. Wait a moment here, and I will return to you.' [101]

Damaris looked after him with interest and gratitude. Young though she had been when the death of Yseulte had moved the hearts of the whole people on those shores, something of its sadness and of its tragedy had reached her, and still remained in memory with her like the echo of some melancholy song heard at evening in the shade of the olive-woods. They had been mere names to her, but they had been names of pathos and of meaning, like the names of Athalie, of Ondine, of Calypso, and of Helen—names attached to a story, leaving a recollection, suggesting something outside common life and ordinary fate.

'I suppose he has forgotten her long ago,' she thought as she looked at him as he passed through the salons.

Othmar approached his wife, and waited impatiently until there was a pause in the conversation buzzing around her. Then he bent towards her:

'Nadège, did you really promise this child from Bonaventure that she should go home at sunset?'

'Yes, I think I did. What of it?'

'Only that I thought you always kept your word, and I find you have not done so.'

There was that in his tone which irritated her extremely; she thought he spoke to her as if she were a person at fault whom he reproved. Those nearest her could hear every word he uttered. She turned away from him with her coldest manner:

'Tell the girl that she may sleep here; the women will see to it. She can say that she has my commands.'

Othmar did not reply; he moved aside and let her pass on to the room where they were playing baccarat. Had they been alone he would have said what he thought; as it was, he went out of his drawing-rooms and across the gardens to the boathouse on the quay.

The yacht could find no anchorage there, and was gone to Villefranche. No sailors remained there in the night-time; even the keeper of the boats did not sleep there. All the pretty painted toys were locked up in the boathouse, and the keeper had the keys, he could not even get at one of them.

'This is the use of being master of the place!' he said to himself with natural irritation. It had never chanced before at St. Pharamond that anyone had ever wanted to go on the sea after twilight.

He retraced his steps to the house and called two of his servants, and gave them orders to break open the door of the boathouse and take out the Una boat as the lightest and swiftest. [102]

Then he returned to where Damaris awaited him.

'You are not afraid to go on the sea in an open boat?' he asked her. 'The water is like glass, and there is a full moon.'

'Afraid—on the sea!'

She could have laughed at the idea; the sea was her comrade and playfellow, and had never harmed her. She was no more afraid of its storms than of Clovis's teeth.

'Then you shall go home,' he said briefly. 'Come with me.'

'I can go home?' she exclaimed in ecstasy.

'Yes, if you are not afraid of an open boat; there are no other means.'

'Oh, I can sail it myself! I steer with my foot, and sail very well.'

'You shall not go wholly alone,' said Othmar with a smile. 'I regret that to speed the parting guest is the only form of old-fashioned hospitality which it is possible for me to show you.'

Damaris hesitated a moment.

'Must I not say farewell to Madame?'

'Madame is occupied,' he said as curtly. 'Come, my dear. Unless you are sure you would not sooner stop here and return in the morning?' he added. 'My wife bade me say she would be happy if you would so decide.'

'Oh no!' said Damaris, with terror in her eyes. 'I could not, I dare not! My grandfather may be home at sunrise.'

'Come, then,' said Othmar.

She needed no second bidding, but willingly followed him through the gardens to the landing-place of the little harbour. The moon was brilliant; the cedars and other evergreen trees spread their boughs over the marble balustrades; the aloes and cacti raised their broad spears and showed their fantastic shapes in the clear white light; there was a marble copy of the Faun which laughed at the stars; the waves were gently rippling over the last stair, the sea spread smooth as a lake as far as the eye could reach; the lights of Villefranche glittered in the darkness in the curve of the shore; the air was fragrant with the scent of millions of violets and of the tall bay thickets under which they bloomed.

Othmar paused involuntarily.

'How seldom we look at the night!' he said with an unconscious sigh.

'It is so beautiful here!' she said with a sigh which echoed his, but had a very different emotion for its source as she looked with timidity at the marble Faun. She had never seen a statue before; [103] she was not sure what its meaning was, but the sweet laughing face whose lips seemed to move in the moonlight bewitched her.

'It is as beautiful on your island, no doubt,' he answered, 'and far more natural. This place is almost wholly conventional.'

The word said nothing to her; she had never heard it before. She was gazing at the marble statue.

'What does that mean?' she said with hesitation.

'It means youth—the treasure you have,' said Othmar. 'Do not want any other. They have tried to teach you discontent. They have been very wrong. You have not been happy here.'

'No—not quite,' she said, afraid to seem ungrateful, yet obliged to tell the truth.

'No; you have felt remorse; you have been wounded by neglect; and you have been allured by the artificial and the insincere. Take warning: the world would give you just what this house has given you.'

The Una boat was at the foot of the stairs; its little sail was spread, there were cushions and shawls inside it; the men of the household whom Othmar had summoned had made everything ready, and waited there.

'Tell your lady,' he continued to his men, 'that I am gone on the sea; shall be back probably before dawn.'

Then he waved them aside and launched his boat into deep water.

Othmar gave his hand to Damaris; she touched it, but vaulted into the boat without his aid. When she saw that he followed her she grew scarlet, and her large eyes opened with that look of amaze which so well became her.

'You—you——' she stammered, and could utter no other word.

'Certainly,' said Othmar. 'Since you have been deceived into coming to my house, I will at least see you safely back to your own.'

She was still so astonished that she could form no protest and shape no thanks.

'You must steer,' he said to Damaris as he handled the sail.

She still said nothing, but she took the tiller-ropes. The little vessel glided easily through the peaceful waves; the wind, by a favouring chance, blew lightly from the north-west; it plunged with the grace and swiftness of a gannet into the silvery moonlight and the phosphorescent water.

Othmar gave his companion a little gold compass set at the back of a watch.

'You must guide our course,' he said to her. 'Bonaventure is as unknown to me as Japan to Marco Polo.' [104]

'I shall make no mistake,' she said, finding her voice for the first time since she had seen him enter the boat. 'I have steered on Sundays from Villefranche home. But—but—I cannot bear to trouble you; it is not right.'

'You give me a charming moonlight sail,' said Othmar; 'and you will show me a *terra incognita*. I am immeasurably your debtor. But for you I should still be indoors in warm rooms with artificial light and an artificial laughter round me. One can have enough of that any evening.'

'If I did not like it I would not have any of it,' said Damaris, with her natural manner returning to her.

'I am not sure that I do not like it,' said Othmar; 'and, at all events, the person I most wish to please likes it. That must be sufficient for me.'

Damaris looked at him; she did not say anything. She was thinking of that day when she had gathered the daffodils, and the swallows had flown about her head, and the old woman Catherine had said: 'Holy Virgin, to think she was so unhappy!' Were they all unhappy, these great people, although they had everything on earth that they could want or wish?

Life outside the island seemed to be a terrible perplexity.

'Mind how you steer,' said Othmar, as in the multiplicity and gravity of her thoughts they drifted perilously near the troubled water churning in the wake of a steam yacht. With prompt dexterity and coolness she corrected her oversight in time.

'There are few things more delightful than being at sea at night when the moon is bright, and the vessel is small enough to make one very near the water,' he said, as they pursued their course and he aided the passage of the boat with the oars. 'Just like this, between the sea and sky, with all those stars above, and all the silent night around one—one ought to be a poet to be worthy to enjoy it, or able to put the charm of it into fitting words.'

'Yes.'

She had felt herself what he said so often, and she too had never been able to find speech for that deep delight, that nameless melancholy, which came to her with the solitude of the sea at night.

He looked at her as she sat at the tiller with the moonlight falling full upon her face, and making it older and more spiritual than it had been by day. So she would look when years had saddened her, chastened her, etherealised her, taken from her the boylike buoyancy of her spirit, the frank audacity of her childhood. Or rather, no;—she would not look like that, she would have wedded Gros Louis, have had sturdy, healthy, riotous children plucking at her skirts; have grown heavier, stouter, coarser, duller; have ceased to care about the moonlight on the sea; have heeded only the sea's harvest of tunny, crawfish, cod, and haddock. Poor Galatea, whom the Polyphemus of a common marriage would bind upon her rock with all the greedy waves of common cares leaping at her and licking her with unkind tongues! Yet there was no fate better for Galatea than her rock; he was persuaded of it; he wished her to be so persuaded. [105]

CHAPTER XIII.

As the boat went smoothly and fleetly over the calm water, through the silvery night, beneath the immense vault of the starry heavens, he talked to her with kindly gentleness, and heard from her all there was to hear of her short life and of her great love for Bonaventure.

The course they took was almost wholly free of vessels; some heavy brig, fish or fruit laden, alone crossed their path, and the great green or red lights of the steamships were always afar off. The navigation of their little vessel did not so engross either of them that they had not leisure to converse, and Damaris, in the dusk of the night, in the familiar sea breeze and sea scent, in the motion of the boat which was as welcome and soothing to her as the rocking of its nurse's arms to a child, felt an exhilaration which restored her spirits and loosened her power of speech. She ceased to be afraid of the chastisement she would receive at Bonaventure, and she felt a confidence in the kindness and the protection of her companion which was very different to the flattered vanity and fascinated awe which his wife had aroused in her.

That he was a *grand seigneur* did not affect her with any sense of diffidence, both because the granddaughter of Jean Bérarde had been reared in an utter indifference to such divisions of rank, and also because in her own heart she fondly nourished the legend of her own pure descent. The sea lords of the mountain above San Remo were as true and near to her in her belief as Hugh Lupus to the Grosvenors, as Hugues Capet to Don Carlos.

It had been eleven o'clock when they had left the quay of St. Pharamond. It was dawn when they came in sight of the island; its grey olive-crowned side fused softly with the silvery dusk which preceded the sunrise. There was no sail in sight, except in the offing to the eastward some score of barques looking no larger than a flock of sea-swallows: they were those of a coral fleet.

'Is that your little kingdom?' asked Othmar, looking towards the cloudlike isle which seemed to float between the sea and sky. 'Well, it must be a charming life all alone there amidst the waters, far away from the world and all its fret and fume. You must be happy there?'

'Oh yes,' she answered rather doubtfully, without the spontaneous whole-heartedness which had characterised her replies to Loswa. 'But, you see—there is a good deal of the fret and the fume—because we trade with the mainland, and when prices are bad my grandfather is out of temper. It is not like Fénelon's island at all.'

'Even if not, be sure it is happier to be on it than amidst the world,' said Othmar, anxious to undo what his wife and her friends had done. 'The pastoral life is the best there is, and when it is joined to the liberty of a seafaring life, it seems to me to be perfect.

'I believe, at least I know,' he continued with some hesitation, 'that my wife spoke to you of your talents, and of all they might do for you in that bigger world which is to you only "the mainland." Perhaps they might do much, perhaps they might do nothing; that world is very capricious, and its rewards are not always just. Poets are charming companions, but they are not infallible guides. Fate has given you a safe home, a tranquil lot, a sure provision. Do not tempt fortune to desert you by showing it any ingratitude. I fear my words seem very cold and dull ones after the gorgeous flatteries you have heard, but they at least are wise as I see wisdom for you; and, believe me, they are well meant.'

He spoke with earnestness as the boat approached the island, and, with the sail lowered, drifted lightly before the wind towards the beach.

'Will you tell your grandfather?' asked Othmar, as they neared the isle.

'Do you think that I ought?' she said in a very low voice, in which was an unspoken supplication.

'I think you ought,' he answered. 'Do not begin your life with a secret.'

She was silent.

'Surely,' he continued, 'he will not be very angry when he knows that you were so much pressed by the Countess Othmar, and that I have myself brought you home. He will be sure you have been as safe as with himself. I will come and see you again some day.'

The face of Damaris clouded. She was silent, occupying herself with guiding the vessel through the surf which broke on the broad shell beach of Bonaventure.

The mists were white and soft, the head of the cliffs was invisible in the tender silvery fog; she could hear the voices above her of Clovis and Brunehildt. The boat was run ashore, and she leaped out before Othmar could aid her.

'You are vexed with me,' he said with a smile. 'But, indeed, my dear, it would be a life-long regret to me if, through any suggestion or persuasion of my wife's, you were brought into a life which failed to answer your ideal of it, and rendered you unfitted to return to the simplicity and quiet of this happy little place. There are neither knights nor lions nowadays for Una. She must defend herself in a bitter warfare in which her sex is only a weapon against her, while her enemies are without scruple. Adieu, you will prefer to go up alone.'

She turned quickly, and looked up at him with a contrite, timid little smile.

'I have no doubt you are right, only—one dreams things—sometimes. I ought to thank you so much: you have been very good to me.'

'Not at all. I have had a charming night upon the sea, and am your debtor.'

Then he begged her to keep the little gold compass in memory of that evening, raised his hat, and left her.

'Can you manage the boat alone?' she cried to him in anxiety.

'Quite well,' said Othmar, as he pushed it through the surf.

When he was some roods from the shore he looked back; he saw the figure of Damaris still standing where he had left her, the silvery green mass of the olive-clothed cliffs rising behind her till they were lost in the hovering clouds of mist. The barking of the dogs came faintly over the sea, and a bell tolled from above the daybreak call to work.

'I have done what I can,' thought Othmar, 'but the poison is there. No antidote, even if it succeed, can ever make the blood quite what it was before the virus entered. And what are ambition and discontent but as the bite of a snake when they seize on a woman—a child?'

Then he went back over the calm blue water, while with every moment the white light in the east spread further, and the mists lifted and the winds dropped, and soon in all its glory rose the sun.

To this man, whose youth had been full of high ideals, which his manhood had found it utterly impossible for him to fulfil, there was something which touched him profoundly in all youth which, as once his own had done, looked forward to the world as to some field of combat, where the fair flowers of faith and of justice would possess a magical strength like the lilies and roses wherewith the nymphs smote Rinaldo.

To the eyes of men, Othmar appeared the most enviable of all persons; to the society around him, as to the multitudes to whom he was but one of the great names which govern the destinies of nations, it seemed that few living beings had ever enjoyed so complete a happiness and prosperity as did he. But in the bottom of his own heart there was a latent bitterness, which was disappointment. He could not have said where or how precisely this sense of failure came to him, in the midst of what was absolute success and entire fruition of all his wishes. Yet it was there. It is the accompaniment of all power and of all possession. Contentment looks from a narrow lattice on a tiny garden bounded by a high box hedge. Culture has the vast horizon of the universe and finds it small, it can measure the stars, and sighs to wander beyond their spheres. Dissatisfaction is the shadow which goes with all light of the intelligence. The uncultured mind can be content; the cultured, never.

CHAPTER XIV.

Damaris went slowly from the cliffs through the moonlight; her heart was heavy. She had had a great temptation, a great joy, a great disillusion, and a great grief, each following close on the heels of the other in the short space of a few hours.

She came back to her poor little isle with something of that remorse, that dejection, that sense of all the golden fruits being but ashes at the core, with which the great ones of earth, after reaching the highest heights of power or of fame, will come back to their lowly village birthplace and think with a sigh, 'Could I but be as once I was!'

The night seemed far severed from the day which had heralded it as if by long years: never more could she rise in the daybreak quite the same child who had leaped to the lattice, and laughed at the sunrise on the sea, that morning.

She did not reason on the change in her, nor understand it, but she felt it.

When the little velvet-hided calf has been branded in the stock-yard with the cruel iron, never more (though turned loose again) will it frolic the same in the prairie grass unwitting of pain or ill.

She took her way slowly over the head of the cliff across the breadth of pasture where a few days before she had led Loswa. There was a dusky crouching figure waiting in the shadow of the orange-boughs; it was that of old Catherine the servant, who sprang towards her and gripped her arm with both hands.

'He is come home!' she said in a loud, terrified whisper.

'My grandfather!'

Bold though she was by nature, her lips and cheeks grow cold and her heart stood still.

'Who else!' cried the old woman roughly. 'For who else would I keep out of my bed at such an hour to watch for you? Where have you been all the while?' [109]

'I have been with the lady.'

Her voice sounded very dull and hopeless; it melted the heart of the peasant who loved her.

'Well, well, you have had your will and your vanity, and have paid for them both!' she said, less harshly. 'Poor little fool! It is your mother's light blood working in you, I suppose; you're not to blame. They are to blame who bred you. I have watched for you ever since I gave him his supper. He asked where you were. I said you were asleep. He has had a good deal of brandy. If you get in by the scullery door, and take your shoes off, and go softly up the stairs, he will not hear, and nobody knows you have been away save Raphael and myself. That is why I waited outside, to stop and tell you that you might creep in unseen.'

Damaris stooped her tall head and kissed the woman's withered cheek:

'That was like you, dear Catherine!'

'More fool I, perhaps. I will punish you come morning, never fear. But I should be loath for you to see Bérarde to-night. Get in.'

Seeing that Damaris did not move, she pushed her by the shoulder.

But the words which Othmar had spoken were echoing in the ear, and sounding at the conscience, of the girl, bearing a harvest which he had never dreamed of when he had uttered them. There was that in them which had aroused all the courage and exaggerated sentiment of her mind and character.

The instincts of heroism, always strong in her, and that instinct to martyrdom ever dear to anything of womanhood, rose in her with irresistible force.

'If Count Othmar ever heard that I did not tell, he would think it so mean and so false,' she pondered, while the eager grip of the woman's fingers closed on her and tried to pull her to the open side-entrance of the house.

She resisted.

'No, no; not so, not so; not in secret,' she muttered. 'I wish to see my grandfather. Let me pass.'

'Are you mad?' screamed Catherine, dragging her backward by her skirts. 'He is hot with brandy, I tell you; you know what brandy makes him; if he knows you have been off the island he will beat you. Has he not beaten you before, that you should doubt it?'

'I do not doubt,' said Damaris. 'But it is only just that he should be told——

'I owe him everything, you know,' she added, 'and I did wrong to go away from home in his absence.' [110]

'Wrong! of course you did wrong. But you would listen to nobody, you were so taken up with those fine folks. Of course you did wrong, but since the harm is done, and it is of no use to cry over spilt milk and broken eggs, get you into your bed; your grandfather will never know anything. Raphael and I, be sure, shall not tell. Get in and hold your own counsel. In the morning it will all be as one.'

'No, it would not be fair,' said Damaris.

Her face was very pale, but the exaltation of a romantic devotion to honour had come upon her, and gave her a strength not her own. She passed the figure of Catherine in the entrance of the scullery, and walked with firm steps through the stone passages, between the crowded bales of oranges and lemons, straightway into the great kitchen, where Jean Bérarde sat. The light from an oil lamp which swung from the rafters shone on his strong, harsh, brown features, his grizzled eyebrows, his white beard; the broad-leaved hat he had drawn over his face threw a dark gloom over the upper part of his features, and added to the natural hardness and fierceness of their expression. He had been running smuggled brandies successfully in his brig, a sport very dear to him, though prudence made him but seldom indulge in it; he had been drinking a good deal, and though not wholly drunk his temper was in readiness for any outbreak, like flax soaked in petroleum. He looked up from under his heavy brows at Damaris as she entered; the light and shadows were wavering before his sight, but he recognised her.

'The woman said you were a-bed,' he muttered with a great oath. 'What do you mean—up at this time of night?'

The exaggerated scruples and the overwrought exaltation of the child made her brave to answer him. She came up quite close to him and looked at him with shining, steady eyes:

'I am only now come home,' she said in a low voice. 'I have done wrong; I have been out all day.'

Jean Bérarde rose to his feet unsteadily, and towered above her, a rude, savage, terrible figure; his breath, hot as the fumes of burning spirit, scorched her cheek.

'Out!' he echoed. 'Out!—without my leave? Out where?'

She looked at him without flinching. Only she was very pale.

'They came and asked me—the ladies and gentlemen—and I wished so much to go. I have never seen at all how those people live, and when I got there the hours went on, and I could not get back until he, Count Othmar, was kind enough to bring me home in his own boat, and he rowed himself all the way; and he said that it would not be right for me to hide such a thing from you, because, though I have done no harm, yet I have disobeyed you——'

She paused, having made her confession; she breathed very quickly and faintly; her eyes looked up at him with an unspoken prayer for pardon.

In answer, he lifted his arm and struck her to the ground.

CHAPTER XV.

Othmar did not see his wife on the following day until the one o'clock breakfast, and then saw her surrounded with her friends.

When everyone had gone to their rooms after midnight he ventured to visit her in her own apartments. Her women were there; she did not as usual dismiss them; she looked at him with something of that expression which used to chill the soul of Platon Napraxine.

'My dear friend,' she said coldly as he greeted her, 'do not speak to me again as you spoke yesterday evening. It is not what I like.'

'I regret it if I spoke improperly,' replied Othmar. 'I was not conscious that I did. You had made a promise, and I reminded you of it. I was not aware there was any grave offence in that.'

'*C'est le ton qui fait la musique.* Your tone was offensive. You may remember that I do not care to be reminded of anything when I forget it.'

'There is nothing praiseworthy in your sentiment,' said her husband unwisely; 'and it seemed to me that a promise made to a poor child, who could not enforce its fulfilment——'

She laughed unkindly.

'You kept my promise for me. I believe you accompanied her yourself. I dare say she preferred it. Really, my dear Otho, what can this trivial matter concern either you or me? The girl has gone back to her island. Let her stay there and marry her cousin.'

'I wish she may. But I doubt whether she will do so now.'

'Because you sailed with her across the sea? It was very wrong of you, though probably very natural, if you took the occasion to *conter fleurettes*!'

'I do not care for those jests from you to me. It is what you yourself have said to her which will have probably poisoned her contentment for the rest of her days.'

She yawned a little behind her hand and gave him a sign of dismissal.

'Pray let me hear no more about her,' she said coldly. 'And if you will forgive me for saying so—I am tired—good-night.' [112]

'Will you not send away your women?' said Othmar in a low tone, with a flush of irritation on his face.

'No, thanks—good-night.'

He hesitated a moment, mastering a great anger which rose up in him; then he touched her hand coldly with his lips and left the room.

'If she thinks she will be able to treat me as she did that poor humble dead fool——' he thought with mortified impatience.

With the waywardness of human nature he wished for that mere human fondness which probably, he knew, had he had it, would have soon tired and palled on him.

As he went out from her presence now, he thought, he knew not why, of the girl Damaris. What warmth on those untouched lips! what deep wells of emotion in those darksome eyes! what treasures of affection in that faithful and frank heart! Poor little soul!—and the best he could wish her was to live in dull content beside Gros Louis.

Nadine heard the doors close one after another, as he left her apartments, with a little smile about her mouth.

'How easy it is to punish them,' she thought; 'and to think there are women who do not know how!'

The power of punishment was always sweet to her; it seemed to her that when a woman had lost it she had lost everything that made life worth living. She had not heard that he had accompanied Damaris home himself because she had not inquired about it, but she had guessed that he had done so. It was a silly thing to have done, exaggerated, quixotic; but then he had those *coups de tête* at intervals; he had always had them in great things and small; they made him poetic and picturesque, but occasionally they made him absurd. He seemed to her to have been absurd now; he could have sent the girl home with a gardener or a servant, with anybody who could handle a boat, if she must have gone home at all: she herself did not see the necessity. But a vague irritation against Damaris came into her as she sank to sleep between her sheets of lawn.

Une sensitive, une entêtée! If there were any two qualities wearisome to others were they not those? No one was allowed to be either nervous or headstrong in her world. When she came in contact with either fault she was annoyed, as when gas escaped or a horse was restive.

'She has talent, and I would have aided her,' she thought, 'but since she is obstinate and thankless, let her marry Gros Louis and have a dozen children and forget all about Esther and Hermione. The world, on the whole, wants olives and oranges more than actresses, good or bad. Myself, I never understand why one should wish to see a play represented at all when one can read it; it argues great feebleness of imagination to require optical and oral assistance.' [113]

The next day, however, when she saw Othmar she said to him with her most gracious grace and that charm with which she could invest her slightest word:

'I think you were right, my friend, and I was wrong, about that poor little girl on her island. I did not behave very well to her. I sought her, and ought to have made her of more account. Shall I go and see her again, or what shall I do to make her amends?'

Othmar kissed her hand.

'That is like yourself! You are too great a lady to be cruel to a little peasant. As for amends to her, I think the kindest thing you can do now is to let her forget you, and, with you, the ambitions which you suggested to her.'

She looked at him with penetration, amusement, and a little scepticism.

'She is very handsome; do you wish her to forget *you*?' she said with a smile. 'I am sure you must have told her you will go and see her again.'

Othmar was annoyed to feel himself a little embarrassed.

'I told her I would see her again some time, but I did not say whether this year or next.'

His wife laughed.

'I was sure you did! Well, then, you can go and see her at once, and take her some present from me.'

'If you will allow me to say so, I think a present will only painfully emphasise the difference of cast between you and her.'

'You have *des aperçus très fins* sometimes! That is a very delicate one, and perhaps correct, though a little pedantic. Well, go and see her, and say anything in my name that you think will smooth her ruffled feathers and restore her peace. I think we should have another Desclée in her; but perhaps you are right, that it will be better to let her marry her ship-builder. Wait; you may take her this book from me. That cannot offend her.'

She took off her table a volume of the 'Légendes des Siècles,' an *édition de luxe*, illustrated by great artists, bound by Marius Michel, illustrated by Hédouin, and published by Dentu, and in the flyleaf of it she wrote, 'From Nadège Fedorevna Platoff, Countess Othmar.' Then she gave it to her husband.

'I am certainly not going there to-day, nor for many days,' he said as he took it.

She smiled as she glanced at him.

'Are you sure you are not? Well, take it when you do go.'

'I shall go, if at all, only as your ambassador.'

'That is rather prudishly and puritanically put. Why should you not say honestly that the girl is very pretty, and that you like to look at her! I assure you it will not distress me.' [114]

'I could not hope that it would,' said Othmar rather bitterly, as Paul of Lemberg entered the room.

There were times when the serene indifference to his actions which his wife displayed found him ungrateful; times when he almost wished for the warmth of interest which the impatience of jealousy would have shown. Jealousy is an odious thing, a ridiculous, an intolerable, a foolish and fretful and fierce passion, which is as wearing to the sufferer from it as to those who create it; and yet, unless a woman be jealous of him, a man is always angrily certain that she is indifferent to him. Jealousy is a flattery and a homage to him, even whilst it is an irritation and an annoyance: it assures him that he is loved even whilst it wears and whittles his own love away. But jealousy was a thing at once foolish and fond, humiliating and humble, which was altogether impossible to the serenity and the security of the proud self-appreciation in which his wife passed her existence.

In a week's time she had forgotten that she had ever seen Damaris Bérarde; but in a year's time Othmar did not forget that he had done so.

A few days later Loris Loswa was ushered into their presence; he had the sullen perturbed expression of a child baulked in its wish, or deprived of some toy.

'Loswa looks as if he had had an adventure,' she said as he entered. 'He is one of the few people to whom these things still happen.'

'I have been both shot at and nearly drowned, Madame,' replied Loswa. 'But that would not matter much if it were not that I have had also the greatest of disappointments.'

'Disappointment and assassination together are certainly too much in the same day for one person. Tell me your story.'

'I have been to Bonaventure,' said Loswa, and paused. He looked distressed and annoyed, and had lost that airy nonchalance and that provoking air of conscious seductiveness which so greatly irritated his comrades of the ateliers who had not his success either in art or in society.

'To Bonaventure, of course,' said his hostess, as she glanced at Othmar with a smile. 'Everyone is going to Bonaventure; it will very soon see as many picnics as the Ile Ste. Marguerite.'

'Not if the tourists be received as I have been,' said Loswa, in whose tone there was an irritated regret which was not hidden by the lightness of his manner. 'Jean Bérarde is a madman. I took a little sailing-boat from Villefranche this morning, and bade them take me to the island. When we reached there, I left the boatmen on the beach and climbed the *passerelle* as usual, but I had not [115]

got halfway up the cliff before a bullet whistled past me, and I was warned that if I stirred a step farther I should be shot like a dog. I could not see who spoke, but the voice came from above. I replied that I was Loris Loswa, a painter from Paris, and that I merely wished to be permitted to finish a sketch which I had taken there a few days earlier. I presume that this was the worst thing that I could have said, for I received a second bullet, which this time passed through the crown of my hat. The person who fired was still invisible amongst the olives above. At the same moment some hands clutched my ankles so suddenly and forcibly that I lost my footing and fell headlong down the ladder through the brushwood to the beach. I was stunned for a few minutes, and when I realised where I was, the man Raphael, mindful, I suppose, of the napoleons he had had, begged my pardon for having made me descend in such a summary mode, but said that, had he not done so, Jean Bérarde would have killed me. Raphael was in a great tremor himself, and urged me to go away on the instant, adding that "le vieux," as he called him, was resolute to shoot all trespassers without regard to rank or right, and had put a notice up to that effect on the rocks. "But it is against the law," I said to him. "Eh, monsieur!" said Raphael; "he is the law to himself here, and he is mad, quite mad—*un fou furieux*—since the little one came back from your friends. He has sent her away, heaven only knows where, and not a soul will be let to set foot on the island." "Sent her away?" I cried to him. "But I have not finished her portrait." The wretch did not care. "What does that matter?" he said. "What matters is that the one bit of gaiety and goodness in the place is gone. My children are crying for Damaris all the day long." I used bad words about his children; what did they matter to me? And I asked him how the old brute had learned that his granddaughter had been out that night: had he come home earlier than she? "Yes," said Raphael, "he did come home an hour before her, but he need not ever have known anything, for we would, all of us, have kept her little secret; even old Catherine would never have told of her. But Damaris was always headstrong, and in some things foolish, poor child; and she would have it that it was cowardly and wrong not to tell Bérarde herself; and so, do what we would, she would go straight in and tell him; and he—he had not had a good day's trade, and he had heard of a debtor who had drowned himself, and left no goods worth a centime, and so he was in the vilest of humours that evening; and when she related to him what she had done, he up with his big elm staff and struck her down, and my wife and I thought she was dead; and old Catherine was cursing, and the children were screaming, and the dogs howling. Such a scene! such a scene! [116] However, she was not injured, and in the evening he took her away by himself in the open boat, and what he did with her nobody knows. He made Catherine pack all her clothes in a great bundle, and so I do not think that he killed her. I suppose he took her to the mainland, to some convent perhaps, though he does not love them. I dare say he would have made away with Catherine too, only he wants her to cook his dinner, and he knows there is nobody else who can manage the bees." That was all that I could make Raphael say; he was in a great state of terror, and urged me to go away at once. He said the old man might come down on to the beach for aught he knew. As Damaris was gone, there was little to be gained by remaining, so I left the island. In returning we encountered a white squall; the boat capsized, we clung to her for half an hour, when we were picked up by a yawl which was going to Villefranche. That is all my story; I have been bruised and soaked, but all that would not matter if I could only finish my picture. But where is Damaris?'

'It is really an adventure,' said Nadine, 'and you have told it dramatically. As for your picture, you deserve not to complete it, for you neglected her disgracefully when she was here.'

'I hope this old tyrant has not hurt her; but a ruffian who fires at one from his olive-trees as if one were a fox or a stoat——'

'Of course he will not hurt her; he will either keep her in a convent to punish her, or, as he does not love convents, marry her at once to her boat-builder.'

Othmar did not say anything; he had heard Loswa's narrative with regret.

'Poor, brave little soul!' he thought; 'and it was I who told her that it was her duty not to conceal what she had done.'

'A caprice may cost something sometimes you see, Madame,' said Béthune with a smile to his hostess.

'She may become a second Desclée yet,' said Nadine. 'Her grandfather will not be wise if he drive her to desperation. I am sorry he struck her: it was brutal.'

'Perhaps we hurt her quite as much,' said Othmar, which were the first words he had spoken on the subject.

His wife smiled.

'I know that is your *idée fixe*. I do not agree with you. If she marry the shipwright she will now do it with her eyes open. It is always well to know what one is about.'

'You have made it impossible for her to marry the shipwright.'

'I really do not see why. Perhaps you mean your compliments or Paul's music.'

'Paul's music, and other things. You showed her the world as Mephistopheles showed Faust youth in a mirror.' [117]

'Faust was, after all, Mephistopheles' debtor.'

'About that there may be two opinions.'

'After all, she would not have been punished if she had not spoken.'

'You must admire that at least. Courage is the only quality which you respect.'

'I admire it, but it was not wise.'

'What heroic thing ever is?'

He went away, leaving her presence with some irritation and some discontent. He knew that he had only said what was best for Damaris when he had counselled her to have no concealment from her grandfather; but the idea of the child's having suffered through his advice, the thought of her taken from her sunny happy life amongst her orange-groves and honey-scented air, and all the gay fresh freedom of her seas, into some strange and unknown place—perhaps into some forced and joyless union—hurt him with almost a personal pain.

The wild rose had paid dearly for its one day in the hothouse.

'Why could not Nadège let her alone?' he thought angrily as he looked across the shining sea to the gold of the far distance, where westward the island which had sheltered the happy childhood of Damaris lay unseen.

CHAPTER XVI.

A few days later they left the coast for Amyôt and Paris. There was no record left of their visit to Bonaventure save the rough sketch which Loris Loswa had made, and from which he still meant some time, when he should have leisure, to create a great picture. One day Othmar bought the sketch of him at one of those exaggerated prices which Loswa could command for any trifle which he had touched.

When his wife saw it hanging in his room in Paris she laughed.

'You are determined,' she said, 'that I shall not forget my *Desclée manquée*.'

'I do not think you were kind to her,' said Othmar.

'I did not intend to be unkind, certainly. She gave me an impression of force, of talent, of a future: the sketch suggests that. But no doubt she has married the shipwright by this time. Little girls begin by dreaming of Réné and Némorin, but they end in making the *pot au feu* for Jacques Bonhomme.'

'I do not think she will ever marry the boat-builder. I told you that we made it impossible for her.' [118]

'I know you did; but then you have always *des billevesées romanesques*. The steward at St. Pharamond could tell you what has become of her.'

'I have inquired. She has not returned to the island; her grandfather never speaks of her, and no one knows anything at all about her.'

Nadine smiled.

'Ah! you have inquired already? I thought she impressed you very much.'

'Not at all,' said Othmar irritably, as he glanced at the sketch on which the sunshine was falling. 'But I was sorry that any caprice of yours should have cost anyone so dear.'

'Is that all? And you are sure she has not married her cousin?'

'They say not. He is still living at St. Tropez.'

'Then she must be shut up in some convent.'

'Or dead.'

'Oh no, my dear, she had too much life in her to die. Besides, her grandfather would have made her death known. I am sure she will live and have a history, probably such a history as Madame Tallien's or as Madame Favart's. She carries it in her countenance.'

'Five fathoms of blue water were perhaps the better fate,' said Othmar.

'You are very poetic,' said his wife with her unkindest smile. 'I always thought you had a touch of genius yourself, only it never took speech or shape. You are a Dante born dumb.'

'Then you should pity me indeed,' said Othmar, with irritation.

He kept the sketch hanging in the room which he most often used at his house in Paris. It served to retain in his memory that night upon the sea when he had seen the figure of Damaris disappear in the moonlight, amidst the silver of the olive-trees, while the fragrance of the orange-scented air and the breath of the sweet-smelling narcissus were wafted to him from the island pastures out over the starlit waters.

'You will end in falling in love with that picture,' said his wife to him with much amusement. He was angered at the suggestion. His regret for Damaris was wholly impersonal.

'We did her a cruel kindness,' he thought sometimes when he glanced at it. 'Wherever she be, and whatever she live to become, she will always carry a thorn in her heart, because she will always have the sentiment that she might have been something which she is not. It is the saddest idea that can pursue anyone through life. Perhaps she will marry the boat-builder and have a [119] dozen children, but that will not prevent her sometimes, when she sees a fine sunset, or sits in the moonlight on the shore waiting for the sloop to come in, from being haunted by the thought that if things had gone otherwise she might have been in the great world. And then, just for that passing moment, while the ghost of that "might have been" is with her, she will hate the man who comes home in the sloop, and will not even care for the children who are shouting on the beach.'

CHAPTER XVII.

They were again at Amyôt in the golden August weather, when no place pleased its mistress better than the cool and stately palace set upon its shining waters and stone piles, with the deep forests of France drawn in an impenetrable screen of verdure around its majestic gardens. She had a constant succession of guests, and a kaleidoscopic infinitude of pastimes. Great singers came down and warbled by moonlight to replace the nightingales grown mute; great actors came down also and played on the stage which had been built and ornamented by Primaticcio; every kind of ingenuity in novelty and diversion was exercised for her by cunning intelligences and brilliant wits. The weeks of Amyôt were likely to become as celebrated in social history as the *grandes nuits de Sceaux*; everyone invited to them received the highest brevet of fashion that the world could give. Other people were immensely pleased and amused at Amyôt and at her other houses: she alone was not. Her intelligence asked too much; the whole world was dull and finite for her.

She had known the greatest triumphs, the highest heights of passion, the most voluptuous ecstasies, the most brilliant of successes, and they had all seemed to her rather tame, quickly exhausted. Faustina appeared to her as absurd, and commanded her sympathies as little, as Penelope.

Life's little round is all too short for satisfaction in it; it is so soon over; it is so crowded and so transient; to have children who may do less ill or do less well than we, to pursue aims or ambitions which have no novelty in them and little wisdom, to love, to cease to love; to dream and die; this is the whole of it, and the sweetest of all things in it are its childhood which is ignorant that it is happy, and its passion which is no sooner made happy than it pales and falls.

'If only life were like a play!' she thought. 'Any dramatist knows that in his last act his movement must be accelerated, and his incidents accumulated, till they culminate in a climax. But in life, on the contrary, everything waxes slower and slower, everything grows duller and duller, incidents become very scarce, and there is no *dénouement* at all—unless we call the priests with their holy oil, and the journey to the churchyard behind the mourning-coaches, a *dénouement*. But it cannot be called a climax: the going out of a spent lamp is not a climax.'

Her lamp was far from spent; and yet a sense of the dullness of life, generally, often came to her. She had everything she had ever wished for, and yet it left her with a vague sentiment of dissatisfaction.

'I wonder if he is really contented,' she thought sometimes doubtfully of Othmar. It seemed to her quite impossible he should be. Why should he be when she was not! And yet there was no one she would have liked better or so well.

The sameness of human nature irritated her. Surveying history, it seemed to her that character, like events, must have been much more varied in other times than hers; say in the Fronde, in the Crusades, in the time of the Italian Republics, even in the days of the Consulate, when all Europe was drunk with war like wine.

Nowadays people are always saying the same thing; entertainments resemble each other like peas; wherever the world gathers it takes its own monotony and tedium with it, and repeats itself with the dull perseverance of a cuckoo-clock.

She endeavoured to infuse some originality into her own society and her own pleasures; but she did not consider that she succeeded. People were too dull. Why was it? Nobody was dull in Charles the Second's time, or in the days of Louis Quinze, or of Henri Quatre. At Amyôt, if anywhere, she succeeded, but, though her invitations to the house parties there were passionately coveted, and everyone else was so exceedingly delighted with them, the utmost she could ever say was that she had not been too greatly bored. Modern existence was not dramatic enough to please her.

'And yet if it be ever dramatic you say it is melodramatic, and ridicule it as *vieux jeu*,' said Othmar to her once.

'No doubt I do; one is not happily obliged to be consistent,' she replied. 'We are too intellectual or too indifferent nowadays to have a Guise slaughtered in our antechamber, or an Orloff assassinated by our bedside, but the consequence is that life is dull. It is a journey in a *wagon lit*, one is half asleep all the time; it has no longer the picturesque incidents of a journey on horseback across moor and mountain, with the chance of meeting Malatesta or the Balafré en route.'

'Yet men have died for you!'

'Oh, my dear! they never did it with any picturesqueness at all! What picturesqueness can there be? A man falls in a duel; he is put in a cab with a doctor! A man kills himself with a revolver; there is again a doctor, and also, probably, a policeman!'

'Which does not prevent the emotions which lead to those incidents from being as genuine as they used to be.'

'I know that is your theory. It is not mine. The passions are nowadays all crusted with conventionality, like life. Look at ourselves, as I have said to you before.'

'Well? What of ourselves?'

'You and I think ourselves very original, but in reality we are the servants of conventionality. I

told you so last winter. When we were free and had the world before us, we could think of nothing more original than to marry each other like Annette and Lubin, like John and Mary. We had no imagination. We thought we should do all sorts of fine things, but we have not done them. We have merely just dropped back into the routine of the world like all other people.'

'I do not see what else we could have done,' replied Othmar, somewhat feebly as he was aware.

'What a conventional reply!' she said impatiently. 'That is just what I am saying. Neither of us had imagination, or perhaps courage, enough to strike out any new path, though we thought we were so much above other people. Both you and I have enough of originality to be dissatisfied with the world as it is, but we have not originality enough to create another one. People who have the perception which belongs to the poetic temperament, as you and I have, without its creative power, are greatly to be pitied. Both you and I have something of poetry—something of heroism—in us, but it never comes to anything. We remain in the world, and conform to it.'

'I would lead any life you suggested—out of the world if you pleased.'

'Ah, but I do not please,' she said, with a little sigh. 'That is just the mischief. You remember when we went to your Dalmatian castle the first year; the solitude was enchanting, the loneliness of the sea and the shore was exquisite, the mountains seemed drawn behind us like a curtain, shutting out all noise and commonness and only enclosing our own dreams; but after a little time you looked at me, I looked at you, and we both tried to hide from each other that we yawned. One morning when there was a rough wind on the sea and the first snow on the hills, I said to you, "What if we go to Paris?" and you were relieved beyond expression, only you would not say so. Now, if we had been poets—really poets, you and I—we should never have quitted Zama for Paris. We should have let the whole world go.'

Othmar did not well know what to reply, because he was conscious of a certain truth in her words.

'I am not a poet, you have often told me so,' he said with some bitterness. 'The atmosphere I was born in was too thick and yellow with gold for the Parnassian bees to fly to my cradle. The supreme privilege of the poet is an imperishable youth, and I do not think that I was ever young; they did not let me be so.' [122]

'You were so for a little while when you first loved me,' she said with a smile; 'that is why I wonder we had not more imagination at that time. Anybody could live the life we live now. It shows what a stifling, cramping thing the world is; we who used to meditate on every possible idealic and idyllic kind of existence have found that there is nothing for us to do but to open our houses, surround ourselves with a crowd, spend quantities of money in all commonplace fashions, and be hated by envy and envied by stupidity. Do you remember our sunlit kingdom in Persia that we were to have gone to together? Well, we are as far off it as though we were not together.'

'Do you mean then,' said Othmar impatiently, 'that you think our life together a mistake?'

'No, not quite that; because we are more intelligent than most people, only we have been unable to rise above the commonplace; unable to keep our iron at a white heat. Our existence looks very brilliant, no doubt, to those outside it, but in real truth there is a poverty of invention about it which makes me feel ashamed of my own want of originality.'

She laughed a little; her old laugh, which always chilled the hearts of men.

She had always foreseen the termination of their pilgrimage of joy in that mortuary chapel of lifeless bones and motionless dust to which the lovers' path through the roses and raptures was so sure to lead. But he, man like, had been so certain that the roses would never fade, that the raptures would never diminish!

Othmar was sensible that he had in some manner failed to fulfil her expectations, and the sense of such a fact stings the self-love of the least vain and least selfish of men. Her life possessed all that any woman could in her uttermost exactness require. All the perfect self-indulgence and continual pageantry of life which an immense fortune can command were always hers; her children by him were beautiful and of great promise, physical and mental; her world still obeyed her slightest sign, and her slightest whim was gratified; men still found the most fatal sorcery in her careless glance, and society offered to her all that it possessed. If this sense of disappointment, of disillusion, of dissatisfaction were really with her, it could only be so because he himself, as the companion of her life, failed to realise what she had expected in him—was unhappy enough to weary her, as all others before him had done.

A vainer man would have laid the blame on her, and have arrived, through vanity, at the perception that it was her temperament and not his character which was at fault. But all the flattery which every rich and powerful man daily receives had failed to make Othmar vain. His self-esteem was very modest in its proportions, and he attributed the fact of his wife's apparent indifference to him humbly enough to his own demerits. [123]

'I have not the talent of amusing her,' he thought. 'I have been always too grave—have taken life too sadly to be the companion of a woman of her wit. I have never done anything of which she can be very proud with that sort of pride which would be the sweetest flattery to her; the years slip away with me and bring me no occasion, at least no capability, of the kind of distinction which she would appreciate. I cannot be a Skobeleff or a Gortschakoff; I cannot make that renown which might arrest her fancy and please her *amour propre*; she has loved me possibly as much as she can love, but as she finds that I am made of the common clay of ordinary humanity, I become not much more to her than all those dead men whom she has tired of and forgotten.'

But whilst his reason told him this, his heart yearned to disbelieve it, and his pride refused a meek submission to it. There was something in her fugitive, delicately disdainful, capriciously insecure, which was certain to sustain the passion of man, because it constantly stimulated it; her concessions were made to his desires not her own; she never shared his weakness even whilst she was indulgent to it.

'I have absolutely never known yet whether you have ever loved me!' he said to her once, and she replied, with her little indulgent, mysterious smile:

'How should you know what I do not know myself?'

It was a part, and no small part, of the ascendency she had over him; it stimulated his affections, because it perpetually stinted them; it made satiety impossible with her.

Yet all which excited his passions and secured the continuance of her influence over him, left him more and more conscious of a void at his heart which she would never fill, because a nature cannot bestow more than it possesses. All the intellectual charm she had for him had a certain coldness in it; her incorrigible irony, her inveterate analysis, her natural attitude of observation and of mockery before the foibles and follies and affections of mankind, enchanting as they were, were without warmth as they were without pity. It was the brilliant play of electric light on polished steel. Sometimes, with the wayward inconsistency of human wishes, he would have preferred the glow from some simple fire of the hearth.

There were times when the feeling which met his own left his heart cold. He had never wholly ceased to feel that he was always in a measure outside her life. He would have been ashamed to confess to her many youthful weaknesses, many romantic impulses which often moved him; there were many lover-like follies which would have been natural and sweet to him, which he had early learned to control and dismiss, unyielded to because he was afraid of that slight ironical smile, and that contemptuous little word with which she had the power to arrest the quick tide of any impetuous emotion. [124]

The excesses of passion and the force of emotion always seemed to her slightly absurd; she had yielded to both for his sake more than she had ever thought to do; but her intelligence always held reign over her with much greater dominance than her feelings ever obtained. There were moments when he felt as if he asked her for bread, and she gave him a stone; a most polished stone of magical charm, of exquisite transparency, of occult power, but still a stone, when he merely wished for the plain sweet bread of simple sympathy.

Once, in riding alone through the forests of Amyôt, his horse put its foot in a rabbit's hole and threw him. He was unhurt, and rose and remounted. But he thought as he rode onward: 'If I had been disfigured, crippled, made an invalid for life, how would she have regarded me?'

With pity, no doubt, but probably with aversion; certainly with indifference. She would have brought her exquisite grace, her cool nonchalant smile, her delicate fragrant presence to his bedside, and would have come there every day, no doubt, and have been careful that he should want for nothing; but would there have been the blinding tears of a passionate sorrow in her eyes, would her cheek have grown hollow and her hair white with long vigil, would her whole world have been found within the four walls of his sick room?

He thought not.

He sighed as he rode through the green glades of the great woods where she had held her Court of Love.

Of love no one could speak with such science and surety as she. She had known it in all its phases, studied it in all its madness, accepted it in all its sacrifices; on no theme would her silver speech be more eloquent; and love had been given to her as the widest of all her kingdoms. But had she really known it ever? Had not that which her own breast had harboured always been the mere impulse of curiosity, the mere exercise of power, the mere chillness of analysis such as that with which the physiologist gazes on the bared nerves of the living organism? After all, why had men cared so much for her? Only because she had been as unmoved as the moon. Men are children; they long for what they cannot clasp. He himself had only loved her so long, despite the chilling and dulling effect of marriage, because he had always felt that he possessed so little real hold upon her that any day she might take it into her fancy to leave him, not out of unkindness but out of *ennui*. [125]

Sometimes he thought with a curious compassion of Napraxine. He thought of him now, and for a moment his own heart grew hard against her as he rode through the beautiful summer world of his woods; hard as had grown the hearts of men who, dying for her sake, had felt that they had given their life for a smile, for a jest, for a chimera, for a caprice—given it away unthanked.

But then, when he entered his house again and saw her, he forgave her and loved her; he cared more still for one touch of her cool white hand, the favour of one careless smile cast to him, than he cared for the whole world of women—women who would willingly have seen him forget his allegiance to her, and have consoled him for all her defects.

'Otho is uxorious, like Belisarius, like Bismarck,' said Friedrich Othmar, with an unpleasant smile. 'And alas! he is neither a great soldier nor a great statesman, to make the weakness respected either by the world or by his wife.'

Othmar had overheard the speech, and it had made him irritated, and afraid lest he ever looked absurd.

'Yet,' he thought bitterly, 'if she were still the wife of Napraxine, no one would ever see anything

singular in any weakness or madness that I might commit for her!'

Between his uncle and himself few intimate words ever passed. After the death of Yseulte a tacit understanding had been come to between them that neither should ever name those causes, whether great or small, which she had had for pain and jealous sorrow in her brief life's space. It was a subject on which they could never have touched without a breach irrevocable and eternal in their friendship.

Friedrich Othmar visited at their houses, caressed their children, preserved all outward amity with both of them, and devoted all the energies of his last years and of his immense experience to the interests of the house which he had honoured, served, and loved so long, but with neither his nephew nor his nephew's wife did he ever pass the limits of a conventional and courteous intercourse, which had neither affection in it nor any exchange of confidence.

Once or twice the worldly-wise and harsh old man did a thing which a few years before, in anyone else, he would have regarded as the most flimsy and foolish of sentimentalities. He took the little Xenia with him into the gardens of St. Pharamond, and made her gather with her own small hands a quantity of violets; then he led her to the tomb of Yseulte, and bade her lay them on it. She had been buried there, though a sepulchre sculptured by Mercier had been raised to her memory at Amyôt.

'Why are you not her child?' he said to her. 'Why are you not? She would have loved you better than your own mother can.' [126]

The child scattered her violets, then came and leaned her arms upon his knee and looked up at him with serious eyes.

'You are crying!' she said, touching softly two great tears which had fallen on his cheeks. Then she added gravely: 'I thought you were too old!'

'I too should have thought so,' said Friedrich Othmar bitterly. 'It is a sign that my end is near.'

And he envied those credulous, unintellectual, happy imbeciles who could believe that that 'end' was only the opening of the portals of a wider, fairer, greater life; he whose reason told him that for his own strong keen brain and multiform knowledge and accumulated wisdom and fierce love of life, as for the youthful limbs and the fair soul and the pure body of the dead girl there, that end was only the 'end' of all things: cruel corruption, hideous putridity, blank nothingness, eternal silence.

'What is the use of it all? What is the use?' he said to the startled child, as he took her hand and led her from the tomb. What was the use of any life or any death? What had been the use of Yseulte's?

One day he found before her mausoleum at Amyôt the most *mondaine* of women: Blanche Princesse de Laon, who, in her childish days, had been Blanchette de Vannes.

'You, too, remember her?' he said in surprise.

Blanche de Laon replied roughly:

'I loved her;—*tout le monde est bête une fois*!'

She stood before the marble sepulchre where Mercier had made the angels of Pity and of Youth weeping. She was not twenty years of age, but she knew the world like her glove. She was cruel, cold, avaricious, sensual, steeped in frivolity and intrigue as in a bath of wine, but underneath all that there was one little spot of memory, of regret, of tenderness in her nature; as far as she had been capable of affection she had loved Yseulte.

'*Tiens!*' she said, as she stood beside the sepulchre. 'Do you think it has succeeded—your nephew's last marriage?'

'I believe so,' replied Friedrich Othmar with surprise. 'Yes, certainly, I should say so; they seem quite in accord; he is devoted to her still.'

'*Tiens!*' she said again, and she struck the marble of the tomb sharply with the long ivory stick of her sun umbrella. 'I watch them like a cat a mouse. I will be even with her still; the first time there is a little crack in what you call their happiness, I shall be there—and I will widen it. Have you seen the drivers of Monte Carlo make an open wound in their horses' flank on purpose? Well, this is how they do it. A fly settles and leaves a little piece of braised skin, the men rub that little place with sand, it widens and widens, they rub in more sand, the sun and the flies do the rest.' [127]

Then she struck her ivory stick once more on the marble parapet of the great tomb.

'She died for them! She was so foolish always. But there was something great in it. We are not great like that. If he only remembered, I would forgive him for her sake. But he never remembers. He does not care. A dog might be buried instead of her.'

'You cannot be sure of that.'

'Bah! I am perfectly sure. He has never even understood that she did die for him. He thought it was an accident!'

'Hush!' said Friedrich Othmar harshly, but with great emotion. 'She wished that he should think it so; what right have you or have I or has anyone in the wide world to betray her last secret if we guess it? It has gone to the grave with her, like her dead children.'

'I betray it no more than you!' she replied with asperity. 'I have given no hint of it to any living soul; when Toinon said it was a suicide I struck her, I made her hold her peace. I was a child

then, and all these years since I have never said a word; but you, you know; you know as well as I.'

'It was not a suicide, it was a heroism. If there were a God, a great God, He would have honoured it.'

'But there are only priests!' said Blanchette, with her bitterest smile.

They turned away together from the mausoleum, where the marble figure of Yseulte seemed to lie in the peace of a dreamless sleep beneath the shadowing wings of the two angels. Gates of metal scroll-work let in the sunlight to this house of death; there was no darkness in it, no terror, no melancholy; white doves flew around its roof, and white roses blossomed at its portals.

'Madame la Princesse de Laon,' said Friedrich Othmar gravely, as they passed across the turf, 'whenever the fly begins that little wound in the skin that you talked of, forbear to widen it for the sake of your cousin who sleeps there; do not make her sacrifice wholly useless. What is done is done. We cannot bring her back to life, and if we could she would not be happy in it. There are souls too delicate and too spiritual for earth. Hers was so.'

Blanche de Laon gave him no promise. She walked on over the smooth sward through the labyrinths of blossom, and crossed the gardens where her courtiers met her, with outcries of welcome and of homage.

[128] She was at the supreme height of coquetry and triumph and fashion. She was not beautiful in feature, but she was dazzling fair, had a marvellously perfect figure, *une crânerie inouie*, and the advantage and fascination conferred by an absolute indifference to all laws, hesitations and principles. She was hard as her own diamonds, plundered her lovers with a greed and ruthlessness which rivalled any cocotte's, kept her splendid position by sheer force of audacity as high above the world as though she were the most pure of women, and before she had completed her twenty-first year knew all that was to be known of the refinements of vice, the exaggerations of self-indulgence, and the eccentricities of unbridled levity. She had supreme scorn for her sister Toinon, who had espoused the Duc de Yprès, a hunting-noble of the Ardennes, and who spent most of her time in the provinces chasing wolves, bears, and wild deer, and could give the death-blow with her knife to an old tusked monarch of the woods or a king-stag of eleven points, as surely as any huntsman in French Flanders or the Luxembourg.

The Princesse de Laon came as a guest to Amyôt with most summers or autumns. She knew that her host disliked her, and would willingly, had it been possible, never have seen her face; she knew that his wife disliked her scarcely less, but that knowledge increased her whim to be often at their houses, and she never gave them any possible pretext to break with or to slight her. Her name was included, as a matter of course, in their first series of guests every season, and usually she was accompanied by Laon himself; a man of small brains and admirable manners, who adored her, and would no more have dared resent the liberties she took with his honour than he would have dared to enter her presence uninvited.

'*J'ai étudié vos moyens de punir votre meute*,' she said once to the châtelaine of Amyôt, with a malice equal to her own. '*Et je les ai imités; tant bien que mal!*'

She was the only person in whom Nadine had ever found her equal in high-bred insolence, in merciless raillery, in unsparing allusions, couched in the subtilties of drawing-room banter or of drawing-room compliment. Blanche de Laon was the only one who could fence with those slender foils of her own, which could strike so surely and wound so profoundly. Blanche de Laon, outwardly her devoted admirer and friend, was the sole living being who could irritate her, could annoy her, and could make her feel that Time, to use the words of Madame de Grignan, robbed her every day of something which she would never recover and could ill afford to lose.

Before this insolent youth of Blanchette she, who had been Nadège Napraxine, felt almost old.

She was not old; she was still at the height of her own powers to charm. She proved it every day that she drove through the streets, every night that she passed down a ball-room. [129] Still Blanchette, twelve years younger than she, reigning in her own world, repeating her own triumphs, awarding the cotillion to her own lovers, made a certain sense of coming age approach her. Age was not at her elbow yet, but she saw his shadow in the doorway. She forgot that approaching shadow at every other time, but Blanchette had the power to point it out to her in a thousand ways imperceptible to all spectators. Hundreds of other young beauties grew up and entered her society, and met her daily and nightly, and she never thought once about them, except when she wanted them for a costume quadrille at her ball in Paris or tableaux vivants at Amyôt. But Blanchette forced her to think of her; forced her to see in her a rival, perhaps an equal, in those kingdoms where she was wont to reign alone. Blanchette, when she let her myosotis-coloured eyes gaze at her, said to her with cruel pertinacity and candour:

'You are a beautiful woman still, but you owe something to art now; you will have to owe more and more every year; you would not dare be seen at sunrise after the cotillion now; soon you will dance the cotillions no longer, but your daughter will dance them instead of you. How will you like it? You have too much *esprit* to be Cleopatra. You will not give and take love philtres at forty. You will have too much wit. But when your empire passes you will be wretched.'

All this the blue keen eyes of Blanche de Laon alone of all women said to her, anticipating the years that were to come, asking in irony—

'How wilt thou bear from pity to implore
What once thy power from rapture could command?'

This is the question which every woman has to ask herself in the latter half of her life. A woman is like a carriage horse; all her *beaux jours* are crowded into the first years of her life; afterwards every year is a descent more or less rapid or gradual; after being made into an idol, after living on velvet, after knowing only the gilded oats and the rosewood stall and the days of delight, she and the horse both drift to neglect, and hunger, and rainy weather, and the dull plodding world between the shafts. The horse comes to the cab and the cart; the woman comes to middle age and old age; he is ungroomed, she is unsought; he stands in the streets dumbly wondering why his fate is so changed; she sits in the ball-room chaperons' seat silently chafing against the lot which has become hers.

Men are so fortunate there. The very best of their life often comes in its later years. If a man be a poet, a soldier, a statesman, all the gilded laurels of fame are reserved for his later years; honours crowd on him in his autumn as fast as the leaves can fall in the woods. Even as a lover it [130] is often in his later years that his greatest successes and his happiest passions come to him. This is always what creates the immense disparity between men and women. For men age may become an apotheosis. For women it is only a *débâcle*.

This will always cause disparity and discord between them. When love has said its last word to her, it is still weaving all kinds of first chapters to new stories for him. Nobody can help it. It is nature. The fault lies in the ordinances of modern civilisation, which have made their laws without any recognition of this fact, and indeed affects altogether to ignore its existence.

She said such things as these in jest very often; but beneath the jest there was a sorrowful and impatient foreboding. The days of darkness had not come to her, but they would certainly come. Having been in her way omnipotent as any Cæsar, she would see her laurels drop, her sceptre fall, her empire diminish. A woman holds her power to charm as Balzac's hero held the *peau de chagrin*; little by little, at first imperceptibly, then faster with each hour, it shrinks and shrinks until one day there is nothing left—and life is over.

Life is over: though the automatic joyless mechanism of living may go on for half a century more.

It is useless to say that the affections will compensate for this decadence. They will do no such thing. As intelligence is more and more highly cultured, and taste made more fastidious, the power to console of the ties of family grows less and less; the mind becomes too subtle, the sympathies become too exacting and refined, to accept blindly such companionship or compensation as these ties may afford.

Every woman who has had the power to make herself beloved has known a height of ecstasy beside which all the rest of life must for ever look pale and dull. You say to a woman, 'When your lovers fall away from you, console yourself with your children.' It is as though you said to her, 'As you can no longer have the passion-music of the great orchestras, listen to the little airs of the chamber harmonium.'

While your lover loves you he is all yours; you are his sun and moon, his dawn and darkness, his idol, his lawgiver, his ecstasy—what can compensate to you for the loss of that power? Whether time or marriage or other women kill that for you, whenever it goes utterly, you are more beggared than any queen driven from her kingdom naked in winter snows, like Elizabeth of Hungary. And it always goes; always, always! We reach the height, but we cannot stay at it. We live for a few instants with the stars, then down we drop like stones.

So she would think at times; and the presence of Blanche de Laon had power to recall and emphasise such thoughts more irritatingly than had that of any other woman. In a thousand [131] hinted insolences, couched in bland phrase, Blanchette again and again reminded her that '*le jour est aux jeunes*.'

The day was indeed still her own, but twilight was near.

It was the Princesse de Laon's fashion of vengeance—pending any other.

Blanchette had known very little emotion in her twenty years of existence, hardly any pain except that of some ruffled egotism or some denied caprice. She had been a woman of the world to her finger tips, from the time of her infancy, when she had been curled and frizzed and dressed in the latest mode to show her small person in the children's balls at Deauville or at Aix; but when she had heard of the death of her cousin, and realised that she would never hear the voice of Yseulte again on earth, she had known a grief more violent, a regret more sudden and sincere, than her vain and self-absorbed little life could have been supposed capable of in its inflated frivolity and egotism. With her intuitive knowledge of human nature, she had divined the true cause of that death, and into her small cold soul there had entered two sentiments which were not of self: the one an imperishable regret for her cousin, the other an imperishable hatred of Nadine Napraxine.

Others forgot: she did not.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Amyôt was to the great world of the hour what Compiègne used to be to it in the finest days of the Second Empire. More indeed, for whilst nearly all patrician France would never pass an imperial threshold, there was no one of such eminence in all the nobilities of Europe that he or she did not covet, and feel flattered to obtain, their invitation to those summer and autumnal festivities of the Château Othmar. But enraptured as her guests all were, the châtelaine of Amyôt remained moderately pleased by what pleased her guests so excessively, and less and less pleased with every year.

'After all, there is nothing really new in anything we do here,' she said slightingly to Loris Loswa, who occupied there a half-privileged and half-subordinate position as chief director of the various entertainments; it was he who brought the greatest actors on the stage, who initiated the greatest singers to direct the concerts, who invented new figures for the cotillions, and who organised the moonlight *fêtes* in the gardens with the docility of a courtier and the ready imagination of a clever artist steeped to his fingers' ends in the traditions of the eighteenth century.

'Vereschaguin would certainly not be one half so useful in the summer in a French château,' said Nadine, with her contemptuous appreciation of his merits and accomplishments. [132]

'Take care that your poodle does not bite one day,' Othmar answered. 'You hurt his vanity very often.'

'He may bite me for aught I know,' she replied. 'But be very sure he will never quarrel with Amyôt. He is very prudent in his own self-interest.'

'But no man likes to be merely used as you show that you use him.'

'I pay him. I have made him the fashion. I can unmake him.'

Othmar ventured to demur to that.

'You can do a great deal in *faisant la pluie et le beau temps*, we all know; but surely the fashion which Loswa has attained (for it is fashion and not fame) is, though a great deal of it may be owing to full artificial support, yet real enough to stand alone. For his own generation, at any rate.'

'My dear Otho, nothing is ever easier than to *dénigrer*: Pope has said it before us. It costs an immense quantity of time and trouble to make a reputation, but to unmake it is as easy as to unravel wool. A word will do. If I were to hint that Loswa is a little loud in his colour, a little crude or *voulu* in his treatment, everyone would begin to find his talent vulgar. I shall not say it, because I shall not think it; he is an incomparable artist in his own way; but he always knows that I can say it, and that knowledge keeps him my slave.'

Othmar was silent: he did not like Loswa, and was impatient of his familiarity at Amyôt, a familiarity made more offensive to him by its mixture with flattering docility. That Loswa had a talent so masterly that it was nearly genius he quite admitted, but the quality of the talent was artificial, and seemed to him to represent the moral fibre of the artist's character.

'All Russians of a certain class are artificial,' said his wife to him when he said this. 'We are all stove plants—children of a forced culture and an unreal atmosphere. In our natural instincts we are cruel, fierce, fickle, Slav *toto corde*. In our social relations we are the most polished of all people. As children we bite like little wolves; grown-up we know more perfectly than anyone else how to caress our enemies. Loswa is only like us all.'

'The future of the world is with Russia?'

'I think so. All the science of history makes one sure of it: but at the present instant we are the oddest union of the most absolute barbarism and the most polished civilisation that the world holds. Society has nothing so perfectly cultured as the Russian patrician; Europe has nothing so barbarously ignorant and besotted as the Russian peasant. "*Les extrêmes se touchent*" more startlingly in Russia than in any other country, and out of those conflicting elements will come the dominant race of the future, as you say.' [133]

Othmar looked at her, then said after a pause: 'I have always wondered that you have not cared to become a great political leader; all political questions interest you, and nothing else does.'

'My dear Otho, I should only be a conspirator if I did; you would not wish that; it would upset the House of Othmar.'

'I should like whatever pleased you,' he said, weakly perhaps but sincerely.

'Even your own ruin?' she asked, amused.

'Even that, perhaps!' he answered—and thought: 'if it served to draw us more closely together.'

She guessed what remained unspoken.

'I do not think ruin would have an agreeable effect on my character,' she said, still with amusement at his romantic fancies. 'I have never at all understood why it should develop all one's virtues to have a bad cook, or why it should render one angelic to be obliged to draw on one's stockings oneself, or brush one's own hair before a cracked glass. I think it would only make me exceedingly unpleasant to everybody, yourself included.'

'Marie Antoinette——'

'Oh, poor Marie Antoinette! She adorns the moral of every lesson of earthly vicissitudes! I think the very enormity of her agony served as a stimulant. Besides, she knew she had all posterity for an audience. In great crises it ought to be easy to behave greatly. Antigone and Iphigenia are intelligible to me.'

'Because you have instincts which are great in you; only——'

'Only what? Do not pause. The one privilege of marriage which is really valuable, is the permission to say disagreeable things.'

'It is a privilege of which the wise do not avail themselves. I was only going to say that I think you would become heroic, were you in heroic circumstances. But the world is always with you and its influences are narcotic or alcoholic, heroic never.'

'I hope I should go to the scaffold decently, if you mean that, were I sent there. That always seems to me a very easy thing to do. But to be amiable or philosophic if one had no waiting-woman, or no bath, or no change of clothes, seems to me much more difficult.'

'Yet, even then, if you were tried——'

'Pray do not, in your anxiety to test my character, go and ruin my fortune! Poverty is tolerable in a novel; but in real life it can only be sordid, tiresome, and vulgar.' [134]

'Not necessarily vulgar. I assure you if I could have brought the House of Othmar down as Samson did the temple of Dagon, without slaying the Philistines under it, as he did, I should have done it many years ago. If poverty be vulgar, what are riches? Intolerably vulgar in my estimation.'

She looked at him with a certain admiration crossed by a certain disdain.

'I always thought your contempt for wealth very picturesque,' she replied, 'and it is, I know, quite sincere. At the same time it is a quixotism, and gets you laughed at by those who cannot possibly understand all the refinements of your motives as I do; to Bleichroeder or Soubeyran you would seem insane. And I do not think you do at all understand one sign of your times; which is the immense preponderance given by it to mere wealth. Every year adds to the power of the financiers. Already it is they who, in reality, make peace or war: ministers cannot move without them, and without them armies starve. At present their dominion is greatly hidden, and not understood by the people; but in a little while it is they who will be the open dictators of the world. It will not be precisely a millennium, but, were I you, I should see the picturesque and the ambitious side of it.'

'I can only see the absolute corruption and decadence which will be inevitable.'

'Because nature meant you to be a poet, writing sonnets to a grasshopper like Meleager, or dying early in the arms of the sea like Shelley; you have been always out of tune with your own times. It is a kind of anæmia, for which there is no cure.'

'It is a malady you share——'

'Oh no! We are as far asunder as *Jean-qui-rit* and *Jean-qui-pleure*. What amuses me as a comedy distresses you as a tragedy: when I see a satire like Pope's you see a dirge like the Daphnis. The two attitudes are as different as a horse chestnut and a chestnut horse.'

'At one time we were not so very inharmonious!' said Othmar unwisely; since it is always unwise to recall a bond of sympathy at any moment when that bond seems strained or out-worn. It is natural to do so, but it is unwise.

'When people are *amourachés* they always imagine themselves sympathetic to each other on every point,' she said with cruel truth; then she paused a moment, and, smiling, added a truth still more cruel.

'I should always have sympathised with you, probably, if I had not married you,' she repeated dreamily and amiably.

'That I quite understand,' said Othmar, with bitterness. 'One can be a hero to one's wife as little as to one's valet. It is not to be hoped for in either case.' [135]

'I know all about you,' she said with a sigh. 'That is so very fatal! Perhaps if you would do something I do not know, you would become interesting again.'

'That is a suggestion which may have its perils.'

'Peril?' she repeated. 'My dear Otho, there is much more peril in the monotony of undisturbed relations. I often wonder if you are really sincere when you profess such constant admiration of me; myself, I admit I constantly think how unwise we were not to remain delightful illusions to each other. It is impossible to retain any illusions about a person you live with; if you looked at Chimborazo every day it would seem small!'

They were alone for a few rare moments in her own apartments at Amyôt; it was but seldom now that he ever was indulged with a conversation *sotto quattr' occhi*. She held firmly to her theory that too much intimacy is the grave of love, a grave so deep that love has no resurrection.

Those stupid women who allowed their lovers or their lords to enter their apartments as easily as they could enter their stables!—what could they expect? All the charm of admittance there was gone.

His face flushed deeply as he heard her now.

'I wonder if you have any conception of what bitterly cruel things you say?' he exclaimed. 'Or are the subjects of your vivisection too infinitesimally small in your eyes for you to remember their possible pain?'

'My dear Otho! I do not think a truth should ever be painful to any candid mind!' she replied, with a little merciless laugh. 'If a man and woman, who know each other as well as we do, cannot say the truth to one another, who is ever to make any psychological studies at all?'

'No one does that has any real feeling in him or in her,' said Othmar impatiently. 'All those elaborate examinations under the glass are cold as ice. They are very scientific, no doubt, but there is not a heart throb in them.'

'I think the greatest pleasure of strong emotion is the analysis of it,' she replied with perfect truth. 'You are not philosophic, you are poetic. So you do not understand what I mean.'

'You mean,' said Othmar angrily, 'that when Hero saw Leander's dead body washed up to her arms from the waves, she was amply compensated for his death by the advantage of putting her own tears under the spectrum!'

'That is an exaggerated illustration. But I admit that the mental intricacies of every passion is what is alone interesting in it to me.'

'It is why you have never felt passion!'

'Perhaps!' [136]

She smiled and stretched her arms indolently above her head as she lay back amongst her cushions.

'I have always perfectly understood,' she continued, 'that unjustly abused lady of the legend who flung her glove into the lions' den; she wanted emotions and she had the whole gamut of them no doubt in those few moments—fear, hope, pride, triumph, discomfiture; she must have known all that it is possible to know of emotion in those three minutes.'

'You have often thrown your glove.'

'Do you mean that for a rebuke? Your tone is gloomy. Yes, I have thrown it, but they have always brought it back to me like lap-dogs. There is too much of the lap-dog in men.'

'In me?' said Othmar with anger.

'Yes, in you too. You would go for my glove still.'

'Yes, I would, God help me.'

She laughed. 'I am sure you would, at present. I suppose the time will come when you will go for some other woman's. It is in your nature to do that sort of thing.'

Othmar was irritated and wounded: he was tired of this eternal jesting. His fidelity to her was the most real and the most sensitive thing in all his life, and yet he had the conviction that in her heart she ridiculed him for it.

'Still, I think you of all women would be most intolerant of inconstancy,' he said, speaking almost unconsciously his own thoughts aloud.

'I hope I should forgive it with my reason, which would understand and so excuse it, though my feminine weaknesses might perhaps resent it; one never knows one's own foibles.'

'It is only indifference which forgives inconstancy.'

'Oh—h—h! I am not sure of that. There may be indulgence without indifference.'

'But not without contempt.'

'I do not know that. *Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner.* I have so very slight an opinion of human nature that I do not think I could ever be seriously angry with any of its errors.'

'Then that would be because none of them had power to reach your heart. I do not believe you would care for anyone sufficiently ever to be jealous of them.'

She smiled and rose. 'My dear Otho, jealousy is a very ugly, useless, and unwise passion. The world decided, as soon as ever I was presented to it, that I had no such thing as a heart. You have always persisted in supposing that I have, but very likely the world is more right than you.'

'May I not hope at least that I have a place in it?' murmured Othmar, and he bent towards her with much of a lover's ardour.

But she drew herself away with a touch of that dullness by which she had used to freeze the blood in Napraxine's veins. [137]

'My dear Otho,' she said, with her unkind little smile, 'really that is a twice-told tale! Do you think after so many years it is worth while to *chanter des madrigaux*? You know I was at no time ever very fond of them. "Laurel is green for a season, and love is sweet for a day!" Let us be friends, the most charming friends in the world; that is far more agreeable.'

Othmar rose from where he had been half kneeling at her feet; his face was very flushed, and his eyes grew angry; he was irritably sensible of having made himself absurd in her eyes.

'You will not awe *me* as you used to do that poor humble dead fool,' he said bitterly. 'But if you be tired of me I will summon my fortitude to bear dismissal as best I may.'

'Oh!—tired—no!' she said, with a deprecating accent which was marred on his ear by a certain

latent thrill beneath it of suppressed laughter. 'Only I think we have done with all that. If Mary Stuart had married Chastelard, I am sure he would not have gone on writing sonnets and songs; at least not writing them to her. We have a quantity of all kinds of interests and objects common to us. Let us be content with those. Believe me, if you will leave off the madrigals it will be very much better. You have been the most admirable lover in the world, but as you cannot be a lover now, suppose you leave off the language and—and—the nonsense? Regard me as your best friend: I shall ever be that.'

Othmar coloured with a confused mingling of emotions.

'Friendship!' he echoed. 'I did not marry you to be relegated to friendship!'

'Then you were not clairvoyant,' she said, with her unkindest laugh. 'There are only two results possible to any marriage: they are friendship or separation, the door to the left or the door to the right.'

Then with her prettiest, chilliest laugh she left him, amused by the vexation, offence, and embarrassment which his features expressed.

'"*Il faut en finir avec les madrigaux*,"' she said, as she looked at him over her shoulder and passed down the staircase.

Othmar was deeply pained and hotly angered. He had at all times, even in the earliest hours of their union, been conscious that his caresses were rather permitted than enjoyed, his tenderness was rather accepted indulgently than ardently returned. There was a total absence of physical passion in her, which had served to heighten his intellectual admiration of her, if at times it had held his emotions in check, and made him feel that his ardour was boyish, absurd, sensual, romantic. But he had never been prepared to accept the position into which Napraxine had been [138] driven by the indifference of her temperament. He had never anticipated that the time might come when he also might be allowed no more than a touch of her cool white fingers, and a careless smile of morning greeting.

Sooner an open quarrel than such mockery of friendship!—so he thought.

He remained where she had left him, sunk in meditation, which retraced one by one the passages of his love for her. It had been love so great, so entire, so intense, that it could never change—unless she or her own will killed it. It had been one of those mighty incantations of which no hand but the sorcerer's own can ever lift off the spell.

As her lover he had always imagined that she, marble to all others, would be wax to him; he had always believed that he would light the flame of fervour behind the alabaster-like ice of her temperament. But he had learned his error. He had found that possession is not necessarily empire. He had discovered that he pleased her intelligence and her vanity rather than awakened her senses or her emotions. She had made him mortifyingly conscious that she found him of no higher stature than other men, and had unsparingly reminded him that there was no more fatal foe of love than familiarity.

She had wounded him more than she had meant more than once, and this time the wound penetrated both his pride and his affections, and left with him an acrid sense of undeserved humiliation.

'No man can have been truer to her than I have been,' he thought, with that pathetic wonder that fidelity does not beget gratitude which is common to all lovers, be they man or woman.

Was it true that she would not care if his fancy wandered elsewhere? Would she not feel any anger were he, like all his friends, to spend his passions and his substance in the arms of cocottes, and in providing the splendours of their palaces? Would she indeed feel no pang if any other woman, whether duchess or *drôlesse*, were to obtain empire over him?

If not, then truly she had never loved him. He felt no impulse to put her to the test: he only felt a weary and dreary sense of loneliness, of discomfiture, of chagrin, of humiliation.

He had always doubted whether she had ever realised the depth and the extent of the passion he had spent on her. He had always fancied that she classed it only with the hot desires and romantic sentiments of men, of which she had seen so much; there might be even many of those men who appeared to her to have been truer lovers than he. He had married her: would Helen have ever believed that Menelaus could love like Paris? Surely not. There had been many men whose blood had been spilled like water on the ground for her sake, or from her caprice. It was [139] inevitable that there should seem truer lovers than he who dwelt under the same roof as herself, and led the even tenour of his daily life beside her.

She had been too early saturated and satiated with the spectacle of strong and forbidden passions for the repetition of a well-known and often-laughed-at love to have any power to excite her interest in the tame sameness of a permitted and undisturbed intimacy. He felt that she had spoken the entire truth when she had said that she would have cared for him much more had she never married him. She required endless novelty, incessant renewal of excitation, continual stimulant to her love of mystery, of peril, and of power. There was no food for these in the calm certainty of possession which is the accompaniment and enemy of all conjugal life, in the tranquil succession of years which resembled one another monotonous as peace.

Perhaps she had loved him most of all on that day when she had written to him that their paths in life must wend for ever apart. It had been a *bon moment*, a moment of exaltation, of intensity, of strong interest, stimulated by a sense of self-sacrifice; a moment in which she had put him voluntarily away from her; and, so doing, had seen him in a light which had never before or after

shone upon him in her eyes.

The mockery of her slight laughter remained now in jarring echo on his ears. What a fool he must seem to her! What a poor, romantic, sensitive, unwise stringer of unwritten madrigals!

To endeavour to arouse her jealousy never passed across his thoughts. It seemed to him that she must know so well that she had taken his own heart out of his breast never to return it to him. Othmar was not more chaste than other men of the world; but his passion for Nadine Napraxine had been of such length of endurance, of such intensity of feeling, had been so environed with the ennobling solemnities of death, and had been so fed on long denial and severance, that it always seemed to him his very life itself. His temperament was too grave for the light loves of the world, and his character too constant and too sincere for those intrigues which form a mere pleasant pastime without engaging either the affection or the memory. He was like the Greek who hung his spear, his shield, his sandals, and his flute before the shrine of Aphrodite's self; and could worship no lesser divinities than she.

He went out of the house and into the gardens of Amyôt, where they were most shadowy and solitary. The late summer roses were filling the air with their fragrance, and the stately peacocks were drawing their trains of purple and gold over the shaded grass. A flock of wild doves sailed overhead; near at hand a fountain sent its silvery column towering in the light, to fall in clouds of spray into the marble basin, where laughing loves rode their white dolphins through green fleets of water-lily leaves. In the distance, beyond the clipped walls of bay, his children with some dogs were playing on a lawn under one of the terraces. Their laughter came faintly on the wind; he could see their shining hair glisten in the sunshine. He did not go to them. [140]

The kiss of a child could not soothe the irritated bitterness which was at his heart, the wound which the hand he loved best had given him.

It was a warm golden day; the heat lay heavy on all the country of the Orléannais; and the Loire water, low and still, was broken by wide stretches of sandy soil where the river bed was laid bare. He, with a vague depression for which he could not have accounted, felt restless and disposed to solitude. With that kind of impulse towards the relief of melancholy things which that sort of motiveless sadness usually brings with it, he, for the first time for years, turned his steps towards the chambers once occupied by his first wife. Nothing had ever been touched in them since the last day that she had been at Amyôt: save to keep away the cobwebs and the dust, no servant ever entered there; the doors were locked, and he himself kept the master key.

An instinct of remembrance, for which he could not have accounted, moved him to enter there this hot and silent noon. He trod the floors with a noiseless step, as men move in the chamber where some dead thing lies, and with a noiseless hand undid the fastenings of one of the great windows and let in the light. All things were as they had been left that day when she had last gone away from Amyôt to her death. The golden sunbeams strayed in on to the white satin coverlet of the bed, the ivory crucifix which hung above it, the *prie-dieu* with the Book of Hours open, the roses a mere brown heap of ugliness, withered where she had set them in their bowl.

He sat down in the midst of the lonely things and felt a sense of regret, of remorse, of wistful compunction and self-reproach. Ever and again at intervals such an emotion had passed over him whenever he had thought of her, but never sharply enough to cause him such pain as it caused him now, remembering her youth plucked by death like a snowdrop in its bud. The big dog which had belonged to her had entered unperceived after him, and was looking upward in his face, as if it likewise were moved by sudden and sorrowful remembrances.

Poor child! so little missed, so utterly unmourned!

'Et rose, elle a vécu ce que vivent les roses:
L'espace d'un matin.'

Friedrich Othmar had had these two lines carved upon her tomb; they told of all the brevity of her life, but not of all its sadness. Had any living creature ever guessed all that? [141]

A chill passed over Othmar as the doubts came to him. Had she suffered much more than he had ever thought? He had been caught then on the strong cyclone of a great passion, and been blinded by its rush and force.

The silence of the large chamber seemed filled with one long sigh.

The dog looked at him always, as though saying: 'I have not forgotten: once she lived; where is she now?'

Ah, where!

He rose oppressed by new and painful thoughts, and moved from one object to another in the room, as though each of them would tell him something he had yet to learn. He touched with a reverent hand this thing and that which had belonged to her, and which survived unharmed, unworn, and would so last for centuries if his descendants spared them; frail toys and trifles, yet dowered with a power of endurance denied to the human life, which there had passed away like a cloud of the morning.

He took up her ivory tablets with the engagements of the day still written in pencil on them; he touched her long thin gloves, her tall tortoiseshell-tipped garden cane, her writing-case with its monogram in silver. The things moved his heart strongly for the first time in seven years: it had been no fault of hers that she had been powerless to gain love from him.

One by one he drew open the drawers of the buhl-table on which these, her writing things, had

all been left unmoved: in one he saw a little book covered with vellum, and closed with a silver pencil as a gate is closed with a staple. He hesitated a moment; then he drew the pencil out and opened the book. It was half filled with those poor timid little verses of which Nadine Napraxine had once by a chance jest suggested the existence, and for which the child had blushed as for a sin. They were faint, blurred, often half effaced, purposelessly, as by a shy uncertain hand afraid of its own creations, but some were legible. He read them, and all the soul left in them spoke to his.

All the thoughts and fears and sorrows, all the longing and the doubt and the hesitation which she had been too timid and too proud to ever show in life, were spoken to him in those tender and imperfect poems. They were simple as a daisy, spontaneous as a wood-lark's song; they were ignorant of all laws of science or rules of spondee and of dactyl; but, all halting and shy though they were, they had all the truth of a human heart in them. They were deep and wide enough to hold the secret which she had shut in them.

As he read them a mist came before his eyes, and a sigh escaped him. He understood all that she had suffered here beneath this roof where he had promised her a life of joy. He saw all that she had hidden from him so carefully, through pride and shyness and the cruel humiliation of a love which knew itself powerless to awake response, of a soul which suffered in its innocence all the tortures of the damned. He had lived beside her seeing naught of that piteous conflict; parted from her by the wall built up out of his own indifference and coldness.

Had he even then been able to discern it, it would not have touched him, because of all chill things on earth the dullest is the heart of a man towards a love which he does not desire, which he cannot return. But it reached and touched him now.

The voice from the grave could not fret him as the voice of the living might have done, had he heard it in that pitiful cry of utter loneliness.

Poor timid little verses like nestling birds shivering in the chill winds and pallid sunshine of an unkind spring—across the years they brought her heart to his.

And though he had never loved her, yet in that moment of remorse he would have given all that he possessed, all the lives around him, and all the peace of his own soul, to be able, once to call her back to earth, and once to say to her, 'Child, forgive me.'

But she was dead.

He sat there long in solitude, the dog lying mute at his feet.

He had read the broken, unfinished, humble little verses till their words were in his ear and before his eyes, and in all the sunbeams straying through the golden dust of the air around.

When he rose he laid them gently back where they had been left, with such a touch as a man gives to flowers which he lays on the dead limbs of some dear lost creature. Then he closed the window and went out of the chamber, the dog following him, with slow unwilling footsteps.

There went with him a remorse which would never leave him. For the first time the sense had come upon him that her death had been self-sought, in that sunset hour of the month of hyacinths, when her body had dropped as a stone drops down through the bird-haunted air.

CHAPTER XIX.

He felt an irresistible impulse to seek out the woman he loved, to unburden his heart to her of this new thought which seemed to him like a crime. He had left her in anger and mortification, but it was to her that he turned instinctively under the pain of a discovery which had filled him [143] with a sense of intolerable remorse.

Alas! they were not alone; the great house was full of guests. With the slanting of the afternoon shadows across the hoary face of the old sun-dial, on which were the monogram of François de Valois and his sister, these indolent people had all left their chambers and were now scattered in quest of diversion all over the house, the gardens, or the woods, riding, driving, making music, or making love, carrying on their banter, their friendships, their rivalries, their intrigues. To see her as he wished, alone, was impossible for many hours. After sunset there was the long and ceremonious dinner; after dinner there was the usual evening pastime, some chamber music by great artists, some dancing for those who wished it, whist and baccarat in the card-room, flirtation in the drawing-rooms, constant demands, which he could not resist, made upon his own courtesy and social powers.

'What a stupid life!' he thought impatiently, being out of tune with its lightness and gaiety. 'What a stupid bondage! The vine-dressers sound asleep in their cave-cabins above the Loire water are a thousand times wiser than we are!'

He looked at his wife often. She had professed to think her world tiresome and its monotony of pleasure tedious; she had professed to find its conventional routine mere treadmill work which no one had the courage to refuse to pursue, but which every one of its toilers hated; and yet she never spent a day otherwise than in this conventional world!—she never ceased for an hour to surround herself with its artificialities and its pageantries. If she had really wished to escape from it how easy to have done so!—how easy to have chosen instead some solitary and tranquil spot with him and with her children!

But they were all as the very breath of her existence, this air of the great world, this perpetual movement and excitation, these elegant crowds, these honey-tongued courtiers, this Babel of news, and novelties, and fashion, and *ennui*, and endless effort to be amused! Were she alone with him at Amyôt, would she not yawn with *ennui* every hour of the twenty-four? She had said that she would.

He left the brilliant rooms as soon as his duties as a host permitted him to escape, and wandered through the dusky aisles and avenues of his gardens.

The night was still and sultry; the sounds of music and the reflection of the lights within came from the many open casements of the great castle on to the terraces and lawns beneath. There was no moon: the steep roof, the pointed towers, the frowning keep of Amyôt stood up black and massive against the starry sky. Restless, and tormented by his thoughts, its master paced the dark grass alleys of its gardens; all the simple verses of the little manuscript poems seemed [144] whispered from their leaves and murmured by the fountains.

'She loved me!' he thought again and again. And to that warm and tender heart his own had been so cold!

It had been no fault of his; no man can love because he will; and still——

He stayed out in the gardens until the lights had ceased to shine in the great windows, and in the distant country lying beyond the forest belt of Amyôt the call to vespers was ringing through the darkling daybreak from village tower and spire, waking the slumbering peasants to their toil amidst the vines or on the river.

Then he entered the house and went to his wife's apartments.

When her woman asked if she would receive him she smiled a little. He was like a repentant child, she thought, sorry that he had been ill-treated and tired of pouting!

'I am half asleep!' she said as he entered. 'Why do you come and disturb me? Where have you been all the evening? You look as if you had seen the ghosts of all the tellers of the tales of the Heptameron!'

She laughed a little as she spoke; she had put on a loose gown of soft white tissues, her hair was unbound; her feet were bare and slipped in Persian shoes sewn thick with pearls. She was lying back amongst the pale rose-coloured cushions of her couch in the hot night; her arms were uncovered to the shoulders; the light was mellow and tempered; the window stood open; a slight breeze stirred the air and the gauze of her gown; her eyes surveyed him with a smile of languid amusement.

'*Pauvre enfant! a-t-il assez boudé!*' she thought with an indulgent derision.

Othmar, for the first time in his life, was insensible of the seduction of her presence. She observed his preoccupation with some offence. It was a slight to herself.

'What is the matter?' she said impatiently. 'When I am dying to be alone and asleep, do you come to tell me that the Rothschilds will not join you in some loan, or that war is going to begin before the financiers wish for it? Surely, your bad news would have kept till to-morrow morning? *Qu'avez-vous donc?*'

Othmar winced under the irritability and lightness of the words.

'Nadège,' he said very low, 'did ever you think that it was possible that—that—she sought her own death?'

His voice faltered, and had a sound of repressed tears in it.

She looked at him in astonishment and silence. She did not ask him whom he meant.

'Sometimes,' she answered at length in a hushed voice, with a certain sense of awe. 'Sometimes—yes—I have thought so. Yes, since you ask me.' [145]

His head drooped upon his chest; he sighed heavily. She looked at him with compassion and surprise.

'Is it possible,' she thought, 'that he never had any suspicion of it? Men are moles!'

Aloud, she said gently:

'What makes you think of it now? What can have happened?'

He did not reply for some moments. Then he answered unsteadily:

'I went into those locked rooms; there were some verses in a drawer—some little poems. I do not know why; all at once the impression came to me; I had never dreamed of it before.'

'Men are always so blind!' she thought, as she replied aloud:

'My dear Otho, we cannot know; why let us imagine the worst? It might very well be a mere accident. The woman Nicolle has said how often she had warned her of the dangers of that ruined roof. Do not take that burden of great useless remorse upon your life. It will make you wretched.'

'Not more wretched than she was. Not more than I deserve. I was a brute to her.'

'That is nonsense; you could not be brutal to anybody if you tried. You were indifferent, but that was not your fault. She did not know how to make you otherwise. There are women who never know——'

'But she deserved so happy a fate!'

'Are there any happy fates? It is a mere expression. The happy people are the conventional *terre à terre* unemotional creatures who pass their lives between two bolsters, one Custom and the other Prejudice. These two bolsters save them from all shocks, and they slumber and grow fat. That poor child might have been happiest in the cloisters, because she would not have known all she missed. But in the world she would certainly have been unhappy, whether with you or any other, because she demanded impossibilities, and because she had no knowledge of human nature.'

Othmar did not hear what she said.

'I shall always feel that I have been her murderer,' he said in a hushed voice. Those poor little verses haunted him like the memory of dead children long unmourned and suddenly remembered.

She looked at him with some impatience rising in her.

'How like a man!' she thought. 'How exactly like a man—to have killed a woman with his indifference and never to have perceived that he killed her, and then suddenly, six or seven years afterwards, to become alive to it as a fact, and then to suffer indescribable tortures! A woman would have known at once, but probably would never have blamed herself for it. We have so much more intuition and so much less conscience.' [146]

She was sorry for the pain she saw in him, but she was impatient at once of his slowness of perception and of the strength of his tardy emotions.

'Will she be like Banquo's Ghost between us?' she thought, with a vague jealousy of those memories suddenly arisen.

'My dear Otho,' she said aloud, with a little disdain in her sympathy, 'I understand all that you feel, because this cruel fancy has presented itself quite suddenly to you. But I do not think that you ought to dwell on it, since you can know nothing for certain. You have been always too much in love with imaginary sorrows; you have always been too apt to make for yourself calamities which destiny was willing to spare you. Do not make such a mistake now. Be man enough to face the truth as it stands, which is, that had that poor child lived, she would have grown more and more intolerable to you with every breath she drew. Men enjoy sophisms, and they hate looking at their own motives in all their nakedness. If she had lived you would have made her utterly miserable, through no fault either of yours or hers, but simply from the fault of marriage, which yokes two uncongenial lives together, and refuses to release them for mental and moral disparities which inflict a million times more misery than do the mere gross offences for which the law does grant release.'

'I have no doubt you are quite right, but I cannot follow your reasoning,' said Othmar with some bitterness. 'I can only feel that I have slain a better life than my own.'

'You were always so exaggerated in your expressions,' she said with the tone which he himself had so seldom heard from her. 'You have always, as I say, been like the German poets of the last century, perpetually in love with sorrow; I suppose because you can fashion her at your pleasure. Those to whom she comes uninvited dislike the look of her, and would shut her out if they could.'

Othmar rose impatient and wounded.

'I should have hoped you would have had more sympathy,' he said as he left the room.

She gave a little gesture of wrath as the door closed behind him.

'Do men ever know what they wish?' she said to herself. 'If he could bring that poor child to life again he would do it, for the moment, and spend the remainder of his life in repenting that he had ever done so. If the powers of men were equal in force to the momentary flashes of their consciences, what strange things the world would see!'

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[147] She herself was conscious that she had answered him with less feeling, with less sympathy than he might well have looked for from her, but the momentary sense of offence with which she had heard him speak had been too strong to allow her gentler instincts to prevail with her. She was irritated, amazed, profoundly offended, and amazed with such grand vanity of amazement as Cleopatra might have felt had some memory of poor pale Octavia risen up betwixt her lover and herself.

He meanwhile went through the hushed dim corridors of the house with a pang the more at his heart. He had spoken in a moment of strong feeling, of freshly-awakened pain, and the coldness with which his confidence had been received, left its own frost upon his soul. He did not remember that which every man finds; that no sorrow for one woman will ever awaken sympathy in the breast of another. Shame, suffering, wounds of the world's scorn or fortune's cruelties will make all women compassionate and tender; but when a man sighs for a woman lost, he will meet with no pity from those women whom he loves. He did not think of that; he only felt a bruised and baffled sense of utter loneliness; a momentary weakness like that of a child who, being hurt, creeps up to arms it loves only to be repulsed from them. That weary sense of hopelessness which her lovers had so often felt before her came to him; such hopelessness as may come over the soul of one who, standing shipwrecked on some barren shore, is fronted by some steep, straight, inaccessible wall of marble cliff, upon whose smooth white breast there is no place for any aching foot to rest or any hand to close: a white wall shining in the sun which sees men drown and die.

Some lines of Swinburne's earliest and greatest years came back in vaguely remembered fragments to his mind.

Yea, though we sung as angels in her ear,
She would not hear.
Let us rise up and part; she will not know,
Let us go seaward as the great winds go,
Full of blown sand and foam: what help is here?
There is no help, for all these things are so,
And all the world as bitter as a tear,
And how these things are, though I strove to show,
She would not know.

And though she saw all heaven in flower above,
She would not love.

Let us give up, go down; she will not care,
Though all the stars made gold of all the air,
Though all these waves went over us and drove
Deep down the stifling lips and glowing hair,
She would not care.

[148]

Let us go home and hence; she will not weep,
We gave love many dreams and days to keep,

All is reaped now, no grass is left to mow,
And we that sowed, though all we fell on sleep,
She would not weep.

The verses came back to his memory as he went away from her chamber to his lonely couch; and he found in them that curious solace which poetry gives to pain when it echoes pain closely; that consolation of sympathy, which makes of poets the ministers and the angels of life. The dull, resigned abandonment which was in these lines was in his own soul. It was no more fierce grief or wild despair, or the delirious rebellion of the lover against his mistress's indifference; it was the apathetic acquiescence of a nature powerless to awake and sway another, the weary and resigned acceptance of a thing unchangeable.

Nay, and though all men living had pity on me,
She would not see!

CHAPTER XX.

It was a warm and beautiful night a year later, in full midsummer in Paris.

Othmar was alone there, being detained there by the illness of his uncle, who had been stricken three weeks before with hemiplegia, as he had sat at dinner in his own house in the Rue du Traktir, and had ever since lain insensible and paralysed, in a semblance of that death which in all its verity and tyranny of annihilation might come to him at any hour.

It was a dreary and melancholy waiting for an end which was inevitable, which no science or effort could avert. He had come out in the coolness of the night, glad, after the closeness of a sick-room, of a little air, a little exercise. His wife was making a series of visits at various great houses throughout the north-east of Europe; the children were on the shores of the Norman coast with their separate household; Paris was a desert, though both men and women were found there who seized the occasion to press on him their presence and their friendship with that assiduity which the world always shows to its very rich men. But he had felt no taste at such a moment for the society of either, and had repulsed both with impatience and scant courtesy.

The world of pleasure never found Othmar pliant to it; he disliked and despised it; he was intolerant alike of its frivolity and of its coarseness; its enormous expenditure seemed to him grotesquely disproportioned to its poor results in amusement; and the mere jargon of its habitual speech was unpleasant to him. He was rarely seen at a club, never at a racecourse, and the laughter of a supper-table left him unmoved to mirth, as the limbs of a dancer left him untouched by admiration. [149]

Crossing the bridge of Solferino now, he paused to look at the river in the moonlight. There was neither wind nor cloud, and the sky was brilliant with stars; the Seine seemed a sheet of silver. It was past midnight; the city on the *rive gauche* was dusky and silent, the other city was studded with a million points of artificial light; the ceaseless hum of movement had not ceased there. The air was warm; the water looked cool and full of repose; the rays of the full moon, which shone down from the zenith, played in the ripples of it, and its mute highway seemed for the moment a silver path into some magic land.

He leaned against the parapet, and looked down its westward course: he knew every inch of its way; he knew all the quiet poplar-shadowed hamlets, all the flowering-grass meadows, all the sleepy quiet ancient little towns which were on either side of the historic stream; he knew how the apple and the cherry orchards sloped to the water, how the lilies and flags grew about the washing-places and the landing-stairs, how the white-capped children, knee-deep in cowslips, stood still to see the boats go by, how the water flowed through the *plaisant pays de France* until it grew black and sullied in the smoke of Rouen, and washed itself white again plunging joyously into the snow-flecked sea by Honfleur.

It was all hidden now, nothing of any of it seen except a broad band of silver spreading away into the darkness; but the eyes of his mind followed it and illumined its way, and in fancy his nostrils smelt the fragrance of the sweet dew-wet fields, and the breath of the sleeping cows, and the scent of the wild flowers growing where Corneille and Flaubert had died. By day it was but a busy water highway, crowded with sail and dulled with steam, serving to bind city and seaport together; but by night it was transfigured, and all the sighing sounds which came up from it seemed only like the peaceful breathing of the slumbering children in the many little wooded hamlets down its shores.

'And Flaubert lived above that water,' thought Othmar dreamily, 'and from his great window saw through his green poplar boughs on to it at sunrise and at sunset, and in the light of the moon like this, and yet he could get nothing of its serenity, and could hear none of its songs, but must vex his soul over the sordid troubles of "Bouvard et Pécuchet." The Seine ought to have been to him a Muse with hands full of meadow-sweet and lips vocal with tender folk-songs. If he had had more genius it would have been so. The village has its Mme. Bovary, no doubt, under its low red roof covered up with apple-boughs; but the village has also its Dorothea—if one be Goethe and not Flaubert.' [150]

The idle thoughts passed dreamily through his brain as he leaned over the coping of the bridge. He had stood there so long and so aimlessly that one of the street-guards came up to him with suspicion, but recognising him, went onward, leaving him undisturbed.

'If I were that *archimillionnaire*,' thought the man, 'it would be the inside of Bignon's that would have me at this hour, and not the outside of a bridge.'

That the man who can command all indulgence of the appetites may not care to so indulge them, always seems to the man who cannot command such indulgence the most inexplicable of mysteries. The poor man drinks all day long when he has a chance; he wonders why does the rich man only take a few glasses of claret when he could be drunk the whole year if he chose?

Othmar, unwitting of the guard's commentary, continued to gaze down the river, repeating in his thoughts the Greek of Bion's sonnet to Hesperus. He was wishing vaguely that he had had the gift of poetical expression; he knew that he thought as poets think, but nature had denied him the power of giving metrical utterance to them. He would sooner, he believed, on such moonlit nights as these, have been able to express what he felt, to portray what he fancied, than have had all the millions which fate had allotted to him. Even a second-rate poet can have such happiness in the fancies he plays with and the figures in which he shapes them on the empty paper. Othmar, from his earliest boyhood, had been haunted with all those imaginings which make the heaven of those

who can lose themselves in them, and find complete clothing of eloquence for them. But they remained mute within him; they were rather painful than consoling to him; when he recalled passages of Shelley, of Musset, of Heine, of Leopardi, it seemed to him that the tongue in which they spoke was so familiar to him that it should have been his own, and yet he had forgotten it or could not learn it, in some way could never make it his.

'You are a *poète manqué*. What a misfortune!' his wife had said to him very often with good-humoured derision. But he himself knew that if he had had the poet's faculty of rhythmical expression there would have been no force of circumstances which could have killed it in him. Why he loved music with so strong a passion was, that in it all he would fain have said was said for him.

'If I were going home now,' he thought, 'to some dark old garret in some crowded *cité des pauvres*, and yet could write a ballad of the Seine on a summer night, so that all the world should listen——'

It seemed to him that it would be infinitely more like happiness than to lend to kings, and baffle ministers, and strengthen cabinets, and give the sinews of war to nations, as he was able to do in that great white pile over in the town on the right, which was known to all Paris as the Maison d'Othmar. And yet what beautiful poems the world already possessed, and how seldom it cared to think of one of them! [151]

Some bright-eyed scholar, some dreaming maiden, some sighing lover: was not this the sole public of the great singers, whose songs, bound in pomp and pride, lay unopened on the shelves of so many libraries?

'And a second-rate singer,' thought Othmar. 'No, I would never have been that. The world, as it is, is cursed and suffocated with teeming mediocrity. If one cannot do greatly, let one do nothing.'

He turned with a sigh from the spectacle of the cloudless shining skies and of the windless shining waters, and went on his way over the bridge to return to his house in the Faubourg St. Germain. The clocks of Paris were striking the half-hour after twelve.

As he took out his cigar-case and lighted a fusee, a woman, held by the same guard who had lately passed him, was dragged by. She was silent and white with terror, but as she went she put out her hand to him in supplication. It seemed to him that he heard some faint bewildered words of appeal too low to be distinct. He threw his cigar aside, and followed and overtook them in three steps.

'What are you doing?' he asked the guardian of the streets. 'What is she guilty of? Touch her more gently at the least.'

To a man of his habits and temperaments, roughness to any woman seemed a horrible unmanliness and offence. At the sound of his voice the face of the captive was turned to him quickly, and the light of one of the bridge lamps fell full upon it. Her lips parted to speak, but her breathing was fast and oppressed, and her voice failed her. Yet he recognised her in unspeakable amaze.

'Damaris Bérarde!' he exclaimed involuntarily. 'Good heavens! What has happened to you? My poor child——'

'I do not know why the guard has taken me,' she said feebly. She put her hand to her forehead and staggered a little, as if from faintness.

She did not understand why they had arrested her, and of what she was suspected. It was the old story which meets all hapless, lone young creatures who are in the streets after dark. The man had thought that he did his duty; she belonged to a sad sisterhood, and had no legal warrant, so he had believed. To her the charge had been unintelligible; she had only known that they were taking her to the nearest commissary of police, accused of some unknown crime. [152]

'Let her go at once,' said Othmar to the guard. 'I know her: I will be responsible for her. Good God, do you not see that she is ill?'

'If Count Othmar know her——' said the man with a dubious smile, unwillingly taking his hand from his victim. Losing that support she wavered a moment like a young tree that is cut to the root, and then fell in a heap upon the stones of the bridge.

'You have killed her!' said Othmar as he stooped to her. 'A country child in the brutality of Paris!'

'She is not ill: she wants food; that is all,' replied the police officer, assisting him with the respect which he felt for his riches.

'They always fall like stones in that way when they are hungry,' he added. 'I am sorry, sir, but how was I to know? She was a stranger, and she had no permit.'

'Call a *fiacre*,' said Othmar.

Although past midnight, a little crowd had gathered, and was fast assembling with that passion for novelty which is as strong in Paris as it was in Alkibiades' Athens. Most of them knew Othmar by sight.

'To the hospital?' asked the driver of the cab which approached.

'No, to my house,' answered Othmar, 'the Boulevard St. Germain.'

He lifted her in himself, threw his card to the guard, and drove over the bridge with the girl's inanimate form beside him.

The crowd laughed a little, cut some coarse jokes, and dispersed. It was a tame ending to its expectations. It would have preferred an assassination, or at least a suicide. The guard, sullen and aggrieved, carried Othmar's card and his own deposition to the nearest commissary. He knew that he would be censured, but whether for taking her up, or for letting her go, he was not certain.

Meantime, the vehicle rocked and jolted on over the asphalte till it reached the patrician quarter. Damaris remained insensible, but her heart beat, though slowly and faintly.

He looked at her with curiosity and compassion. It was certainly she; the granddaughter of Jean Bérarde, the betrothed of Gros Louis; the same child that he himself had taken over the moonlit sea to her fragrant island. White as she was, and thin, and altered by evident suffering, she was still too young to be much changed. Her features were the same, though they were pallid and drawn, and in place of the brilliant colours born from the sea winds and the southerly suns, they [153] had the dull pallor which comes from want of food and want of air. Her clothes were the same dark serge that she had worn at Bonaventure, but they were discoloured and ragged. Her hair had lost its lustre, and was rough and tangled; her hands were scarce more than bone; her bosom was scarce more than skin; all the lovely rounded contours and curves of a rich and well-nourished youth were gone. He saw that the guard had been right: she had no doubt fainted from hunger.

But how had she come adrift in Paris? she, the heiress of Bonaventure, so safe and so sheltered under the orange-boughs of her island?

Had that single drop of the wine of 'the world' which his wife had poured into her innocent breast been so developed in remembrance and solitude that its consuming fever had left her no peace until she had plunged into the furnace and sunk beneath its flames? Heavens! how easy it was to influence to evil, how hard to sway to any better thing!

He looked at her with a compassion so tender and solemn that it left no place in him for any other feeling. She had no sex for him; she was only one of the world's innumerable victims, swallowed up in the vast self-made shell which men call a city. To him, always surrounded by every luxury and comfort, there was something frightful in the thought that a young female thing could actually want bread in the very heart of crowded thoroughfares and human multitudes.

'The very wolves are better than men and women,' he thought. 'The wolves at least always suffer together, and make their hunger a bond of closer union.'

He did not touch her; he shrank as far away from her as the space of the hired vehicle allowed him to do. It seemed to him a sort of violation to gaze at her thus in her helplessness, her poverty, her unconsciousness. She was as sacred to him as though she had been dead.

When the cab passed before the great gilded gates of his own residence, and the night porter opened them with wonder, Othmar descended, and paused, hesitating for a moment. He was in doubt what it would be best for her that he should do. Then he lifted her out of the *fiacre* himself, and crossed the court, bearing her in his arms.

'Send for a doctor and awake some of the women,' he said to the concierge as he paused at the foot of the staircase.

The lights were burning low. All such of the household as remained in Paris were in bed or out; the only person up, beside the porter, was his own body-servant, who, hearing his master's step, came down the stairs to meet him. With a few words of explanation to this man Othmar, assisted by him, carried the girl into his own library, and laid her down on one of the broad leather couches. Then he took some cognac from a liqueur-case which was in one of the cabinets, and [154] forced a few drops of it through her teeth.

In a few minutes the head women of the house, hastily roused, had hurried to his summons. He gave them a few directions, and left her to their care.

'When she is sensible, you will tell me,' he said to them, and went into an inner room. He was still pursued by that sense as of doing her some wrong, some dishonour, if he looked long at her in her unconsciousness.

The servants obeyed him without venturing on any question or comment, even among themselves. They were accustomed to strange things which their master did, and knew that human misery was title enough to his pity. When the physician joined them, he said at once what the guard of the streets had said: she was senseless from want of food.

'By my examination of her' he added to Othmar, 'I am inclined to believe that no food has entered her body for twenty-four hours or more.'

'Good God! How hideous!' said Othmar.

It seemed to him as if it were some crime of his own. Not a crust of bread in all Paris to nourish this child? In Paris, where epicures spent a thousand francs on a single dish of Chinese soup, or Russian fish, or honey-fed Sicilian ortolans!

The sharp contrast of wealth and of want jarred on him with a dissonant harsh clangour. A child could die from want of a mouthful of food in a city teeming with human life—and Christianity had been the professed creed of Europe well-nigh two thousand years!

'It is hideous!' he repeated; while a profound emotion consumed him and oppressed his utterance.

The physician looked at him in surprise at his agitation.

'You know her?' he asked.

Othmar hesitated; then he told the little that he did know.

'A year and a half ago,' he added, 'she was the boldest, brightest, happiest of young girls; the only heiress of a rich old man.'

'Many things may happen in a year and a half,' said the physician. 'Were I you, I would send her now to the Ladies of Calvary; their refuge is open day and night to any such case as hers.'

'So is my house,' said Othmar coldly. Turn her out at such an hour as this! He would not have turned out a dog that had trusted and followed him.

'He is always eccentric,' thought the man of medicine, 'and I dare say he goes for something in her misfortunes; he is confused and agitated.'

Aloud he said that he placed himself wholly at the disposition of Count Othmar. There was no immediate danger for the young girl; she had recovered consciousness in a measure, but she was [155] dull and not clear of mind. He feared that, later on, fever or lung disease might be developed. He spoke long and learnedly with many scientific terms; his auditor heard him impatiently.

'Shall I see her?' he asked.

The other answered that this could be as he pleased.

Othmar hesitated a little while, then re-entered his library.

The electric light which illumined it bathed in its effulgence the poor dusky ill-clad form of Damaris, where it was stretched on the couch almost under the great statue of Andromache, sculptured by Mercier. Her clothes were rough, even ragged; her feet were clad in coarsest stockings of hemp; her whole figure was expressive of extreme poverty, that ugly and cruel thing which would blanch the cheeks of Aphrodite or Helen; and yet on her face, as the light fell on her where her head rested on the purple leather of the cushions, there was a great loveliness, though wan and dulled and fevered. The features had a sculpture-like repose, and the tumbled hair, though lustreless, was rich and of fine colour; her eyelids were closed; her mouth was half open, as if with pain or thirst.

Hung by a little piece of shabby ribbon from her throat he saw a small gold object. He was touched to the heart when he recognised in it the little maritime compass which he had begged her to keep in memory of their moonlit sail together.

She had nearly lost her life from hunger, yet she had not sold this little jewel! Why? Because she had always regarded it as his, or because the memory of that moonlit voyage in the open boat was pleasant to her. A flush of feeling passed over his face as he thought so; and remembered his wife. What two romantic simpletons both he and this poor child would seem to her, could she know the fidelity with which the little gift had been kept, and the emotion with which he regarded it!

'*Une sensitive*, indeed!' he thought with emotion, recalling that epithet which his wife had contemptuously bestowed on her. A soul how little fitted for the rude realities and cruel egotisms of the world!

As he drew near, her eyes slowly opened and looked at him with a dreamy, heavy, half-conscious look.

'Do you know me?' he said gently.

She made a sign of assent.

Othmar took one of her hands in his. A great emotion stirred in him; he had always the vision of the child beside whom he had sailed across the moonlit sea, with the sweet fragrance of the orange-groves coming to them through the shadows and the stillness of the night.

'Lie still and rest, my dear,' he said to her. 'You are safe, and I am your friend. Can you [156] understand me? Good-night. To-morrow we will talk together.'

She looked at him with comprehension and with gratitude; two large tears gathered in her eyes and fell slowly down her cheeks. She had no power to speak.

When the morrow came she was lying insensible on a bed in one of the largest chambers of the house, a room of which the window's looked out upon the green sward and tall fountains and stately trees of the gardens, and where scarcely any sound from the streets around could penetrate. Exposure and hunger had brought on pleurisy; Sisters of Charity had been sent for to attend her, and all the resources of modern science were called to her assistance. Had she been a young sovereign of a great country she could not have been better ministered to or more carefully assisted through the darkness and peril of sickness.

'Spare nothing,' said Othmar to his physicians, careless of what evil construction might be placed upon his generosity.

He was obeyed with that complete and eager obedience which is one of the treasures rich men can command, and which may somewhat atone to them for the subserviency and fulsomeness of mankind.

CHAPTER XXI.

Othmar went from her chamber to that of his uncle, lying dumb, unconscious, almost inanimate in his little hotel in the Rue de Traktir, all the innumerable wires which connected that little house with the Bourses of many nations only serving now to bear north, south, east, west, the words so momentous to the ear of financial Europe:

'*Le Baron Friedrich se meurt.*'

Many there were who trembled at these few words; more who rejoiced to know that the keen eyes were closed, the subtle brain paralysed, the powerful mind swamped in a flood of darkness. He had millions of enemies, thousands of sycophants, few friends; crowds came about his door to know how near he was to death, but it was of the share list and the money market that they thought: how would his loss affect this scheme, those actions, these banks, that syndicate?

'Heaven and earth!' thought his nephew, 'all this excitement, this outcry, this anxiety, and amongst it all not one single honest thought of regret for the *man* who lies dying!'

If in love we only give what we possess and can do no more, so in life we receive that which we desire. Friedrich Othmar had wished for success, for power, for the means to paralyse nations, [157] inspire wars, control governments, purchase and influence humanity. He had had his wish; but now that he lay dying these thing left him poor.

Men who had eaten his admirable dinners through a score of seasons, said in their clubs: '*Le vieux farceur! est-ce vrai qu'il crève?*' and women who had fitted up their costly villas and adorned their worthless persons at his cost hurried to his rooms and took away these jewels, those enamels, that aquarelle, this medallion, whatever they could lay their hands on, screaming '*C'est à moi! c'est à moi! c'est à moi!*'

Othmar when he had arrived there, on the first intelligence of his uncle's attack of hemiplegia, had found the house already sacked as though an invading army had passed through the apartments; '*ces dames ont pincé par ci et par là*,' said the servants, not confessing their own collusion, with apology. Hardly anything of value that was portable had been left in it; they had all robbed this poor, senseless, fallen monarch as they would.

Othmar was filled with an invincible melancholy as he stood beside the bedside of this man, whose vast intellect had been suddenly beaten down into nothingness as a bull is brained by the slaughterer. There had been no great affection between them; their views had been too opposed, their characters too utterly different for sympathy, or even for much mutual comprehension, but he had always done full justice to the unerring intelligence, the stubborn courage, and the devoted loyalty to the interests of his house, which were so conspicuous in Friedrich Othmar, and he knew that his loss would leave a place in his own life, public and private, which would never be filled up again. No one not bound to him by ties of blood and of family honour would ever care for his interests, work for his welfare, guard his repute, and consolidate his fortunes as Friedrich Othmar had done from the days of his boyhood. They had often been sharply opposed in opinion and in action, and more than once the elder man had learned that the younger man deemed him well-nigh a knave, whilst the elder held the younger in complete derision as a dreaming fool. But despite all this there had been that bond between them of community of interest and kinship of descent which no hireling service and no friendship of aliens could ever replace.

Othmar knew that, this man dead, he himself would stand utterly alone in many ways and in many difficulties with which no other would ever have power or title to advise or to assist him. There were engagements, obligations, secret treaties, and concealed alliances in his house of which he would bear the burden alone, Friedrich Othmar being once gathered to his fathers. And, selfishness apart, there was a keen pang to him in the sight of his old friend lying prone like any fallen tree, in the knowledge that the quick wit would never more play about those silent lips, [158] and the clear flame of reason and of scorn would never more flash from those closed eyes.

He was dying: soon he would be dead: and Friedrich Othmar was one of those who make the dream of immortality seem as grotesque as the child's hope to meet her doll in heaven. Who could think of him without his slow, satiric smile, his fine intricate speculations, his genius at whist, his perfect burgundies, his firm white hand which, touching a button in the wall, could speed an assent or a refusal which served to convulse Europe?

'Immortal?—what *ennui*!' he would have said, with his most good-humoured contempt for the dull and grotesque shapes in which human illusions, ideas, hopes, and creeds have so oddly shaped themselves.

'You will find everything in order,' he had said more than once to Othmar. 'I shall die suddenly one day, in all probability. I leave everything in perfect order every day. You will only have to wind up the watch after I am gone. But will you take the trouble to wind it?'

That was his doubt, the doubt which had tormented him in many an hour.

Othmar now, leaving the warm golden light of the streets and the summer air, sweet-scented even in Paris from passing over the hay-fields and the flower gardens of the country round, and the blossoms of the limes upon the boulevards, entered the hushed, close, darkened room with a sense of coming loss and of impending calamity. There was no sound but of the heavy, laboured breathing of the dying man.

'There is no change?' he asked of the attendants, but he knew their answer beforehand; there could be no change but one—the last.

Life mechanical, painful, sustained and prolonged by artificial means, was there still, but all else was over—over the manifold combinations, the daring projects, the cool unerring ambitions, the pitiless study and usage of men, the traffic in war and want, the wisdom which knew when to stoop and when to command, the skill which could gather and hold so safely all the cross threads of a million intrigues, the intellect which found its fullest pleasure in the problems of finance and the great needs of nations. All these were over, and the quick, cautious, wise and well-stored brain was shattered and ruined like a mere piece of clock-work that a child stamps in pieces with an angry foot.

Of course he had long known that what had come now might come any day; that at the age of his uncle the marvel was rather his perfect health, his clear brain, his strong volition, than any mortal stroke which might befall him.

[159] The afternoon was growing to a close; without, there were the sounds of traffic and of pleasure; through the closed venetian blinds the air came into the room, which was hot, dark, filled with the soporific odours of stimulants and medicines. Great physicians waited by the death-bed, though they could do nothing to avert the sure coming of death. Othmar sat there and watched with them. Now and then someone spoke in a whisper, that was all. The end was near at hand. The sun sank and the evening came. There was always the same slow, stertorous breathing so painful on the ear of the listener, so expressive of effort and of suffering still existent in that inert unconscious mass which lay motionless upon the bed.

As the hours passed on, Othmar went downstairs and broke a little bread, took a little wine, then returned to the chamber of death and waited there. They told him that as the night wore away the last struggle must come. Death loves the hour before dawn.

Many thoughts came to the watcher as he sat there; they were melancholy and tired thoughts. Life seemed to him, as to Heine, like a child lost in the dark. What was the use of all the energy and effort, all the desire and regret, all the grief and hope, all the knowledge and ambition? The issue of them all at their best was a few years of success and of renown, then a brain which refused to do its work any more, a body which was but as the carcass of a slaughtered beast.

The hours stole on, the strokes of the clocks echoed through the silent house, the wheels of the passing carriages made low and muffled sounds upon the tan laid down on the street beneath in needless precaution for ears deaf for ever, for a brain for ever numb and senseless. The evening became night and night brightened towards morning; a little bird sang at the closed shutter. Othmar rose and opened one of the windows and looked out; it was daybreak. There was a soft mist over the masses of verdure of the Bois, and in the sky a pale, dim light.

'Shall I die like this?' he thought; 'and will my son sorrow no more for me than I sorrow now?—who can tell?'

He stood gazing out at the shadowy houses and the dim outlines of the avenues. When he turned back from the window he saw that the hand of the dying man feebly beckoned him. In the supreme moment of severance from earth, the stunned mind recovered one momentary gleam of consciousness, the mute lips one momentary spasm of thickened, struggling speech; once more and once more only the tongue obeyed the order of its master—the brain.

Friedrich Othmar looked at him with eyes that for an instant saw.

'Do not make that loan—do not make that loan,' he said with his paralysed lips. 'Wait—wait; there will be war.'

His master passion ruled him in his death.

[160] Then he made a movement of his right hand as though he wrote his signature to some deed.

'The house—the house—tell them the house will not——' he muttered thickly, then a spasm choked his voice, the agony began; in less than an hour he was dead.

'God save me from such a death as this!' thought Othmar as the full day broke. 'Rather let me die a beggar in the high road, but with some love about me, some hope within my heart!'

And the mouth of the dead man seemed to smile, as though the dead brain knew his thoughts, as though the dead lips said to him:

'Oh, dreamer!—Oh, fool!'

CHAPTER XXII.

The death of Friedrich Othmar brought increased occupation and cares upon him, and the first few days after the obsequies were too full for him to give more than a passing thought once or twice in twenty-four hours to the sick girl lying under his roof. He asked each day after her health, and they each day answered him that the progress made in it was now all that could be wished; youth and strength had reasserted their rights. He was importuned by a thousand claimants on his uncle's properties, fatigued by a thousand attempts at imposition and extortion; all the wearisome details which harass the living and add a millionfold to the horrors of every death, encompassed him all day long.

All that the old man had possessed he had bequeathed unconditionally to his nephew, and there were many companions of his late pleasures who clamoured incessantly to his heir for recognition of their unlawful demands. All these matters detained him in Paris until midsummer had waned, and a weary sense of irreparable loss and of harassed irritation was with him, through all these long summer days, which found him for the first time in his life in the stone walls of a city when fruits were ripe and roses were blooming in shady, fragrant, country places.

The whole temperament of Othmar was one to which business was antagonistic and oppressive in the greatest degree; nature had made him a student and a dreamer, and all the dull, fretting cares which accompany the administration of all great fortunes and houses of finance were to him the most irksome and distasteful of all bondage. But they were fastened in their golden fetters on his life as the burden of the ivory and silver howdah lies heavy as lead upon the back of an elephant in a state procession. And now there was no longer beside him the astute wisdom, the ready invention, the untiring capacity of Friedrich Othmar, to take off his shoulders this mass of affairs, of projects, of public demands, of state necessities supplied or denied, of all the throngs of supplicants, of sycophants, of enemies or of allies, who day after day besieged the Maison d'Othmar. [161]

In these hot summer days in Paris, in the empty chambers of his uncle's house, all the old weariness and disgust at fate came back upon him. He would willingly have cast aside all the power which men envied him, to be free to spend his time as he would, and shut the door of his room on these buyers and sellers of gold, these traffickers in war and want, these speculators in the folly or greed of mankind who call themselves the princes of finance.

'Les délicats ne sont pas vêtus pour le voyage de la vie; ils n'ont pas la botte grossière qui résiste aux cailloux et ne craint pas la fange.'

Othmar was a *délicat*, and most of the ambitions and all the prizes of life seemed to him supremely vulgar. It was a temperament which shut him out from the sympathies of men and made him appear eccentric, when he was only made of finer and more sensitive moral and mental fibre than were those around him.

Meanwhile the child he had rescued was passing through the weary stages of pleuro-pneumonia, succoured by all that science and care could do for her, and slowly recovered to find herself with amaze lying on a soft bed, a canopy of pale-blue silk above her, and around her white panelled walls painted with groups of field-flowers, whilst from a wide bay window there came, tempered by pale-blue blinds, the ardent sunbeams and the hot air of July. It was only one of the many bed-chambers of the Hôtel d'Othmar, but to her in her first moments of convalescence, as the fragrance from the garden below came through the room, and the distant music of some passing regiment was wafted on the warm south wind, it seemed a very part of paradise itself.

She did not remember very much; her mind was hazy and indolent through great weakness, but she remembered that she had seen Othmar. She knew that he had said to her, 'I am your friend.' Her attendants, the nuns, were astonished and annoyed that she asked them no questions; her taciturnity was irritating to their own loquacity and inquisitiveness. But she was silent from neither shame nor obstinacy; she was silent because she was utterly bewildered, and shrank willingly into the shelter of this knowledge of her safety under his roof, as a hunted hare shrinks under fern and bough. She never saw him after that first night in his library; but she heard his name often spoken, and she understood that every good thing came to her from him.

[162] The fresh flowers in the china bowls, the books when she was well enough to read, the volumes of drawings and engravings which amused her feeble tired mind, the grapes, and the nectarines, and the pines, piled in pyramids of beautiful colour on their porcelain dishes—all these things came, no doubt, from him; indeed, whenever she asked any questions, she was always answered by his name.

A great unconquerable lassitude and melancholy lay upon her; yet, under it, she was soothed and lulled by the sense of this invisible but absolute protection. It was as a shield between her and the misery which she had undergone; it filled her with a vague, grateful sense of safety and of sympathy. As far as she could be sensible of much in the feebleness of illness, she was dully conscious that Othmar had stood between her and some crowning wretchedness, some unutterable horror.

He never asked to see her.

It seemed to him that to thrust himself upon her would be brutally to recall and emphasise the fact of all she owed to him: it would seem to cry out to her her own helplessness and his services. Extreme and even exaggerated delicacy had always marked the charities he had shown to those he befriended; and in this instance it seemed to him that only entire effacement of himself could

make endurable to her her sojourn under his roof. To reconcile her to it at all appeared to him almost impossible. As far as he could learn she was quite friendless and alone: what would he be able to do for her in the present and in the future?

He was more anxious than he knew to hear her story from her own lips, but he would not have any request to her made to receive him. A guest in his own house, above all when she was poor and homeless, must send for him as a queen would send before he could enter her chamber. It was one of those exaggerations of delicate sentiment which had always made him at once so absurd and so incomprehensible to Friedrich Othmar, and to mankind in general. For the majority of the world does not err on the side of delicacy, and is colour-blind before the more subtle shades of feeling.

During these later weeks, which were filled for him with dull and distasteful cares, Damaris was recovering more fully and more rapidly health and strength than she had done at first in the atmosphere of luxury and service by which she was surrounded; it was the first illness that she had ever known, and she could not understand her own weakness, the languor which lay so heavily on her, the sense of dreaming instead of living which the lassitude and beatitude of convalescence brought to her.

She had grown; she had lost all the warm sea bloom upon her face and arms; she was very thin, and her eyes looked too large for her other features: but she was nearly well again, and only a [163] little pain in her breathing, a sense of feebleness in her limbs, remained from the dangerous malady which had threatened to cut her life short in its earliest blossom. When she could think coherently, and understand clearly, her shame at the beggar's position to which she had sunk was shared and outweighed by her passionate gratitude to her deliverer. The figure of Othmar was always before her eyes, god-like, angel-like, stooping to deliver her from the mire and horror of the streets of Paris.

'Could I see him?' she said at last to her attendants; the question had been upon her lips many days, but she had not had courage to put it into words. They promised her to tell him that she wished it, and they did so.

'I will see her, certainly, in the forenoon to-morrow,' said Othmar, moved by the request to a sudden sense of the strangeness and responsibility of his own position towards her. What would Nadège see in it? Something supremely ridiculous, no doubt. Something of the 'lac et nacelle' school worthy of the romanticists of the year '30?

As yet he had not even informed her of the bare fact that this child of the island was in his house in Paris.

He looked often at the portrait by Loswa of the child with the red fishing-cap on her auburn curls, and he always heard the mocking of his wife's voice saying with her careless amused raillery: '*Si vous en devenez amoureux?*'

And each time that he was about to tell her as he wrote to her that the girl for whom she had predicted the destiny of Aimée Desclée was lying mortally sick and apparently wholly friendless beneath his roof, the recollection of that raillery made him unwilling to provoke it anew. She might share his compassion and appreciate his motives: it was possible that she might do so if —*if!*——the narrative reached her in one of what she called her *bons moments*. He knew that there were emotions both of generosity and of pity in her nature, but he knew also that they were fitful and uncertain in their action. He had never known her stirred twice to interest in the same object; her caprices were, as she had said, like a convolvulus flower, and only blossomed for a day; when a thing or a person had ceased to interest her, sooner could a mummy have been awaked to consciousness under its swathings of linen than her attention be recalled and attracted to it any more.

'*Quand l'amour est mort, il est bien mort,*' says a cruel truism; and as it is with love so was it with her fancies and enthusiasms. Once dead and forgotten there was no resurrection for them.

He knew that with her everything depended on her mood. A great tragedy or a great heroism would seem to her admirable or absurd, precisely according to the humour of the hour; a pathetic [164] history or a terrible calamity would find her disposed either to turn it into ridicule, or receive it with sympathy, merely as her day had been agreeable or tiresome, as her companions had interested or wearied her, as her toilette had pleased or displeased her.

'My dear Otho,' she had said once to him, when he had ventured on some courteously-worded reproof of this extreme uncertainty of her temperament, 'if I did not get a little variety out of my own sensations, I should never find any at all anywhere. I cannot be like the editor of a newspaper, who, whatever may happen, always has his joy or his woe already in stereotype and large capitals. If one gets up in the morning to find a grey sky when one wants a blue one, to find a dull post-bag instead of an amusing one, to be disappointed in the effect of a costume, to be prevented from riding by getting a chill, what can one care if all Europe were in flames? Whereas, if everything is pleasant when one wakes, one remains quite amiable enough all the morning to be sorry even for Gavroche and Cossette in the street! Caprice? No, it is not precisely caprice. It is rather something in one's temperament which is acted on by one's surroundings, as the barometer is by the weather. If I have ever done any very generous or great things, as you are flattering enough to tell me that I have, it must have been at some exceptional moment when Worth had especially pleased me. All the finer inspirations of women come from satisfaction with themselves or their gowns!'

At the present moment she was carrying her graceful person and her unchangeable *ennui* to the

various great houses which she deigned to honour; imperial hunting châlets, royal riverain castles, noble summer palaces set on mountain side, in forest shadows, or on broad historic streams. She did not deem it necessary to go into retreat because her old enemy was dead. She telegraphed her condolence to Othmar, and thought that enough; she had some exquisite costumes made *en demi-deuil*, wore no jewels except pearls, and had no bouquets save white ones. So much was concession enough to the usages of the world at such moments; Friedrich Othmar himself would not have expected more.

Yet a vague regret, which was sincere, had touched her on receiving the telegram which announced his death. She had respected his intellect and his wit; she had even rather liked him for his stubborn and uncompromising hatred of herself.

When the world was so flat and so tame, and human nature so monotonous, anyone with character enough to hate unchangeably was to her interesting.

And her own intelligence had enabled her to measure and appreciate all the worth of his counsels and of his presence in the Maison d'Othmar. She had an idea that her husband, now that he would be uncontrolled, would drive the chariot of his fortunes in some such disastrous manner as Phaeton, only not from Phaeton's ambition, but from contempt and discontent. 'Only there is the child, happily there is the child,' she thought; a little fair-haired, happy boy then playing on the sands of the northern seas, scarcely more than a baby; but, possibly, link enough with the future of the world to make a sentimentalist like his father refrain from ruining his heritage. '*A quelque chose faiblesse est bonne*,' she reflected with a compassionate smile. [165]

She was at that time at Tsarkoë Selo.

She did not love the Imperial Court, nor did the Imperial Court love her; but they made *bonne mine* to one another for many potent reasons, and as matter of wise diplomacy on both sides. She was a woman whom even sovereigns cared not to offend, for her delicate and merciless raillery could pierce through robes of ermine and cuirass of gold, whilst she could sway her husband as she chose in any question of politics or public life. On her side she, for the sake of Napraxine's sons, desired always to retain her influence with and to remain a *persona grata* to the rulers of her country. She was not given to moods of remorse or of penitence, but sometimes her conscience smote her for her treatment throughout their life together of Platon Napraxine, and as a kind of atonement to him she studied the social advantages and future welfare of his children with a care which was perhaps of more real use to them than the effusions of maternal sentiment would ever have been. She disliked their personal presence at all times, but she never neglected their material interests.

There was something also in Russia which pleased her temperament, something which no other land could quite afford her. The vassalage and submission of the people gave her a sense of absolute dominion, more entire than any she could feel elsewhere. The intense and sharp contrasts of life which were there, the supreme culture beside the dense ignorance, the hothouse beside the isba, the orchid beside the icicle, stimulated her surfeited taste and moved her languid imagination. Though belief was not her weakness usually, yet she believed in the future of Russia. She would have liked to be herself upon the throne of Catherine, and to stretch her sceptre till it touched the Indian Ocean and the Yellow Sea.

She did not offer to return to him when Othmar notified the death of his uncle, and his own detention by various affairs in Paris. She wrote to him to join her wherever she might be whenever he should have leisure, and did not display any impatience that this should be soon. She liked his companionship—when he did not weary her by any 'madrigals,' or irritate her by any sentimental enthusiasms with which she could feel no agreement. She was never disposed to wish him away when he was beside her, or failed to admit that the resources of his intellect, and the sympathetic quality of his character, made him always agreeable. But as she had said to him, with her usual candour, she knew all about him; his character was a volume she had read through, he had ceased to possess that charm of novelty which goes for so much in the power which one life possesses to interest another; he would never again make her pulse beat a throb the quicker, if indeed he had ever done so. She bore his absence with an equanimity so philosophic that to him it appeared indistinguishable from indifference. [166]

More than once when he was on the point of taking up his pen and writing to her of the circumstances which had brought her future Desclée beneath his roof, he was stopped by the sheer nervous apprehension of ridicule which paralyses delicate minds, and that sense that his communication would be supremely uninteresting to her, which is sufficient to make a proud and sensitive temperament refrain from any confidence. She would inevitably laugh at him as a Bayard of the boulevards, as a Sir Galahad of the asphalte, even if she took the trouble to read the narrative to its end—which was most doubtful. He decided to wait to tell it to her till he saw her: till he found her some day in a gentle and sympathetic mood. Besides, with whatever indifference and raillery she might view it, his knowledge of women told him that, nevertheless, his protection of Damaris Bérarde might not seem to her the mere inevitable and innocent thing that it really was.

At all times he wrote but rarely to her. He had too often seen her throw aside hastily, or only half read, perhaps not read at all, the letters of the cleverest and most preferred of her friends, for him to believe that his own letters would be likely to be rewarded with much closer attention. The delighted welcome which a woman gives to the writing of one she cares for, the eagerness and frequency with which it is studied and searched for all its expressions of tenderness, and all its more hidden meaning, was altogether impossible to the Lady of Amyôt. Spoken love interested her so slightly that written love could not possibly hope to charm her. People were tiresome

enough in speech; what could be expected of them when they wrote? He would have read anything she might have written with keenest interest, with warmest reception, but he did not dare to suppose that she would have much patience if he wearied her on paper. When they were apart, therefore, they telegraphed often to one another, but they wrote to each other seldom. Telegrams were to her agreeable, because they were as little of an *ennui* as any communication can possibly be.

In an early time Othmar, absent from her, had been given to pour out his feelings in ardent expression, and even offer her those delicate flowers of sentiment which always dwell shyly hidden in every deep and affectionate temperament. But one day she had written back to him a cruel little word. She had said: 'You are Obermann and Amiel; do you really think life is either long enough or interesting enough to be worth so very much sentimental speculation?' [167]

It was only her irresistible and incurable poco-curantism which dictated the lines, but they mortified and chilled him. He dreaded, with something that was actually apprehension, her ridicule or her irony. He knew well that to weary her was to lose her favour. From that day he had never written to her a syllable of the feelings and reflections of his inmost thoughts.

'She has never really loved me,' he had said to himself bitterly, of the woman on whom he had spent the great passion of his life.

Therefore it became easy to him to say nothing of the presence of Damaris in his house in Paris.

'I shall tell her when I meet her, and she will not even listen to it, most probably,' he said to himself. It would entirely depend upon the mood in which he might find her, whether the part which he had himself played would seem to her utterly absurd or partly worthy of sympathy.

'If only Melville were in Europe!' he thought very often. But Melville was in China, using his persuasive eloquence and Churchman's tact to obtain Celestial concessions and protection to the Jesuit missions in the Flowery Land. Melville had written to him: 'I walk amongst the ruined palaces and desolated gardens which the Allies defiled in 1860, and endeavour to believe that it is we who are the civilised and the Chinese who are the barbaric people, but I fail. Shall we ever be apostles of light whilst our coming is proclaimed with musketry, and our path strewn before us with charred ruins? It was a strange way of teaching enlightenment to destroy in a day treasures of beauty and of art which all the world together could not reproduce again.'

Melville was taking his scholarly thought and his courtly smile through the flowering ways and over the marble bridges of the Summer Palace, believing, if he thought of her at all, that the child he had baptized and taught was safe in her island home amongst the flowering orange-trees, steering through the blue water at her will, and going in peace and quietude to the churches on the shore.

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[168]

CHAPTER XXIII.

In the morning he was detained by many matters of importance, and it was towards evening when he at length found leisure to visit his guest. He felt a certain hesitation and delicacy in entering her presence. He was conscious that he had done so much for her that, on her side, she could not meet him without some embarrassment, some pain.

He had seen her but twice; he was no more to her than a name. Yet he had known her in her island life: he thought that tie of memory would make him seem to her less of a stranger than any of these white-coifed pious women who changed places in vigil at her bedside. And a wonder which was warmer and wider than mere curiosity made him anxious to learn how she could have become alone and adrift in Paris, she whose life had been so safe and so sweet and so simple in the midst of the blue water and the flashing sunbeams, and free from spot or stain as the white narcissus growing in the orchard grass, as the white wings of the pigeons cleaving the azure air.

When he entered her chamber she was lying on a couch beside the open window; one of the Sisters was sitting near her doing some needlework. She flushed over all her face as she saw him, and she put out her hand timidly. Othmar bent over it and touched it with his lips in silence. Emotion held them both mute. The nun looked inquisitively at them.

Damaris was still weak, and pale, and changed, but there was the look of fast returning health about her. She was thin still, but no longer emaciated; her lips had regained a little of their damask-rose colour, her hair which had been cut short was bright and shining; she wore a loose plain linen gown which the women had made for her, and her arms were bare to the elbow; the afternoon was close and sultry, and she seemed to breathe with effort.

'I am so glad to see you so nearly well, my dear, and my wife will be no less glad to hear of your recovery,' said Othmar, as he recovered his self-possession. It was a subterfuge, in a way an untruth; but he used his wife's name almost involuntarily, as the only possible way of reconciling this child to her presence in his house.

'You have been very good,' said Damaris simply. Her words seemed poor and thankless, but she could think of no better ones. She was still bewildered at her own position, and wounded in her tenderest pride by the charity she had received. She was not ungrateful, but now that she saw him face to face, she would have given her soul that he had let her die on the stones of Paris.

'Where did you find me?' she added, 'I cannot remember—at least not everything.' [169]

'You were taken unwell on the Solferino bridge,' said Othmar evasively. 'Do not think about that. You are safe here, and all my house is at your service; it is yours whilst you are in it, as the Spaniards say.'

He spoke a little hurriedly; he felt the embarrassment which every generous nature feels before one whom it has benefited.

The red blood came quickly and painfully over her face and throat.

'I do remember now,' she said. 'They were going to take me to prison. Can they do that when one has done no harm?'

'The guard thought you looked ill, and were too young to be alone at night,' Othmar answered, evasively still. He wished to learn something of her position, but he would not even hint any question to her. She should say what she chose in her own time and way.

'I do not mind being alone,' she replied, with something of the old pride and independence which Loswa had admired in her. 'I was weak because I had not eaten.'

She stopped abruptly, and grew scarlet.

It seemed very shameful to her to have been without food. She had always despised the poor crawling beggars whom she had seen on the mainland, even whilst she had given them all the loose coin in her pocket. 'Only the lazy and the idle ever starve,' her grandfather had often said to her, in the hardness of heart of a man full of energies and riches; and she had believed him. And now she had starved, she herself, and it seemed to her pitiful, miserable, hateful, a very brand for ever of disgrace.

'Do not think of it,' said Othmar kindly, as he took her hand in his.

'I shall think of it all my life!' she said bitterly, whilst the intensity of the tone told him that it was no mere empty phrase. She turned her face from him and looked steadfastly out into the green spaces and pleasant shadows of the gardens below, whilst her young features grew cold and stern, and full of repressed pain. Then all at once her head drooped on her breast, and she burst into a passion of tears.

'Oh, why did you not let me die!' she cried in reproach to him. 'Why did you not let me die when I was dying? I should have known nothing now!'

'That is thankless and sinful,' muttered the nun. 'Thankless and sinful to heaven and to earth.'

'Hush!' said Othmar to the Sister with a frown; he was troubled and distressed by the child's passionate rebuke. He hated at all times to see the sorrow of a woman, and he was too ignorant of her circumstances to know how to console her. He could not have told why, but a memory of [170] Yseulte passed over his mind; a memory which rarely ever rose at any time before his thoughts. Nothing could be more unlike her than this sea-born, impetuous, daring child; yet he remembered her as he saw Damaris weep. How many tears had the dead girl wept for him! how

often had her young eyes looked wistful and sorrowful out on these green gardens, on these towering trees, on these distant and gilded domes of Paris!

The nun cast angry glances at him, and began to tell her beads.

Othmar remained silent till the first force of grief had a little spent itself. Then he said the first consoling words which occurred to him, without remembering all to which they might commit him in the future.

'My dear child, do not talk of death. Death and youth are horrible in the same phrase. Your life is scarcely begun, why should you wish it away? If you have no other friends than ourselves, do not deem yourself friendless. We will supply the place of others to you. You will remember the interest which my wife took in you at St. Pharamond. Believe me, it will be only strengthened by any sorrow or misfortune you may have had since we saw you then.'

She looked at him, strongly grateful, yet hurt and ashamed.

'It is charity,' she said, in a low tone. All the pride of her indomitable childhood was in the word.

'I do not like the expression,' he replied. 'You will pain me if you use it. I should be a cur if I had not done the little that I have done, for you would certainly,' he added more gaily, 'have done as much for me if I had been wrecked off Bonaventure.'

She sighed wearily. No kindness of speech could reconcile her to the burden of debt which she felt laid on her. She knew she was all alone in the world and homeless, except so far as this stranger's home was momentarily hers, and she shrank with horror from the memory of all she must have owed to him during these weeks of sickness and semi-consciousness.

He saw the pain and humiliation there were in her, and rose to leave her in peace.

'I will return whenever you wish me, my dear,' he said, as he laid his hand on hers. 'For the rest, look on my house as yours.'

She hesitated.

'Wait,' she said faintly, 'I have so much I ought to tell you.'

'You can tell me in your own time. I shall not leave Paris, at least only for a day or so at a time. My uncle died a few weeks ago, and many affairs in consequence keep me here. Adieu, my dear: rest and recover. That is all you have to do now.' [171]

'But I have no right to be in your house, and you know that the lady despised me!' she murmured with a painful agitation, which said, without more words, how cruel a dilemma it seemed to her in which her weakness and her helplessness had placed her.

'You have every right,' said Othmar. 'And she would be the first to say so. Do not hurt me by taking this kindly chance which made us meet as a burden or an injury. I have often thought of you since we parted that night upon your island beach, and always with a deep regret that my wife had so fatally influenced your life. Will you not believe how glad I am to be able to do you any little service to help efface that wrong?'

He kissed in grave farewell her wasted hand, once so plump and brown with youth and health, and the bronze from the sun and the sea, and now so pale and fleshless.

She looked at him and stopped him with something of her old pride and spirit in her face, as she said a little abruptly:

'You remember you told me it would be mean not to tell him where I had been that day?'

'Yes, my poor child. I remember.'

'I did tell him.'

'That was very brave of you and very noble. I fear my advice cost you dear.'

A smile that was almost happy at his praise parted her lips and showed her small white teeth.

'You told me what was right,' she said. 'It would have been cowardly to say nothing.'

'It was very brave to say the truth. You shall tell me all that happened from it on another day. I can never forgive myself for all the misery which my wife's thoughtless invitation has entailed on you. Let me do my best to atone for it.'

Then he bowed low with unfeigned reverence, and left her. What was so worthy of reverence as so much innocence, as so much courage?

She drew a long sigh, and her eyes closed. She was tired with the exhausted sense of failing powers which the feebleness of illness causes after every slight exertion. But his visit had left on her a deep, sweet sense of serenity and safety.

'How good and great he is!' she said dreamily to the nun, as the door closed on him.

The pious woman did not reply. Othmar was not her idea of human excellence. He went to no church, and he supported no religious institutions. Besides, as she thought to herself, who could tell what motives he had in taking this handsome child off the streets? It was not her business to speak; her superiors had sent her there, and had said to her: 'Nurse the girl, and say nothing.' [172] But the Sister had not gone on her many errands of mercy for a score of years in all the quarters of Paris, good and bad, rich and poor, without knowing the meaning of human vices. She began to convey vague warnings, and cite praiseworthy examples of temptation resisted and overcome to her patient. Her voice went on and on unanswered, like the flowing of a slothful brook, and

when at last she looked up from her embroidery, Damaris was asleep upon her couch, the last red reflection from the sun, which had set beyond the trees of the gardens, tinging her face with its warmth, and her hair with its light. For the first time since she had been brought there her expression, as she slept, was one of peace.

But soon she woke again, startled and distressed. The tears sprang to her eyes; she pressed her hands together in passionate agitation.

'I spoke so badly!' she said, in great contrition. 'I said such poor weak words! He will never know all I feel. He will only think me ungrateful!'

'Tut, tut!' said the nun roughly. 'Take your gratitude to God, not man!'

CHAPTER XXIV.

The following day he sent to ask if she would receive him again; it seemed to him that not to do so would be to appear to neglect her. He did not misconstrue her few embarrassed words or deem her thankless; he had that intuition into the minds of others which minds sensitive themselves possess; he understood all the conflicting emotions which had agitated her, all the vast weight of gratitude which held her dumb and made her almost mute, almost awkward in his presence. He paid her a brief visit four or five times in that week, then was absent himself at Amyôt for a few days. On his return he saw her again, and she seemed to have gained greatly in strength. She could sit erect; her face had the hues of returned health, and her eyes met his with the candour and brightness which were natural to her regard. She was a child still, and she had so much trust in him that it supplied to her the place of friends and home.

If the memory of the great lady who had tempted her and ridiculed her, and who was his wife, had not been too constantly before her, she would have been almost happy again. But for her she had a sombre antagonism, a curious sentiment, half defiance, half fear. Othmar never pressed her to tell him more or sooner than she wished of all the circumstances which had led to his discovery of her on the bridge; but one day when he found her nearly well, standing by the open windows with the breeze lifting the short thick waves of her hair, and her eyes looking wistfully across the trees at the domes and roofs of Paris, she turned and caught his hand in hers and laid her lips on it. [173]

'What can I do? How can I thank you? A very dog could do something to show you his gratitude, and I—I can do nothing.'

'You have rewarded me by getting well,' said Othmar kindly and lightly, to avoid the expression of any stronger emotions, 'and you can reward me more greatly if you will tell me everything that has befallen you since I took you home that night. Will you?'

'It will not tire you?'

'It will interest me greatly.'

She sat down, the full afternoon sun falling on her face as it was upraised to him, her hands locked in her lap, her face pensive and grave with many memories.

'When I told him the truth that night,' she began, 'he hurt me a good deal, but more in my heart than in my body. I suppose he did not believe that I had done nothing wrong; anyhow, in going to your house I had disobeyed him. In the morning he took me to the mainland and my clothes with me, and without speaking ever a word, drove me in different vehicles up, up, up into the interior where the hills were, and placed me in a convent of Benedictine nuns up in the mountains above Val de Nieve. There he left me without saying a word to me, though I suppose he explained things to the Sisters. Perhaps he told them I was wicked, for they were very harsh to me, and their discipline was very severe. It was exceedingly cold there after the island, which you know is so warm, and for months there was snow all around, nothing but snow. I felt like a chained dog, and I fretted and raged, and they punished me. It was very miserable. Twice I tried to run away, but they prevented me. Then the better weather came and the very mountains grew green and bore flowers. This gave me a kind of hopefulness, and there were a number of little children in the convent, and I played with them and became less wretched, and I learned many things, for the Sisters were instructed women and taught well, and I had always been fond of books and eager to read them. But how I longed for the sea, and to feel a boat bound under me, and go as I chose it to go! You see I had always been in the open air and on the open sea at my fancy, and that is no doubt why I felt like a chained dog in these stone chambers, with their iron bars and their windows so high that one could only see a hand's-breadth of sky. Why do people live so when there is the air and the earth and the water? I was there half a year, or rather more. Then in the month of October my grandfather came, just before the passes in the mountains were closed with snow, and took me back to Bonaventure.' [174]

Her eyes closed a moment as if to keep in unshed tears. Then she resumed her story.

'He never addressed me except just about things which he could not help, and we crossed the sea and landed at the dear island, and I thought the dogs would have gone mad with joy. Catherine had died whilst I was at the convent, and he had never allowed me to be told. That she should have died in my absence was a great pain to me, because I had known her all my life, and she had been often kind and good though her temper was cross, above all on washing and baking days. But now she was gone, poor soul! Everything else, however, was as I had always known it, and I was so happy to be home I could have kissed all the inanimate things! The goats knew me, too, and one of the hens flew to my shoulder directly. My grandfather let me do whatever I liked all that day, but he never spoke once except to bid me eat and drink. When it was night and I was about to go to bed, for I felt tired, he took me out under the orange-trees; it was a fine night and the air very light and clear, and there was a moon then coming up above the edge of the sea. There he said to me that if I would marry my cousin he would give me the whole island all for my own, and to my cousin the brig and all the money that was saved, and he himself would only keep a room or two and enough for his wants, and my cousin was to take the name of Bérarde. I thanked him, but I said I would not marry my cousin. I might have done if your Lady had never come to me that day, perhaps; I do not know. I said a score of times that I would not; each time I was more resolved than before. Then my grandfather grew like a madman and cursed me horribly, and told me that I had no claim on him; that my father had never married my mother, that the law would allot me nothing. I do not very well understand how, but it seems that I had no

legal right there, and that all he had done for me he had done to please my uncle Jules, the one who died of cholera, who had loved my father and so loved me. Now, perhaps, as all my life had been a burden to him and a debt, I ought to have obeyed him and married Louis Roze. Do you think so?'

'No,' said Othmar, with some vehemence. 'No; such a marriage would have been a blasphemy!'

'I did not stay to think, I did not want to think. I said no—no—no—a thousand times no! And then I thought he would have beaten me as he beat me the night you took me home.'

'Beat you? Good God!'

'He had beaten me before when he was in drink, never at any other time. This night he had not drunk. He was quite sober, but he became mad with rage; it was always so with him at any opposition, and he had thought that I should be dull and tame, having been so long in the convent. But I was not. I told him that I would obey him and work for him as long as he lived, because I owed him everything I had ever owned or enjoyed; that I would be his servant, and till the ground, and sail the boat, and fish in the sea, and cut wood, and do all that Raphael did; but that I would never marry my cousin or anyone else. Never—never. So I told him as we stood under the moon together.' [175]

'But, before we saw you, you were willing to make this marriage?'

Damaris coloured more.

'I had never thought about it before then. My grandfather said it was to be. It was to me as when he said so many thousand oranges were to be packed, or so many barrels of oil sent to the mainland. I never thought about it. But after—after I had seen your wife, and your house, and your friends, then, I do not know why, but everything seemed different.'

If his wife had not gone to the island in that hour of caprice, this child would no doubt have accepted the fate prepared for her, and passed her life as so many other women did, mated to a boor but reconciled by habit to uncongenial companionship, putting aside her dreams with the orange-flowers of her bridal clothes, and learning to think only of the gold pieces in the bank, the yield of the oil-presses, the price of fish and of fruit, the growth of the children that with each year came to birth. Would it not have been better? Common sense and vulgar prudence would say yes, he knew, but in his inmost soul he could not say it. Besides, revolt might have come, disgust, the desire for wider worlds and higher thoughts and warmer passions.

With her luminous eyes and her poet's thoughts she would have never been contented long with the narrow, coarse, dull ways of such a life as would have been hers had she yielded.

'Poor child!' thought Othmar, with a pang of almost personal repentance.

Nadège had done many things which were as so much mere thistle-down on the wind in her own eyes, but which had sown dragon's teeth in the paths of others. But it seemed to him that she had never done a more unkind or a more wanton act than when, on the spur of an idle moment's caprice, she had tempted this innocent Alcina from her happy island of content.

Damaris did not say so, but he himself had haunted her dreams ever since that night's sail over the moonlit sea.

This man, with his gentle courtesies, his low soft voice, his tender care and compassion for her, his high romantic sense of honour which had made him counsel her to tell the truth, cost what it would, seemed to her a being of another world than that to which her grandfather and her affianced lord belonged. [176]

She had thought of little else but Othmar ever since he had left her on that shore in the soft-tinted shadow, where the light of daybreak crossed the last rays of the moon. It was not love which she felt; he was too far away from her, too impersonal, too great for her to think of him with any personal thoughts; but it was an idealised admiration, a keenly grateful remembrance, a vague, unconscious sympathy, which had filled her mind with his image in the many lonely hours she had passed since that night, and the remembrance of him had made her shrink from the possible contact, from the mere thought of her cousin, with a disgust and a revolt which had made her as unmoved as the rocks of her island itself, before the rage of her tyrant and the threats of his blind passion.

A thousand times better death, she had said to herself—death under the blue waters on the deep sea bottom of her native gulf; death and peace and silence amongst the broad green weed and the jewelled fishes and the white coral branches which she had seen so often, fathoms down below her, as she had leaned over the boat's side and gazed through the pellucid water clear as a mirror to her eyes.

Startled, she was recalled to the present by the voice of Othmar, as he asked her to continue her narrative.

'I thought I was on the island!' she said with a sigh.

'Would you like to go back there?' he asked. A vague, wild fancy came to him of buying back her lost paradise for her at any cost. She hesitated.

'It would not be the same,' she said at last. 'I should not be the same, you know. But sometimes I want the sea so much! I want the sight of it, the scent of it, the feel of the wind from it blowing on my face! He was very cruel, but, I suppose, he could not help it. He was disappointed in me, and that made him very hard. When he found that he could not force me to marry my cousin he

became quite mad. He took me down to the water, and put me in one of the small boats, and he told me to go, just as I was, with nothing but the clothes I had on and the gold cross Monsignor gave me at my first communion, which I always wore at my throat, and a few trinkets which had belonged to my mother. He ordered me to row away or he would fire upon me.'

'Good God, what a brute!' cried Othmar.

'I am sure he did not intend to really hurt me,' she said earnestly. 'I am sure he only meant to frighten me, and thought I should go back to him and do what he wished me to do. He never [177] supposed, I dare say, that I should take him at his word and go.'

'Few of your age and sex would have had the courage to do so.'

A look of contempt passed over her face.

'I would have given myself to the sharks sooner than return and give in. One must be a very weak creature to be driven like that.'

'Why did you not come to us?'

'I could not have done that.'

'Why? We were absent, but if you had gone to the house there and written to me—or to my wife.'

'No. I could not have done that. When I was there I was a burden to her. Besides, you had no right to do anything for me. You were a stranger.'

'I had the right I have now—that of a friend. You were ill treated in my house, that I know, but it was no fault of mine.'

'It was no one's fault. Only my own, for being foolish enough to go there. But let me tell you the rest as quickly as I can, or you will be tired——'

The colour rose over her face, and her voice grew lower, and her words more rapid as she hastened on the course of her narrative.

'I knew he would do as he said, for he stood above with his musket levelled downward at me. I took up the oars and I rowed away from the island, steering with my foot. I felt quite stunned; I did not think of resisting: when once he said I was nothing to him, and ought not really to bear his name, I did not feel as if I had any business there ever any more. Only I could not understand it, because after all he said that I was his son's child; and I have been all the days of my life on the island, and I thought my heart would break. Well—I got into the boat. It was quite light because the moon was now at the full. The sea was still. I did not feel in any way afraid. Yet I had never felt the sea so solitary as it seemed that night. Far away there were the lights of steamers moving steadily. I could smell the smell from the orange trees for a long, long while, and the last sound I heard from home was the cry of Clovis. He was howling because I was gone——'

Tears choked her voice; but she only paused a moment.

'Of course,' she continued, 'I had never been alone at sea in the night time before. One feels so small, so weak, so very lonely, all by oneself between the water and the sky. I was afraid, but I was not frightened. Do you know what I mean? I mean that I was not a coward, but I felt very near death. The boat was so small, and the sea was so large. It had never seemed so large to me before. Well, I could steer by this compass you gave me, which I had never let anyone see lest [178] they should take it; and the wind was southerly and drove me northward.

'After many hours, and when my arms were very tired, and the day was breaking, I came to the coast.

'I landed at St. Jean; no one saw me land, and I avoided the fisher-people whom I knew there, because I could not bear to tell them how my grandfather had dealt with me. There were a few of them on the beach, getting their cobles ready to go out, but it was only dawn, and I did not let the few there were astir see me. I left the boat tied to some piles and went inland. I have never seen the sea since!——'

There was a great regret and longing in her voice.

'I did not like to stop anywhere on the coast, for there were many people there who knew me; and I was sure they would ask me so many questions. I drank some water at a well; I was not hungry. I dare say you will wonder that I did not feel afraid, but I did not. I went out of the town on the northern road; I wished to get to Grasse and so to Paris.

'I had not gone very far before I met a Brigasque woman mounted on a mule. I knew her as a friend of Catherine's. She was well-to-do, and owned a flower-farm not far from St. Dalmas de Tende; she grew common plants for the perfume distillers of Grasse. She thought I had run away from the island, and I let her think so; and as she hated my grandfather, because he had outbidden her years before at the sale by auction of some acres of land in the Roya valley, she offered me to go home with her and work for her amongst the flowers. As I did not know what to do or where to sleep I accepted her offer, and she hired a mule for me at the next inn we came to, and so I rode with her into the Brigasque country, which I did not know at all, but which I found was very pretty and had more trees in it than usual. I stayed with her all the winter, helping her in what ways that I could.

'I passed the winter there, for I knew I must not go to Paris without some little money at least. One day in the new year there came by a pedlar whom I knew; we had bought little objects of him once or twice, when Catherine and I had been at St. Jean at the same time as he. He recognised me at once and roughly called me a fool, for he said that my grandfather had died of apoplexy

straining at the oil-press one day, in place of a bullock which had dropped at the work. He called me a fool, because he said if I had not run away I should have now inherited the island and all he had, whereas it was now left unconditionally to Louis Roze. I did not tell him that I had not run away.'

'In what little things,' thought Othmar as he listened, 'a high and generous nature shows itself, quite unwitting how it innocently displays its own fine instincts!' [179]

'Did you not tell him of your wrongs then?' he asked aloud.

'Oh no: not when my grandfather was dead and could not defend himself! To me it was the end of all hope. I had hoped that one day I should go home. I had always thought he would relent and seek me out; it made me miserable to think that he should have said such cruel words to me for the last words, and he had certainly been good to me, very good in his way. He could not be very gentle, it was not in him; but he had been generous to me, and sometimes kind and quite proud of me too. I was very sorry, because when a person is dead, you know, one only remembers what was good in them, and one wants so much to say so many, many things to them; but now I knew that this could never be, and I was very wretched. The pedlar had said that everything was given to my cousin, but the people I was with would not believe it. They got a letter written to my cousin, and asked for my share (unknown to me; I would not have let them do it had I known). Louis Roze wrote back to them that I inherited nothing under the will, and had no legal claim to insist on any division of the property; he said he was about to marry a young woman of St. Tropez, and he sent me a bank note for a thousand francs. I sealed it up and sent it back to him. You know he knew that all the island would have been mine. I care nothing for the money, but I love the island; I love every stick and stone upon it, every shell on its sand, every wave that breaks on its rocks!'

'You shall have your island again, if money can buy it!' thought Othmar, with one of those heedless impulses of generosity which had more than once cost him dear.

'I was so unhappy to think my grandfather was dead, and dead with rage in his heart against me, that for weeks I could do nothing,' she pursued, while the tears rolled off her lashes. 'But then I felt that there was no one on earth to do anything for me if I did not do it for myself, and I worked hard to get together money enough to take me to Paris, and keep me there a little while. They all said that life there was very dear, and money ran like water. You see I was always thinking of what your Lady had said, about my having some talent in me. I thought of it all day long as I worked in the rose-fields and among the great thickets of jessamine. Your Lady had said that I might be great some day, and it is always to Paris that people go who wish to be great, at least all the books say so. Watteau went, and Molière, and Rousseau, and Napoleon, and ever so many others——'

'Ah, poison of the world!' thought Othmar. 'What cruelty we did! She would have stayed on her island and been the mother of little brown children, and known nothing of the world but its fresh honest sea and its frank, bold winds! What a pity! What a pity! The rattlesnake is kinder than such dreams of fame!' [180]

He was sorry and troubled, and angered against his wife, who had cast the stone of worldly desire into the limpid, calm waters of this young child's thoughts.

He was unspeakably saddened by the vision of her, coming northward over the sandy roads of Provence, with so much hope and fancy in her heart, only to drop sick with hunger upon the stones of Paris—Paris, so fair a mistress to the rich, so hard a stepmother to the poor. Gilbert, and Hégésippe Moreau, and Meryon, and how many others, had traversed that path before her, only to perish in the hospital or the garret, mad or famished, clutching at the bough of laurel, obtaining only the hemlock of death!

'So I determined to leave St. Dalmas,' she continued, 'and walk all the way to Grasse when the March weather came. On the roads I assure you I did quite well. People were very kind whilst I was in my own country, as it were. At the bastides and the cottages they let me sleep well and gave me food, and let me do work in return. I know how to do many things that are of use on the farms, but of no use at all in Paris. So little by little I did get to Grasse, and there one of the women who knew my Brigasque friends gave me welcome, because some of them had given me a letter to her asking her to be kind. But I shall weary you; I will try to tell the rest shortly. I could have stayed on at Grasse as long as I would, but I wanted to get to Paris; above all, now that my grandfather was dead, there was nothing to keep me in my own country; no one wanted me or sought for me. They had paid me a little for what I did in the Brigasque country, and I saved up all of it, and when I had enough to pay for the railway to take me there (it is very dear indeed), I bade them farewell and took the train to Paris. I had never travelled by land before, only on the dear sea. It is horrible to have all that fire in that great iron pot swinging one to and fro, while it yells and bellows through the heat and the air that is not like air at all but only so much smoke. How Fénelon would have hated it; it would have seemed to him like hell! Why do men travel in such a way when there are the tree-shadowed roads and the rivers? I had taken my passage (do they call it so?) straightway to Paris, and there were many changes and many pauses and great confusion, and the noise and the heat and the strangeness made me feel unwell. I had never felt ill before, that I remember. It was a very great many hours, even days I think, before we reached Paris; it was night, and it was raining; nothing was at all like what I had pictured it. There were crowds and crowds of people, but no one noticed me. I felt lonely, and I missed the sea and the sweet fresh smell that is anywhere where the country is. Here the air felt so thick and so greasy, and the rain had no pleasantness in it; it was not clean and fragrant, as it is when it scours over the fields or patters through the orange-leaves at home. As I came out of the station a young man [181]

looked into my face and was insolent. I struck him a blow on his cheek with all my might; I hurt him; the people wanted to seize me, but I was quicker than they, and I ran, and ran, and ran until I outstripped them, and then I was in a narrow, dark street, and sat down on a doorstep and wondered where I ought to go. I had only three gold pieces with me in a belt round my waist, and I knew they would not last long. I had spent almost as much as that for the train and in food at the places the train waited at; the food was very dear and very bad, even the bread.

'Some women went by and spoke to me, but I did not like their words, and I answered nothing, but got up and looked about me for a place to sleep in. I was wet through, for it rained a great deal. I saw a little place which seemed like a restaurant, and I went in and asked if I could have a room there. They gave me one, a very little one, and not clean, and I went to bed without eating, being afraid to spend the little I had.

'When I got up in the morning and went to pay for my chamber and supper, I found that I had no money at all. My belt was gone. I suppose I had been so sound asleep that I never heard them come into my room and take it. I always think it was the woman of the house who stole it, because I had shown her the napoleons. She raved and abused me when I told her my money had been stolen, and said her house had always been honest. She denied that she had ever seen the belt, and swore that I should pay for all I had or go to prison. I told her that it was she was the thief, not I. I threw her my little gold cross to pay her, and went out of her house into the streets. I think she was a wicked woman.'

'Wicked, indeed,' said Othmar, whilst he thought, 'it is heaven's mercy that she did not do worse to you.'

He, by whom all the hideous vice of the great city was known, all its grasping greed, its hunger for gold, its remorseless seizure of all ignorance, and innocence, and pleasant rural things, and virgin beauty of the body and the mind, knew that by a miracle scarce less than that which in legend bears the royal saint of Alsace unharmed through the flames had this child escaped pollution in the heart of Paris. Corruption had been all around her, and the morass of iniquity upon every side; her own sex were for ever on the watch for such as she, to sell their youth into the slavery of the brothel, and she had known no more the peril which she ran than the wild dove does when its flying shadow passes over the trap hung below it in the oak-boughs.

'I asked in a great many places for such work as I knew how to do, but nobody wanted any of it done. There seemed such numbers of people everywhere clutching at every little bit of work. Many laughed at me: I saw my clothes were different to what they wore in Paris, and my accent was different too to theirs. But they were cruel to laugh. I went to the theatres and tried to see the directors, but no one of them would even see me. All these days I lived on the little money I had gained by selling my great cloak: it was such warm weather I did not want it. I had made acquaintance with a good woman who was very poor herself, but she told me what to do and where to go, and let me sleep in her one little attic; she had three children, quite little ones, and she worked in a match factory. She lives in a little passage up at Montmartre. Of course I had to make her think I ate all I wanted out of doors or she would have robbed herself for me, poor though she was. I had a friend in her, but when I had been with her three weeks, there was a noisy mob which assembled near, and screamed for bread, and broke open the bakers' shops and stole the loaves. She was coming home from the factory, and was arrested as one of the rioters, though I am sure she had been merely passing down the street, and the little children had no one but me for a little while. I did what I could for them until their grandmother came up from some village outside the barrier and took them away, and I missed them very much. [182]

'I would rather not talk about the days that came after that dreadful morning,' she pursued, the wavering colour fading wholly from her face, for the recollection of them was unbearable to her. 'It is only three months ago since I came to Paris, but it seems as if it were years. I saw and heard things that I could never tell anyone, they were so horrible. I sold all I had of clothes, it was very little. I lived as I could, I was very hungry all the time, but I did not mind that so much as I minded the squalor, the noise, the crowds, the filthy smells, the horrible language. I tried to get work, but I could not. I went to the theatre doors, but the porters would not let me in. I did not know what to do; even my linen was sold. I sold even my shoes, and people give you so little when they know that you want much. I could not get any work of any kind. I was of use on my island, but not here; and the men jeered at me and were rude—and—and—there is nothing more to tell that I know. I could make no money at all, and so of late I could get no food, and the night I fell down on the bridge I was faint and very unhappy, for they had turned me out of the woman's room because she did not come back, and I had no money to pay for keeping it. But that is enough about me. I met you on the bridge. You know the rest. I had not eaten anything all the day, I suppose that was why I fainted. I never fainted in my life before. It is only three months since I left Grasse, but it seems so many years—so many years! Is this the world indeed that the Comtesse Othmar spoke of? Surely it cannot be—it is cruel, it is hideous, it is hateful—if I could only see the sea or the country once more! You have been very good to me. I pray you to help me to gain my own living somehow, only not in this city—pray not here! I am stifled in it. I want the air. Pray help me!' [183]

Othmar was silent from emotion. It seemed unutterably cruel to him that this child should have been led into such perils, such pain, such want, by one careless word of his wife's, and he, who all his life long had had about him everything that luxury can invent and comfort demand shuddered at the thought of her suffering and her exposure, as though he had seen his own little daughter naked and shivering in the snows and the winds of a winter's night.

When he left her presence that day he could think of nothing but her piteous story. The heroic

courage of the young girl, the noble qualities she had all unconsciously revealed in the course of its narration, the utter friendlessness of her position, and the fearless frankness of her confidence in himself, all touched his heart closely. It seemed horrible to him that any woman-child should suffer so much and be surrounded with such cruel perils. Those days in Paris had done the work of years upon this innocent creature, who had before only known the freshness of sea and shore, the safety of a sheltered youth, the dauntless gaiety of a buoyant and unchecked spirit; but he saw that all through it, through all its miseries and all its temptations, she had kept her soul unhurt. He dared not ask her how she had done so, but he knew that she had defended herself safely from all foul contact, and again it seemed to him a miracle great as that which guides the swallow over desert and ocean back to its last year's nest.

CHAPTER XXV.

Othmar was naturally of a tender and even enthusiastic nature. His sympathies were warm and spontaneous, his imagination was strong and governed his reason very often. There was much in the circumstances of this poor child which appealed both to tenderness and imagination, and he was haunted by her swift mellow voice, with its meridional intonations, her great dark luminous eyes filling with sudden tears as she remembered her island home.

He felt that they owed her a debt. They had robbed her of her birthright of simple joys and honest, obscure, healthful ways of life. They could never again make her what they had found her. Who can put back the gathered rosebud on the rose-bough? [184]

They had a right to give her what they could give in lieu of all which she had lost, indirectly but indisputably, through their means. His conscience, as well as his common sense, told him that as his wife had been the chief offender against the child's peace, so she had the first right to know the results of her interference, and amend them. But he had the moral timidity of proud, reticent, and sensitive natures: he dreaded her irony and her indifference. He could not tell what she would say or do; possibly in the end something which he would approve; but he knew that first of all she would ridicule him: with her lips certainly, very likely even in her thoughts. Even when he had been her lover she had always laughed at him for taking life so seriously, for being Ruy Blas and Rolla rather than Sir Harry Wildair. And even if she were moved to any kindness, how likely would her languid, haughty footsteps tread hurtfully, without knowing or heeding it, on the storm-tossed wild flower? She could be exquisitely kind, magnificently generous; none more so: but was it not, alas! only while her mood to be so lasted?

'I will tell her—later,' he said, with that temporising before difficulty which many a man, bold and even rash in his dealings with his fellow-men, is apt to adopt when he deals with women.

Meanwhile, something had to be done at once, he knew, to reconcile Damaris to her dependence upon himself. He knew she was of the temper which would break loose from the safest shelter and rush to the direst danger if she deemed herself humiliated by assistance. In all her grace of youth and helplessness of circumstance, there was still something warm, strong, untameable in her, which he felt as the hand which holds a bird will feel its wings stir and tremble ready to fly. It would, he knew, be hard to aid her. It would have to be done in her own despite.

A thought occurred to him; one of those spontaneous ideas which come to us like very angels, and which, in after years, seem rather born of hell than heaven. On it he spoke to her the next day.

'Tell me, my dear—your grandfather died after you had left the island some months? Well, did you never hear any details of his death or of his will? You know only what the pedlar said?'

'Only that.'

'Then I think you should know more. He may have repented him of his cruelty, or he may have made some sort of bequest to you, even if the bulk of what he had has gone to your cousin. My people there could soon inquire. Will you allow me to do that?' [185]

'If you wish. But I am certain he left me nothing—never thought of me. You did not know him: once he had put any person out of his heart, it was to him as if they never had lived at all. He was very hard, and he never by any chance forgave. Beside—he told me—I had no claim on him, was nothing to him.'

'Legally. But sixteen years of life spent beside him could scarcely pass utterly out of his memory. If he had left you anything, it is possible your cousin was not honest enough to say so. I will inquire at any rate. It will be more satisfaction to you to know more definite tidings than the hawker could possibly give you.'

'I am sure he left me nothing. But I should be glad to hear of Raphael and the dogs.'

'You shall hear. Raphael, I have no doubt, will be as glad to hear of you. Meanwhile be sure that both my wife and I should be unhappy if you fled away from our roof out into the world again. The world is not a kind place or a safe place, my dear, for those who are young and motherless.'

'But I must do something,' she repeated feverishly. 'I must do something. I cannot live on your charity. I would die sooner!'

'I tell you I do not like the word of "charity,"' said Othmar. 'When people have all a common misfortune, they have as it were a common tie. We have all the misfortune, the supreme misfortune, of human life.'

Even absorbed as she was in her own great straits and needs, Damaris was astonished at such words from one who, it seemed to her, was at the very summit of all earthly happiness.

'If he be not content, who can be?' she thought.

'It is a tie,' continued he, unconscious of her surprise, 'which binds us all together. No one is so fortunate that he may not live to want aid and pity. It is not so very many years ago, as the lives of nations count, that here in Paris a king and queen became so friendless that none dare say a kind adieu to them as they went to their deaths upon the scaffold. Compared to Marie Antoinette, how rich you are! You have youth, talents, friends, and all your future.'

'I have no friends,' said Damaris, with a gloomy rejection of all solace.

'You have one at least,' said Othmar. 'You are a little in love with sorrow, my dear; all imaginative

youth is so. When we have really had its actuality with us for awhile, we get to hate it bitterly, and do all we can to forget its presence.'

She looked at him with wonder.

'Have you ever been unhappy?' she said incredulously; 'with all these beautiful places? with that beautiful lady? with all the world?' [186]

'One is never happy for more than a day,' said Othmar with some impatience. 'One wants, one wishes, one desires, one obtains, one regrets—there is the whole gamut of all human notes. The scale no sooner ascends than it descends. There is nothing happy except youth, which does not know that it is so, and so goes through all the glories of its time ignorant, purblind, longing to cease to be youth.'

'I was quite happy on the island,' said Damaris wistfully.

'Then you were wiser than I ever was,' said Othmar, as he thought with a sort of remorse of how this innocent animal happiness, born of the waves, and the winds, and the sun, and the blossoms, and the radiant joy of mere living, had been destroyed by one breath and glimpse of the world, as a flower withers up in a flame, as a bird drops dead in carbonised air. Had they only let her alone, she would have been happy still.

'Yes,' Damaris sighed, and her eyes had a weary, troubled, introspective look. They saw the blue sea washing the face of the cliffs, the white dogs barking on the strip of yellow sand, the steep path going up and up and up under the olive trees, the old woman in her blue kirtle and a grey hood coming from out the groves of orange and of lemon, a saucepan freshly scoured or linen freshly washed in her horny hands—had all those familiar pictures faded for ever from her sight?

Béthune had said truly that to gather the rosebud is the act of an instant, but what power in heaven or on earth shall put the rosebud, once broken off, back again upon the mother plant? If by any force of will or of wealth they were to buy back her island again for her, it would never be possible to give her back with the solid soil, and the old house-roof, and the fruitful trees of it, the old, sweet, happy ignorance and peace of her childhood there.

'She is not here?' she asked suddenly, as she roused herself from her dream of her old home.

'My wife?' he asked in some surprise. 'No; she is in Russia.'

'She will despise me,' said Damaris, a dull red glow of shame mounting over her forehead. 'Will you tell her that I was found in the streets?'

'Not if it pain you. But you mistake if you think——'

'I should hate her to know it,' said the girl under her breath. 'I wanted to become something very great; something that she would hear of and come to see; and then I should have said to her: "Yes, it is I, madame, and you will not laugh at me any more now."'

'She never laughed at you. She admired you, and predicted a great future for you,' said Othmar with a little embarrassment, not knowing very well how to speak of one so near to him to this child, whose memory was so tenacious alike of benefits and affronts. [187]

'Is this house hers?' asked Damaris.

'Surely, my dear: what is mine is hers.'

Her face darkened.

'I am well now,' she said abruptly. 'May I not go away? I could get work, I think, in the gardens or on the river; there would be things I could do. I learnt something, too, at the convent in the mountains; not much, but something. Pray try and get me work.'

'Do not be in such haste,' said Othmar. 'It sounds like a reproach to me. You are most fully welcome, my child. I shall always feel that we can never atone to you for being the cause, however unconsciously, of the breaking up of your happy life. Wait, at least, until I have made some inquiries into your grandfather's death and testament. It may very well be that your cousin took the occasion of your absence to help himself to more than was his due.'

'I do not think so. Louis was an honest man.'

'If he be honest, inquiry will not hurt him.'

He had resolved to go himself upon an errand which he had resolved not to entrust to any of his agents, trustworthy though many of them were.

In the warm August night he took the express train for the south, and went across the country, golden with ripe corn and green with vine-leaves, straightway to the sultry shores of the south, deserted by their hosts of guests, and sweltering, baked and white with dust, in the intense suns of the late summer weather.

He went first to the seaport of St. Tropez, and made inquiries in its dockyard and shipyard as to Louis Roze. He found that the man had really inherited the possessions of his uncle Bérarde, had married a young woman of the town, and was now living on the island of Bonaventure. So far the tale told by the pedlar to Damaris had been true. An old man, an owner of a coasting brig, who had done business with the Bérardes all his life, told him also of the manner of Jean Bérarde's death, and added, with regret, that the curmudgeon had left not a penny to his granddaughter because she had refused to marry her cousin; and added, further, that the poor child had gone no one knew whither. It was a pity, the old man said regretfully, for she had had a face and a voice that it did good to the souls of men to see and to hear, and had been as active on the sea as any

curlew, and so handy with a boat, even in wild weather, that it had been a pleasure to sail with her anywhere.

Asked as to whether she had truly no legal claim upon her grandsire, the old skipper affirmed that everybody had always known she was a bastard, except herself; but nobody had ever supposed it would make any difference in her succession to Bonaventure. Louis Roze had always known it, but had been willing to marry her to prevent any division of the property. So much he learned, sitting on the sea-wall of St. Tropez, and letting the old master of the brig *Paul Mousse* ramble on at will with the sunbaked land behind them, and before them a sea, tame as a plain, and oil-like in the drowsy drought. [188]

He knew who Othmar was, as did most people on those shores, and readily told him all he knew, though silently wondering why he was asked these questions.

Othmar slept that night at his own house, and on the morrow, almost before the sun was up, took one of his own sailing-boats, and, attended only by one man, crossed the well-nigh motionless sea in the direction of Bonaventure. When the isle rose in sight, lifting its green cone out of the waves in the hot blue air, it was still early in the morning. As he went over the smooth surface of the summer sea, skimmed by thousands of gulls and fanned by languid fruit-scented breezes from the land, his heart ached for the sea-born child shut away under the zinc roofs and gilded vanes of Paris. Even if he could buy back her island, who could make her quite what she had been? He was angered against his wife, who, for sake of an absurd caprice, which had had no more duration in it than the light of a wax match, had brought about so sad an exile, so utter an uprooting and alteration of a simple and a happy life.

He, like many men of high position, deemed a lowly fate by far the happiest; he would have agreed with Cowley and George Herbert, and would have chidden Herrick for not being content amidst his Devon moors and streams, his cherry trees and roses.

Health, peace, and fresh air seemed to him three treasures which were ill exchanged for the feverish struggle and the artificial joys of life in the cities of the world.

When they neared the island they saw no one. The boat was easily run up on to the smooth strip of beach, and he ascended the *passerelle* and the steps cut in the rock, as Loris Loswa had done before him once and Damaris a thousand times.

Things were all changed upon the little isle. Catherine, dead, had left no successor so thrifty and sturdy as herself; the man Raphael had gone with all his family to live at Vallauris; Louis Roze and his wife had new faces, new ways, new things about them. The dogs were chained up; the old coble was newly painted; the little balcony had a dab of gilding, tricolour paint, and some smoking chairs; the great white rose had been cut down, the new owners had thought it harboured caterpillars and slugs. Nature had made the place lovely, and even man, the universal deformer and destroyer, could not make it wholly otherwise. But it had lost its look of freshness and luxuriance, and all its deep charm of solitude; it was choked up with vulgar furniture and gewgaws that the bride thought fine and rare. Modern china stood upon the shelves, and in the old solid silver pots artificial flowers were stuck. Some maidens, with many colours in their gowns and great ear-rings in their ears, cackled and giggled behind the orange trees. It had been an idyl of George Sand's; it was now a rustic scene for an operetta of Offenbach's. [189]

All that could not be vulgarised was the pure air, rich with the odour of millions of orange-blossoms, and the serene far-stretching sea, blue as the mouse-ear growing by a woodland brook.

Louis Roze in his shirt-sleeves, smoking beside the door, was a big, burly, red-faced man, with ear-rings also in his ears, and the broad roll of the southern accent in his thick voice; his wife was a buxom, brown, stout, and vulgar woman of four- or five-and-twenty. They did not know Othmar by sight, and he did not make himself known to them. He gave them an order for a boat in the name of one of his own yacht-builders; an order large enough to open the heart of the boat-builder of St. Tropez. Then by casual questions, and by letting the owner of Bonaventure talk on and boast of his possessions, he learned what he wanted to know: the facts of the elder Bérarde's death, and of the amount which had been bequeathed to his nephew.

'He left everything he had on earth to me; he knew in whose hands it would prosper and increase,' said in conclusion the big, oily-tongued, boastful Provençal.

'Had he no other heirs at all?' asked Othmar, 'or was it your uncle's very natural preference for yourself?'

'None on earth,' said the man hastily, with a little added red on his red cheeks, and a quick glance of his eye.

'Who was the girl, then,' asked his guest, 'who used to live with him, and go out in his brig?'

'She was nothing at all to Bérarde,' said Louis Roze sullenly, beginning to perceive that he had been interrogated with a purpose.

'A bastard!' he added. 'The law does not recognise bastards.'

'The law, like proverbs, is the distilled wisdom of mankind,' said Othmar. 'Like proverbs also, it occasionally may be caught tripping in its wisdom.'

The man eyed him uneasily.

'She was a bastard,' he said again. 'I did generously by her, because after all blood is blood. I sent her a handsome dowry; big enough to get her a good spouse amongst better men than she had any right to look for:—'

He felt angry and baffled, and would have been quarrelsome and have told his visitant to mind his own business, only that he saw the unbidden guest was a gentleman, and the order for the craft had made him patient and obsequious. [190]

Othmar looked at him with some disgust, changed his tone, and addressed him with more severity.

'M. Louis Roze, it is no concern of mine you will say, but I am here to tell you one thing, and you must listen to me. Legally, maybe, your cousin Damaris had no claim on this estate, but you know that she was brought up from infancy as her grandfather's heiress, that she was always encouraged to believe the island would be her own, and that only because of her refusal to marry you was she omitted from her grandfather's will, to your benefit—perhaps from an old man's perverse tyranny and rage, perhaps a little also from your suggestion and your intrigues. Be that as it will, you are morally bound, unless you are a cur indeed, to share your inheritance with one who has every moral right, and right of usage, to the whole of it. The dower you boast of having sent was returned to you. Your cousin is poor, but not so poor as to take as your alms what is her right. She is with those who can protect her, and is out of the danger to which you allowed her to drift without stretching out a hand to save her. If you consent to divide in equity your inheritance with her, I will tell you who I am, and give you all proofs and explanations that you may reasonably require. If you refuse I shall bid you good-morning, and rest content with the satisfaction, not a rare one in this world, of having seen an unjust and dishonest man.'

Louis Roze stared at him, perplexed by his tone, purple with rage and astonishment, made a coward not by conscience but by fear of losing a lucrative order, and so bewildered at the sudden attack that, southerner though he was, he had no good lie ready. All he felt for the moment sensible of was that not a bronze bit of the money, not a rood of the soil, not a rotten bough off one of the trees, should go away from himself to that girl, who had so grossly outraged him in refusing his hand. In a boorish, dumb-animal fashion he had been in love with the handsome child, who had always laughed at him and flouted him, and had never even let him kiss her cheeks in cousinly manner. As she had made her bed so she might lie in it. Not a sou should she get out of him, that he swore; the will was a good will, attested and duly proved; no one could gainsay it, and the young woman falsely called Bérarde was without any possible claim whatever; there had been no legal adoption of her. So he declared, with many an oath to keep his courage up before this stranger, whose manner daunted him; and his wife overhearing that it was a question of the inheritance which was under discussion, thrust herself into the balcony and vociferated with shrill iteration and the fury of a woman menaced in her dearest possessions, that [191] whilst she lived not a centime should ever go away from her lawful lord.

Othmar turned away before their clamour was half done.

'That is enough,' he said to them, 'keep all you have and may it prosper with you. Your cousin has no need of it, but I thought it right to give you a chance to do your duty.'

Louis Roze eyed him with perplexity, and grew silent.

Othmar asked him nothing more and took his leave; the bride and her sisters watching his departure through the intricacy of the orange-boughs, giggling and criticising him in audible phrase, their black eyes and their gold hair-pins flashing in the sunshine amongst the glossy leaves.

'That brute will do nothing for her,' he thought, as he descended to his boat. 'And even if he were inclined ever to do so, his wife would never let him follow his inclination. There is nothing on earth so avaricious as peasants who have grown rich.'

He took his way back to the mainland, and left behind him much uneasiness, wonder, and speculation amongst the inhabitants of Bonaventure.

The will was a good will, and his position was as sound as sound law could make it, yet Louis Roze was not quiet in his mind. He was not a bad man, though greedy, and he felt that this stranger was right; that something of all he had gained by this inheritance ought to go to the child who for so many years had been allowed to look upon herself as the future owner of Bonaventure. He was pursued by his recollections of her leaping like a young kid up the rocks, steering through the sea foam and the sunshine, gathering the oranges or the olives, carrying the linen down to the beach to dry, running gaily with the white dogs before her, swimming like a fish with her beautiful arms flung out on the water, and her eyes smiling up at the sky; *la mouette* as the people had called her, because she was so at home in the waves and the winds.

Truly she ought to have had something; she was of the old man's blood, whether or no the law recognised her or not; and where was she and what would become of her? His thoughts were painful and perplexed as he smoked his pipe under the orange trees.

But he was not ready to part with any portion of what had been bequeathed to him. He was well off certainly, still no one has ever enough; and his wife was with child, and might in time give him a score of children. It was better to keep what he had got, and, after all, Damaris had insulted him after being affianced to him from the time she was twelve, and his heart hardened utterly against her at that memory. If she had not been an obstinate, insolent, wayward fool she would have been here now, instead of the young woman from St. Tropez, who had a shrew's tongue, [192] which Louis Roze heard oftener than he cared to hear it.

So he thrust the matter from his mind and counted the oranges on the tree nearest him with complacent sense of ownership. This stranger had said that Damaris was with friends, let them look after her; his conscience was clear.

When in the course of the day he learned from some deep-sea fishers trawling near the island who his visitor had been—for the fishermen had recognised Othmar as he had passed in his boat—Louis Roze felt yet less sure that he had done wisely. To have pleased such a rich man might have been worth more than an acre of land, than a handful of gold. He hated aristocrats with all the savage hatred of a socialist of the south, but he respected rich men with all the admiring esteem which those who love money feel for those who possess it in unusual abundance. The good-will of this *archimillionnaire* might have been more valuable to him than a little piece of the land, had he offered it frankly as his cousin's share.

When, in a week's time, some persons came to him to seek to buy the island, he was certain that they came from his late visitor, although they came only in the name and by the commission of a well-known lawyer of Aix.

He was himself dazzled by the great sums they were willing to propose, was half-disposed to treat with them; but his bride was shrewder, or thought herself so, than he.

'Would you barter your coming child's property?' she hissed in his ear. 'If rich men seek after the place, be sure it is because it has some value we are not aware of; it has some buried treasure that they know of, or some silver in the rocks, or some other ore or another. If you sell it you will never forgive yourself. Keep it, and send them about their business, and begin to bore in the ground and see what you can find.'

The suggestion heated the fancy and the cupidity of her husband. Of course, he reflected, no one offered three or four times the apparent value of a place unless they knew that it would become worth what they were anxious to pay for it; and he sternly refused to hearken to any terms of sale for the rock of Bonaventure.

'What is mine is mine, and all the kings of the earth cannot buy it of me,' he said, with a petty mind's delight in power and in the occasion of baffling and thwarting his superiors.

'I believe he is in love with the girl,' he added to his wife, 'and wants to get the island for her. We might make a rare bargain if it were so; but those men of Aix are too cautious to let out who is behind them.'

'Roze,' the wife said, 'you are a simpleton. There is no love in the business. They know of some value in the island that we do not; that is why they want to buy. Because you are for ever hankering yourself after that great-eyed, long-limbed child, you think every other man is just a fool the same.' [193]

And Louis Roze, whose temper was cowed by the fiercer sharper temper of his bride, gave in to her argument, and remained so stubborn that the agents from Aix could come to no terms with him.

Inspired by the idea of buried treasures or possible ore in the rocks, he began to neglect his own affairs at St. Tropez and elsewhere, and dig and delve himself in the soil, and hack at the stone face of the cliffs with a pickaxe. The chimera of a fantastic hope entered into him and gave him no peace; he was ready to ruin all the fair fruits of the surface, and all the artificial soil brought there at such labour in the previous century, for the sake of this imaginary wealth, hidden in the bowels of the isle.

Meantime the men of Aix informed Othmar that it was not possible to induce the proprietor to part with Bonaventure, and ventured to hint that the property was not worth one-half or one-quarter of what he had been willing to spend on its purchase.

'That may be,' he said; 'but it is a caprice of mine. If the island ever comes into the market, obtain it for me on any terms. The owner may need money some day, or may change his mind.'

His experience of men was that they always sold things in the long run, if they could do so with advantage, and that they seldom remained in the same mind when it turned to their profit to change it.

CHAPTER XXVI.

When he returned from the south he paused at Amyôt before going on to Paris. He wanted a day or two to reflect on the future of Damaris before he saw her again. It was a problem which did not very easily admit of solution, without oppressing her with a sense of debt and servitude.

The certainty that her cousin would do nothing to help her brought home to himself the gravity of his position towards her. He had taken her from the streets as a kind man will take a stray dog; he had as much actual right to turn her out to them again as the man would have to turn out the dog, but his compassion and his chivalry forbade him to think of such desertion of her. There was that in the loneliness of her circumstances which touched all the warmest and most pitiful fibres of his nature, whilst the fact that more or less directly the caprice of his wife had been the beginning of all her misfortunes, made him feel that he owed a duty and a debt to her which could only be discharged by the most honest and sedulous endeavour to do well by her and secure her future from shipwreck. [194]

But what was that future to be? To seek any counsel from his wife seemed to him useless. He had seen her more than once moved to strong interest and expectation by some nascent talent which she had fostered and sheltered in the sunshine of her favour, in the hothouse of her world; and he had also seen her intolerant impatience and her profound oblivion when her anticipations had been unrealised, and that which she had honoured had proved incapable of rising to the heights of great achievement. He knew the changes of her temperament too well to be willing to subject to their fluctuations a proud and sensitive child. Even if she deigned to notice her again, Damaris could never be more to her than a mere plaything, and she had a terrible habit of tiring of her toys in ten minutes. She had had a fanciful idea that the girl had talents of a high order, and he knew that if her fancy proved at fault she would become intolerant of the person who had disappointed her expectations. Mediocrity had always seemed to her the worst of all offences. The flowers which might unclose at sunrise might never reach, or never bear if they did reach, the glare of noon. The world is pitiless, that he knew, and to its wedding feast of fame many crowd, but few are chosen. And Nadège, he knew too, would be as intolerant as the world if where she had deigned to believe that genius existed, she should only find a mere facile and fragile talent, without power to ascend where she bade it soar, or force to justify her protection of it.

He had not, either, forgotten her suggestion before Loswa's sketch, that some day he would fall in love with the subject of it. The jest had annoyed him and offended him.

Some time, no doubt, she would know everything: circumstances would bring it before her if the world and Damaris ever became acquainted; and if not, if obscurity became the child's lot, and failure the issue of her dreams, then it would be better that Nadine, who had no pity for the one or sympathy with the other, should hear nought of her. He did not care to dwell himself on the possibilities of the future of one who seemed to him so ill fitted for the prosaic brutalities of a struggle for fame: he had temporised with her destiny, and vaguely trusted to some sequence of fair chances to drift the barque of her life into some safe haven. Of the pure and chivalrous tenderness for her which he felt, he would have been ashamed to speak to any living soul: for who would have believed him?

'How difficult it is to do a little good!' he thought, as he drove through the deep glades of his own woods, through the cool, dewy, windless air of a summer evening towards the great castle which had once known the Valois kings. 'Now, if I wished to do the most brutal, selfish, hellish thing on earth, how easy it would be! I should find the whole world conspiring to help me, and should buy souls as easily as if they were oysters!' [195]

Since his son had been born there, an affection for Amyôt had come to him. It was his residence of preference; if it had been possible he would have liked never to leave its vast woods, its sunny shining courts, its majestic and historic solitudes. The feeling that he was a new comer there had been soothed away as years had passed; he had ceased to be haunted by the memories of his fathers' evil deeds; he had begun to look forward to a race springing from himself which should ennoble and justify the riches of the Othmars. It had become to him less an ill-acquired and eternal monument of his ancestors' iniquities than the cherished birthplace of children who would transmit to the far future his own conscience and his own honour. But as he came to it now in its stillness and loneliness, the earlier feeling stole back on him, as a bitter taste will survive and return when a sweet one has passed away.

It towered before him in the warm ethereal rose of the sunrise on the morning of his arrival, one of the greatest of the historical palaces of a chivalrous and immemorial land; and as the first beams of the eastern sun caught the glittering vanes of the towers, the gilded salamanders of the first Francis, he once more recalled with sudden sharpness and disgust the memory that the Othmars had entered these mighty stone portals only through the usurer's right-of-way; had climbed these lofty sculptured towers only by the money-lender's ladder of gold.

The world of men had forgotten it, or, if they ever remembered it, did so only with respect and envy as they always jealously and admiringly chronicle what they call self-made success. But to him it was humiliating and hateful. Sometimes it seemed to him that, had he done what his conscience and his manhood required, he would have refused utterly and always to use this wealth of theirs in any luxury, would have stripped it off him like a plague-stricken garment, he would have gone to any personal toil, with hands empty but clean—dreams, fanatical and foolish dreams, all men would have said, yet dreams which, followed out, would have had in them a certain nobility, a certain reality, a certain fulfilment of the ideals of his youth.

As he paced its terraces in the balmy stillness, the gardens outstretched beneath him in all their beauty, which bloomed and faded unseen by any eyes save those of the hirelings who tended them, the remembrance of the dead girl who once had dwelt there beside him in a summer such as this came back upon him as it did often now since he had found and read those pathetic [196] records of her short life. A repentant consciousness whispered that to her those dreams would not have seemed absurd: with her they would not have been impossible. Yseulte would have obeyed him had he chosen to change Amyôt to a La Garaye.

He would have seemed to her no more unwise or mad had he stripped her of all wealth and luxury than Claude of La Garaye seemed to the woman whose bones lie beside his beneath the weeds and grasses of the graveyard of Taden. Had he said but one word to her of such a dedication of their lives, all her unworldly simplicity and courage, all her childlike optimism and faith, all her heroism, fervour and superstition, would have made her whole soul kindle at his invitation as spirit leaps to flame at the first touch of fire. With her it would have been possible; a life wholly unlike the life of the world, led in open contradiction of all its opinions, demands and estimates; spent in entire imaginative atonement for the greeds and the crimes of dead men.

'No, it would not have been possible,' he thought, as these memories floated through his brain. 'No; for the life of La Garaye two things are essential, Love and Faith. I had none of the first for her; I have none of the second either for man or God.'

La Garaye was the outcome of blind unquestioning belief in humanity and heaven, such belief as can only come over narrow horizons and to uncultured minds. 'Have Augustine's faith,' says a modern teacher to a faithless world. But the teacher forgets that the world can no more return to its abandoned faiths than a man can return to the toys and the joys of his infancy.

There is a profound melancholy in the solitary musings of every man or woman whose youth has harboured all the high ideals of a lofty and pensive enthusiasm, and whose maturity is held down by all the innumerable habits and demands, usages and necessities of life in the great world. Society is imperious and irresistible. Out of its beaten track none of its subjects can wander far or long. Its atmosphere is pregnant at once with sloth and excitement, and its bonds are liliputian but indestructible. Society has neither imagination nor ideality, and when either of these comes into it, it destroys it unmercifully. There is a potent attraction in it even for those who believe themselves the least susceptible of such seduction, and the network of its usages and habits becomes a prison which even the most unwilling captives learn to prefer to liberty.

It might have been possible once, possible to have given back all those ill-gotten millions to the hungry multitudes of humanity; possible to have stripped himself of all pomp and possession and been nothing on earth save such as his own brain might have had power to make him. It might have been possible once, but it was now and for ever impossible.

Such thoughts drifted through his mind as he paced the beautiful rose-colonnades and magnolia- [197] groves of these gardens which had in them the sadness inseparable from all places which have a history and have once been peopled by a historic race.

Neither power nor place had any fascination for him, and the meannesses of mankind wearied him and left his heart barren. When the world grudges the rich man his 'unearned increment,' it forgets how much base coin it gives him in revenge for his possessions; it is for ever seeking to cheat or, at best, to use him; the parasite and the sycophant are always licking the dust from his path, that, unseen, they may steal the gold from his pocket; the meanest side of all humanity is exposed to him; even friendship becomes scarcely distinguishable from flattery, and the greed, the envy, and the low foibles of his fellows, though the base toys with which the cynic plays, leave his soul sick when it is not covered with the cynic's buckler.

Othmar was no cynic, and his knowledge of his fellows had saddened and oppressed him. This knowledge had not made him serve them less faithfully, but it had taught him that all such service was utterly vain, either to secure gratitude or to ennoble society. The world rolls on, soaked in dulness, in bestiality, in cruelty, in a hideous monotony of vulgar inventions and crafty crimes and imbecile conventionalities; it has America instead of Athens, a machine instead of an art, a Krapotkine instead of a Socrates—and it prates of progress!

Governed by money as men are, things were possible to Othmar which would have been impossible, or most difficult at least, to many. His position made a vast number and variety of persons of all classes known to him; his large liberalities had endeared him to many people of all kinds, who would have done anything he desired in return for his benefits; he had always dealt with his fellows with great kindliness and indulgence, but with perspicuity and intelligence; he was well served by those who laboured for him, and was seldom betrayed. Ingratitude and treachery he met with sometimes, but less often than his own slight estimate of human nature led him to expect, and when he needed assistance or service he could always find on the instant instruments adapted to his end. If he had had the instincts of a bad nature he could have contributed endlessly to the demoralisation of his fellow-men; with the temperament he possessed he never asked any return for his benefits or expected any thankfulness for them. Nevertheless the world was set thick with his debtors, if he believed that he numbered few friends, and whenever he wanted anything done it was as easy for him to discover doers of it as it was for the Borgia to find the hand that would fill the cup, the fingers that would use the dagger.

One half-hour's thought, as he wandered through the lonely gardens of his château, sufficed him [198] to dispose of the problem of Damaris's fate. She must be made to believe, he decided, that her grandfather had left her enough to keep her from want, and she must be placed somewhere in safety. As for her genius, if genius she had, it would find its way to culture as surely as a plant to

the light. But meantime she must live: and live without imagining that she lived on charity. The only way to make it possible for her to do so would be to induce her to think that she had not been wholly forgotten by Jean Bérarde. So he reasoned, and acted on his conclusions without weighing their possible consequences to himself or her.

He was a man much more truthful than life in the world makes men usually. A falsehood was contemptible and cowardly in his sight. One of his most continual contentions with Friedrich Othmar had always been his refusal to admit that lying was needful in politics and finance; and in private life his wife laughed at him frequently for his distaste to those mere social untruths which have become the small change of society's currency. He disliked all subterfuge, all sophism, all distortion of fact, and even the harmless falsehood of compliment.

But this single untruth to be told to Damaris seemed so necessary, so harmless, that it carried with it no odour of dishonesty to him. In no other way could she be kept from want and danger. Without some such simple ruse she could never be saved from herself, and from all that impetuosity and ignorance which would destroy her as surely as a like enthusiasm destroyed the virgin of Domrémy.

Rich people, who have many connections and dependents, can arrange circumstances to their liking in many small ways, with a facility which is sometimes in pathetic contrast with their powerlessness to command personal happiness and health, human gratitude or human contentment. To Othmar it was easy to arrange circumstances for those in whom he was interested, though it was out of his power to make his own life the thing he would have liked it to be. His wide command of money, and his great knowledge of men and women, enabled him sometimes to play the part of *deus ex machinâ* successfully. He tried to play it for Damaris: tried, with an honest wish to serve her, and a boyish disregard of consequences, which would have made his wife, had she known of them, call him a *berger de Florian* in pitiless ridicule.

Amongst the many persons who owed him more than a common debt, there was an old woman whose only remaining grandson, a young student at the time, had been compromised in the days of the Commune, and would have been numbered amongst those who were to be shot without mercy, had not Othmar, who was at Versailles at the time, interceded for and saved him, being touched by the youth's fine countenance and his entreaty to be allowed to see his grandmother ere he died. On inquiry and further knowledge of the lad he had been more and more interested in him, perceiving that mistaken creeds and distorted ideals had brought him amongst this sorry company of pillagers and *pétroleuses*. He had influence enough with M. Thiers to get a free pardon for the youth, on condition of his leaving France at once. He sent him at his own expense out of the country, gave him a clerkship in his house at Vienna, and had the satisfaction of seeing him become in a few years a peaceable and happy citizen, a diligent and devoted servant. [199]

The old grandmother, by name Reine Chabot, owned and farmed a few acres of good land near Les Hameaux, in the rich vale of Chevreuse. To Othmar, who had saved her boy in body and soul, she would have given body and soul herself. She was a hale and strong woman, of simple habits and of noble mind. She was a recluse, but not a morbid one, and her ways and manner of life were similar to those which Damaris had been used to on the island of Bonaventure. To her he resolved to confide the girl's charge during her convalescence, or for so long as she might need a home. He went himself down to the farm, and, almost before he had spoken, his request was granted and received as an honour.

The dark, stern eyes of the aged woman were soft with moisture as she joined her brown hands on his, and said with fervour:

'All that I have is yours to command. Did you not do for me and mine that which was beyond all praise or price?'

'I have found two people who accept my motives as honest ones,' thought Othmar. 'I shall surely find no more. To expect belief in any action that has no personal object at the bottom of it is a folly that nobody but a boy should commit. The child believes in me because she is at the age of faith and of innocence; and the woman believes me because she adores me and does not look any further; but nobody else will be so quick in faith.'

The farmhouse, called the Croix Blanche, was a stout seventeenth-century building, which had escaped injury during the great war by some miracle, and was as lonely in its situation as though it had been five hundred instead of fifteen miles from Paris. In such a retreat he thought this checked and bruised sea-bird might find as safe a nest for a season of rest as the lark found there in the long grass of its meadows. Rural quietude, pure air, good care, and the balm which lies for poetic temperaments in the mere sense that the country silences are around them, would do all that was needed, he fancied, to restore the natural buoyancy and strength of her constitution, and thither he directed the nuns to take her one afternoon when the shadows grew long over the grass pastures and quiet woods of that smiling and pastoral country which stretches around the ruins of what was once Port-Royal des Champs. [200]

She was in that state of weakness blended with the delicious sense of returning health which makes life seem like a dream, and all its scenes pass like dream-pictures. She was filled with a vague sense of perfect faith and peace, and all that he did for her she accepted unquestioningly as undoubted good.

When she saw the low grey-stone farmhouse covered with its climbing roses, its wooden outhouses buried under elder and poplar trees, its grass lands lying warm in the glow of the afternoon sun, she stretched out her thin hands to it all as to a friend, and tears of pleasure swam in her eyes.

'It is the country,' she said under her breath with delight.

All the sweet pungent smell of the turned earth where a labourer dug in it, all the fresh glad scent of growing leaves and ripening fruits and grasses browning in the sun, all the familiar sounds, a watch-dog's bark, a blackbird's song, the hum of bees in the rose bloom, the distant call of a corncrake in the meadows—they were all dear and welcome like the voices of friends long unheard. It was the country: all the strength and the warmth and the force of her youth seemed to rush back into her veins with the sight and the sounds of it.

For the first time since she had left the island she laughed.

'That is well,' thought the old woman, her hostess, regarding her. 'Those who love the country have clean souls.'

She had not asked or wished to ask any questions concerning her guest.

In her eyes Othmar could do no wrong, and to her gratitude his will was law. But she had kept her own soul clean all her days, dwelling here always in these same green peaceful places; and as she looked on the face of Damaris she was glad, for she saw there three things which are as beautiful as flowers—innocence, and youth, and ignorance of all fear and guile.

Damaris slept very soundly that night in a little white room that smelt of lavender and pressed rose-leaves, and when she awoke in the morning heard the pleasant sound of mowing scythes, of rippling water, of a thrush's singing in a blossoming elder bough; and all the young life in her seemed to arise and grow anew, and become once more as glad to greet the sun as any bird which wakes at dawn as the first white light gleams through its house of leaves.

Many quiet and almost happy summer days followed for her, in which she recovered all her normal strength. The ways and the work of the farm were familiar and welcome to her, and she scarcely waited to be well before taking to herself a share of its labours.

The widow Chabot asked her no questions, but she, having no secrets, soon related the few incidents of her short existence, and heard in return the narrative of Othmar's actions during the Commune. Taciturn by temperament, and grave and reserved by habit as the old woman was, she grew eloquent whenever she spoke of the saviour of the last of her race, and Damaris, when the day's work was done, and they sat together in the rose-coloured porch while the spinning-wheels flew round, never wearied of hearing that tale, and said in her own heart as she listened, 'How good he is!—how good!'

These summer weeks in Chevreuse were full of rest and solace to her. It was but a pause, a halt before the heat and stress of life, she knew; an '*étape*' such as she had seen the dust-covered conscripts on the march enjoy, resting by the wayside under the trees, where some little water-spring bubbled up amongst the cistus bushes and the euphorbia of a Riviera road. But she was at peace in it, and, childlike, hardly thought of the morrow.

Sometimes she looked far away, when the sun rose, to the east where Paris was, and wondered if ever there the world would hear of her, know her, care for her. But it was all vague. Her future was bathed in golden light, like the green landscape when the sun came out from the mists of dawn; but it had no distinctness to her, no definite shape or end. It was mere radiant nebulæ, like the rosy and amber-tinted clouds which the peasants looking eastward said was Paris, though no roof, or dome, or spire was visible when the morning broke.

Othmar came to see her rarely, and his visits were brief; but as she had no vanity and had much gratitude, she was wholly content with such slight remembrance. He sent her many books and other things which amused her, and her mind was eager for all kinds of knowledge. She had great natural intelligence and quickness of perception, and she read the fine prose and the stately alexandrines of the old French authors with avidity and delight. Something of the intellectual life of Port Royal seemed to her fancy still to linger in the air, and make classic all the rustic paths of this quiet valley.

When she walked over the daisied grass that grew about the ruined dovecot, Pascal seemed to pace beside her, and as she leaned over the little brook which finds its way amongst the cresses and the mouse-ear, she fancied she saw the face of her great master Racine reflected in its shallow waters.

Her hostess, though a woman of no great culture, yet was learned enough in the literature of earlier days, and in the associations of her birthplace, to know every legend and name that are attached to the stones and the meadows of Les Hameaux. She was no uncongenial companion to an imaginative girl, for though taciturn, she could have a certain rude eloquence when strongly moved, and to her reverent and unworldly mind 'les Messieurs de Port-Royal' were ever present memories, both saintly and heroic.

CHAPTER XXVII.

He had apportioned the sum needed at a lower figure than his own wishes would have dictated, that it might seem to her more natural as the legacy of Jean Bérarde; it was enough to keep her in such simple ways of life as she had been used to, no more. He told her of it, as of a legacy, the first day that he saw her at Les Hameaux: told it in few words, for all equivocation was painful to him. She never for a moment doubted the truth of the story, and he was touched to see that her first emotion was not relief at the material safety insured to her, but joy that the old man dying had forgiven her.

'If I had only known,' she said through her tears, 'I would have gone back to him! I would have gone back just to have heard him say one kind word for the last!'

The thought that her grandsire had pardoned and remembered her was a philtre of health and strength to her. It brought back all the warmth to her cheeks, all the depth of colour to her eyes; she wept passionately, but from a sweet not harsh sorrow, from gratitude to his memory, from thankfulness that his last thought of her had been one of kindness.

Othmar watched and heard her with an embarrassment which she was too absorbed in her own emotions to notice.

'All the money I shall give her would not suffice to buy one of Nadine's rows of pearls,' he thought. 'Yet what rapture it affords her! A lie! of course it is a lie; and all my Jesuit tutors could never make me credit that a lie could be a good thing, however good its motive. But this lie is innocent if ever there were one innocent, and even if it were a crime the crime would be worth the doing, to set this poor lost sea-bird safe from storm upon a ledge of rock. She would be beaten to death by the waves without some shelter.'

Yet his conscience was not wholly easy as he responded to her warm words of gratitude to himself for having discovered this bequest for her, and answered her many questions as to the island that she loved, the children of Raphael, the dogs, the trees, the boat; all things on Bonaventure were living things to her. However long her life might last, always the clearest and the dearest of her memories would be those sunny childish years in the little isle of fruit and flowers, where for sixteen years the sun had shone and the sea wind blown on her, and the fish and the birds and the beasts been her schoolfellows.

She had something of meridional heedlessness, and much of meridional imagination, which made the fiction of her grandsire's legacy more easily believed by her than it would have been by more prosaic and cautious tempers. To her it seemed so natural that he should have relented towards her and provided for her. All her memories were of wants provided for by him; he had been her providence, if a harsh one, for so long that it seemed a natural part of his character and of her destiny that he should continue to be her providence even in his grave.

'If I could only be sure that he is happy in heaven,' she said to Othmar, with a certain appeal and doubt in her accent. Even to her, though she had respected him, it was difficult to think of Jean Bérarde of Bonaventure in any celestial life. 'Do you not think,' she added wistfully, 'that God would remember that he was a very good man in many ways, and always honest and upright in all his dealings with rich and poor? He loved money, but he was not mean—not to me, never to me—and if *laborare est orare*, as the Sisters used to say, surely he must be in peace?'

Othmar heard the tormenting fear which was expressed in her tone, and refrained from adding one grain of doubt to it.

'Be sure he is at peace, my dear,' he answered; while he thought, 'more peace than such a brute deserves—the peace of utter extinction; the peace of dissolution and absorption into the earth which holds him, into the grass which covers him; peace which he shares with kings and poets and heroes!'

'He believed nothing, you know,' said Damaris wistfully, 'nothing of any creed, I mean. But then, if he could not, was it any more his fault than it is a deaf man's fault that he cannot hear? I think not. Do you remember that poem of Victor Hugo's? I forget its name, but the one in which a great wicked king of the east, all black with crime, is saved from hell because he has a moment of pity for a pig that is sick and tormented with flies and lies helpless in the sun? The king drew the pig aside out of the sun and drove the flies away. It is beautifully told in the poem; I tell it ill. But what I mean is, that I think if they are angered in heaven with my grandfather because he led a hard, selfish, crooked, cramped life, they will yet let him into paradise because he was so good to me.'

Othmar assented, with a sense of infinite compassion for her. All her dream was as baseless as the golden city which an evening sun builds out of clouds for a moment in the western sky. But he let it be. Life would soon enough wake her from such dreams with the rough hand of a stepmother, who grudges motherless children sleep.

'Let us speak of present things,' he said, to distract her thoughts. 'This is very little money, though you think so much of it, which is left to stand between you and all kinds of want. Will you let me place it out for you where it will bring you most? You may have heard, my dear, that I am one of those hapless persons who are doomed by circumstance to have much to do with gold. I hate it, but that is no matter. It is my fate. Will you trust me to try and multiply your little fortune? I will be very careful of it, but something more it shall make for you in my hands than if it were lying in a kitchen chimney or under an orchard wall, which you are too true to your nation not to think the safest kind of investment. I may? Then be it so. No, do not thank me, there is no

need for that. But you are very young and you are not very prudent, I should say, and in these matters you will need advice. Remember always to command mine.'

She looked at him with grateful but questioning eyes.

'Why should you do so much for me?' she said with wonder.

'I do very little,' returned Othmar. 'And were it far more, you have a direct claim on me—on us. If my wife had not tempted you away that memorable day, you would have been dwelling contented on your island still, and probably for ever.'

'No: not there,' she said slowly, as if she reasoned with herself. 'I do not think I should ever have stayed there very long. I loved it, but I wanted something else. When I used to sit, as so often I sat, all alone on the balcony that hangs over the sea, when it was late at night, and everyone else was asleep, and the nightingales were shouting in the orange-boughs underneath, I used to think that some other world there must be where some one cared for Ondine and Athalie, where some one had cried as I cried for Triboulet and Hernani; where they did not all talk all day long of the price of oil, and the cost of cargoes, and the disease in the lemons, and the worm in the olive wood. I knew that all these great and beautiful things could not have been written unless men and women were, somewhere, great and beautiful also; and very often—oh, often! long before your Lady spoke to me—I had thought that whenever my grandfather should die I would go and find that world for myself. And now——'

He waited some moments, but her sentence remained incomplete.

'And now?' he repeated at last. 'Now do you think still that there is such a world, or do you not see that no one does care for Ondine or Athalie? that the price of oil and the worm in the olive (or their equivalents) are the sole carking cares of the great world, just as much as of your peasant-proprietors? Did you not dream of Hernani, and did you not only meet the *sergent de ville*?'

'I met you!' she said gently, with a tinge of reproach in her voice.

'My dear child!' said Othmar, touched and a little embarrassed. 'I am far from heroic. Ask the person who knows me best, and she will tell you so. I only rake the world's gold to and fro as if I were a croupier, and I assure you the olives and the lemons are much worthier subjects of thought.' [205]

She made a little involuntary gesture of her hand, as if she pushed away some unworthy suggestion which it was not needful to refute in words. Her face had grown serious and resolute; she had the look of a young Pallas Athene. Innumerable thoughts were crowding on her which she could ill express.

Ever since a possible fate had been suggested to her in which fame might attend on her, ever since a vague immeasurable ideal had been suggested to her in the music of Paul of Lemberg, it had become impossible for her ever to remain content with the homely aims and the prosaic thoughts of the people amongst whom she had been born. Heredity and accident had alike combined to divorce her from her natural fate. Of those thus severed from their original source, thus rebellious against their native air, two or three in a generation become great, famous, victorious; the larger number fall back from the summits which they aspire to reach, and fill the restless, dissatisfied, tarnished ranks which are comprised in the all-expressive word *déclassés*. But the word seemed unfitted to her; there were that simplicity, that originality, that force in the child which mark the higher natures of humanity, whether they be found in peasants or in princes; there were in her also that natural high breeding and absolute self-unconsciousness which render all vulgarity and assumption impossible; those marks of race which are wholly independent of all circumstance. Jeanne d'Arc greeted her king as her brother, and Christine Nilsson meets sovereigns as her sisters.

He had seen this child also bear herself with inborn grace and natural dignity in the first dazzling scene and unkind embarrassment of circumstance which she had ever known. It seemed to him that she would go thus through life.

'I think I could *make* the world care,' she said, with a curious mingling of dreaminess and decision, of ardour and of doubt in her tone. 'Even your wife said I might do so—it is something outside myself, beyond myself. I do not mean any vanity or folly. It is something one *has*, as the nightingale has its song, and the lemon flower its odour. If they would hear me—as your Lady heard? How could I make them hear me?'

Othmar was silent.

Then he added almost cruelly, but cruelty seemed to him kindness:

'My wife forgot that she had heard you five minutes afterwards: so perhaps would the world. And if so, what then?'

'At least I should have tried.'

The divine obstinacy of genius spoke in the words. Better failure and oblivion than oblivion without effort. [206]

'If only I could try?' she repeated with imploring prayer: to her he seemed the master of the world, as utterly as Agrippa or Augustus seemed so to the Roman girls who saw them pass from palace to temple, 'I know it would be only interpretation; but I feel their words say so much to me that I surely could interpret them, aloud, so that I could move some to feel them as I do.'

He knew she meant the words of those poets which had taken so strong and firm a hold upon her

imagination, read as she had read them in the glory of the southern light, between the sea and sky.

'Perhaps you could,' he answered reluctantly. 'But if you did, what would be your fate? You would die like Aimée Desclée. My wife likened you to her.'

'Who was she?'

He told her, with the pathetic force of a profound sympathy; for poor Frou-frou had been well known to him in her brief career, and all the feverish yearning, the tumult of unsatisfied desires, the conflict of genius and malady in that tender and hapless soul had been sacred to him. He passed in silence over the passions of that life, but he dwelt long and earnestly on its storm-tossed youth, and its premature and tragic close.

Damaris listened; her whole countenance reflecting the narrative she heard.

'I think she was happy,' she said at length. 'You do not, but I do. She broke her heart singing, like the nightingales in the poem. I read once of a sword which wore out its scabbard. Who would not sooner be that than the sword which rusts unused?'

Othmar did not reply. To him the life and the death of Aimée Desclée were the saddest of his generation; but he could not tell this child why he thought them so, and even if he could have done it would have been of no avail. He knew that he argued with that thing which no example appals, no warning affects, no prescience intimidates; the thing at once so strong and so feeble, at once blind as the bat and far-sighted as the eagle—the instinct of genius.

When he quitted her that day he left her with disquietude and uncertainty. It seemed to him as if he held her fate, like a bird, in his hand, and could either close the cage-door on it in safety, or toss it upward free to roam through fields of air or to sink under showers of stones as chance might choose.

He believed that she did not deceive herself when she thought that she could move others by the electric forces within herself. He recognised a certain volition in her which resembled that of genius. Her imagination, which could console her for so much, her quick assimilation of high thoughts and poetic fancies, her power of feeling impersonal interest, her very ignorance of real life, and imprudence in its circumstances, were all those of genius. Reared in prosaic habits, she had forced her own way to a subjective and idealistic mental life, even amidst the most opposing influences. She had heard the nightingale in the orange-boughs, though all those around her had been only busied counting the oranges to pack the crates. She had watched the shoal of fishes spread its silver over the waves beneath the moon, though all those around her at such a sight had only thought of the deep sea seine, the casks for market, and the curing brine. Surely this power of withdrawing from all familiar association, and escaping from all compelling forces of habit, could only exist where genius begat it?

But then he knew that even with the wedding-garment of genius on, yet to the wedding-feast of fame many are called but few are chosen. And it might be only a breath, a flash, a touch of inspiration, *un brin de génie*, as his wife had said, enough to have impelled her to push open the doors of her narrow destiny, and look thence with longing eyes, but not enough to force her with untired feet and unconquerable courage across that desert of effort which parts effort from triumph, poetic faculty from mere dreamy indolence. He who had always from his boyhood honoured and assisted talent, wherever he had found it, with a patience and a liberality very rare in this world, had suffered much disappointment from many ordinary and pretentious lives which he had been led to believe had had the hall-mark of intellectual superiority. He had too often found what deemed itself genius was mere facility; originality, mere eccentricity; ambition mere instinct of imitation; the 'coal from the altar' only the momentary blaze of a match. Many and many a time he might have said of the immature Muses who sought him, in the words of Victor Hugo, '*Que de jeunes filles j'ai vues mourir!*'

Damaris Bérarde appeared to him, as to his wife, a beautiful child with an uncommon nature, and with possibly uncommon gifts; but between the mere promise of the dawn of youth and the full heat of the meridian of genius what a difference there was!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

In lieu of driving homeward to Paris that day, he turned his horses' heads in the direction of Asnières, where a once famous artist, David Rosselin, lived.

'I will ask Rosselin,' he thought. 'Rosselin can judge as I have no power to do; and if he decide that she has genius she had better make a career so for herself. I have no business to stand between her and any future she may be able to create.' [208]

He disliked the idea of his wife's careless predictions being fulfilled. It seemed to him barbarous to let this white-souled sea-bird soar to the electric-flame life in Paris, fancying its light the sun. But who could tell?

It was a doubt which troubled and oppressed him as he drove back to Paris through the pastoral country, consecrated by the memory of Port-Royal. He felt that he had no right to make himself the arbiter of her destinies; he would be no more to her in her future than the dead thinkers whose brains had once been quick with philosophic and poetic creation amidst these quiet green meadows.

So he opened the little green trellis-work gate which was set in the acacia hedge of the cottage at Asnières, and found the once great impersonator of Alceste, of Tartuffe, of Sganarelle sitting beside his beehives and behind his rose-beds, with a white sun umbrella shading his comely and silvered head, and in his hand a miniature Aldine Plautus. His old servant was close by carefully dusting the cobwebs off the branches of an espaliered nectarine.

It was a small suburban villa which sheltered the last years of the great actor; a square white house set in a garden, over whose trim hedges of clipped acacia Rosselin could see the groups of students and work-girls going down to the landing-stairs of the Seine, and farther yet could see the grey-green shine of the river itself with its pleasure craft going to and fro in the midsummer sunshine.

David Rosselin in his prime had made many millions of francs, but they had gone as fast as they were gained, and in his old age he was poor: he had only this little square white box, so gay in summer with its roses and wistaria, and within it some few remnants of those magnificent gifts which nations and sovereigns and women and artists had all alike showered upon him in those far-off years of his greatness; and some souvenir from Othmar of an Aldine classic, or a volume bound by Clovis, which had lain on his table some New Year morning.

Othmar, who was quickly wearied by men in general, appreciated the intelligence and the character of this true *philosophe sans le savoir*, and would have made Rosselin free of all his libraries and welcome at all his houses if the old man would have left for them his white-walled and rose-covered cottage at Asnières.

'No one who is old,' said Rosselin, 'should ever go out, though he may receive, because he knows that those whom he receives care to see him, or they would not come to him; but how can he be ever sure that those who invite him do not do so out of charity, out of pity, out of complacency?'

And save those of the theatres, of the Conservatoire, and of the public librairie, he crossed no threshold save his own. [209]

'If I had only been a grocer,' he used to say with his mellow laugh, 'a good plump grocer, as my poor father wished, who knows? I might have even been mayor of my native town by this, and had a son a vice-préfet!'

He was a man now nigh on eighty years, erect, vivacious, combating age with all the eternal youthfulness of genius, his black eyes had still a flash of those fires which had once scorched up the souls of women, and his handsome mouth had still the smile of fine irony which had adorned and accentuated his Alceste and his Mascarille. He dwelt alone with a servant nearly as old as himself; he had a great natural contempt for all domestic ties.

'Had I become a grocer I would have married,' he was wont to say. 'If you are in trade, respectability is as necessary to you as dishonesty; but to the artist the nightcap of marriage is like the biretta which they draw over a man's head in Spain before they garotte him. When once you put it on, *adieu les rêves!*'

And in his celibate old age, if he had no longer dreams, he had recollections and interests which kept him mentally young. His Paris was his one mistress, of whom he never tired.

He had left the stage five-and-twenty years and more, in his own person, but he still took the keenest interest, possessed the highest influence, in all higher dramatic art and life. The silence of David Rosselin on a first night condemned a play as an irrevocable failure, whilst his smile of approval was assurance to an author that he had successfully *empoigné* his public. He was the most accurate of judges, the most penetrating of critics; he would occasionally make little epigrammatic speeches which remained like little barbed steel darts, but he was indulgent to youth and encouraging to modesty. When Rosselin said that a pupil of the Conservatoire had a future, the future, when it became the present, never belied his judgment. For the rest, he was in a small way a bibliophile, delighted in rare copies and delicate bindings, and was an unerring authority on all centuries of costume and custom.

'Incessantly acting all your life, when did you find all the time to acquire so much knowledge?' Paul Jacob had said once to him.

David Rosselin had replied with his genial laugh:

'Ah, *mon cher*, I have had all the time that I should have spent in quarrelling with my wife if I had had one!'

This love of books had been a bond of sympathy between him and Othmar ever since one night in the green-room of the Français, when they had spoken of fifteenth-century Virgils; and to him the thoughts of Othmar had turned more than once since the problem of Damaris and her destiny had [210] come before him. There was no one in all Europe who could discern the gold from the pinchbeck in human talent with such precision; no one who could more unerringly discriminate between the aspirations of genius and its capabilities, between the mere audacities of youth and the staying powers of true strength.

An absurd reluctance to speak of her, of which he was ashamed, and for which he would have assigned no definite reason even to himself, had made him indisposed to seek his old friend on such a subject; but it seemed to him, now that her soul was apparently set on the career which his wife's careless praise had suggested to her, no other way of life was so possible for her, or so likely to afford her interest, occupation and independence.

He had seen the life of the stage near enough to loathe it. The woman whom he had adored with all a boy's belief and passion, and who had been hired by his father's gold to do him the cruel service of destroying all belief in him, had been an actress, famous for the brief day of splendour which beauty without genius can gain in the cities of the world. He hated to imagine that the time might come when this child, full now of ideals of heroisms, of innocence and of faithfulness, might grow to be such a woman as Sara Vernon had been! Sara Vernon, who had now turned saint and dwelt in the odour of good works on her estates in Franche-Comté: the estates which had been his father's purchase-money of her.

But it seemed to him that he had no right to let his personal prejudices, his personal sentiments or sentimentality, stand between Damaris and any possibility of future independence, of future happiness which might open out before her through her natural gifts. He felt nothing for her except a great compassion and a passionless admiration, and he had a sense of indefinite self-blame and of infinite embarrassment for the position towards her into which circumstances had drifted him. It was not possible to retreat from it: he had become her only friend, her sole support; but the sense that to the world, and perhaps even to his wife, his too impulsive actions would bear a very different aspect, haunted him with a feeling which was foreboding rather than regret.

'Ah! my friend!' said Rosselin in some surprise, as he passed through the gate. 'Is it possible you are in Paris while Sirius reigns over the asphalte? It is charming and gracious of you to remember a decrepit old gardener. Come and sit by me in the shade here, and Pierre shall bring you the biggest of the nectarines. If Virgil could have tasted a nectarine! There may be doubts about every other form of progress, but there can be no manner of doubt that we have improved fruits since the Georgics, and wines.'

Othmar answered a little at random, and accepted the nectarine. The quick regard of Rosselin [211] read easily that there was something in the air graver than their usual talk of rare editions and coming book-sales which his visitor desired to say to him, and with a sign dismissed the old servant to the strip of kitchen garden on the other side of the house.

Othmar made his narrative as brief, his own share in it as small, and the facts as prosaic as he could; but he could not divest them of a tinge of romance which he was ill-pleased to discover to the shrewd comprehension of the great artist who listened to him.

'Do what I will, tell it all how I may,' he thought angrily, 'how ridiculous I shall look to him, playing knight-errant like this!'

And as he related the story of Damaris to Rosselin he seemed in fancy to hear the voice of his wife behind him commenting in her delicate suggestive tones on his own exaggerated share in it. What she would say, and what the world would say, seemed to him to be said for both in the momentary smile which passed over Rosselin's face.

'Of course he does not believe me,' he thought. 'Nobody will ever believe me. They will always suppose that I have base reasons which have never even approached me; they will always accredit me with the coarsest of motives.'

Rosselin, with his power of divining the thoughts of others, guessed what was thus passing through his mind.

'Yes, they will certainly never accredit you with a good motive,' he said, answering the unspoken thoughts of his visitor. 'For that you must be prepared. But if you think that I shall do so, you mistake. You are a man, my dear Count Othmar, who is much more likely to be fascinated by a disinterested action than by a vulgar amour. I understand you, but I warn you that nobody else will.'

'I suppose not,' said Othmar. 'That must be as it may. How did you divine so well what I was thinking of?'

'Divination of that kind is easy after experiences as long as mine are,' answered Rosselin, gathering one of his carnations and fastening it in his linen coat. 'If we do not acquire that much from life we live to be old to little purpose. You have done a generous thing, and probably the world will punish you for it; it always does. The position your chivalry has led you into is of course certain to be explained in one way, and one only, by people in general. The world is not delicate, and it never appreciates delicacy.'

'Of that I am well aware,' returned Othmar. 'It is on account of the coarseness of all hasty and ordinary judgments that I wish to keep my own name and personality hidden as much as possible in relation to this child. If her own talents could secure independence for her, it would be very much to be desired that they should do so. Will you do me the favour to judge of them?' [212]

Rosselin hesitated.

'You can command me in all ways,' he added. 'But I think it only fair to warn you that, even if she have very great talent, as you seem to believe, neither technique nor culture come by nature. Training, long, arduous, severe, and to the young most odious, is the treadmill on which everyone must work for years before being admitted into the kingdom of art. Has she enough to live on during these years of probation?'

'Yes,' answered Othmar; he did not feel called upon to confess his device for supplying this necessity. 'All I would ask of you is your judgment of her talents. Of course she is only a child; she has seen and heard nothing; even the poorest stage she has never seen. She has not had any of those indirect lessons which the very poverty and misery of their surroundings gave Rachel and Desclée. They were always in the road of their art, even though they went to it through mire. She knows nothing, absolutely nothing; I tell you she has not been even inside the booth of strolling players at a fair. Yet she gave to my wife and to me the impression of latent genius. Will you see her and hear her, and then give me your opinion?'

'I would do much more for you, my dear friend,' replied Rosselin with a vague sense of reluctance. 'But I have seen so many of these maidens who dream of the stage—little, quiet, good girls, with mended stockings and holes in their umbrellas, thronging to the Conservatoire to pipe out "O sire! je vais mourir" or "Infame! croyez-vous," going away with their mothers like chickens under the hen's wing when a big dog is in the poultry-yard; falling in love with the student who gives them the *réplique*, keeping chocolate in their pockets to nibble at like little mice between the scenes; little good girls, some pretty, some ugly, some saucy, some shy, all of them as poor as church rats, all of them with hair-pins tumbling out of their braids—*j'en ai vu tant!* And hardly a spark of genius amongst them! When they have fine shoulders and big eyes, then their career is certain—in a way; when they have no figure at all and no complexion, then they go into the provinces and one hears no more of them; or, perhaps, they leave their illusions altogether at the Conservatoire, and take a place behind a counter. It is the prudent ones who do that: "*elles commencent où les autres finissent*." Some clever woman has said so before me. Is it not better to begin so? Why not get a little snug shop for Mademoiselle Bérarde from the first?'

Othmar moved impatiently.

'And the two or three who are better than the rest,' he asked; 'those whose lips the bees of Hymettus have really kissed?'

'My dear friend, you know how it is with these also,' sighed Rosselin: 'immense success, immense *insouciance*, immense enjoyment for the first few years; lovers like the leaves on the trees in midsummer; debts as numerous as the leaves; enormous sums thrown away like waste paper; beauty, health, power, all spent like a rouleau of gold in a fool's hand at Monte Carlo; and then the *dégringolade*, the apathy of the public, the indifference of the lovers, the persecution of the creditors whose ardour grows as hotly as that of the others cools, the infinite mortifications, humiliations, chagrins, disappointments; then the death from anæmia or from consumption, or the still worse end, which is a fifty-year-long obscurity: Sophie Arnould sweeping out her garret with a two-sous broom! Ah bah! Marry Mlle. Bérarde to one of your cashiers, and buy her a cottage at Neuilly.' [213]

'Do you suppose Desclée or Rachel would have married a clerk, and lived in a little house in the suburbs?' said Othmar with some impatience.

'Ah, who can say? Neither would have stayed with the clerk certainly,' replied Rosselin, lifting up the drooped stalk of one of his picotees and fastening it to its deserted stick. 'It is all a matter of chance and circumstance. Temperament goes for much, but accident counts for more, and opportunity for most. You say yourself, for instance, that Mlle. Bérarde might have lived and died on her island but for some careless words of Madame Nadine and an invitation to St. Pharamond. While we are young life is always inviting us somewhere, and we accept the invitations, without thinking whether they will lead us to Bicêtre or to a quiet cottage garden in our old age. *Allons donc!* Let us do our best to secure the garden and the sunshine for your little friend from the South. I need not assure you that you shall have my perfect honesty of opinion and my absolute discretion concerning her. Will you come into the house a moment? I picked up yesterday, at a bookstall, a precious little *bouquin*; nothing less than a copy of the "Terentii Comœdiæ" of 1552 by Roger Payne.'

Othmar went in and admired the *bouquin*, and stayed a few moments longer, while the evening grew duskier and the scent of the carnations and stocks and great cabbage-roses came richer and sweeter through the open windows into the small rooms, clean and cosy, and raised from the commonplace by the rare volumes which were gathered in them, and the fine pieces of porcelain standing here and there on their wooden shelves.

Then, promising to return on the morrow, he took his leave. Rosselin walked beside him down the little path to the gate. The sun had set and the skies were growing quite dark. The ripple of the Seine water under the sculls of a passing boat was audible in the stillness. From the distance there came the sounds of a violin, and some voices singing the postillions and travellers' chorus from the 'Manon Lescaut' of Massenet. [214]

Rosselin, left alone, leaned over his wooden gate between his acacia hedges, and listened to the voices dying away in the distance, and looked through the soft dusk to where his Paris lay.

'I wonder if he has told his wife?' he thought. 'If not—well, if not, perhaps Madame may not care. She has never cared, why should she care now?'

The interrogation had been on his lips more than once whilst Othmar had been with him, but his worldly wisdom had kept it back unspoken.

'*Entre l'arbre et l'écorce ne mettez pas le doigt*,' was an axiom of which he, so often the exponent of Sganarelle, knew the profound truth.

Aloud he added:

'Of course I will see her, and with the greatest pleasure. When and where?'

'I will take you to-morrow. I shall remain in Paris two days.'

'Then to-morrow I will await you. Do not think me a cynical and indifferent old hermit. If I dread to see youth throw itself into the river of fire which leads to fame, it is only because I have seen so many burned up in its course. I always advocate obscurity for women. Penelope is a much happier woman than Circe, though the latter is a goddess and a sorceress. Your protégée may become great only to die like Desclée, like Rachel. You would do her a greater service if you married her to one of your clerks, gave them a modest little house in the *banlieue*, and became sponsor to their first child. Though I have been a graceless artist all my life, I confess I hesitate at being the person to assist such a friendless creature as you describe to enter on a dramatic career. I have seen so many failures! By-the-bye, is she handsome?'

'She has beauty,' said Othmar a little coldly, because the question slightly confused and irritated him.

'It was a needless interrogation,' said Rosselin to himself. Even the chivalry of Othmar would have deemed it necessary to do so much for a plain woman.

When he went to Les Hameaux on the following day he saw her, heard her, studied her, stayed some two hours near her, now and then reciting to her himself, half a scene from 'Le Joueur,' a single speech from the 'Misanthrope,' a few lines of Feuillet, a few stanzas from the 'Odes et Ballades.'

'Oh, who are you?' she asked in transport, the tears of delight and admiration rising to her eyes.

'My dear,' answered Rosselin with a smile, which for once was sad, 'I am that most melancholy of all things—an artist who was once great and now is old?'

She took his hand with reverence and kissed it.

'*Va!*' said the man whom the world had adored, with a little laugh which had emotion it. '*Va!* Life is always worth living. The flowers always smell sweet and the sunshine is always warm. And so you, too, would be an artist, would you? Well, well! every spring there are young birds to fill the old nests.' [215]

When he left her he was long silent. When he at last spoke, he said briefly to Othmar: '*Elle a de l'avenir*.'

CHAPTER XXIX.

The day after Othmar went alone to the green shadows of the vale of Port-Royal. It was five o'clock in the afternoon when he reached there: he saw Damaris before she saw him; all her rural habits and associations had come to her in this leafy and rustic place; she rose with the sun and went to bed with it; she had recovered her colour and her strength; she assisted in the out-of-door work and rejoiced in it. As he drew near he saw her mowing a swath of the autumnal aftermath of the little field, the two watch dogs of Bonaventure, which he had bought and restored to her, lying near and watching her with loving eyes. Her arms, vigorous as a youth's and white as a swan's neck, were seen bare to the shoulder in the swaying sweep of the scythe; her hair was bound closely round her head, and its dark gold glistened in the sun. The veins in her throat stood out in the effort of the movement; the linen of her bodice heaved and fell. It was an attitude which Rude or Clésinger would have given ten years of their lives to reproduce in marble; it was the perfection of full and youthful female strength and health, teeming with all the promise of a perfect organisation, all the vitality which makes strong mothers of strong men.

It was womanhood; not the womanhood of the *mondaines*, delicate and fragile as a hothouse flower, pale from late hours or faintly tinted with the resources of art, serene and harmonious in tone, in charm, in manner, the most perfect of all the products of artificial culture; but womanhood as it was when the earth was young, and when life was simple and straight as a rod of hazel; womanhood buoyant, healthful, forceful, fearless; with limbs uncramped by fashion and beauty ignorant of art, living in the wind, in the water, in the grass, in the sun, like the dappled cattle and the strong-winged bird.

He watched her awhile, himself unseen. With what grace, yet with what vigour, she moved the scythe, sweeping round her in its wide semicircle, the long grass falling about her in green billows, with trails of bindweed and tall red heads of clover in it; beyond her, the blue sky and the pastoral horizon of the vast wheat-fields of La Beauce.

What would the hot, close, fevered pressure of life in the world give her that was half so good as that? How much better to dwell so, between the green grass and the wide sky, than to court the fickle homage and the fleeting loves of men! How much better if all her years could pass so on the peaceful breast of the kindly earth, living to lead her children out amongst the swaths of hay and teach them to love the lark's song and the face of the fields as she loved them! How much better to be Baucis than Aspasia!

Perhaps! but where was Philemon?

As the thoughts drifted through his mind she paused to whet her scythe, looked up, and saw him. With a smile that was as glad as sunshine in May weather she came towards him, leaping lightly over the hillocks of mown grass. She was happy to see him there. She felt no embarrassment for her bare arms and her kilted skirt; she had not been taught the immodesty of prudes.

'No, we will not go in the house,' he said to her when he had greeted her. 'Let us stay in your sweet-smelling meadow. Why are you mowing? Are there no mowers to do it?'

'I like doing it,' she answered; 'and it spares Madame Chabot the day's pay of a man. I can mow very well,' she added, with that pride in her pastoral skill which she had been imbued with on Bonaventure.

She walked on by his side through the little narrow spaces of mown ground which ran between the waves of the fallen grasses. She had pulled down her sleeves and taken the pins out of her skirt, and passed with her firm light tread and her uncovered head over the rough soil, with the afternoon sun in her eyes and on the rich tints of her face. It intensified the radiance of her colouring, as it did that of the scarlet poppies which were blowing here and there where the grass still stood uncut.

'What did he say of me?' she asked anxiously and wistfully, as Othmar walked on in silence beside her.

'He says you have not deceived yourself.'

'Ah!'—she drew a deep breath of relief—'I pleased him, then? And yet, when I heard him recite, it seemed to me that I could do nothing more than stutter and gabble foolishly; his voice was music ——'

'He has been a very great artist, and speech is to him as the flute to the flute-player: an instrument with which he does what he will. Yes, you pleased him, my dear. He thinks that you have in you the soul of an artist, the future of one if you choose.'

'Ah!' she laughed aloud for sheer happiness and triumph, in the joy and the pride of a child. It seemed to her the most exquisite glad tidings, the most superb success.

'He will even help you; he will train you himself; and whoever is trained by David Rosselin is in a certain sense secure of the public ear,' said Othmar with a reluctance which he felt was unjust to her, for if she possessed this power why should she be denied the knowledge of it? 'But,' he added slowly, 'I must warn you that even he, great artist as he has been, thinks as I think—that it is better to mow grass in the fresh air than to seek the suffrage of crowds in the gaslight. He thinks as I think, that, for a woman, the more secluded and sheltered be the path of life the happier and the better is it for her. This sounds very cold and cautious to you, no doubt; but it would be what every man of the world would tell you, who was honest with you, and had your welfare at heart.'

Her face changed and clouded as she heard him.

'Why?' she said abruptly.

He was silent. It was impossible to tell this child, who was as innocent as any one of the poppies blowing in the grass, all the reasons which made the future she coveted look to him like the open mouth of a furnace into which a white sea-bird was flying in its ignorance.

'Private life is the best life,' he said as she repeated, a little imperiously, her 'why?' 'It is the calmest, the simplest, the most screened from envy and hatred. I suppose tranquillity does not seem to you the one inestimable blessing which it really is. You are full of ardours and enthusiasms and longings, as the vines are full of sap in the springtime. You want the wine of life, because you do not know that the intoxication of it is always coupled with nausea, and fever, and unspeakable disgust. It is of no use saying this to you, because you are so young; but it is true. If I could compel your future, I would have it pass yonder, where, far away, we see that golden haze. There are the great wheat-lands of La Beauce, and the thrift and the peace and the abundance of a rich pastoral life. If you spent your little fortune on a farm there, with your love of country sights and sounds and ways, you would be happy; and you could take your choice from the many gallant youths who reap the harvests of those plains. You would be a rich demoiselle in La Beauce, but in the world of art you may be poor, my dear, for all your gifts from nature. We are poor, very poor, forever, when once we have failed.'

His own words sounded in his ears unkind, unsympathetic, harsh, and almost coarse; but he spoke as, it seemed to him, both experience and conscience made it duty to do. Damaris looked down on the shorn grass at her feet, and he saw her face and throat grow red.

'If I had wished to marry I would have married my cousin,' she said with a sound of anger and offence in her voice. 'Peasant life is good, very good. Perhaps, if I had never seen anything [218] different, it might have seemed always the best. But not now—not now——'

'But you do not know——.' He left his reply unfinished.

Standing in the green warm meadow, with the light of afternoon shed on it, and the golden haze of a late summer day on its horizon, his thoughts were full of all the many things in life of which she could imagine nothing. All the passions and pleasures and disgusts, all the desires and satisfactions and satieties, all the tumult and vanity and nausea and giddy haste of life in the world—what could she tell of these? She would be handsome and young and alone; what would that world not teach her in a year, a month, an hour? Self-consciousness first; then, with that knowledge, all else.

As, to her, having never known anything but the close limits of peasant life, the world which she did not know assumed the colours and the rejoicing of a vast borealis pageantry, so to him, by whom the world was known like an oft-read Virgil, it seemed that the safety, the quietude, the daily round of simple duties, undisturbed by ambition within or by contention from without, which the life of the peasant afforded, was a kind of happiness, a positive security from which any safe within it were ill-advised to wander.

Of all wretched creatures the *déclassée* seemed to him to be the most wretched. He had reproached his wife with the effort to make this child one of those pitiful anomalies, and he now reproached himself with doing the same unkindness.

Damaris was a *déclassée*; she could never more return to the order of life whence she had come. Ever since some indistinct glory for herself had been suggested to her by the thoughtless words of the great lady who had represented Fate to her, she had been haunted by the desire for an existence wholly unlike that to which she had been born and by which she had been surrounded. It had been only a very few hours which she had passed under the roof of St. Pharamond, but that short space had been long enough to make her conceive a world wholly inconceivable to her before, a world in which art and luxury were things of daily habit, in which leisure and loveliness and gaiety and ease were matters of course, like the coming and going of time, in which personal graces and personal charm were all cultured as the flowers were cultured under glass; in which even for her there might become possible the fruition of all manner of gorgeous indefinite visions, born out of the suggestions of poets and the phantasmagoria of romantic books—a world in which all she had humbly longed for, as she had listened to the nightingales in the orange thickets, would become visible to her and possessed.

She was a *déclassée*: not in the vulgar sense, but in the sadder meaning of a young life uprooted from its natural soil and filled with desires, aspirations, dreams, which made all that was actually [219] within her grasp valueless to her. That one night, in which she had seen around her the destinies which appeared to her like a tale of fairy-land, had impressed her imagination with indelible memories and her heart with ineffaceable wishes. He, who only saw in the life of his own world tedium, inanity, stupidity, extravagance, monotonous repetition, could not guess what enchantment its externals had worn to her. He, who was tired of the unvaried paths of that garden of pleasure whose habitués only see that in it 'grove nods to grove, each alley has its fellow,' could not divine what a paradise it had looked to this young waif and stray, who had been only able to catch one glimpse of its beauties through the golden bars of its shut gates. To him her wish for the world appeared the most pathetic of errors, the most pitiable of blunders, a very madness of unwise choice. Had not the world been with him always, and what had it given him? Possibly it had in reality given him much more than he remembered: it had given him culture with all its charms, and courtesy with all its graces; it had given him the great powers which lie in wealth, and the great light which shines from knowledge. But then he was so used to these he counted them not, and the world only wore to him the aspect of a monster devouring all leisure,

all simplicity, all repose, driving all mankind before it in a breathless chase of swiftly escaping hours; and to her this monster would be ravenous as a wolf, cruel as it could never be to any man! It would take everything from her, and only give her in return worthless gifts of ruinous passions, of consuming fevers, of poisoned fruits, of fierce desires.

It seemed to him as if he saw some young child coming gaily through the grasses, clasping all unconscious to its breast a mass of smoking dynamite, and deeming it a kindly playfellow.

And it was impossible to warn her in words brutal enough to scare her from her purpose. He could not say to her, 'Men are beasts, and women are worse: there are hideous pleasures, hateful appetites, cruel temptations, of which you know nothing, but which will all crowd on your knowledge and grow to your taste, once you are in the midst of them. The world will embrace you, but as the bull embraced the Christian maiden forced to appear as Pasiphaë in the circus of Nero. Be wise while there is time. Stay in the clean, clear daylight of a country life. Its paths are narrow and few, they only lead from the hearth to the door, from the door to the brook or the mill; but you may walk in them safe and content, and teach your children to follow your steps. Peace of mind is the sweetest thing upon earth; but it is like the wood-sorrel, it only grows in shady, quiet, homely places. No one has it in the world.'

But he thought these thoughts, and did not say them. He looked at her standing with dew-wet feet amongst the seeding grasses, the warm fresh air about her, the blue sky above, and he thought of her in the atmosphere of a supper-room in Paris, with the smoke, and the perfumes, and the odours of the wines, and beside her men with swimming lascivious eyes, and *drôlesses* with flushed faces and indecent gestures. He would not take her there, but others would.

She raised her head suddenly and looked at him.

'What are you afraid of for me?' she said suddenly. 'There is nothing to be afraid of. If I fail I fail; I have enough always to live on, you say; and if I succeed——'

'Failure will not hurt you,' he said coldly; 'success may.'

'How can success hurt one unless one be very vain or very weak? I do not think I am vain, and I know I am strong.'

'My dear—you can go from the meadows to the world if you will, but remember you cannot come back from the world to the meadows.'

'Why? Did not many come from the world to Port-Royal when it stood yonder?'

'Yes; they came with sick hearts, with defeated hopes, with aching wounds, with disappointed passions; but they never stood in the green pastures, in the morning of life, again.'

There was a sigh in the words which brought them home to her heart with a sudden sense of all their meaning.

She was mute while the little crickets in the stalks of the hay grass sung their last little song of one note, which would soon end with the end of their tiny lives.

'You are not happy yourself?' she said after awhile. Astonishment and regret were in the question.

Othmar hesitated. His sincerity combated the negative, which a vague sense of loyalty to one absent made him desirous to utter.

'No one after a certain age is happy, my dear,' he answered evasively. 'Illusions are happiness; and in the world which you think must be a fairy tale, we lose them very quickly.'

'I should have thought you were happy,' she said regretfully; that splendid pageantry of life of which she had seen a glimpse seemed to her magical, marvellous, inexhaustible.

'I did not think *she* was,' she added, with that directness and candour which made her great unlikeness to all of her sex whom he had ever known.

'Why?' he asked abruptly; the supposition annoyed him.

'She looked tired, and as if she were looking for something she did not find.'

The accuracy and divination in the words surprised him. How had this child, who had never before seen any woman of the world, guessed so accurately the perpetual vague desire and as vague dissatisfaction which had always gone with the soul of his wife as a shadow goes through brilliant light?

All her life long Nadège had found the old saw true, familiarity had bred contempt in her; custom had made wisdom seem foolishness, wit seem prose, amusement become tedium, and interest change to apathy. Intimate knowledge of anything, of anyone, had always altered each for her, as the fairy gold changed in mortal hands to withered leaves.

It was no fault of hers; it was not even mere inconstancy of temper; it was rather due to the infinitude of her inexhaustible expectations and the microscopic penetration of her intelligence. The world was small to her as to Alexander.

He knew that neither to her nor to himself had their life together been that poem, that passion, that harmony which they—or he at least—had imagined that it would be. But was not this due only to that doom of human nature which they shared in common with all the rest of mankind? Was it not merely the effect of that lassitude and vague disappointment which must follow on the indulgence of every great passion, simply because in its supreme hours it reaches heights of rapture at which nothing human can remain?

Yet, however his philosophy may explain it, to have any other imagine that he does not render a woman who belongs to him perfectly contented with him always irritates and offends every man. It is a suspicion cast on his powers, his loyalty, and his good sense: it indirectly accuses him of deficiency in attraction or of feebleness of character. Othmar had but little vanity; no more than human nature naturally possesses in its unconscious forms of self-love; but the little he had was mortified by this child's observation. She, ignorant of all the fine intricacies of emotion which are the traits of such highly-cultured and over-refined temperaments as were theirs, could only say, in her simple and inadequate language, that they seemed to her 'not happy.' It was not the phrase which expressed what they lacked; it was too homely, too crude, too direct, to describe the complicated world-weariness of which they both suffered the penalties, the innumerable and conflicting sentiments and desires which made of their lives a continual vague expectation and as vague and continual a regret. But her young eyes, unused as they were to read anything less clear than the open language of sea and sky, and ignorant of the whole meaning of psychological analysis, had yet been able to perceive the shadow of this which she had had no power of understanding.

He was surprised at her penetration, whilst he wondered uneasily if the world in general, so much keener of sight and more bitter of tongue than she, saw as much as she saw. The idea that it might be so was unwelcome to him. The supposition was horrible to him that the great passion of his life had gone the way of most great passions which are exposed to that most cruel of all slow destroyers—familiarity; familiarity which is as the mildew to the wheat, as the sirdax to the fir-tree, as the calandra to the sugar-cane. He loathed to realise the fact, or think of it in any way; and when it was placed before him by another's observation, he saw his own soul, as it were in a mirror, and detested what he saw. [222]

He answered with some constraint: 'I have told you, my dear, that happiness is the fruit of illusions; it cannot exist without them any more than we could have that beautiful haze yonder without water in the atmosphere. Besides, in the world, people are only content so long as they are of completely frivolous characters. My wife has cultivated her intelligence and her wit too exquisitely to be capable of that sort of coarse and common satisfaction with things as they are which is so easy to mediocre minds.'

'Yet you advise *me* to be content?'

'My dear child, you are young, you are accustomed to an out-of-door life, you have the felicity of belonging to country things and country thoughts which give you a storehouse full of sunny memories. My wife is a *mondaine* (if you have ever heard that word) who is also a pessimist and a metaphysician. Life presents many intricate problems to her mind which will, I hope, never trouble your joyous acceptance of it as it is. Fénelon, I assure you, was a happier man than Lamennais.'

'Because he was a stupider one.'

'Stupid? No, but simpler, cast in a different mould, naturally inclined to faith, averse to speculation, taking things as he found them without question. That is the cast of mind of all men and women who are made to be happy.'

She was silent; wishfully thinking of those immense fields of knowledge shut out from her own eyes like the aerial spheres of unseen suns and planets which the unassisted sight can never behold. She felt childish, ignorant, made of dull and common clay.

The bells of a little distant spire sounded for Vespers. The sun was sinking beyond the edge of the wide green plain. A deeper stillness was stealing over the meadow and the low coppices which made its boundaries. Birds, looking grey in the shadows, flew low, to and fro, restlessly, in that uncertain flight with which, near nightfall, they always seek a resting-place for the dark hours.

Othmar looked at his watch. 'I must leave you or I shall miss the train to Paris, and I go to-night to Russia.'

She changed colour.

'To Russia! That is very far away!'

'It does not seem so in these days. One sleeps and wakes and sleeps again, and one is there. If you want me in any way, write to me at the Paris house and they will forward your letter. Rosselin will come to see you to-morrow. He will tell you, as no one else can, all you will have to prepare for and encounter if you choose the life of an artist. Do not decide too hastily. There is no hurry. I like best to think of you in these safe pastures.' [223]

'But the winter will come to them and—some time—to me?'

'It is far enough off you, at least, to be forgotten. Well, listen to Rosselin and be guided by your own impulses; they are the only safe guides in such a choice as this. I dare say the world will win you; the world always does. It is only in fable that Herakles goes with Pallas. Adieu.'

She grew very pale, and the light had gone out of her face as it had now gone off the landscape.

'You will come back soon?' she asked.

Othmar resisted a wave of tenderness and pity which passed over him.

'Not very soon,' he answered. 'You know I have many occupations, and the world I warn you against is always with me, alas! I shall never be able to see you often, my dear, for—for—very many reasons; but whenever you really need me, write to me without hesitation, and always depend upon the sincerity of my regard.'

She did not reply. She stood motionless. With the coming of the evening shadows there had came a great chillness, a sense of loss upon her, as if she had been suddenly brought from the warm green meadows of the vale of Chevreuse into the awful silence and whiteness and frozen solitude of a winter's night in Siberia.

'Write to me,' said Othmar again. With a gentle movement he stooped and kissed her on the soft thick waves of hair which fell over her forehead.

Then he left her.

She remained standing in the same place and the same attitude, her feet in the mown grass growing wet with dew, her head bent like a statue of meditation. The caress had been gentle, slight, passionless, like a kiss to a child; but her face and bosom had grown hot with blushes which the evening shadows veiled, and a strange vague joy and pain strove together in her.

CHAPTER XXX.

It was eight o'clock in the evening on the plains of Russia, and warm with that Asiatic heat which comes with the reign of the dog-star even to the provinces that lie between the Baltic waters and the Ural snows. In the vast gardens and white wide courts of the house at Zaraïla the evening was sultry, and Nadège, spending a few dull days in her annual visit to her elder children and their estates, was lying half asleep upon a couch, listening to the monotonous drip of the lion-fountain in the central court, and thinking of nothing in especial. This visit had always represented to her supreme and unmitigated tedium. It was a duty to come there no doubt; her duties were docile courtiers as a rule and seldom troubled her; but it was tiresome, infinitely tiresome, it was so much time lost out of the sum of her life. Why is duty never agreeable? [224]

The Napraxine children were in their own apartments; the clear sunny evening, whose light would stretch almost to dawn, illumined the gardens and terraces. She reclined motionless upon her broad low couch, with a little cigarette between her lips, now and then sending into the air around her delicate rings of rose-scented smoke. The mother of Platon Napraxine, a woman old and austere, with the terrible austerity of women who have loved pleasure and passion, and only turned to devotion when both have deserted them, sat near and watched her with dark, brooding, sunken eyes, full of a hate which the object of it was too indifferent and too careless to care for or to measure.

The Princess Lobow Gregorievna, born a Princess Miliutine, was a woman who had been handsome, but had now lost nearly all trace of past beauty. She was spare, colourless, and attenuated, and her severe, straight profile, and her expression of ascetic rigidity, gave her a curious likeness to those Byzantine portraits of St. Anne and of St. Elizabeth which were surrounded with jewels and relics on the altars of her private chapel. Her piety in old age was as complete and absorbing as her licentious amours had been in her earlier womanhood. Superstition had taken the same empire over her in age which her passions had possessed previously; and she was as extravagant in her donations to church and convent as she had once been to the impecunious officers of the guard and princely gamblers, who had been in turn favoured with her fantastic and short-lived preference. Her religious and most orthodox fervour was neither a mask nor an hypocrisy. It was the most genuine of all religions—that which is founded on personal fear. But it intensified the hardness of her temper, and never whispered to her that mercy might be holier than long prayers.

In all Europe Othmar and his wife had no enemy colder, harder, more implacable than this holy woman, whose name meant Love, and whose good works were seen in endowed convents, jewelled reliques, mighty treasures bestowed all over her province, and ceremonials, fasts, and penances of the orthodox most rigidly observed in her person. Nadège never tried to conciliate or propitiate her grim foe; she was at once too careless and too courageous. With her delicate and unsparing raillery she had stung this enmity with many a barbed word, subtle and negligent and penetrating, accentuated with the cruel sweet music of her laughter, until the hatred with which the Princess Lobow hated her was deep as the Volga, though hidden like the Volga's bottomless holes so long as Platon Napraxine had lived. His death had given it justification, and intensified it a thousandfold. [225]

'If she were a good woman she would be compelled to hate me,' thought the object of her hate. 'And being what she is, if she could poison me secretly she would do it, even in the blessed bread itself.'

When they had first met after her marriage with Othmar, there had been said between them such words as are ineffaceable on the memory like vitriol flung on the face.

'For the first time in my life I have allowed myself to be in a rage; *je me suis encanaillée!*' she had said to herself, penitent not for the anger into which she had been driven, but for the force with which she had uttered it, which was an offence against her canons of good taste.

The earlier years of the Princess Lobow had been dedicated to all those refined ingenuities of depravity in which the nineteenth century can rival the Rome of Vitellius and the Constantinople of the Byzantine emperors. There were terrible facts in her past, ready, like so many knives, to the use of her opponent, allusions which could pierce like steel, and could scar like flame. Nadège had spared none of them. With all the pitiless disdain of a woman in whom the senses have but very faint power, she had poured out her scorn on the other, whose senses had been her tyrants until, virtuous perforce through the chills of age, she had taken her worthless withered soul to God.

Since that time the bitterest enmity had been open and avowed between them. Concession to the world, and regard to the dead man's memory, caused them to still keep up a show and aspect of conventional politeness before others. But the polished surface covered the most bitter feud. They were studiously ceremonious and courteous one to the other; but beneath the few phrases they exchanged, often trivial and apparently amiable as these might be, there were a hint, a tone, a meaning which told to each of the other's undying animosity. To the younger woman it was a matter of pure indifference, of careless amusement; her nature was too capricious and too disdainful to cherish deep enmities; she despised rather than she disliked; but to the elder this hatred she cherished was the last flickering flame of the many hot passions which had governed her in earlier years. For her only son she had had a concentrated intensity of affection, into which all the ambition, cupidity, and love of dominion in her character had been united. His marriage had been hateful to her, and when Nadine, in her sixteenth year, as fragile as an orchid and as impertinent as Cherubino, petulantly detesting the husband they had given her, and in the [226]

bitterness of her disillusions at war with all the world, was brought in the first months of her marriage to the great house of Zaraïla, the Princess Lobow had seen in her not only the despoiler of her own power, but the ruin of her son.

Many and violent had been the scenes between Platon Napraxine and herself, of which his wife was the object and the cause.

'She is a crystal of ice, you say,' she told him a hundred times. 'Well, she will so chill your heart one day that it will be numb for ever. Remember that; I warn you.'

He did remember when he went out to his death in the dawn of the April morning at Versailles.

Whilst he lived his mother's hatred for his wife was impotent and perforce mute; but all the many slights, the constant indifference, the frequent ridicule of which he was the object, though unperceived or forgiven by him, were written on his mother's memory indelibly as on tablets of stone. All the coquetries and scandals which were associated with his wife's name, all the tragedies for which the breath of her world made her responsible, all the cruel words and strange caprices which were attributed to her, were gathered up and treasured by the Princess Lobow. Seldom leaving her solitudes in the provinces, and seldom seen even in Petersburg, she yet was as accurately informed of all the gossip of Europe concerning her daughter-in-law as though she had lived perpetually beside her. None of the minutiæ of the vaguest rumours about her escaped the vigilance of her enemy. Saint though she was, she prayed passionately that some imprudence greater than usual, some coquetry which would pass beyond the patience of her husband and her world, would deliver Nadège Federowna into her hands, but she waited in vain. The indulgence of both the world and the husband was inexhaustible for one to whom they were both of the most absolute insignificance.

Then one day, as falls a bolt from a clear sky, a single line by the electric wires told her that her son was dead.

In her eyes he was murdered by his wife, as surely as though she had touched his lips with poison.

Her grief and her rage were terrible: the more terrible because the hatred which might have assuaged it had no outlet in action, could scarce have any in speech.

For Platon Napraxine had left his young sons wholly in the hands of their mother, and she could take them whither she would, and do with them whatever she chose; and the elder woman, who had transferred to them all that jealous and violent attachment which she had given their father, concealed all she felt that she might retain them near her, whilst the secretiveness and ruses of the Slav temperament made it possible for her to continue in apparent friendship before the world with one whom she looked on as his destroyer. [227]

She sat now erect on an antique chair of gilded and painted leather, and through her dropped eyelids watched the indolent attitude, the profound idleness, the outstretched limbs, like those of a reposing Diana, of the woman she loathed. In all the attitude, from the *sans gêne* and complete ease of it to the little rose-scented puffs of smoke which ever and again came from her parted lips, there was that 'note of modernity' which beyond all other things the Princess Lobow detested. The women of her time had been as licentious as the great Catharine herself, but they had been different to the *cocodettes* in manner, in mind, in opinion, in everything. They had been like fierce Oriental empresses, often barbarous, uncleanly, gross, but they had had a stateliness which all their excesses could not impair. The modern woman of the world, with her careless attitudes, her mockery of all ceremonial, her disrespect for tradition and etiquette, her airy scepticism, and her vague dissatisfaction, was, wherever she was met with, an enigma and an affront to the elder woman, whose own life had been divided between strong vices and strong faiths, and whose bigotry and whose sensuality had been of equal force. They had neither senses nor souls, these poor modern *anémiques*, thought this woman of seventy years, who had been a Messalina and who had become a St. Katherine.

'Ah, you despise us, madame; how right you are!' Nadège had said to her once. 'We never know what we wish, and when we get what we ask for, we are as irritated as when it is denied to us. It is the fault of all culture—it creates discontent and fastidiousness as surely as civilisation brings all kinds of new diseases. I only wish that we could be like our granddames and godmothers, who had no earthly ideals beyond a constant succession of big officers of cuirassiers, and no mental doubt whatever as to the existence of a "bon Dieu." It must have simplified life so much to have been able to balance the little weakness for the succession of cuirassiers with such a perfect confidence in Heaven!'

At this moment in the summer evening at Zaraïla neither of them were speaking. They had exchanged many cruel, courteous innuendoes in the course of the day, but with the evening there had come a tacit truce. The little boys were wholly under the power of their mother as their guardian, and their grandmother feared that if she were too much irritated she might remove them from Zaraïla or request her to leave it. Nadine, on her side, had thought, with a sense of compassion and that disdainful but candid justice which was seldom wanting in her: 'After all, as she loved that poor, big, clumsy fellow so well, and he was her only son—the only thing she had—it is pardonable, it is natural, that she should hate me for ever.' [228]

It grew late, but it was still light with the long and radiant evening of the north in summer. She, in the drowsy heat of the eventide, looked with still dreamy eyes out on to the sultry gardens beneath, where golden evening light was poured on endless aisles and fields of roses, and groves of feathery bananas and plumed palms; the vegetation of the vales of Kashmere made by art to

blossom there for the brief season of a Russian summer.

'How very foolish women are to fear absence,' she thought. 'Absence is the only possible avenue which can lead us to find the *fontaine de jouvence* of renewed interest. Familiarity is so fatal—so fatal! Helen's self would be unable to hold her own against it. Those silly women who let the man they love enter their chamber as easily as he can go into his racing stables, set a great grey ghost of indifference at the threshold. Most women are afraid of not being near what they love. If they only knew how distance helps them; how constant proximity hurts them! If Love cannot keep a few surprises in his pocket, he is as tiresome as a newspaper a week old.'

She laughed a little, watching the leaves of a full-blown rose fall under the touch of an alighting bird.

'When it has once been full-blown,' she thought, 'any touch—even a bird's, even a butterfly's—will serve to finish it for ever.'

Love was so like that great crimson rose, which a moment before had been a cup of ruby-coloured fragrance, and now was a mere litter of dropped leaves upon the grass. Love lives by its emotions, its desires, its illusions: so long as these can be excited and sustained it is Love; when they cannot be so, it is as the Spanish poet said centuries ago, habit, friendship, what you will, but not Love any more.

She had studied the natures of men too profoundly not to know this.

There was the sound of wheels in the central court, and various doors opened and shut in the apartments leading to the grand salon where they were. Then the groom of the chambers, in his black uniform, only relieved by his silver chain of office and the key embroidered on his collar, preceded and announced Othmar.

Nadine half rose, leaning on one arm on the cushion.

'My dear Otho, this is charming of you! I did not expect you until to-morrow,' she said, with a smile of welcome, as she put out her left hand to him. Othmar kissed her fingers with warmth and deference, then saluted with ceremony the Princess Lobow.

'I came from Moscow more quickly than I could have hoped to do,' he said, as he seated himself beside his wife. 'An Imperial train was leaving for the north, and the Grand Duke Alexis offered me a place in it. Are you well? It is three months and more since we met.' [229]

'I am as well as it is ever permitted one to be in a century in which the nerves play the most prominent rôle. And the children?'

'Perfectly well, and perfectly happy. They are not yet at the age of nerves. But I have telegraphed all news to you; there is nothing left to say, except that absence——'

'Oh, do not make me compliments like a *berger d'éventail*! We will take all that for granted.'

The reproof to him was the same sort of mockery with which she had been always wont to repress the attempts at tenderness of Napraxine; but his mother, listening, heard the difference in the accent, and watching, saw the difference in the smile with which they were spoken.

'The wanton!' she thought bitterly; 'she expected him to-night, though she said not till to-morrow. It was for him, that attitude like a *Diane endormie*, that coquette's disarray, that studied disorder of laces and gauzes, that little bouquet of heliotrope fastened just above the left breast! Oh, the beast, the beast! All that belonged to my son—every atom of it, from her little ear to her slender foot, and should have been burnt with him, like the Indian women, if I could have had my way—should have been buried with him, like his stars and his crosses. Oh, the beast, the beast! if I could only wring her neck!'

Then she rose, and murmuring some words inaudible and indifferent to her companions, she left the apartment. Othmar, alone beside his wife in the aromatic warmth of the summer evening, bent over her couch and kissed her little bouquet of heliotrope.

'*Allons, berger!*' she cried, with a little resistance which was not displeasure.

It pleased her that she had the power to make her husband her lover; that she could still see him moved to the *folies des bergers*. It was a point of vanity with her, as well as an impulse of the heart, to retain something of that empire over him which had once been so absolute. When she should wholly cease to be able to do so, it seemed to her that she would be grown old indeed. She had never put more coquetry, more sorcery, more art concealed by art into her efforts to blind and enslave her lovers, than she had done that evening when she was awaiting Othmar after three months' absence. It might not be the highest form of love, but it was the ablest. It was of a piece with that magic by which Cleopatra defied time, and changed the ravages of habit into philtres of fresh charm.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Othmar did not tell her that night of Damaris.

With daylight he remembered uneasily that it was a story which should be told. A certain nervousness came over him whenever he thought of her possible, her probable, laughter, the incredulity as to his motives which she would be sure, out of mirth, to affect if she were too unlike other women to in seriousness entertain it. He recalled the tone with which she had spoken of his escort of the girl to her island, and he shrank from hearing the same tone again. He felt that, if heard, it would anger him unreasonably, perhaps move him to the utterance of that kind of words which are most fatal to friendship, harmony, or love.

The lovely *Diane endormie*, who had received him with so sweet a smile, could, when aroused, select and speed arrows from her quiver which could pierce deep and rankle long.

It seemed to him impossible to tell her that for weeks his house had been the home of Damaris Bérarde without awaking all those ironies and all that disdain which were always so very near the surface in her nature that they were displayed upon the slightest provocation. He would certainly seem to her to have behaved with needless exaggeration, with uncalled-for chivalry. Paris was wide enough to furnish other asylums than his own house; his means were large enough and powerful enough to have obtained friends for a desolate girl without becoming her chief friend himself. Away from the pathos and charm of Damaris's fate, of her perfect trust in himself, and of her childish courage and candour of character, what he had done seemed even to him, himself, unnecessarily personal in its care of her. He did not regret it; he would not have done less if he had had to do it again; yet he was conscious that to induce his wife to see his actions in the light in which he honestly saw them would be difficult, probably impossible.

This day drifted by, and another, and another; and the name of Damaris did not pass his lips.

She had for him the sanctity of innocence, of youth, and of supreme misfortune; he felt that he could not trust himself to have her made the target for the silver arrows of his wife's wit. True, there might be moments in which she would be so compassionate and generous, that the calamities of the child whom she had tempted from her safe solitudes would find in her a frank and generous friend. But Othmar knew women too well not to know that she would only have been so had he himself had nothing to do with the fate of this waif and stray; if she, and not himself, had found her adrift in the streets of Paris.

'She would doubt my motives and ridicule my endeavours,' he thought, and the fear of her slight, chill laughter was strong upon him. He knew that she would be unsparing in her sarcasms upon himself, even if she should chance to feel any remnant of her momentary interest in the future Desclée of her prophecies. [231]

He could not forget the coldness and scorn with which she had treated his regret and remorse at Amyôt; he could not forget the aching sense of loneliness and loss with which she had allowed him to leave her presence on the night when he had told her of the little verses which he had found in the closed chambers of Yseulte. He almost resented with a sense of weakness and unworthiness in himself, the empire which she possessed over his senses, the self-oblivion into which she had the power to draw him when she chose.

He was sensible that he lost all dignity in her eyes, because he was so willing to forgive, so easy to be recalled, so spaniel-like in his too meek acceptance of her slights, and too eager gratitude for her capricious tenderness.

The first hours passed of that dominion which she could always exercise over him at will, the sense of his own weakness returned to him with humiliation. He was conscious that he must appear unmanly and feeble to her, since he allowed her to play with him thus at her whim and pleasure. At Amyôt she had been unkind, disdainful, contemptuous; if he condoned her cruelty, and accepted her commands, did he not seem to her no higher than the Siberian greyhound which it was her fancy one moment to adorn and caress, and which the next was abandoned and forgotten?

He knew that a lover may obey the varying shades of his mistress's temper without unmanliness, but that in marriage such humility and obedience on the man's side are fatal to his peace and self-respect. If he had had the strength of character from the first to resist her influence, and enforce his own, he might have had empire over her; now he felt that he would never gain it, that on her side alone was all that immense power of command, and of superiority, which in human love always remains with the one who loves least. He had too long allowed her to treat him as she treated her hawk in the falconry-parties at Amyôt, whistling the bird to her wrist and casting it off down the wind with wanton unstable fancies, for him now to take that place in her esteem, and that dignity in her sight, which he had lost through his too fond and too submissive idolatry of her. He had only of late grown conscious of this, and the sudden perception of his own error was full of bitterness and useless regret.

'He resents the power I have over him,' she thought, 'and he is thinking of something which he does not say.'

She had never expected him to vary with her varying moods. When she was cold, she had always seen him unhappy; when she had chided his warmth, he had always remained her adorer. That any shadow from her own indifference which had fallen like night across the paths of others should ever touch herself, seemed to her impossible, intolerable, almost grotesque; that she could ever cease to be his sun and moon, his planet, and his fixed star, seemed to her as [232]

improbable as that the earth would cease to revolve.

Her philosophic wit had indeed predicted the time when the fate which overtakes all passion would overtake his, and end it, but in her inmost soul that time had seemed to her remote as death itself. From the time when his eyes had first met hers, she had had complete and undisputed mastery over his life; she had dominated his fancy, filled his imagination, ruled over his destiny, and held empire over his senses. More than once she had told herself, as she had told him, that in the common course of human life and human nature this would change and cease some day, but in her own heart she had never realised what her lips had said.

Men had seldom changed to her. They had met tragic ends for her sake or through her name, or they had given up their lives to celibate indifference to all other women, as Gui de Béthune had done; but they had seldom or never, having once loved her, loved others; seldom or never learned to meet her tranquilly in the world as one who had become naught to them. The philtre poured out by her cool white hand had been of that rare flavour which makes all other beverages tasteless. Even Platon Napraxine, although her husband, had yet retained for her such utter devotion in his slow, rude, mute nature, that he had hungered for a rose from her bosom the night before he had gone out to be shot like a dog for her sake.

Of the mortification of waning ardour, of the slow sad change from fervour to apathy, of the great *débâcle* of all passion which so many women watch with hopeless and sinking hearts, as poor peasants of Alpine valleys watch the melting snow and stealing floods sweep away their homesteads—of these she had known nothing; known no more than the reigning and honoured sovereign knows of exile and dethronement. Now she was conscious of it, of the first slight imperceptible chillness of feeling, even as she had been conscious of what no other eyes than hers saw; the first faint change in her own beauty like the film of breath on a mirror. It was very slight, rather negative than positive, rather told by what was lacking than by what was present; a shadow of fatigue, an absence of eagerness, a forced attention, an accent of constraint, slender, vague, intangible things all; yet apparent and eloquent to her quick intelligence, to her supreme knowledge of human nature.

They affected her with a strange sense of offence, of astonishment, of irritation. She had a sudden impression of loss, as of one who, having carelessly swung in his hand, without remembering it, a jewel of value, discovers with a shock of surprise that his hand is empty, and his treasure dropped in some crowded street, its fall unheard, its loss only told by its absence.

Always, hitherto, after any separation he had returned to her with the impassioned enthusiasm of a lover; the hours had been long to him without her near presence, and all the warmth of early passion had accompanied his return to or his welcome of her. She had often chilled him, checked him, laughed at him, left him vexed, dissatisfied, and chafing, but the ardour on his side had never been less. Men had called him uxorious, and he had been careless of their ridicule; he had only lived for her. Now, for the first time, a chill had come, as sometimes in a summer night, in those still grass plains of Russia, there would steal through the hot, fragrant air a breath of ice-cold wind, and then those skilled to read the forecast of the weather would say to one another: 'Lo! the frost is near.'

She was as skilled in the weather of the human heart as the peasants were in that of the earth and skies; and she failed not to read its presage aright. With all her arrogance she had always had that kind of humility which comes from great intelligence and self-comprehension; part of her contempt for her many lovers had arisen from her candid estimate of herself, as not worth so much covetousness, despair, and dispute. All the flatteries she had been saturated with all her life had left her brain cool, and had never warped her estimate of herself. She would see coldness take the place of idolatry with the same philosophic consciousness of its inevitability with which she contemplated the certainty of age overtaking her upon the road of life if she continued to live. Long before their approach she had reasoned out the surety of the arrival of both, sure as the surety of winter to the Russian plains. But still, nature shrinks and withers before winter. Who can welcome it as they welcome summer?

With the inherent instinct of contradiction common to all human nature she, who had nine times out of ten evaded his caresses and repulsed his affections, was angered and felt defrauded of her own because for once her power over him in a measure failed in the exercise of its magnetism. To find thoughts which occupied his mind to her exclusion was something so strange, so new, that it disturbed all her philosophic serenity, and with that quick divination of the motives of men with which her experience and her penetration supplied her, she wondered if it were in truth only the memory of that poor dead woman which had changed his manner and chilled his caresses, or if it were some fresh and living influence?

A certain cold contempt succeeded her anger as this possibility suggested itself.

If he were like other men, after all? Well—why not? Would she care greatly? She did not know. All she was conscious of at the moment was that sense of astonishment, of affront, of loss, with which a woman feels for the first time that her power over any man has had its fullest sway, and has begun to decline and waste.

It was a sensation she had never experienced before, and it displeased her that she should be capable of feeling it.

'As if I were Jeannette and he were Jeanôt!' she thought with disdain for so *bourgeois* an emotion.

But it recalled to her sharply, painfully, what the world never had recalled to her hitherto; that the time must come to her, no less than to others, when her empire over all men would cease,

when its sceptre would pass to other hands. It is a knowledge which hurts with the humiliation of dethronement every woman who has ever reigned.

There was nothing said by either which had the least actual coldness or offence in it: yet the sense of offence and coldness was between them, and many times he smarted under some such touch of ridicule or of reproof from her as had used to make Platon Napraxine stand like a chidden schoolboy before her. He was neither so blunt of nerve nor so dull of comprehension as Napraxine had been; and he had an impatient revolt of compromised dignity when he became the target for his wife's delicate and cruel ironies. True, he knew they were a part of her temper; as natural to her as its talon to the falcon, as its pungent odour to the calycanthus. He did not attribute too serious a meaning to them, knowing that her lips were often merciless when her heart was kind. Yet they irritated and estranged him. No man likes to feel that his character is lessened or his opinions regarded with indifference by the woman before whom he most desires to stand in a fair if not an heroic light.

'My dear Otho,' she said a little irritably one day when he had answered her with wandering attention, 'you are very pensive and *distrait* since you came to Russia. What have you been doing in the solitudes of a Parisian summer? You look as if you had been writing an epic and had failed in it.'

'Death is never gay or agreeable,' said Othmar; 'and I have been in its company.'

'My dear, when death does not come until our friends are over eighty, surely we can see his approach without surprise or any very great regret. Besides, I never knew that Baron Friederich was remarkably sympathetic to you. You used to quarrel with him about most things. But you have such a curious waywardness in always regretting, when they are dead, the absence of the very persons you most wished away from you when they were living.' [235]

Othmar shrank a little from the words, as though they hurt him physically. They were true enough to be painful.

'Perhaps one knows their value too late,' he said, controlling with effort a strong impatience of her want of sympathy and her unkind and careless amusement at his expense.

'Or perhaps we imagine a value in them they never possessed,' she replied. 'That is far more probable. Distance lends enchantment to the view of them—at least it does with such temperaments as yours, which are always self-tormenting and given to idealising both things and people. When the persons are living, to ruffle and weary and contradict you, you only think what bores they are; but when they are dead you begin to idealise them, and sacrifice yourself to their manes in all kinds of self-censure. It is a very morbid way of taking life. I hope your son will not resemble you in that particular.'

'It is to be hoped, for his comfort, that he will rather resemble his mother in the art of immediate and complete oblivion of both the dead and the living,' said Othmar, with an irritation which was almost ill-temper, and a retort which passed the limits of courtesy.

He had never felt so strong an annoyance as he felt now at her ironical and slighting treatment of his thoughts and feelings; so great an impatience of that tranquil and contemptuous method of regarding life which never varied in her, and which would never vary, it seemed to him, even before his own dead body. Before it he felt that fatigue which human eyes feel when long in the radiance of electric light. He longed for simple sympathy, simple consolation, simple affection, as the tired eyes long for rest in cool shadows of dusky dewy eves in summer woods, and he was ill at ease with himself for what he concealed from her.

Yet, he thought, of what use would it be to tell her of that poor child at Les Hameaux? She would have no pity certainly, probably no patience, with what would seem to her the most absurdly romantic course of adventures. She would ridicule him as she ridiculed him now—if she believed him; and very likely she would not even do that.

She looked at him under the languid lids of her dreamy eyes: eyes so calm, so indifferent, so mysterious, so satirical in their survey of him as of all mankind.

'My dear friend,' she said, with a little contempt and a little rebuke in her tone, 'it seems to me that we are very nearly—quarrelling! Nothing is so vulgar as to quarrel. I have never done it in my life. It is a great waste of time; and nothing can be more *bourgeois*. I have never understood why people should quarrel; it is so very easy to walk away!'

Therewith she rose and walked towards the open doors, with that undulating movement of the hips and beautiful ease and grace of step for which she was renowned through Europe; no woman's walk was comparable to hers. [236]

Othmar remained standing where he was, and looked after her with a sombre and regretful glance, in which some of the old worship and passion lingered, united to a new-born anger and offence. The mortification which lies for any man of intelligence and feeling in the sense that he has never really touched and held the soul of the woman of whose physical possession he has been master, was upon him in a strong and cruel sense of moral failure and of intellectual impotence. Was it his fault or hers? Was it true, as he had said once to her, that you cannot obtain more from any nature than it possesses, and that all the forces of created life cannot draw fire from the smooth marble or make the pale pearl blush like the opal? Was it that she had it not in her to give any man more than that mingling of momentary aphrodisiacal indulgence and of eternal immutable derision; and that whilst her power to create a heaven of physical passion was so great, her power of satisfying the exactions of the heart and soul was slight?

Or was it, as the self-depreciation of his temperament led him to think, that he himself had not moral and mental force or intellectual greatness strong enough to obtain empire over her mind—a mind so cultured, so refined, so exacting, so satiated, that hardly any human companionship could succeed in awaking in it any lasting interest?

He had humility enough to believe the last.

The Princess Lobow Gregorievna, sitting mute and chill as a statue of Nemesis, heard and watched, and in the depths of her narrow darksome soul, filled with harsh creeds and as harsh hatreds, said to herself that perchance, after all, her dead son might yet be avenged by the mere results of time—that foe of love, that friend of all disunion.

Their marriage had been abhorrent to her. It had seemed to her eyes like a blow on the cheek given to her son's corpse. Any laugh or smile of either of them seemed an affront to him. Every glance of sympathy exchanged between them seemed a mockery of his death, suffered for their sakes. She who had never doubted that Othmar had betrayed her son in his lifetime, only cherished one hope in her chill breast—to see him suffer the same fate. She had always felt that she would kiss on both cheeks any lover of Nadine's who should make Othmar feel the shame of a dishonoured name, the pangs of a betrayed trust. But for that lover she had looked in vain. She had always said to the hungry hate in her heart: 'Patience; time will bring all things; and the serpent may cast its skin but keeps its nature.'

But of late years she had feared that nothing would ever divide them. [237]

Their lives seemed to her to pass on like a smooth full river, without shoal or rapid, or any spate from storm. There was many an hour when she lay stretched in semblance of devoutest prayer before the holy eikon of the chamber altar, when all that her soul uttered and her lips murmured were curses low and long upon them both.

Year after year went on and brought her no gratification of her desires and her hate. All things went well with them. They had health and pleasure; happiness too, so far as happiness comes to mortals. Their offspring throve in loveliness and grace, and the world honoured and caressed them both. Sometimes, in the stern yet frantic hatred which she cherished, she would pray that disease or pestilence might at least take the woman's beauty from her; but her prayer passed ungranted. Nadine had ever that serene immunity from all serious maladies of the flesh which so often accompanies the fragile appearance and sensitive nerves of women who, like her, declare themselves made unwell by a discordant noise, an unpleasant odour, a wearisome day, or any other trifle which displeases them. Even the pains and perils of maternity her good fortune had made unusually light to her, and except from that cause she had hardly had a day's real suffering in her whole existence. To the sullen eyes of Napraxine's mother she always seemed to bear a charmed life.

Therefore with fierce dumb joy Lobow Gregorievna, with her vigilant ear and eye, saw the one little rift within the lute, heard the one jarring chord on the music. It was so slight that no anxiety less keen than her own would have detected it; but it was there.

He remained in Russia a fortnight, but during that time he did not find any occasion which seemed to him propitious enough for him to speak of Damaris, with any chance of obtaining sympathy for her position or understanding of his own actions. With that ignorance of what most concerns us, which is one of the saddest things of life, he never dreamed that any change in himself had made his wife as he found her to be, in one of her most captious, most capricious, most unsympathetic moods. He was not unused to these; he attributed them now to the weariness she felt at existence in the plains of Ural and impatience at the companionship of the Princess Napraxine which he knew was at all times irksome to her. He was not aware that he was himself more absent of mind, less tender in manner, less frankly and fully confidential in speech; he was not aware that this one thing untold, this one thought unrevealed, had caused an alteration in him, slight and vague indeed, yet plainly perceptible to her, skilled reader of manner and of mind as she was.

A delicate nature shrinks from the imputation of unworthy motives, and a fastidious temper shrinks from any possibility of ridicule; it was the dread of both which kept him silent as to the friendship he had shown to the child from Bonaventure. The apprehension of his wife's scepticism and ironies hung like a grey mist over the generous impulses of his manhood, as in his earliest youth the certainty of his father's brutal cynicism had lain like a stone on the poetic aspirations of his boyhood. [238]

Even in those rare instants when she was moved to sympathy with any unselfishness or any unworldliness, there was always in her eyes some faint gleam of derision, there was always in her voice some lingering accent of doubt and of raillery. She would have been capable of many great things in great emergencies herself, but she would have been wholly incapable of refraining from making a jest of them afterwards. It is the temper of all wit; it is the temper of much philosophy; but it is not the temper which invites the confidence or soothes the doubts of another.

Confidence, like a swallow coming over seas in the storm and sunshine of spring weather, will only nest where it is sure of a safe shelter.

The higher, better, subtler emotions of the human heart will not venture to come forth into the wintry air of mockery or scorn; they are shy blossoms which want the warm wind of a sure sympathy to enable them to expand.

'If I told her, she would only think me either an imbecile or a libertine,' he thought, and the tale went untold.

CHAPTER XXXII.

Amyôt was still quite solitary when he returned from Russia. The children were on the north coast by the sea; its châtelaine was still taking her desired presence with rare condescension and alternative moods of ennui and irony to those royal hunting castles and imperial pleasure places she deigned to honour; the wide avenues, the great terraces, the blossoming gardens, the sunlit colonnades of the modern summer dining-hall were only tenanted by the last lingering butterflies which skimmed the air with white wings, blue wings, scarlet wings, and the balmy aromatic scent of the millions of roses which seemed to wander through the empty places like a visible presence.

Usually whenever he came thither he was surrounded by that society which was a necessity to his wife, even whilst it failed to satisfy her, by that movement, gaiety, and *entrain*, which even if they fail to amuse, yet can always in a manner distract thought and fill up time. There seemed to him a strange silence, a melancholy which was oppressive, in these stately places, usually so full of colour and pleasure, now so quiet and so lonely, with only some noiseless servant passing with swift step across its floors or down its staircases. [239]

There was not even the song of a bird to break the stillness; it was early in autumn, and their sweet throats were mute.

He saw in remembrance the grace of his wife's movements as she had passed down these great stairs, he saw the smile in her eyes indulgent as to a child's weakness, ironical as of a man's folly; he heard her voice saying, with that little sound in it of some exquisite disdain falling from on high on mortal thoughts as silvery fountain-water falls from marble heights on creeping mosses:

'It is scarcely worth while to *faire des madrigaux*.'

Had that speaker ever loved him even for five minutes of her life?

Had she ever known what love was? He thought of the Court of Love which she had held under those oak trees yonder, above whose rounded masses a white moon now sailed. With what ingenuity, what subtlety, what philosophy, what absolute knowledge of all love's minutest weaknesses and utmost madness, she had been able to discourse of it. But was it not such knowledge as the physiologist's knowledge of pain in the creature on which he experiments? Of knowledge there is abundance, of the chill and analytical knowledge of science, of the name and structure of every torn tissue, of every bleeding fibre, of every tortured nerve; but knowledge such as is born of fellow feeling, of sensitive sympathy, of comprehending pity, there is none. Was it not so with her?

Had not love been always to her as the living organisation which he tortures is to the physiologist? Had she not, like him, watched, studied, tabulated the agonies of the wretched creature before her, whilst also, like him, she had never felt in her own nerves one single thrill of pain?

As her lover it had allured him with the intense attraction of an impenetrable mystery, this attitude of her mind, this indifference, both sensual and spiritual, before the demands of love. But as the companion of her life it left him with a sense of dissatisfaction, and of unsatisfied desire. For years it had served to excite and to sustain his passion, but as time wore on it almost communicated its coldness to himself; he began to feel with a sense of terror, as before some disloyalty which he could not escape, that the apathy, the fatigue, the absence of emotion, which are the certain attendants on all satisfied passion, were not far distant from himself.

The very air of Amyôt seemed melancholy to him in these late summer heats, without the usual gaiety and movement which were there at most other seasons when he came to it. Solitude had always, in his youth, been welcome to him, and had fatigued him less than the routine of society; but solitude requires the charm of accompanying dreams, it needs the visions of youth, the vague but glorious hopes of opening life; and Othmar had a vague sense that he would never dream any more, that he grew old, that his fate was fixed, that never would any very welcome or sweet response come to his wishes from the voices of the future. He had had the poet's temperament without the poet's power of expression; he could not take the poet's consolation, 'Sing to the Muses, and let the world go by.' His destiny imprisoned him, and there was little sympathy between himself and it. [240]

As he walked in the moonlight, under the roofs of late roses which shed their petals, white, crimson, and blush-coloured, on him, dewy cool and sweet as the touch of his wife's cheek, a servant brought him a pencilled note.

It said briefly:

'There has been an accident. We are not hurt, but the train cannot take us on. Send your carriages for us. I saw in the journals this morning that you were at Amyôt.'

The paper had been sent from the town of Beaugency, whilst it was signed 'Blanche de Laon:' the last person on earth whose presence he would have wished for in his solitude. Irritating, distasteful, and even painful to him as her society was, yet he could do no less than attend to such a request. He must have complied with it had it come from a stranger. He at once sent his brake and two other carriages, with fast horses, to do her bidding, and returned indoors to give such orders as were needful for this unexpected invasion of an unknown number of guests.

It was late, and he himself had dined two hours before; but he ordered a supper to be got ready for the new comers, who might not have dined at Orleans. He concluded that she was passing from Paris to one of her châteaux near Saumur, where in late summer and early autumn she

often assembled the very distinguished, but somewhat noisy, society which regarded her as its queen. His musings and his solitude had been roughly dispelled; and, though both had been somewhat joyless, he regretted them as an hour later he heard the roll of the returning wheels and the stamping of impatient horses' hoofs in the great central court of honour, and went perforce to meet and greet his uninvited guests.

The Princess Blanche, having herself driven the four horses of the brake through the moonlit cross-roads which led from Beaugency to Amyôt, was in the highest spirits as she descended from the box seat, and gaily greeted him in her shrill, swift voice and her fashionable *langue verte*. There had been a severe accident; a goods train had been met by the express; the usual story, as she said contemptuously. The line was strewn with wrecked waggons and overturned engines; there had been no possibility of proceeding to Blois. Had there been people killed? Oh, yes; she believed so. '*On braillait là-bas, n'est-ce pas, Gontran?*' she said indifferently to one of her companions, and added, with fervour, '*Tiens! J'ai une faim de loup!*' [241]

'But you said that no one was hurt?' said Othmar, regretting that he had not gone in person to the scene of trouble.

'None of us were,' she replied. 'We were in the centre of the train. We felt the shock; that was all. We were playing the American "poker." The collision threw down the cards. I should have come to Amyôt if you had not been here. No one could pass the night at a country station. Besides, Amyôt is always ready for a hundred people.'

'Amyôt is always at the service of all my friends,' replied Othmar with sincerity, but with a certain stiffness. He disliked her familiarity with him at all times, and was conscious that, despite it, she bore no good will to himself or to his wife.

She wasted no more words on him, but led the way into the house, scarcely deigning to present to him those of her companions with whom he was not already acquainted. There was some dozen of them, all, both men and women, notabilities of that *haute gomme* which was the only world she recognised. They had been travelling with her from Paris, being bidden for a shooting party to her castle in Touraine.

Othmar conducted her to the great hall; then he said to her:

'Everything is at your disposition, and all the household at your command. You will excuse me if myself I leave you for awhile to go and see if I can be of any use to those less happily fated persons—*qui braillaient là-bas*.'

She laughed.

'Ah! you were always a Don Quixote. Even Madame Nadège has not cured you.'

'Your servants may have been hurt, or worse still, your *fourgons* damaged. I will bring you news of them,' said Othmar, with an irony which affronted whilst it amused her.

She went to her own apartments *pour se débarbouiller*; and a little later, surrounded by her fellow-travellers, sat down to supper in the summer dining-hall, which shed its dazzling light far out on to the dusky lawns and the pale aisle of the white roses; there was a banquet fit for the gods, though prepared at such short notice; the delicate wines circulated quickly; the adventure was amusing; the whole thing unexpected. Blanche de Laon and all her companions were in the highest spirits, in a more vulgar world they might even have been thought a little intoxicated; their laughter rang frequent and shrill and long over the quiet gardens and the royal woods.

Meanwhile their host went to the scene of the late disaster, and found a sight of frightful destruction and of many deaths, while scores of poor horned cattle, mutilated and moaning, lay in pitiful heaps of bruised and bleeding misery upon the iron way. [242]

It was noon in the following day when he returned to Amyôt, where all his unbidden guests were slumbering soundly and late after their alarm and their fatigues.

He, tired out himself, went to his own rooms and rested as well as he could rest for the sights and sounds of suffering which haunted him in his sleep. He had done what he could to alleviate it; but that all seemed so little and so inefficacious. At sunset he met all his undesired visitors at dinner.

'Your wife is still in Russia?' asked Blanchette that evening.

Othmar assented.

'Does it amuse her, Russia? If it did not, however, she would not stay there.'

'It is her country, and her court.'

'Of course. But that would not make her stay there if she were bored. Why did not you stay too?'

'I had business in France; the death of my uncle has doubled my obligations and occupations.'

'And some of your business lies at Chevreuse?'

'At Chevreuse?'

He was astonished and was annoyed to feel himself also embarrassed. The blue cold eyes of Blanche de Laon were looking at him with their penetrating supercilious malice over the feathers of her great fan.

She smiled, amused and unmerciful.

'Did Baron Fritz leave you that legacy at Chevreuse? It is a very handsome one!'

'I do not understand to what you allude,' said Othmar, with coldness and irritation.

She laughed; a little short incredulous laugh.

'My cousin! If you do not want people to talk about it, why do you stand in the middle of a hay-field with your uncle's legacy?—if it be your uncle's.'

Othmar was irritated and more embarrassed than he showed. Blanchette was the last person on earth whom he would have chosen to know anything of the more intimate details of his life. He knew her unsparing tongue, the exaggerated colour she could give to the slightest story, the smallest incident; the malicious pleasure in mischief-making and in scandal which she took at all times from mere natural malice and love of caustic words. Whatever she saw, or knew, or guessed, she dressed up in colours of her own invention, and made into comedies, to divert herself and her world. Was it possible that she had recognised Damaris? He thought not. Many [243] months had gone by since the evening at St. Pharamond, and it was scarcely probable that so great a lady, with her multiform interests, excitement, and intrigues, had ever remembered the peasant girl of Bonaventure.

He was silent because he was for the moment too amazed to trust himself to speak, and Blanchette gazed at him over her fan, with cruel satisfaction and entertainment at his visible irritation.

'The open air is always so dangerous,' she said, maliciously. 'Even if you be sure there is nobody near, how can you be sure there is not a balloon somewhere above you? or a field-glass half a mile off? I had a field-glass; I was driving from Versailles. If the Baron left you many legacies like that one, your affairs must be more agreeable than legal successions often are.'

Then she laughed again, and rose and took her elegant person, her shrill, cruel, little laugh, her pale, keen, penetrating eyes into an adjoining room, where she gathered her adorers about her to play at *chemin de fer*, and win or lose, in breathless alternations, gold enough to dower fifty dowerless maidens, or stock a score of farms, whilst without the still, cool, dewy night lay soft as a blessing on the gardens and the woods and the great distant river, with the shadowy vessels gliding to and fro, and the little villages, dusky and noiseless, hidden away under the vineyards and the pear trees.

She cared in nothing what he did; he was profoundly indifferent to her when she did not remember her dead cousin, and then she hated him. She had not seen the features of his companion in the fields of Les Hameaux, nor would she have recognised them had she done so. The evening at St. Pharamond was blotted and blurred into oblivion under the heaps of forgotten things of a past year which could have no place in a mind engrossed in its own vanities and excitations, and living wholly in the present. But she had recognised Othmar himself as her carriage had passed yards off, and she had put up her field-glass at the towers of the château of Dampierre; and it had amused her to find that he was just like other men, though he affected such absurd, undivided devotion to one.

No doubt it was only an *amourette*; but it pleased her to have something with which she could tease him when she felt so disposed; and it pleased her more strongly still to reflect that his wife was losing her power over him, which she probably was, she reasoned, if another woman were gaining any. Pure malice was an integral part of her nature; to irritate, torment, and dominate people through their various little secrets seemed to her the best part of the comedy of life. She had nothing of the supreme indolent disdain of the woman she hated, or of her absolute [244] indifference. She loved to *fourrer son nez* in all holes and corners. Her theory was that all knowledge was useful, especially when it was knowledge to your friends' detriment; and a lively and insatiable curiosity was her strongest guarantee against ennui.

She thought complacently of the trouble she had cast into his mind as she sat and played her game of hazard, the light flashing on her rings and the gold she handled. No doubt the thing was only an *amour en village*, an absurdity, a caprice, some rosy-limbed, coarsely-built nymph of La Beauce, who pleased him for the hour because of her utter unlikeness to the great ladies he lived amongst.

'*Je les connais!*' thought Blanchette, with something of Nadine's contempt for the sex. 'When they can drink out of a hundred silver goblets they are always crazy for a brown cottage pipkin. They are always like that.'

She attached no importance to the discovery that he walked not unaccompanied in the fields of the vale of Chevreuse; but the knowledge that he did so had embarrassed him; that was enough to make it delightful to her.

It amused her to be at Amyôt when its mistress was absent. '*Nous sommes très bien installés*,' she said carelessly to Othmar, not even going through the form of inquiring as to his wishes, and she and her party stayed on for the rest of the week. He was displeased, but he could not tell them to go. His wife could do that sort of thing; he could not. It seemed to him impossible to make even self-invited guests realise that they were not welcome. Blanche de Laon thought his compliance argued fear of her, and was more diverted than before.

'Perhaps he is dying to get back to Chevreuse!' she thought with much amusement. 'But he is too courteous to turn us out; he belongs to the last century.'

She was not grateful for his courtesy; she, rather, despised him for it.

One morning she took a fancy to wander over the house by herself; it was an immense building, and to visit it thoroughly would have taken more hours than she gave it minutes; but even in her

rapid and cursory fashion, she covered a good deal of ground.

'It is really a royal place,' she thought. 'We have nothing like it. La Finance gets everything.'

She disliked Othmar; he was everything that she detested in man: he was reserved, punctilious, prejudiced; he had a distant manner of cold courtesy, which was not at all of her own generation; he was grave, often preoccupied, and always blind to her own attractions: yet as she went over she wished that she had married him.

'*Quel diable de vie je lui aurais donné!*' she thought with complacency, and how amusing it would have been! [245]

Bertrand de Laon was not rich; at least not rich enough for the enormous expenditure at which they lived; and then he was so stupid, so amiable, so devoted, that there was no kind of pleasure in doing him every sort of wrong that a woman can do a man! He never knew anything about it, or, if he did know, never resented anything. She grew tired of kicking this poor spaniel, who, beat him as she would, always came humbly and caressingly to her feet.

As she wandered about the house she came on the doors which led to the apartments of Yseulte. They were locked. She sent one of her companions to fetch the major-domo.

'Open these doors,' she said imperiously to the official, who timidly answered that he dared not; except by his master's orders they could never be unlocked. 'I have his orders, open them,' said Blanchette, with such authority in her tone that the man never dreamed she was not speaking the truth; besides it seemed to him to be natural enough; she had been, he knew, the cousin german of the dead Countess Othmar. He fetched the duplicate keys he possessed, and opened the doors: great doors of cedar-wood like all those at Amyôt, with intricate locks of old Florentine work of steel and silver. Then he went in and opened also some of the shutters of the apartments, letting in the warm summer light from without on some portions of the rooms, whilst other parts of them were left in darkness.

Blanchette shut out her companions with her usual unceremonious manner.

'It is not for you,' she said curtly, and banged the doors in their faces with that insolence which was considered by others as by herself *d'un chic suprême*.

She had never been able to come there before, for she had never before been at Amyôt in the absence of its mistress. She was not sure why she came now; partly because she thought it would annoy Othmar, partly from a movement of that remembered affection for the companion of her childhood, which was the only thing of any tenderness which had ever sprung up in the breast of Blanchette: one tiny flower of sentiment blossoming on a granite soil. The sentiment had been rooted in selfishness; 'she used to give me so many things!' she thought always, whenever she remembered her.

The little volume of manuscript poems was in its place; Othmar had hesitated to remove it; everything was in the rooms as when Yseulte had lived, and no eyes but his own had ever beheld them. He had returned more than once to read again those poor fragments, so simple in language, so immeasurable in devotion: read them with a mist before his sight and the sense of some base ingratitude in himself which had come to him on his first discovery of them. He had [246] always replaced them with a lingering and reverent touch in the drawer, whence he had first taken them, where they lay now with a crumpled glove, two or three faded roses, and some notepaper with her initials in silver on it. The restless penetrating agile glance and fingers of Blanchette, touching, seeing, alighting on all things, and skimming over each with the lightness of swallows, brought her to that drawer amongst other places, and showed her the little volume lying with the dead roses. She took it up, and turned over the pages rapidly; looking on it here, there, everywhere; scanning a hundred lines in the space of time that would have served to others to see only half a score. The familiar handwriting, the pathetic words, the mixture of ignorance and of intensity, the force of strong emotions striving to express themselves in an unwonted manner, and half observed, half revealed by the unaccustomed livery of language, had a certain effect upon her as she stood in the empty rooms before one of the great casements, and turned over the leaves of the little book, half contemptuous, half reverential.

If she had read such lines in a printed volume, she would have tossed it away with her most terrible sneer. '*Pleurnicheuse!*' she would have said, with a grin of her white small teeth; but read in the handwriting of her dead cousin, they affected her differently; they did not seem ridiculous; they brought home to her the fact that this world, which was but a masked ball, a mad *fête*, a continual comedy to herself, might be to others, who yet were not wholly fools, a place of martyrdom, endured in silence. Her shrewd and quick intelligence supplying the place of sympathy, could read between the lines; could make her understand as Othmar had understood, all that was unuttered, or only half uttered, in those halting, timid, tender, wistful verses.

'*Dame! Comme c'est drôle!*' she murmured to herself: it was droll that anyone with youth, with fortune, with beauty, with all the pleasures, and pastime, and pomps of existence at her call, should have wasted her time and her tears in useless lament, because the heart of one man was cold to her. It was droll; it was absurd; it was contemptible; and yet she closed the little velvet book, and laid it down by the worn glove, and the dead roses with a vague admiration, with a certain respect.

But her heart grew harder than before against the man who had been thus loved, and had given no throb of love in answer.

She remembered the words of Friederich Othmar at the mausoleum in the grounds yonder: 'She would wish you to spare him.' Yes, no doubt, poor, generous, heroic, saintly, foolish soul!—if she

could know, if she could speak, if she could interpose, she would always come from her grave to save or to serve the husband who had never had one impulse of love for her. But the dead know nothing; the dead never stir; '*quand on est mort c'est pour longtemps*,' thought Blanchette, with grim realism, as she closed the drawer which held the little poem: and meanwhile, if ever she herself had the chance, she would do as she had said: she would rub the sand into the gall, she would widen any wound that she saw. [247]

She thought to herself, 'If she had lived, perhaps——' perhaps she would have kept alive some little green place in her own soul; perhaps she would have kept her own steps aloof from some vices which were not all sweetness; perhaps she would have had something in her own life besides insolent audacity, merciless intrigue, and insatiable curiosity of unattainable excitations: it was a consciousness of her own loss, in the loss of the one purer influence which her life had ever known, which made the arid and frivolous nature of Blanche de Laon cherish her hatred for those who seemed to her as the murderers of Yseulte with a ferocity and tenacity of remembrance which was the only impersonal emotion she had ever known.

Avarice, expenditure, vanity, corruption, every ingenuity of self-indulgence and of physical licence, filled up her own days, and left no space for any memory which was not selfish, any desire which was not base; she had copied and exaggerated the egotism of Nadine Napraxine until it had become a monstrosity, and she had replaced the physical indifference of her model by appetites and curiosities which were both morbid and insatiable. Yet her life at times failed to satisfy her, and at such time the recollection of Yseulte came to her as a cool breeze will touch the hot forehead of a drunkard. Things which had been odious and ridiculous to her in all others, had looked worth something when mirrored to her in the clear soul of her childhood's companion; when Yseulte had passed out of her life she, little greedy, callous cynic of a child though she had been, had vaguely felt that something had gone away from her which would never be replaced.

'Poor little saint! Poor little fool!' she thought now, with as near an approach to tenderness and reverence as her temperament could approach, as she cast a lingering glance over the lonely rooms, with the dead flowers in the vases, the dust of years on the walls, the stray sunbeams slanting on to the empty bed, the scent of late roses and autumn fruits coming in through the dusky shadows and close odours within.

'Poor little saint! Poor little fool!'

As she stood thus, Othmar, passing through the gardens, saw the windows open which were by his command always closed. He was immediately beneath them, and he called aloud in tones of exceeding anger: 'Who has ventured to enter there?'

Blanche de Laon heard, and her insolent, fair, small face looked out from one of the open places in the old painted casements, guarded with their scrolls of iron. [248]

'It is I,' she said, with the usual impertinence of her accent hushed into quietude, almost into sadness. Then she leaned her elbows on the stonework of the sill, and put her face close to his. He was almost on a level with her, for those rooms were raised but a mètre or two from the ground.

He grew pale with indignation.

'Madame de Laon,' he said in a low tone, through which all his anger thrilled, 'when I put all my house at your disposition there were some things in it which I did not suppose it necessary to enjoin you to respect.'

'Pooh!' said Blanchette, resting her elbows on the stone and her chin on her hands. 'I have more title in her rooms than you; I have not forgotten her.'

His face flushed; he hesitated a moment.

'What means did you take to induce my servants to disobey me?' he asked, avoiding her later words.

'I told them I had your authority,' said Blanchette carelessly. 'What can it matter to you? *You* never come here. You never go to her grave. Your uncle did. Even I do. But you—never.'

Othmar was silent. He hated this woman with her impudent pale face, her high satirical tones, her overbearing effrontery, and he hated to see her there in the rooms which had been the bridal chambers of Yseulte in the one brief summer of happiness which she had known.

Blanchette looked down at him with hard cold eyes; she, on her side, hated him no less at that moment. There was no one within hearing; the western garden on which these rooms looked was the loneliest though the loveliest place in Amyôt; and since the death of Yseulte it had been so unfrequented, that hares would come and nibble at the moss-roses under the windows, and once a stag from the herds of red deer cast loose in the park had dared to enter and drink his fill at the fountain.

'*Tiens!*' said Blanchette, leaning from the window, her artificial pale blonde beauty looking akin there. 'She broke her heart for you: one laughs at those things in the world; they are good for the "Traviata," not out of it; it was absurd—grotesquely absurd; and yet in her one knows it was true. When I was a child, and she married you, I wanted her to think of the fine clothes, the fine jewels, the fine houses, all the rest of it—all the things *we* give ourselves for—but she never cared. She said once, "If he were a beggar I should be happier, because then he would be sure that it is for himself that I care." Oh yes, she would have gone barefoot in the dust after you if you had held out your hand. And you—you did not see it or know it, or thank her for it; all you cared for was Nadine Napraxine. It is always so. It is always the other—the other that we cannot have. And now [249]

"the other" is your wife; and so you go to the meadows in Chevreuse. How like a man! And to think that such a woman as Yseulte should have died for you! *Pouah!* If she had known you as I know men she would not have wasted a hair of her head on you. *Pouah——!*'

Then she banged the casement close, and left him standing there. He might rage in his heart as he chose, what did she care for his wrath or for his amours or for his whole existence? What she had cared for was the dead girl who had died for him. That she had insulted him in return for his hospitality and his courtesy was delightful to her. In that moment she would have liked to insult him before the whole world.

Othmar paused a moment, looking blankly up at this window of his own house thus shut in his face; then, with slow step, and with his head down, he pursued his way through the western garden. His guest had insulted him, but the worst sting of the insult lay in its truth. It was true, most true; he owned to himself that he had been wholly unworthy the sacrifice of such a life as Yseulte's.

Yet, he thought, in the words which had been quoted under the oaks of Amyôt in the Court of Love, 'How is it under our control to love or not to love?'

Love is not to be commanded, and naught less than a great and undivided love could ever have given happiness and faith in itself to so delicate, to so sensitive, to so perfectly and sincerely humble a nature as that of the dead girl whose bridal hours had been passed in those closed chambers, around whose casements the ivy climbed and the swallows nested undisturbed as the seasons passed. The rough, sharp, upbraiding words of Blanche de Laon smarted in his memory, as the cut of a knife smarts in the flesh. They only repeated in coarse emphasis what his own conscience had said to him ever since he had found the little manuscript poems in the drawer with the faded roses. Before then, with the blindness of a man whose whole soul is centred on another passion than the one which claims his sympathy, he had never once dreamed that the death of Yseulte had been self sought.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Damaris, meanwhile, was altogether at ease as to her own circumstances. No doubt ever entered her mind as to the legacy bequeathed by her grandfather; it was more than enough for all her wants, and she understood that she could live at Les Hameaux easily, all her lifetime, if she chose. But without any apprehension for her future, she was not without that unrest which is the [250] inseparable companion of all ambition. The remembrance of the wife of Othmar was like a thorn in her side: she had an eager, passionate, thirsty desire to justify herself in the sight of that great lady, to become something which could not be derided or denied or set aside with contempt. The memory of that day under the roof of St. Pharamond was continually with her, in all its humiliation and its disappointment, and its sharp cruel sense of being a barbarian amongst the highest grace and culture that were possible to human life and manners. It had been a glimpse into an unknown land never to be forgotten; the gates to it had been shut in her face, almost as soon as opened; but the dreams which had come to her through them remained with her, and pursued her sleeping and waking.

She threw herself into the resources of study with a kind of passion. In books, she thought, lay all the secrets of the spells of power.

When he had bidden her wed a farmer of La Beauce he had wounded her in a way that she could not forget; not because she despised that homelier life of the husbandman, but because she thought that he deemed her incapable of the higher life of the intellect or the soul. She had been violently uprooted from all her childish associations, and severed from all the habits, thoughts, and attachments which had been hers from birth. The shock of that separation had intensified and deepened the sensitive side of her nature, and subdued the sanguine *insouciance* of it. She was not happy at Les Hameaux as she had been happy on Bonaventure; but she was still companioned by many dreams, and still full of high courage, though the dreams had lost something of their splendid phantasy, and the courage had lost something of its rash undoubting faith.

At times she longed for her old playmate, the sea, with a curious painful yearning—the yearning of the home-sickness of the exile.

'How well I can understand,' she said once to Rosselin, 'that Napoleon longed all his life for the smell of the earth of Corsica. All my life I am sure I shall smell the smell of the fresh sea water leaping up in the wind under the orange boughs and the bay leaves; there is nothing like it here, though the pastures smell sweet in the dew.'

In a short time she had changed much. She had become still taller, and the peachlike bloom of her face had paled. She had the look in her eyes of one who studies assiduously the great thoughts of great writers; she had a less childlike and boylike beauty, and one more intellectual and spiritual. Months count as years at her age, and the southern blood of the Bérardes matured early.

Rosselin watched her growth with pride. Her softened accent, her subdued gesture, her [251] intelligent comprehension of intellectual things, her simple but picturesque clothing, were all due to his training or his suggestion. He had taken her to great libraries, famous galleries, historic palaces, and had taught her to understand the true and the false in art; he had taken her to recitals of the Conservatoire, and even to rehearsals at the great theatres, where, secured from observation, she could herself observe, and realised, as she listened, all the many traits and the many efforts which go together to make up admirable dramatic representation. He never allowed anyone to speak to her, scarcely to see her, but he gave her thus that training of the eye and of the ear without which no great artist can be created.

'Nature does much,' he said to her. 'Yes. But art is a different thing to nature. Art is three parts divine, but it is one part human, and that human part requires the most unwearied and elaborate training. The sculptor may bring a god out of the clay in the fire and the fever of his inspiration, but if he have not studied the laws of anatomy, the limbs of his god will be out of proportion, and one leg will be shorter than the other.'

In the artistic circles there went a whisper about that Rosselin had some paragon whom he was educating, and would produce some day; but every one feared the sarcastic power of the great artist's tongue too much to meddle, unasked, with his concerns, and Damaris, under his guidance, passed unmolested, almost unobserved, through the intricate mazes of that art-world, which she touched without entering it.

One day, when she had been taken to a recital at the Conservatoire, he had left her alone for a few moments; the recital was over, the pupils had left the stage; the professors were conversing together; from the floor there rose a cloud of dust, and from the hot, pent air a strong noisome odour. Her eyes ached, her temples throbbed; she, whose whole life had been passed in the fragrance of the open air, in the freshness of buoyant sea winds, felt stifled, stunned, nauseated. Fame itself seemed hateful, approached through this vitiated atmosphere. To pass your years in boxes of brick and stone, in cages of wood and iron, rather than in the glad freedom of glancing waters and unchecked movement over golden sands and flowering meadows, was it not madness indeed?

She remembered the words of Othmar, bidding her live the life that was led on the wide cornlands of La Beauce. All that was strong in her, and born to freedom, and filled with the love of the sea, and the joys of untrammelled movement through sunlit air, and against fruit-scented breezes, rose in nausea and revolt against the pent-up life of the artist in cities.

Where, oh where, was the open-air theatre of the Greeks, with no dome but the blue sky, and the voices of the chorus echoed by the sounds of the sea-waves breaking to surf upon the marble stairs? [252]

'What are you thinking of? Your eyes look wild,' said Rosselin, rejoining her.

'I was thinking that I could never speak upon a covered stage: the air would choke me!'

Rosselin looked at her in silence. He himself was thinking of Aimée Desclée, of the *bohémienne* who had always wanted the fresh air, the free sunlight, the unpaid laughter, the unbought love.

Aimée Desclée seemed to rise before him, and cry to him:

'Why tempt another on my path?'

He said to her solemnly and tenderly, while his voice sounded very grave in the silence of the emptied theatre:

'My dear, we cannot call back the Athens of Pindar for you, nor yet give you the ideal world of your fancy. If you want to be great in our world as it is, you must breathe its air, which is dust and chokes sensitive lungs. When the air is gold dust it is not much lighter to breathe, though people fancy it light as the air of the planet Venus. If you decide that it will be too weighty for yours, I do not say that you will not decide wisely. Your friend Othmar has told you that obscurity and liberty are the happier choice. He is a man who knows by experience how painful a thraldom are eminence and wealth. You yourself may attain eminence, and wealth too, possibly, probably, but you cannot do so and remain free to be all day long under the blue sky. You must dwell in the air that is full of dust, and poisoned by being shared by a million mouths. That air killed Aimée Desclée.'

Damaris was silent.

She went out beside him through the sordid ways and shabby passages of this temple of the acolytes of fame, and thence into the crowded streets, which were grey with a leaden-coloured slow rain.

Oh, how sweet the rain was in the country, scudding over the green fields, brimming in the grass holes, hanging from the orchard boughs, shining in the window lattices, lying in the great dock leaves! How the snails came out in the glistening roads, and the birds drank it from off the ground, and the ducks went about in the little shallows it left, and how merry and glad the whole land was!

'You love the country,' said Rosselin, when they had walked the length of some streets in silence. 'You love the country, my dear. Stay in it; you have enough to live on; let fame go by, unsought, unmourned.'

Damaris sighed:

'But if I do not do something great she will always say that I could not. She will always despise me.' [253]

'Who?'

'His wife.'

'Othmar's?'

'Yes.'

'Ah!' said Rosselin; he understood the motives which moved her more completely than she understood them herself. 'Do not think of that capricious woman,' he said with irritation. 'Be sure that the day after she saw you she had forgotten that you existed.'

The colour rose to the face of Damaris.

'I wish to make her remember,' she said under her breath.

'Ah!' said Rosselin once more.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

One evening in October Rosselin walked beside his pupil amongst the fields of Les Hameaux. She had had her lesson in elocution in the afternoon; a lesson in which he was inexorably hard to please, a very tyrant over all the minutiæ of accent and of expression; and now in the walks at sunset he had relaxed into all that benignity and bonhomie which were most natural to him in the company of women and of children.

'I am afraid I do not please you,' she had said with some dejection.

'If you did not, my dear, do you think I would come thrice a week to Chevreuse to train you?' he answered. 'It is because you have exceeding natural talent, because you have uncommon gifts, a flexible and beautiful voice, quick perceptions, and that intuitive comprehension which is the innermost soul of art, that I deal with you harshly to compel you to acquire all that artificial treatment of your own powers which is absolutely indispensable to success. If I had not seen genius in you it would not have been merely to please Othmar that I would have told you to give yourself to art; I should have said to you, on the contrary: "Go and marry a farmer of La Beauce, spin and sew, and wear a silk gown on Sundays; have any number of children; be an ordinary woman in a word."'

'Marry a farmer of La Beauce!'

She coloured with indignation. Was it not what Othmar himself had said to her?

'It is not a life to be despised,' continued Rosselin. 'They live in corn as the crickets do. You, who are so fond of country things, would be happy enough if—if—you had never read Racine and Hugo, if you had not that fermentation of the fancy in you which seethes and stirs and smokes until out of it comes the wine of genius. The swallows cannot stay in the fields as the linnets do. [254] There is something in them that makes them go when the hour is come. They do not know what it is; they obey an imperious instinct. They cannot stay if they would. They go blindly, and very often they drop down dead in mid-ocean, and never see the rose fields of Persia or the magnolia woods of Hindostan, as they meant to do; yet they go.'

Unknown to herself, a strong impulse moved her to prove to the wife of Othmar that the *brin de génie* was hers; a true bough of laurel, not a spurious weed. The indifference and the oblivion of this, the first great lady she had ever seen, still remained in her memory with the sting of an affront which nothing could efface. The world was represented to her eyes by that one delicate, smiling, negligent, cruel critic, whom she passionately admired, whom she unconsciously challenged. The child had no vanity, but she had great pride; the pride of the aristocrat and the pride of the republican had been inherited by her, each stubborn as the other. Her pride had been wounded, and her ambition and her dreams excited. She knew that she might drop, like the tired swallow that crosses the sea, into the deep abyss of failure and oblivion; but, like the swallow, the instinct which moved her was irresistible.

Rosselin saw that it was so, and he was too utterly an artist in every fibre of his being to be able to prevail on himself to discourage her wholly. He believed that she would become the glory of the French stage; that very union of the strength of the peasant and the delicacy of the patrician, which was so marked in her physically and mentally, seemed to him to possess that rare originality which all those destined to be great in any art are stamped with from their birth. He did not admit to her how much he admired her, but when she recited to him at one lesson those passages which had been set to her at a previous one, he was secretly amazed at the justness of her reading of them, the accuracy of her rendering, and he marvelled where in her simple life, set between sea and sky as it had been, she had reached such understanding of the greatest utterances of great minds.

'Yet what a fool I am to wonder,' he thought a moment later. 'As if it were not always so with genius, or as if anything less than that ever could be genius.'

But he took care not to utter that word often to her. All he ever granted to her was that she might arrive at something, perhaps, if she studied hard; if she were resolute and yet humble; if she accepted all his corrections and instructions, and did her best to lose that southern accent which would send all Paris into Homeric laughter if it were ever heard upon any stage.

'It could only be permitted,' he added, 'if you were reciting Mireille.' [255]

She did not know what he meant, but she listened to his pure and exquisite pronunciation, and did her uttermost docilely to acquire it, as to obey and execute all his teachings.

Then, when their lesson was over, not seldom he would unbend utterly, and strolling with her through the meadows, or sitting beneath the trelliswork of the porch with the rose leaves falling on his white hair, he would tell her the most wonderful and enchanting of stories, merely drawing all of them from the innumerable treasures of that wonder-horn, his own manifold experiences. He said not a word that would hurt her. All that would be learnt soon enough.

'*J'en ai vu tant!*' he would think often as he left the Croix Blanche in the warm evenings. He had seen the world devour so many, like the dragons that were fed on white flesh. But he fancied she would be one of those who bind the dragon, like St. Marguerite, and make it follow them slavishly.

She had strength in her, the strength of the old mountain race of Bérarde. He knew nothing of those dead people who had ruled land and sea in the dark ages, and perished finally under the axe on the scaffold; but there were a vitality and a force in her which seemed to him destined to

conquer where weaker natures gave way and failed.

Provided only, he thought, provided only that she would have as many passions as there were grains of sand on her own sea-shores, but amongst them all no real love.

Passion is the most useful of teachers to any artist; that he knew; but love is the destruction of all art. Mademoiselle Mars lived through a blaze of glory; Adrienne Lecouvreur died in her youth. Rosselin did not trouble himself about conventional morality. He took the world as he had found it. He respected this child's supreme innocence, and would not have sullied it by a breath; but, casting her horoscope, he would have given her the heart of Rachel, not that of Desclée, if he had had the power. It is better to be the tigress which preys than the hind which bleeds.

He was no cynic; he only knew the world well, and well knew what the world makes of women.

On est broyé, ou on broie les autres. There is no middle path for those who once have left the cool secluded ways of privacy and joined the crowd which pushes at the brazen gates of fame.

But still, to Rosselin, to have passed these gates seemed the perfection of human triumph.

'What all who are not artists underrate,' he said to Damaris, as they passed beside the round tower of the dovecote, 'is the artist's joy in the mere power of expression. It is a mistake to suppose that it is the *ignis fatuus* of celebrity which allures the young poet, the young musician, [256] the young painter; that is very secondary with him. What overmasters him is the longing for the opportunity of expression; the *besoin de se faire sentir*, which is as powerful and imperious as the *besoin d'aimer*. I first played in a barn to villagers; I had a grand part, Robert Macaire; I was as perfectly happy as when I later on played at the Français to emperors and their courtiers. It is the same delight as the lark feels in singing, as the swan feels in swimming, as the heron feels in slowly sailing through the air: the ecstasy in the expansion of natural powers. But the majority of men know nothing of that. The custom-house officer would not believe that Berlioz was composing music as he sat on a rock above the sea. They laughed in his face and said: "Where is your piano?" This is as far as the world goes; it understands the piano, but not the music which is mute in the soul.'

He rested as he spoke on a stone of what had once been the great 'abbey of the fields:' the fields were there unchanged, it was only the great thinkers whose brains were dust.

'I had no such romantic cradle as you possessed in your island of orange groves,' he continued. 'I was born in a little dusky, close, noisome shop in a back street of Vierzon, that dreary town of our dreary district of the Sologne. My grandfather had been born in that shop before me. Everything in it was poverty-stricken, ugly, vulgar, sordid; and vulgarity is so much worse than any ugliness, and sordid small aims and hopes are so much worse than any poverty! Of course no one need be ignoble in a shop, even in a shop where they sell tallow. I suppose Garibaldi was not, but my people were. Well, in that little stuffy plebeian den, only frequented by the lowest of the ironworkers and the canal bargemen, beautiful fancies thronged on me and noble visions haunted me, as they did you in your sea-girt orange thickets, and I used to sit in my hideous attic and recite verse to the one star which was all I could see through a chink in the wall, as you did, you tell me, to the whole of the southern skies glowing above your balcony. It was not fame that I wanted; I never thought of it; I longed to hear my own voice in the glory of the words; I longed to leap up and shout to all the sleeping town; I longed to cry out to the Immortals, wherever they were, "I have understood you, I am not unworthy!" Ah, those beautiful impersonal enthusiasms of youth! Fame! It is of nothing so narrow or so selfish that we think!'

The tears rose to his eyes: half a century and more had rolled away from him; he was a boy again, dreaming his dreams as he wandered over the sandy wastes of the Sologne.

'Ah, my dear,' he said with a sigh, 'how miserable I thought I was in that little ugly house, with the sluggish canal water slipping past its walls, and the black-faced iron puddlers quarrelling [257] over my father's short weight! It stifled me; it cramped me; it killed me! so I thought. But I got away from it, nevertheless. Pegasus came for me in the shape of a towing-horse, which carried me away to Issoudun first, and to a new life afterwards. I had the seven lean years as a strolling player; a jack at a pinch, a *Jean-qui-rit* or a *Jean-qui-pleure*, as it was wanted; and then I had more than thrice over the seven fat years, and all that men call success. I have had all the best things that there are in life, and I do not think I should have had as many of them if I had remained in the dingy little shop all my days, as my father wished me to do. Poor old father! he came to see me once in Paris—once, when I was thirty years old, and in the height of my best triumphs; and he was dazzled and dazed, and did not very well understand, but he found out that my servants charged me four times too much a pound for candles. "*Un grand homme toi!*" he said, with a sneer at me, "*et tu n' sais pas le prix d'une bougie!*" The world admired me: he never did. I was always to him a fool who burned wax instead of tallow. There is always something to be said for the *bourgeois* point of view; but it is narrow—narrow. After all, the storms and sunshine on Parnassus are better than the worry over a lost centime in the back parlour. I have been a successful artist in my day, but I should have been a very indifferent shopkeeper, because I never could bring myself to care for that lost centime—though I have lost many!'

He rose with a laugh, remembering the grand *gaspillage* of his generous and careless manhood. It had not been wise, perhaps, but it had been delightful; and, after all, he had as much as he wanted now in his little river-side house, his good wall fruits, and his first editions of Molière and of Marivaux. He would not have been a whit happier had he been a millionaire.

As the frank mellow sound of his laughter echoed on the air, and the shadow of the doves' tower lengthened behind them on the grass, the notes of a horn in the fanfare which is called La Brisée,

blew loud and full over the fields to their ears.

'What is that?' cried Damaris, startled at the sound which she had never heard before.

'I forgot; it is the first day for hunting,' said Rosselin, listening. 'It is the *ouverture de la chasse*.'

As he spoke some equestrians rode out from a thicket across the field in which they were. They were members of the hunt of Dampierre, clad in a picturesque costume and looking like a picture of the time of Louis Quinze as the warm sunset light fell across them. They rode on quickly towards the west whence came the notes of the hunting fanfare.

They did not look towards herself or Rosselin; but a few seconds later another huntsman, whose hunter was lame, came by in their wake more slowly, leading his horse. He turned his head, paused a moment or two, then rode straight towards them. [258]

It was the Duc de Béthune. He doffed his tricornered gold-laced hat and bade Rosselin, whom he knew well, good-evening; then glanced at Damaris.

'Mademoiselle Bérarde!' he said, hesitatingly. 'Surely I do not mistake?'

She looked at him with recognition.

'You came to the island with her,' she said, rather to herself than to him. The colour grew hot in her face; all the unforgettable shame of that day was with her in bitter recollection.

'I am honoured by so much remembrance, and grateful to the hole in the turf which lamed my horse.'

'That is language for the château of Dampierre,' said Rosselin. 'M. le Duc has lost his way, I think?'

'No; I know my road,' said Béthune, who understood the old man's meaning. 'And I never speak any language, Rosselin, but that which best conveys my real thoughts. You, who are so perfect an artist in speech, must be aware that I am a very clumsy one. Is there any smith here who could look to my poor beast?'

'You can put him up at the house where I live,' said Damaris. 'It is a very little way off; we can show you.'

'That will be sweetest charity,' said Béthune.

Rosselin did not see his way to prevent what annoyed him. The Duke, with the bridle over his arm, walked beside her over the pasture; the notes of the Brisée had ceased; the hunt had passed onward westward, where Dampierre was.

Béthune spoke to her with deference and interest, but she answered him briefly and absently. Rosselin kept up the conversation. Suddenly she said in a low tone:

'You have seen her—lately?'

Béthune was surprised.

'You mean the Countess Othmar, your hostess of St. Pharamond? Yes; I saw her a week ago. We stayed together at the same country house in Austria, and I shall soon see her again at Amyôt. That is her castle, as I dare say you know, on the Loire.'

Damaris said nothing. She paced onward, a little in advance of him and of Rosselin; her head was drooped, her face was thoughtful.

'She was not as kind to you in appearance that day as, I assure you, that she was in feeling,' said Béthune, not knowing well what to say. 'She is capricious and negligent, but she has a mind that is very generous and true in its instincts, and those instincts were all your friends and admirers.' [259]

Damaris remained silent.

'The chief instinct of the lady you speak of is to provide herself with amusement,' said Rosselin curtly. 'She usually fails, because the world is so small.'

'You are unjust to her,' said Béthune, her loyal servant and courtier. 'I am sure that she felt the truest interest in Mademoiselle Bérarde. We were all of us distressed when we learned that that magic isle was tenantless.'

'The new Virginie has left her isle,' said Rosselin, 'and I am endeavouring that she shall not make shipwreck on these stonily seas of art and life. My dear duke, great ladies like your châtelaine of Amyôt let fall idle words, never thinking what they may bring forth. It is so easy to destroy content and to suggest ambition. But to efface a suggestion is very hard when once it has taken root in a young mind.'

Béthune guessed at his meaning. 'The world will be the gainer,' he said, as they entered the courtyard of the Croix Blanche.

Damaris called a man to his horse, then, without even looking at him, she crossed the court and went indoors, and he saw her no more.

'She is very much changed,' said Béthune in surprise as he looked at the dusky archway of the door through whose shadows she had passed from his sight. 'What is her story since I saw her on that happy island; I shall never forget it; its blue sea, its radiant air, its scent of orange-flowers, its handsome child reciting to us from Esther—it was a poem. Are you going to make a great artist of her? Tell me her story since that day I saw her on her isle.'

'I do not know it,' said Rosselin. 'All I have to do with is the Muse in her. My dear Duke, I repeat,

your gracious Lady of Amyôt, for her own diversion, poured into a childish breast a little drop of that divine curiosity which men call ambition: it was only a drop but it burned its way into the soul, and will eat up the life before it has done, I dare say. Madame Nadège did not care what mischief she did: oh no: she only wanted to while away an empty hour for herself.'

Béthune reddened indignant for his absent sovereign.

'As you are so great an artist yourself you should think that she did well in waking any soul to art.'

'No,' said Rosselin angrily. 'No one does well who meddles with fate or displaces peaceful ignorance and honest content by unrest and desire. This child was happy on her island. The world may perchance make her famous some day, but happy it will never make her again, for happiness is not amongst its gifts!'

'That is quite true,' said Béthune with a sigh. He asked many more questions, but obtained little information. He waited in vain for Damaris to re-appear. The sun sank, the shadows deepened into dusk over all the vale, the swallows circled in their last flight round the high house roofs. With reluctance he was forced to bid adieu to Rosselin and take his way to the distant château of Dampierre, where he was a guest. [260]

'Salute her for me,' he said at parting. 'Say that I shall return to thank her to-morrow.'

'If you wish to do her any service in return for the help to your horse, do not speak of her at Dampierre or in Paris,' said Rosselin.

'I will not speak of her to anyone,' returned Béthune, 'unless it be to the Countess Othmar. But you will allow me to return.'

'I have no power to forbid you. Yet it is to her that perhaps it would be desirable you should say nothing,' answered Rosselin after a moment of hesitation. 'I merely mean that the Lady of Amyôt did, I believe, prophesy a great career for my pupil, and first of all suggest to her the possible possession of talents the world might recognise. For that reason I think Damaris Bérarde would prefer that she should hear nothing more of her, unless some day the world itself may have justified her predictions.'

'You think it probable, or you would not waste your hours on her?'

'I think she has infinite feeling and a poetic temperament. Whether these are enough remains to be seen. There are so many other qualities required, all those humbler qualities which are the prose of genius, the plain bread of character.'

'She has one requisite, beauty. She is exceedingly handsome. What brought her here?'

'I cannot say: I am only her teacher.'

'And who is her lover?' mused Béthune, as he walked slowly out of the grey courtyard in the gloaming. His suspicions drifted to Loswa.

Rosselin went within and mounted a low wooden staircase which led to the door of Damaris's chamber.

'Come out and bid me good-night, my dear. If I loiter I shall lose the last train to Paris.'

She obeyed him and came outside her door.

'Why did you avoid Béthune?' he asked her. 'He is a gentleman and a soldier; he is a man you may respect and who will respect you; though he is a great noble he is an honest fellow. He is one of the few lovers who have worshipped Othmar's wife without losing dignity or honour.'

Damaris did not answer. She could not well have defined why she had come within doors. There was a certain pain to her in the presence of Béthune because he was associated with that one day so big, for her, with fate. [261]

Rosselin looked at her as she stood in the twilight at the head of the stairs. There was an open window behind her, a hand's breadth of blue sky, a bough of pear heavy with fruit.

'Why did you not mention Othmar to him?' he said abruptly; 'you mentioned her.'

'I do not know.' said Damaris. She spoke the truth. She did not know why she was always reluctant to speak of him.

'Good-night, my child,' said Rosselin, with a tenderness in his voice that was new to her ear. He sighed as he too went on his way through the dusky dewy fields, sweet with the breath of browsing cattle and murmurous with the whispers of the leaves.

CHAPTER XXXV.

When Othmar returned to Paris he paid Rosselin a visit.

'You have been to Chevreuse?' asked Rosselin. 'No?'

'No,' said Othmar with sincerity and some annoyance, 'I am still at Amyôt. I only come to Paris occasionally. Is she well? Are you satisfied?'

'She is quite well,' replied Rosselin. 'The answer to the other question is less simple. I am satisfied with her talent, not with her character.'

'What do you mean?'

'Oh, nothing that is her fault. I merely meant that she is, as Madame la Comtesse once said, "*une sensitive*." Such people have no business in public careers. You do not make street-posts out of the stems of a sensitive plant. The Latins gave the statues that were destined to stand in thoroughfares brass discs to protect them. If you have not the brass disc you must not stand even in the peristyle of a theatre.'

'I do not think she is weak. Had she been weak she would not have left the island as she did.'

'Who is talking of weakness?—I mean that she is not of a temper for the coarse career of the stage, which is always passed in the press and glare of a stormy crowd. She would play Dona Sol divinely to an audience of poets on your terraces at Amyôt under a midsummer moon. But it is unfortunately not a question of playing it so, but on the stages of public theatres, where very often the coarse applause of the friendly ignorant is still more offensive than the envenomed vituperation of the hostile critic. I dare say we can make her fit for this. We can give her the brass disc, but it will spoil the fine white marble when we fasten it to it. My dear Count Othmar, you know what the life of a great actress in Paris is; you know what it will be for her. We need not spend words on details. Is it a good action that we do when we encourage her to qualify herself for it, or is it a bad one?' [262]

Othmar heard him with distress. He was always haunted by the memory that his wife, by a few careless words, had broken up for ever that simple, peaceful, healthful, flower-like life which Damaris Bérarde had led in Bonaventure. The power of all the kings of the earth could not have replaced her in it.

'It is her choice,' he said, after a silence of some moments.

'Is fate ever wholly choice?' said Rosselin. 'And when a child says he will be a soldier, what does he know of war, of wounds, of the sickening stench of the rotting dead, of the maladies which kill men in hundreds like murrained cattle? Nothing: he thinks it all *tambour et trompette* and *Væ Victis*! Your friend at Chevreuse knows no more of what the life of the theatre is than the child knows of war, and I for one have not the courage to enlighten her. Have you? She dreams of all kinds of glories; she does not see the rouge-pot, the white powder, the claque, the press, the lovers, the diamonds, the ugliness, the vulgarity, the money bags, the whole *ronde du diable*. She thinks she will be Dona Sol, be Esther, be Rosalind, off the stage as well as on it. Who is to tell her the mistake she makes?'

'Surely you can, if anyone?'

'No, I cannot. You cannot make a mind conceive a thing wholly inconceivable to it. I can say a certain number of words certainly to her; produce a certain effect; suggest some images to her which will be painful and revolting. But when I have done that I shall not have done much; I shall not have produced any real impression on her, because the advice which I mean will not in itself be intelligible to her. I may talk as I will of war to the child; but I shall never be able to make him see what I have seen in the days of the siege of Paris, which sometimes still turns me sick when I awake at night and think of it. Perhaps it is because I grow old, and, so, sentimental that I am troubled with those scruples which I do not suppose would have suggested themselves to me twenty, or even ten years ago; but I certainly do feel that I have not done what contents me in preparing Damaris Bérarde for the art of the stage. She will be a great artist, I believe, but she will be a miserable woman.'

Othmar heard him with anxiety and pain. The vision of her was always before him as he had left her in the red brown grass with the evening skies behind her. Country peace, woodland silences, fresh air of early autumn, simple pleasures of youth—these would find no place in life into which she had been led to enter. Some, losing them early, long for them all their lives. [263]

'I suppose,' continued Rosselin, 'that the imagination in me is dying out; as one grows old one drops illusions, as old trees drop branch after branch on the ground, till there is nothing left but the trunk, and perhaps a woodpecker in it, perhaps nothing except dust. Certainly twenty years ago I should have said, and should have thoroughly believed, that art—any art—was worth any sacrifice. But now I do not think so. One pays too heavily for any kind of fame. To be famous at all is to have all the doors and windows of your house standing wide open, and a mob, all eyes and ears, for ever staring in and watching you as you eat, as you drink, as you sleep, as you play, aye, even as you weep by your child's coffin or draw the shroud over the breast of your dead mistress. Once famous, you never can laugh or can cry in solitude ever again. Either to throw laurel crowns at you or to pelt you with stones, the mob is always pushing in over your threshold. When boys and girls dream of fame they do not know what it is—the eternal adieu to privacy, the eternal self-surrender to the crowd. Alkibiades loved the crowd; there are many like him in all centuries; but *les sensitives* hate it, shrink from it, try to bar it out with their bare arm, which

gets broken in the struggle, like the Scottish maiden's in history. The price paid is too heavy. All the shade and the freshness and the quiet leafy by-paths of life are denied us for ever. There is only the great high-road, the crude hard light, the gaping multitude that stare and grin till we give up the ghost! The price is too heavy. It is the same curse as the curse which lies on kings, never to be alone.'

He sighed as he turned and walked up the little path of his cottage garden. Looking back upon his life he seemed to have thrown his years to the mob as offal is thrown to a pack of hounds.

It was only a mood, a passing mood, but there was a great truth in it.

'One needs not to be famous to suffer that curse,' said Othmar. 'Whoever is in the world has it. Private life is a thing of the past; we are all expected to dine and to sup, and to spread our bridal-beds and our death-beds, in public, like the monarchs of old. An age which has invented the electric light has abolished solitude and respects no privacy; it will end in forcing all *âmes d'élite* to find and form a new Thebaïd.'

'If they can anywhere find a square mile without a tramway and a telephone!' said Rosselin, tenderly touching a tea-rose which blossomed in the cold wet weather against the low white wall of his house.

Then he said abruptly:

'What does your wife say now of her second Desclée?' [264]

Othmar was angered to feel that the natural interrogation embarrassed him.

'My wife has forgotten both her prophecies and the subject of them,' he said with a certain impatience and bitterness in the accent with which the words were spoken.

'And you have not refreshed her memory?'

'I think it would be useless.'

Rosselin was silent: he was not pleased. He angrily thought of Béthune, and wondered if he would speak of his encounter with Damaris.

'Some one will tell her if you do not,' he said with some significance. 'Pardon me if I say too much, but I dislike concealments; they are usually unwise and seldom profitable. Chevreuse is not a vale in Venus or Polaris, that we can be sure no one will ever see your *protégée*!'

'Anyone may see her,' said Othmar, with annoyance and hauteur. 'But to recall to my wife a subject she has forgotten demands a courage of which I frankly confess myself not the possessor.'

'Humph!' said Rosselin with dubious accent: he was not satisfied. It seemed to him that embarrassing complications would of necessity grow up out of so much needless reticence. Othmar, he thought, was most probably not aware himself of all the various and confused motives which disposed him to silence on the name of Damaris.

'She is not of a facile character,' he thought, recalling all he had ever heard of the caprices and cruelties of Nadine Napraxine in her youth. 'But when there is a nettle in question it is always best to grasp it boldly. Besides, if she be so indifferent as they say, the whole thing would be of infinitesimal insignificance to her, unless concealment were to lend it an importance not its own, as some shadows can be thrown on a white wall so as to make a beetle loom large as an ox.'

'Chevreuse, moreover,' continued Othmar, 'is a place that no one ever sees in winter. Unless it be in the few weeks when Dampierre is occupied, not a soul of our world ever goes there. If she mean or hope to become famous with the fame you decry, she is best there in solitude; if, on the contrary, she fail it will be still well that none should know her efforts who would not pity them. My wife is like the Latins, she has no altar to pity; she despises it. If the world ever applaud Damaris Bérarde, then and then only shall I venture to recall to her the prophecy she made at St. Pharamond.'

'If with her nothing succeeds like success she only follows the world,' said Rosselin. 'I thought she led it?'

'She does lead it: but she has great contempt for those who fail in it. When a lamb falls from fatigue on the Australian plains the shepherd walks on and leaves it to its fate. Those who fail [265] seem to my wife as the fallen lambs do to the shepherd: that is all.'

'Damaris Bérarde will not fail,' said Rosselin, with a sense of anger and of triumph in her.

'Aimée Desclée did not fail—but she died.'

'Damaris will not die; she is too strong; but she may break her heart over broken illusions, as a thorough-bred horse breaks his over bad roads. Good God, what a beautiful world it would be if it were like the world these youths and maidens see in their dreams!'

'She may break her heart over broken illusions.'

The words haunted Othmar's memory as he left the cottage at Asnières. Yes, that was often the death of the strongest, death mental and moral if not death physical.

What he had done for her had secured her future from want, had given her a safe home for so long as she would be content with it; but how much more was there for which no prescience could provide, from which no friendship could secure her! With her ardent temperament, her ignorance of life, her poetic and unwise impulses, how much would her heart ask and her imagination demand! She would not, could not, lead the passionless life of passionless natures.

Whom would she love? Would love only be for her the Charon who took her through a river of hell to the shores of death, as he had been to Aimée Desclée?

Or would she leave behind her all those beautiful faiths and fancies, all those innocent ardours and tender thoughts, as the year leaves behind it the blossoms of spring, the young green of April: and would she become famous and flattered, leading the world in a leash, and putting her foot on the necks of her lovers?

He liked one vision as little as the other.

Either way the sea-bird of Bonaventure would be no more; either way the child who had gone away from him in the moonlight under the silver shadows of the olive-trees and of the mists of dawn would be as dead as though she were in her grave. Would the time ever come when she would say to him, 'Why did you not let me die on the stones of Paris instead of keeping life in me for this?' Or would time give her that brazen disk of which Rosselin had spoken, and with it the heart of bronze which all must have instead of a heart of flesh and blood if they would go triumphant through the heat and pressure of the world? Rosselin had said aright, that the disk of brass would spoil the fair white statue, and the heart of bronze, the heart of the mockers of men, the heart of Venus Lubetina, would it ever be hers?

[266] He went home to his own house, where he was expecting his wife's return that evening. He went into his own rooms and looked at the sketch made by Loris Loswa. The sight of it troubled and disturbed him. He had a sense of wrong doing upon him of which, when he searched his own conscience, he could with honesty declare himself blameless. He had put her as much out of his own hands as it had been possible to do, and the simple *ruse* by which he had been able to provide for her maintenance seemed as innocent as any pretence by which the motherless lamb can be persuaded to eat or the unfledged bird to let itself be befriended by gentle hands. Still it had been a subterfuge; it had been an untruth; and he hated the merest shadow of falsehood. His detestation of it had been the constant subject of Friederich Othmar's ridicule and sarcasm, and the elder man had in vain argued with him a thousand times, to endeavour to prove to him that it is, in the hands of a skilled casuist, at once the most forcible and the most delicate of weapons. He had always refused to admit its virtues; it seemed to him a craven and contemptible thing, however dressed up with wit and wisdom.

That Blanchette de Laon had seen him at Chevreuse had kept him from returning thither, and it also made him feel the absolute necessity of acquainting his wife with all he had done for Damaris before Rumour, with her hundred tongues, and women, with their devilish ingenuity in exaggeration and suggestion, should have bruited the tale abroad in some guise wholly unlike the truth of it. If he could by good fortune place the story before her in such a light that it would move her finer and more generous impulses, then all would be well. But this was so doubtful; the quixotism of his own conduct would be the first thing which would strike her, and she would probably be unsparing in her ridicule of it. Besides, the reception of his narrative would wholly depend on her mood, on the trifles of the moment, on the facts of whether or no she were in a sympathetic and kindly humour. Any trifle would do to determine that: if the rooms were not heated enough, if the flowers in them were not those she liked, if the costumes of the coming season seemed ugly to her, or if she had caught a slight chill on her journey—any one of these things, or anything similar to them, would make any appeal to her generosity and sympathy worse than useless.

He had been so long accustomed to study the barometer of her caprices that he dreaded its mutability. He knew that there were in her instincts and elements of nobility, even of greatness, which, could she have been cast on troublous times and dire disasters, would have made her rise to sacrifice, even to heroism. As it was, in her perpetual self-gratification, her unlimited power of command, her bed of unruffled roses, and her atmosphere of incessant adulation, all the capriciousness and egotism of her nature were encouraged and nursed to overweening growth. [267]

In the depths of her nature were those finer qualities which will always respond to the appeal of higher emotions in moments of extremity or the hours of great calamity or of great peril. She would have had the dignity of Marie Antoinette before the Convention, the courage of Anne de Montfort before Philippe de Valois, the strength of Maria Theresa before Europe. But nothing less than the inspiration of such supreme hours of life could have penetrated the indifference of her temperament, and the trivialities and the frivolities of modern existence could never do so for an instant.

Had he sought her pardon for some great crime, sought her fidelity through some great ruin, he might, he probably would have aroused the latent forces and sympathies dormant in her character; she would not have given him a stone when he had asked for bread. But in the things of daily life he had found her too often without mercy to have in her mercies much trust.

The conviction that she would never give him the comprehension which he wished made him withhold all other utterances of his deeper emotions and more tender thoughts. He had gone to her in one supreme moment of pain, and he had received a rebuff such as repels for long, if not for ever, a sensitive nature.

She did not realise that her infinite comprehension of the moods and minds of others was marred to them by the chill raillery which accompanied her acute perceptions. She did not remember that though to herself the dilemmas and the weaknesses, even the passions which she studied were objects of amused ridicule, they were to those on whom she studied them subjects of great moment, and often of as great suffering.

Even the men who most blindly loved her were afraid to confide in her, because of the inevitable

irony with which their confidence was certain to be met. Many a time Othmar himself had longed to lean his head on her knees, and lay bare to her all the contradictions, and longings, and regrets of his soul; but he had never dared to do so, because he had always shrunk from the certain mockery which would, he knew, point through all her sympathy, if sympathy she would ever give. Her comprehension of human nature made her in one sense the most lenient of auditors; but in another sense she was the most unsparing: she could pardon easily, but she could never promise not to ridicule. That one fact held sensitive natures aloof from her with all the force of a scourge.

'She will deem me such a fool,' he thought often: and then he kept silence.

He went this evening down to the Gare du Nord to receive her, and almost before the train had paused he had entered the saloon carriage in which she had travelled undisturbed since she had left Berlin. There was always in him something of the eagerness after absence of a lover; her mere presence always exercised over him a magnetism and a charm. [268]

She raised herself on her elbow from the mass of sable furs and of wadded satin on which she had been lying; she had been rudely awakened by the cessation of the train's movement; the blaze of a lamp was in her eyes; she was impatient, and she yawned.

'Otho! my dear Otho!' she said with petulance, 'why will you always come to meet one at a railway station? Of all the many absurd customs of our generation that is the most absurd. Nobody's emotions are so poignant that they cannot wait till one comes into the house. I was asleep. What a cold night! Why cannot they devise something which would carry the train straight to one's bedside? All their inventions are very clumsy after all.'

She was slowly raising herself from her heap of furs and red satin; her eyes were languid with arrested sleep; her tone was irritable and irritating: she scarcely seemed to perceive his presence; the sweet delicate odour as of tea-roses with which all her clothes were always impregnated came to him well known as the accents of her voice. A curious passion of conflicting feeling passed over him; he could have seized her in his arms and cried aloud to her, 'I have given you all my life, do you give me no more than this?' Yet he felt chilled, angered, alienated, silenced for the moment; a feeling which was almost dislike came over him; it seemed to him as if he had poured out all the love of his life upon her and received in return a mere handful of ice and snow. But the inexorable haste and vulgar trivialities of modern exigencies left him no moment for thought or for the expression of it. He could only offer her his hand in silence to assist her to alight, and give her his arm and lead her through the throngs of the Northern Terminus to her own carriage.

He drove with her through the streets to their own house and escorted her to the apartments which were especially hers.

'I dare not disturb you longer to-night,' he said with a certain bitterness of tone which he could not control. 'The children wished to remain up to welcome you, but I did not allow them to do so; I know how you despise undisciplined feeling.'

She laughed a little languidly, letting her women remove her fur wrappings, whilst she stood in the delicious warmth and light of the rooms where thousands of hothouse roses were gathered together in welcome of her return, filling the hot air with their fragrance.

'Do you mean that for satire?' she said with a little yawn. 'Do not try to be sardonic, it does not suit you. The children are certainly much better in bed. I will go and look at them after I have had a bath. I am very tired. Goodnight.' [269]

She gave him a sleepy sign of dismissal, then chid her women for being slow. Had they her pine-bath ready?—there was no bath so good after fatigue and cold.

He left her presence with pain and anger, despite the coldness which came over him towards her: coldness born from her own as the frosts of the earth come from the cold of the atmosphere. His adoration of her had been too integral a part of his life for her touch, her voice, her glance, not to have a certain empire over him which no other woman would ever obtain.

In the forenoon, quite late, he was again admitted to her presence. She had recovered her fatigue, she was serene and almost kind, but the children were there: they were not alone five minutes. Later, she gave audience to all the great *faiseurs*, whose intelligence had been busied inventing marvels of costume for her for the winter season. Later yet, there came some of her intimate friends and some of her most devoted courtiers.

It was raining heavily in the streets, but in her apartments there were hothouse heat and hothouse fragrance, in the sultry air and amidst the innumerable roses it was hard to believe that it was the thirtieth of November. People came and went, laughed and chattered; she wrote notes, sent messages, telegraphed many contradictory orders to her tradespeople; the day was crowded and entertaining; there was a certain stimulant, even for her, in the sense that she was in Paris.

Othmar did not see her again until they met at dinner. Béthune dined there, and four or five other persons, who had called and been invited that afternoon. The day was a type of all other days of her life.

Othmar thought with impatience and bitterness of the dreams he had dreamed. She despised the world and ridiculed it; yet who was more absorbed by it? Who was less able to live without it? She always spoke with her lips of the fatigue of society, but, as he thought angrily, she was not so weary that she was ever willing to forsake it. All the year round it was about her. Every season saw her where its fashion, its pastimes, its flatteries, were most largely to be found. Without that

atmosphere of adulation, of luxury, and of excitement she would have been lost. The world was a poor affair, no doubt, not anything like what if might be were people more inventive and more courageous. She had said so a hundred times; but still there was nothing better than its movement. To read Plato all day under an oak-tree, or to sit alone by a library fire with a volume of Sully Prudhomme, would not be any improvement on it, though it might be more philosophic.

To his fancy, life together was poor and meaningless, unless it implied mutual sympathy and communion of feeling. He was a romanticist, as she had always told him. To his views it was not in any way an ideal of either love or happiness to be for ever surrounded by the fever of the great world, to be for ever separated by its demands and its excitements, to meet only on the common ground of mutual interests, to dwell under the same roof with little more intimacy than two strangers met there at a house-party. It appeared that this was what she now expected, what she now preferred. His pride prevented him from struggling against her decrees; but he felt, and loathed to feel, that he was insensibly approaching a position towards her scarcely higher than that which Napraxine had occupied. True, she still had moments of exquisite charm, of irresistible sorcery, in which she occasionally deigned to remember that he had been the lover of her choice; and in these she bent his will and turned his brain almost as much as in the earlier years of his idolatry. But these moments were rare, and when they came appealed to the senses in him, and not to the heart; they left him unnerved, they did not satisfy his affections. [270]

The world had so many claims upon her: his were forgotten or ignored. Where were the visions he had had of a life out of the world, poetic, unworldly, tuned to another key than the brazen clangour of society? They were gone for ever like last year's roses.

The so-called pleasures of life had never had attraction for him; they were a mere routine; he was tired of crowds, of flattery, of splendour, of movement; he was tired of the women who tried to beguile, and the men who endeavoured to use, him; the whole thing seemed to him witless, tedious, tame. She, who had always declared that it was so, yet could find her diversion in dazzling it and stimulating its envy; though most things failed to please her, yet, like all women, her own power pleased her always; but he had no such resource, for the power which he had (that of wealth) he despised.

A sense of failure came wearily upon him during this evening which followed on her return. If this were all the issue of great passion and great love, what use were either?

The world was a pageant to her, and he might stand by and see her pass in it. The *rôle* did not please him. He fancied—no doubt he told himself it was but fancy—that the world ridiculed him in that subordinate place, that half-effaced position, that too indulgent acceptance of her continual caprices, tyrannies, and slights.

He did not remember, did not know, that he himself in Russia had seemed cold to her. He was only sensible of the barrier which had grown up between them, of the indifference with which his presence or his absence was regarded by her. Gradually, as the fine mist of approaching rain steals over a sunny country, dimming the colours and effacing the lines of it little by little, until nothing is seen but the colourless blur of the wide white rain itself, so the sensation of dissatisfaction, of disappointment, of disunion had come over the tenor of their lives together. The consciousness of it brought to him a profound and passionate sense of irreparable loss. A word from her would have dispelled it, an hour of full belief that she had ever loved him as he had once loved her would have sufficed to sweep it away; but the word was never spoken, the hour never came. Time only strengthened his conviction that, were he dead before her, she would not greatly care. [271]

The sense of the incompleteness of his own life came upon him with a strong consciousness as he stood in his brilliant rooms with the laughter of his wife and her guests borne to his ear, and the sounds of some gay music coming to him from another salon. He might have ten, twenty, thirty, forty years more of this existence, and its years, its days, its hours would always be precisely like this year, this day, this hour. The future seemed to rise up like a phantom and say to him, 'The past gave you the fulfilment of your greatest desire. I shall give you nothing but the fruit of that fulfilment. If that fruit do not content you, whose fault is that?'

Men whose wishes are thwarted can throw the blame on fate if their lives prove barren; but he had passionately wished for one thing, and all the forces of life and of death had joined together to give it him. He had no one to reproach, no unkind destiny to upbraid, if the gift left his heart cold, his soul cheerless; if he felt at times a mortal loneliness, and at times a weariness of vague regret.

The cruelty of all great passions is that, after their fruition, there must come this inevitable regret. They are altogether beyond the pale of daily life; they can never fraternise with the demands of social existence. She had once said truly that death is the kindest friend to love, because it saves it from being made ridiculous by daily habit and worn away by daily friction.

The world is wrong when it pities Romeo, when it weeps for Stradella.

The great love he had borne her had survived all those trials of familiarity and of habit which are crueller enemies to love than absence or than death. It had been the romantic passion of Romeo united to that depth and unity of devotion which Friederich Othmar had been wont slightingly to call the knight's love for his lady. It had been so essentially interwoven with his life that it had always seemed to him it could only go away from him with life itself.

The idea that a love so great should yet have the same fate as have all the little passions of a frivolous hour was still intolerable to him. With him it had been of those passions which ennoble [272]

and enlarge human nature, because, though interwoven with the senses, they yet embrace the soul, and are drawn by their very idolatry to that longing for immortality which is the only possible approach to faith in it.

But he knew that he had never moved her thus; he knew that, if he had ever given utterance to all he felt, she would have listened with a derisive compassion as to the exaggeration of a mind distraught. The crystal clearness, the acute penetration, the ingrained scepticism of her intellect made impossible to her those illusions and those hopes which are so dear to minds more imaginative than critical, to temperaments more impassioned than logical, as was his.

He had given his whole life away to her, and she did not even care for the gift; scarcely deigned to accept it, except in conventional shape. He was unreasonable, no doubt, as she would have told him had he said so to her. He had asked of life and passion what neither can give—immortality. All which serve to console the great majority of mankind did not avail to console him for that loss.

Most men grow content with the crowd which is constantly about them, with the host of petty interests which claim them, with the repetition of pleasures and pursuits which is enforced on them; their days are dull, but they are full; they are consumed by monotony, but they are unconscious of its tedium, because they have no imagination and often no passion.

Othmar could not be thus reconciled to the disappointments and the sameness of existence. He required life to be a poem, and he was not consoled because it proved a mere diary.

The new year brought him without break that increase of occupation which makes it a season of such weariness to all who are of any importance in the world, and have a crowd of supplicants and petitioners always looking to them for support. Himself he would have liked to pass the winter season at Amyôt, but to her it was useless even to suggest it.

'You cannot ask the world to bury itself in a frozen wood by a river in flood,' she had said when once he had wished to do so.

'But is the world absolutely necessary?'

'If it were not there what should we do? You would read Plato perhaps for the thousandth time; I could not promise to read Goethe for the hundredth. The country in winter is like a man of eighty repeating a poem on spring.'

'It is just possible that the man of eighty might feel the meaning of the poem more thoroughly than the boy of eighteen.'

'His feelings would not prevent him from looking absurd.'

'I suppose, you at least would never pity him?'

'Most surely not.'

'What would you pity?' he said bitterly.

She smiled. 'I should not pity people who could shut themselves up in damp forests on the Loire water in midwinter. A Russian winter is quite a different thing; the air is like champagne, the frost is like diamonds, the plains are like marble; it is charming to have one's roses and palms in a temperature of 30° Réaumur, and by merely going out of doors plunge *en pleine Sibérie*. That is why I am a very patriotic Russian. I love the intensity of its contrasts.'

'As Marie Stuart loved Chastelard and Bothwell!' said Othmar with a certain significance.

'Should you think she loved either of them? I should doubt it. They loved her, and being stupid as men only are, they compromised her.'

'I dare say she thought of all men as you do!—as a little higher than the horse, a little lower than the dog! No more!' said Othmar with some impatience.

She smiled: 'Perhaps! I am not sure that it is a bad compliment. Where should we put you in the seat of creation—Mary Stuart and I—who cannot adore you as Penelope and Hermione can?'

'I never hoped to be adored!' said Othmar with some bitterness.

'Oh, yes; you did, one day. All men hope for it, only they do not get it,—except from Griseldis whom they beat, and from Gretchen whom they forsake.'

They were alone in their drawing-room in the vacant five minutes before a great dinner party. He looked at her wistfully. What woman was ever comparable to her, he thought; where else were that exquisite grace, that entrancing languor, that supreme distinction in every movement and in every attitude? The very tones of her voice, sweet as the sound of any silver bell, and cold as the breath of frost, had a charm in it that no other's had. With a sudden impulse of reviving ardour he stooped and pushed the loose glove from her arm, and kissed the white soft skin beneath it. But she, remembering and resentful of the weeks in Russia, drew it from his caress with her chilliest rebuke:

'My dear Otho! we are neither children nor lovers!'

He was repulsed and silent.

At that moment their groom of the chambers announced that some of their coming guests, who were of imperial name and place, were entering the gates.

He and she together descended the grand staircase between the lines of their servants in state liveries.

'Together like this!' thought Othmar. 'Together in these pageantries, these conventionalities, these mummeries; but never in any other hours, in any other way!'

CHAPTER XXXVI.

The days slipped one after another away, and he had still said nothing to her of Damaris. He seldom saw her alone; when he did so, no opening had presented itself which seemed to him propitious. The length of time which he had unwisely allowed to elapse now created an additional difficulty. She might, if he told her now, naturally ask why he had been silent so long. He had made no intentional concealment; anyone of the household knew that the girl had been there in the summer and throughout her illness. But no one, not even her most confidential attendants, would ever have ventured to tell their mistress anything unasked. She held them at a distance, which the boldest of them never dared to pass. The only servant she had treated with more familiarity had been the little African boy Mahmoud; and Mahmoud had died, in his fifteenth year, from the cruel north winds of Northern Europe, babbling in his delirium to the last, in Arabic, words of his lady and his love for her, poor little tropical beast! killed as men kill the antelope kid of the desert when they drag it from its groves of palm and its warm golden sands, to shiver and perish behind the bars of a cage in a northern menagerie.

Not one of the household spoke, or would ever speak, of anything which ever took place unknown to their mistress; but they knew, doubtless—as servants in great cities know all the affairs of their employers—that the young girl who had been ill there, brought in from the streets in the bygone summer, was dwelling at Les Hameaux, and was occasionally visited by their master. Partly from their gossiping when outside his walls, and partly from other causes, the name of Damaris Bérarde began to be bruited about in Paris. A secret is very like a subtle odour; it escapes by unseen crevices and passes to the outer air, though every egress may be barred. A certain vague rumour arose that not only had Rosselin discovered some new and great talent which he was training for the public stage, but that with this hidden life which was so carefully concealed the name of Othmar was connected.

Had Blanche de Laon been accused of first setting afloat that breath of calumny, she would have declared, and truthfully, '*Moi? Je n'ai jamais soufflé mot!*'

Yet she had conveyed a hint into the air, and it was sufficient. One thistle-seed is enough to choke a field with thistles.

In vain do we think we walk in private paths unseen; some eyes are forever there to peer through the thickest hedge; some lips are forever ready to say what they do not know, and magnify the harmless mouse-ear to a wonder-flower with a poisoned root. Those of whom rumour thus discourses with bated breath and comprehensive gesture are seldom or never aware that they are the subject of such whispers; they are always the last to imagine that their acts are put under the magnifying-lenses of public speculation. [275]

Even Rosselin, with his intimate knowledge of the inquisitiveness and the loquacity of human nature, did not dream that the mere fact of his going twice or thrice a week to Les Hameaux and taking a neophyte to the temples of his own art, to quiet morning recitations, could be a fact of any import to the world at large. He had had so many pupils, and he never remembered that the world had had any concern with them unless they had become ultimately great enough to challenge and compel its languid attention; and even then its notice had been very hard to obtain, Why should it break its rule of universal apathy and indifference towards those who are obscure because a young girl lived on a farm in the pastoral solitudes which had once sheltered Racine?

Both he and Othmar, in very different ways, had a reserve and hauteur of manner which always kept at arm's length rash intruders and trivial questioners. Therefore they were the last persons on earth to hear anything of what rumour murmured of either of them. Damaris, in her simple home under the ashes and elms of the Croix Blanche, was not more isolated from the gossip of the world than they both were by choice and temperament. But the world gossiped not the less but the more for the immunity which their ignorance permitted to it, and because it knew little invented much.

The world to whom Othmar's was so familiar and conspicuous a name built for him a tall edifice of lies down in those innocent pastures of Les Hameaux. But he was unconscious of that house of fable in which they made him dwell. He believed that his own abstention from any visits there made Damaris as safe from notice as though she were still beneath the orange leaves and olive shadows of her isle. If she wanted anything or any counsel, Rosselin would tell him he felt sure. At times the memory of her, as he had left her standing in the evening dusk amongst the red-brown seeding grasses, made him desire to see her with a wish he restrained. Sometimes the recollection of her flushed, bowed face, as he had touched her forehead with his lips, came over him with an emotion which was too gentle for desire, too kind for passion; but he resisted it.

'To see me can do her no good' he said to himself; 'and it may make others do her harm. If she be left alone she may learn to live for art: it is a safe and kindly friend.'

[276] One day, when he was at work in his little *cabinet du travail*, his wife came to him there for a moment on her way to her carriage. It was his favourite room; it opened on one side into the library, on the other into the gardens; the peacocks would walk in from without when the doors stood open, and the green gloom of an avenue of coniferæ stretched away immediately in front of its steps. It was here that the sketch made by Loswa hung betwixt a woodland glade painted by Corot, and a sloop becalmed in the Sound painted by Aivanoffsky.

It was rarely that Nadine deigned to enter there; she paused there now for a moment with an open note in her hand, which she had received that instant from Prince Hohenlohe, requesting her intercession with Othmar concerning some matter of German interest which did not brook

delay.

It was soon disposed of. He wrote a line and gave it to her to do as she pleased with it, and looked at her with wistfulness. It was the first time he had seen her that day; it was four o'clock, she was about to attend a musical gathering at the Prince of Lemberg's hotel in the Boulevard Joséphine, convened to hear the first execution by illustrious amateurs of a pastoral cantata of his own composition on the theme of Ruth.

'You are going to the Ruth?' asked Othmar.

'Yes; I wonder you are not. Music used always to draw you out of your hole like a lizard.'

'I have a great deal to do,' he replied; 'and, besides, how many times have you not enforced on me the *bourgeois* absurdity of accompanying you anywhere?'

'You need not accompany me. You can come by yourself. Certainly I think it does look absurd to see two people always together like two dogs in a coupling-chain.'

Othmar sighed a little impatiently.

'Lemberg has chosen a very *bourgeois* theme; surely very archaic and ill adapted for his audience. The emotions of Ruth will seem to your world something as ridiculous as a gown of the time of Marie Amélie!'

'They are only in a pastoral,' she said with a smile. 'They are very well there. We are not required to share them. You would share them, perhaps; nobody else would.'

'You mean I should share those of Boaz!'

'Boaz or any other *vrai berger*. You should inhabit one of the happy valleys of Florian and Mademoiselle Scudéry. There is always something in your ideas which is quite of the last century, and seems to suggest a flock of sheep with ribbons and a crook, like those in the Saxes statuettes. If I were to die, you would like to lie on a bank of violets and mourn me in alexandrines.'

He smiled, but the raillery was not welcome to him. It seemed to him that, if she had any love for him, she would never laugh at him, never see in him that weaker, absurder side, which may be found in every human character if eyes without sympathy look for it. And the imputation of sentimentality irritated him as it irritates all those whose feelings are strong and whose temperament is incapable of any affectation or of any shallowness. [277]

Let a man have as little vanity as he may, yet in his secret heart he likes the woman he loves to find him a little more than man. He had been long conscious that he would for ever look in vain for this kind of admiration from her. There was a certain depreciation even in her indulgence; there was an invariable criticism in her mental attitude, however favourable; she could be no more deceived as to the weaknesses of character than a great surgeon can be as to the weaknesses of body. True, her wit and her intellect served to retain her power over him, but then he was nervously sensible that these made him less in her eyes than he would willingly have been. He was aware that the very fineness of her penetration, the very brilliancy of her mind, made her infinitely more hard to please for any length of time than women of smaller brain and of less highly-trained powers. To a woman of rare intellect and of critical wit it is difficult for any man to remain long a hero.

'Our minds are all finite, alas! and you want the infinite,' he said once to her with some petulance, conscious that his own mind did not content hers any more than any other man's.

She assented.

'I have no doubt it was always the same everywhere,' she conceded. 'Probably Marcus Aurelius was very dull and fussy if one knew the truth; and I dare say even Horace is livelier on paper than he was in person!'

As she spoke now, her eyes had wandered at the paintings which were hung on the wall behind him. He saw that they rested on Loswa's sketch. He took the occasion which seemed to present itself.

'Have you ever thought of her?' he asked, turning to look himself at the portrait.

'Thought of whom? I was thinking that Loswa has lost something of his originality, of his singularity: what he has produced this year is all *banal*.'

'Or seems so. That is always the Nemesis which overtakes a mere trick of manner; when once it ceases to startle it becomes commonplace. That sketch is so admirable because it is no trick: it was a genuine inspiration of the moment. Loswa was never so natural before or since.'

He spoke indifferently, but he was looking at her with concealed anxiety. Perchance it was a propitious hour in which to tell her of the fate of Damaris.

'Do you ever think of that child?' he said abruptly.

'Of what child?' she asked. [278]

'Of the one for whom you predicted the future of Desclée?' he answered with a movement of his hand towards the picture.

She looked at the portrait with an effort at recollection. She had really forgotten the whole matter; it had been such a trivial incident to her, though so momentous to the other actor in it. He saw that her forgetfulness was quite unfeigned. She went up to the sketch and looked closely

at it, drawing on one of her long gloves as she did so.

'Ah, yes; I remember now. A little fisher-girl who interested you, and whom you took home one night over the sea in a most romantic fashion. What of her? Has she married her shipwright? Was it a shipwright? Do you want me to give her some nuptial present, or a baptismal cup? All the idyls end in one's having to buy something ugly at a silversmith's!'

'I told you once before she did not marry the boat-builder—the shipwright, as you call him. You made it impossible for her to do so.'

'I did?' she repeated with amusement. 'You mean Loswa did; or you, perhaps——'

He grew red with anger.

'I do not like such jests.'

'Oh, my dear, you like no jests! You are a knight of doleful countenance and take everything *au pied de la lettre*. If you had had a little amourette with a fisher-girl it would argue bad taste perhaps, but it would not surprise me, except as a fault in taste.'

'Nor would it matter to you,' he said bitterly; 'you have given me my liberty so very often that, with the usual obstinate ingratitude of human nature, I could have wished you less kind—and less indifferent.'

'All the same, are you sure you have never taken advantage of my kindness?' she said with amusement. 'If not, you must be the ideal husband of that *bourgeois par excellence*, Dumas fils. But it is a quarter-past four. *Au revoir.*'

He opened the door for her in silence, and in silence escorted her through the house to her carriage, and bowed low as it rolled away.

His heart was bitter against her. He had been at once disappointed and relieved at the failure of his effort. Damaris was not even a recollection to her; she had caused the uprooting of the child's whole life, but she thought no more about it than a person strolling through green fields thinks of some field flower which he has plucked up, carried a moment in listless fingers, then flung away. Her own life was humbly touched by so many supplicants whom she passed, not seeing them, so many whose eyes were fastened on her in envy and in wonder, that a poor little barbarian who had been under her roof one brief evening could occupy no cell of her memory. If he told her the whole story she would only laugh; call him probably Scipio or Galahad. She would be sure to say something which would wound him; she would be sure to receive his narrative with a cruel smile of doubt if not of derision. [279]

'Time will tell her as much as she will ever care to know,' he thought with the procrastination natural to a hesitating temper. Time would tell her, if ever her forgotten Desclée should become one of those on whom the fierce light of the world's fame beat; whilst if the life of Damaris should pass away in failure, in obscurity, in the paths of privacy, what would it ever be to her? No more than the rain which fell, or the dust which blew, in some dreary by-street which her own graceful steps never approached. She had no pity for failure, no sympathy with impotence; the unsuccessful were to her eyes the born *crétins* of the world.

He paused on the terrace of the house as her carriage rolled on its noiseless tires through the courtyard and out of the great gilded gates.

His heart was heavy, and a personal offence was in him against her as he remembered her words.

What plainer hint could she have given him to pass his time and take his caresses elsewhere?

All alone though he was, his cheek grew red with anger and mortification.

'What does it matter to her what I do?' he thought bitterly, with a sense of mortification. 'I must be the vainest fool if I can flatter myself that, had I a hundred mistresses she would be ever jealous of any one of them. Men are feeble creatures, and coarse, and what they do matters nothing to her. So long as I do not cross her threshold unbidden, or ruffle a rose-leaf beneath her, what does she care what I do?'

As she herself passed behind her black Ukraine horses through the streets, a certain vague annoyance came over her, remembering his manner and his words.

He had never before been irritable as he was now. The evenness of his temper had been perfect, and had allowed her so great a latitude in the indulgence of her satire upon him, that she had been led to think him weaker than he was. It was only of late that he had answered her with a touch of bitterness, had hinted his impatience of her criticisms, and had shown that fatigue before their manner of life which he did not now affect to conceal.

'If we go on like this,' she thought, 'we shall become like everybody else; we shall not subside into friendship, but only into dissension, and the world will end in observing our dissensions, which will annoy me, his whole temper is so utterly unphilosophic. He cannot understand and accept the inevitable. He would have liked me to go and live in the centre of Asia Minor and adore him: I refused to do it when it would have been interesting to do. Good heavens! Why should I do it now, when I know every line of his face and every turn of his character as one knows the very stones on a road one takes daily?' [280]

She had been wearied by his romantic ideas and by his unpractical aspirations, which suggested to her only more *ennui* than the world, stupid as it was, afforded her already. Yet she was irritated by her own latent consciousness that she should not care to know that his dreams went

elsewhere.

'*Comme cette fille lui trotte dans la tête!*' she said, half aloud, with surprise and irritation. Her knowledge of men told her that remembrance with them usually means attraction, that irritation usually means some secret consciousness, some unspoken interest.

Languidly she recalled from the depths of her own memory the trivial, long-forgotten incident of Damaris Bérarde, whose features the sketch by Loswa had preserved from oblivion. She remembered how absurdly chivalrous Othmar had been that evening, how coldly and sharply he had rebuked herself for her negligence towards the child.

Pshaw! how like a man it would be, she thought; if he had been attracted by a little peasant with brown hands and bare feet!

If, after all, he were just like other men, she thought; if he had a villa on the Seine, a cottage at Meudon, where he passed his time when he was supposed to be closeted with the Rothschild, or gone to a conference with Bleichrœder? Would she care much? She thought not. She would feel that half good-natured disdain which a woman, passionless herself, always feels for the riotous passions of men; but she did not think that it would affect her peace of mind in any way.

If it were a woman in her own world, yes; she would have resented that. She would have felt it an offence and an outrage. She would have disliked the comments of her own world on it; she would have been impatient of the ridicule or the compassion which it might have entailed on herself from others; and she would have been angered at the possible ascendency over his intellect, and the possession of his confidence, which such a rival would perchance have acquired to her own despite.

But of what she would have called a mere vulgar *liaison* she would have felt no jealousy, not even much surprise, for she considered that men were slaves of their appetites, even when they were masters of their intelligence.

[281] For the whole ways of life of a man she had that contempt which a woman who reads their hearts and knows their follies is apt lo entertain when to herself the senses say little, and their gratification is indifferent. But if it were a question of the possession of his mind and thoughts by a new passion, if anyone had passed before her and taken that pre-eminence in his imagination which she had held so long, she became irritably conscious that this would be unwelcome to her. A love which reigned over his fancy, occupied his memory in absence, and had empire over his will, would be an assumption of her own place, would be a seizure of all that more spiritual and subtle dominion which had been peculiarly her own.

She had had unbounded influence over him for ten years; she had been so certain of her influence that she had been for once absurdly credulous of its duration. Though she knew that passions wane like moons, yet she had never doubted in her soul (whatever scepticism her lips might have declared in jest) that his for her would never become less. She had never truly realised that the time would come when her surpassing seductions might leave him cold as one who hears a twice-told tale, when his immortal passion for her might lie dead like last year's leaves.

She had always piqued herself upon the wisdom with which she had looked at all accidents and sentiments of life. She had always believed that no weakness or instability of human nature could ever take her by surprise. And yet to find that at last she had lost her sorcery for his senses and her exclusive reign over his thoughts astonished her with a shock of humiliated surprise.

During the pause between the two parts into which 'Ruth' was divided, the guests of the Prince of Lemberg left the music-room and strayed at their will through the other apartments of his beautiful little house, which was modestly called a pavilion, and stood withdrawn behind gardens and high walls of clipped evergreens. It was four o'clock in the winter's day, and the whole of the rooms were lighted as at night; the hundred or so of people who were there represented all that was greatest in fashion, with a few of those who were greatest in art. Belonging, as he deemed, to both categories, Loris Loswa was amongst those present.

'Bring me some tea,' she said to him when she had seated herself in a little alcove filled with bananas and palms, whose green branches drooped against a background of Florentine tapestries, and threw up in high relief the dead gold and dusky furs of her costume. When he brought it she signed to him to seat himself on a stool at her feet. He obeyed, flattered and charmed.

'Loris,' she said in a low tone to him, 'what became of the subject of that sketch you made two years ago on that island in the seas beyond Monaco?'

[282] Loswa reflected a moment, then he answered with perfect candour:

'I have never thought of her from that day to this. I meant to have made a great picture from that little study, but I lost sight of it; I sold it.'

'You sold it to us: yes. It is there in Otho's room. I have often wondered what became of the original. Do you mean that you have never had the curiosity to inquire?'

'I really never have. She was certainly a provincial beauty, but they are not the beauties which dwell longest in my mind. I intended to make something *très empoignant* of that sketch, but I forgot it, once it was sold.'

'How like a modern painter!' she said with amusement, and changed the subject.

Lemberg approached and Loswa rose.

'What is your verdict on my work?' asked the composer of 'Ruth.' 'I am very nervous till you have spoken. When they are all praising me and you are mute, I think of those lines of Robert Browning's, which tell us how the musician heard all the theatre applaud, but himself looked only to the place where "Rossini sat silent in his stall."'

'If I were silent in my stall,' she replied, 'it must have been because silence seemed the fittest tribute to your exquisite pastoral. One seemed to hear the corn bend, the wind sigh, the poppies blow. For one half hour you made me in love with the country! And then the farewell to Naomi——I only wish that Gluck were alive to hear.'

She passed on to a discriminating criticism of the musical structure of the composition, with all that profound and scientific knowledge of the tonic art which were united in her to the most subtle appreciation of its phases. The 'Ruth' had charmed her ear, and her mind could distinguish why it did so.

Béthune, who was near, had heard the conversation, and wondered if Loswa were speaking falsely. He thought not; he felt an impulse to speak of what he had seen at Les Hameaux on the day his horse was lamed, but he refrained. Rosselin had invited his silence, and Rosselin was not a man of idle words, nor likely to give a caution without some good motive.

Yet he felt a sense of guilt and of complicity. He had gone back twice or thrice out of a sense of courtesy, as well as of interest, and he had learned easily, from the people of the hamlet, how and through whom she had been brought thither. The knowledge that it was Othmar who had placed her there had struck him first with amazement, then with anger.

He knew none of the circumstances which had brought Damaris Bérarde to Paris. She preserved an obstinate silence in regard to herself, and his good breeding would not allow him to put direct questions to her which were evidently unwelcome ones. It was only in the village that he heard [283] the name of Othmar, and the chivalrous laws which governed his actions at all times did not allow him to try and learn what was withheld from him. The hostility to Othmar which had for so many years been so powerful a factor in his life was the strongest of all reasons with him to compel him to abstain from all investigation, to avoid the least semblance of inquisitiveness as to his conduct. But in the absence of knowledge he placed the natural construction of a man of the world on the little he knew, and the facts of her altered abode and manner of life, and he was angered against the man who could, as he thought, change for new amours the passion which he had given to his wife.

Of the faults of that temperament which left Othmar's unsatisfied and repelled, Béthune was too loyal a lover to see anything. Her very defects had always seemed beauties in his eyes. To desert such a woman as she was for even so lovely a child as Damaris seemed to him intolerably unworthy; and the secret conduct of such a connection seemed to him at once commonplace and coarse. He had always done justice to the rarity and delicacy of many qualities in his successful rival, and the discovery of what he supposed to be a mere intrigue in his daily life surprised and disgusted him. When he heard Nadège now speak of Damaris Bérarde he felt indignantly grieved for her deception, as men are always inclined to grieve for a woman who interests them before an infidelity which is not their own.

'Who would have believed that even she would fail to secure constancy?' he thought as he watched the light play upon the rings upon her hand as she gave back her cup to Loswa.

'You look interested in my inquiries,' said Nadine, observing his countenance with amusement. 'Is it possible that *you* followed up that idyl on an island of which I let you read the first chapter?'

'No, indeed,' said Béthune in haste, with a certain embarrassment which did not escape her observation.

'My dear friend, it would not be a crime if you did,' she said with a smile. 'Considering how many men saw that handsome child in my rooms, I know very little of human nature if some one at least of them did not return to the isle to write an epilogue to 'Esther.' Loris denies that he has done so. To be sure, men always deny that sort of accusation. But for once he looks innocent.'

'You never heard anything of her?' asked Béthune, conscious that he did not speak wholly at his ease.

'What should one hear? I dare say she has shut up her play-books and eaten her bridal bonbons by this. I remember she was quite stupid when one saw her close; she kept blinking in the light of my dancing-rooms like a little owl out at noonday. If she had had any real talent mere upholstery [284] would not have had any power to strike her dumb.'

'Probably it was not the upholstery. You have struck dumb greater persons than she.'

'When I have desired to do so. But with her I do not remember that I desired it. I desired only to be kind to her. I have always wished to discover genius in some obscure creature.'

'They say Rosselin has discovered one,' said Paul of Lemberg. 'Then you will say, it is his trade.'

'Who is it?'

'Ah, that I know not. Some woman or child who is to revive all the last glories of the French stage. Some one kept in perfect obscurity hitherto, as bird-trainers keep their piping bullfinches in the dark all day long.'

He spoke with no second thought, knowing nothing more than that which he said. But Béthune, silently listening, felt again an uneasy sense as of some guilty complicity in what he withheld from the person whom it most nearly concerned.

Yet it was not for him to give up to her what Othmar had concealed from her. Unwillingly and perforce, his honour and his delicacy made him the reluctant keeper of a secret which he disapproved. 'I have always been his enemy, so I must be now his friend,' he thought with that loyalty which was the strength of his character, though a quality so little known to his generation that it seemed to it to be a weakness.

'Am I an imbecile,' she thought as she drove away from the house, 'am I an imbecile, that this girl I had utterly forgotten haunts me all day long like a phrase of the 'Ruth?' Is it just because I looked at her picture? Or is it because that song of Paul's, "O, reine des champs," made me remember her as I saw her going through the hepaticas under the orange leaves on her strange little island? All these men know something of her, I think, and Otho perhaps knows most.'

As she drove through the streets, lying almost at full length in her carriage, wrapped in furs and with a great bouquet of gardenia idly clasped in her hands, her eyes were closed, but her thoughts were awake. A little contemptuous smile was on her lips, but a great slowly-arousing and amazed suspicion was in her heart.

She had bidden him take his liberty, true. So great sovereigns bid their courtiers take theirs; but evil betides the courtier who is rash enough to construe the bidding literally.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

There lived in Paris an old man who had once been a freed serf, and then a confidential private secretary of her father's. He had received a pension from her family for his faithful and intelligent services, and the devotion which he had given to her father he had continued to give to her. He was a man of great humility, though of great sagacity. He had the patience and submissive temper of the Muscovite peasant joined to the subtlety and the adroitness of the educated Slav. Whenever she needed any errand executed in which prudence and ability were needed, she always sent for this person, whom she had known from infancy, and who loved and revered her with an almost abject devotion. Rather than fail to execute the wishes of Nadège Federowna, or fail to keep the secret of them when fulfilled, he would have died a hundred times over with that serenity under torture which the Russian of the Baltic shares with the Asiatic of the Indus.

Of the very existence of this man Othmar knew scarcely anything. It had always seemed to her well to have some few instruments of which the position and the species were known only to herself. One is never sure of the future. It was her manner of keeping '*une poire pour la soif*,' after the wise injunction of the provincial proverb.

She had never hitherto used the services of Michel Obrenovitch for any wrongful cause; but she knew that, to whatever purpose she chose to dedicate him, to that purpose he would be bound.

When she rose in the following forenoon she sent for him, and gave him the name of Damaris Bérarde and the name of the island of Bonaventure.

'Whatever there can be learnt of this person and this place learn for me,' she said to him.

He asked no more instructions. He kissed the hem of her gown in sign of humblest loyalty and good faith, and withdrew.

'He has the grip of a ferret,' she thought, 'and the heart of a dog.'

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

It was now towards the close of carnival. Othmar's time, always largely occupied, and doubly burdened since the death of his uncle, left him but little leisure for the studies and the thoughts most natural to his mind. His temperament led him to the love of leisure, of privacy, of meditation. To read Plato under an oak-tree all day, as she suggested, however insufficient it might have seemed to her, would have been to him the most congenial of occupations. He would have chosen Vaucluse, like Petrarca, could he have done so. [286]

Amidst all the variety of affairs which came before him he was often tired with that fatigue of the mind which is more painful than the fatigue of the body. Study, even over-study, does not produce that fatigue; what produces it is the constant pressure of uncongenial and constantly-recurrent demands upon mental attention. Since the death of Friederich Othmar such demands upon him had been multiplied a hundredfold; and whilst all Paris looked on him as one of the most enviable of its great personages, he himself would willingly have given all his millions to be free to pass his years in the intellectual leisure and repose which were to him the chief excellence of life.

'He has remained Wilhelm Meister and Werter, though an unkind fate has made him a rival of the Rothschilds,' his wife had said once. And a student at heart he did remain, and a dreamer also whenever the thunder of the brazen chariots of the world around him left him any peaceful moment in which to enjoy silence and remember the dreams of his youth.

The moments grew rarer and wider apart every year. He was like the king on Burne-Jones's wheel of fortune: he was crowned, but bound on the wheel.

Therefore, in the press of great interests and of public matters, which despite himself absorbed so much of his thoughts and of his time, the remembrance of Damaris was no dominant thing, but a tender and fugitive memory which came to him ever and again, as the song of a bird on a bough outside his windows may bring the gentle thoughts of other days to the hearer of it who sits shut up in a close room under a zinc roof in a city. Whenever he remembered her it was with infinite pity, with great anxiety, with little of those more selfish impulses which tinge a man's thoughts of a woman, always with an almost passionate desire to undo the wrong which had been done her by his wife.

'What can I do for her? Command me in all ways,' he had said more than once to Rosselin, who had always answered: 'Perhaps the best thing you can do is to let her alone.'

He had many thoughts of her which troubled him, and vague projects which he was forced to abandon as impracticable. He wished to give her back the island, set her there in simple sovereignty over the orange trees and the sea-waves, restore to her her beautiful free open-air existence amongst the sea-swallows and the olive-haunting thrushes. He would have striven to do it at all cost; but the isle was not to be bought. The owner believed it to be a mountain of treasure, since it was sought for, and would not part with it at any price. There was no possibility for him to give her back her little realm, to make her life anything he would have liked to make it. He could only leave her alone, as Rosselin had bluntly told him to do; and that cold kindness did not satisfy the generosity of his temper, or seem suited to the softness and helplessness of her years. [287]

This day when he had watched his wife's carriage roll through the gates of the courtyard, his conscience smote him especially for what seemed to him neglect and unkindness to one who had no other friend than himself.

On an impulse of compassion and repentance he went out of the house and took the train which goes west on its way to the sea-shores of Brétagne.

'Poor child,' he thought. 'Fear of them makes me a coward to her. She must have deemed me unkind and neglectful; all these weeks and months I have never been near her. Time goes so fast ——'

He alighted at the little station of Trappes, and took his way on foot across the fields towards the Croix Blanche.

The weather, though dull and grey, had been rainless as the train passed through the market-gardens and shabby suburbs of the north-west, but when he reached Magny the valley in its silvery fog looked poetic, and wore a charm all its own after the dreary bricks and mortar of the outer-boulevards. The leafless woods wore lovely hues of bronze and ashen-grey; the bare fields were of the red-brown of a stag's hind; far away the plains of La Beauce were veiled in a mist which promised snow; a man went by him carrying cut wood with the bowed back, the bent head, the heavy step, the downcast face which Millet has made immortal in art.

'How have we managed to make a toil and a burden of that outdoor life which was so blessed to the Greeks'?' he mused. 'We must have blundered horribly. Or is it the weather which is more at fault than we? In the south, pastoral life is still enjoyable and still graceful.'

He spoke to the woodman and got only sullen monosyllables in return. He gave him some money, and saw the slow dull eye lit up with surprise and greed.

'I should be as sullen and as covetous myself, I daresay,' he thought, 'if I had to cut faggots for a living.'

Then he went on over the fields along the cross-road which led to the home of Damaris.

He had not yet reached it, when he perceived her at a little distance, walking quickly, with the white dogs running before her. She had on a long dark cloak, and the hood of it, lined with crimson, was drawn over her head; her head was a little thrown backward; her eyes were looking upward at the steel-grey sky, across whose sad-coloured vault a flock of the farm pigeons flew. Her hands held an open book; her lips were moving, but he was too far off from her to hear the sound of her voice. Her feet came quickly over the brown bare pasture so that she almost touched him ere she saw him. When she did so she dropped the book; the colour in her face changed instantly from white to red, from red to white. She gave an inarticulate cry of pleasure and amaze. [288]

'You! you!—at last!' she said, holding out to him both her hands, warm with the warmth of youth, though gloveless, in the winter weather.

Othmar took them in his own with a tender gesture and touched them with his lips.

He could not doubt the great joy which his presence brought to her. Her eyes were shining through suddenly starting tears of gladness; her mouth was tremulous with smiles; her cheeks had flushed scarlet; her whole face and form were eloquent of a happiness which needed no words for its expression.

He thought of a languid, amused, disdainful voice which had said to him awhile before, 'Surely anyone's emotions can restrain themselves until one gets into the house!'

The welcome of Damaris affected him profoundly, touched him to a vivid gratitude. He was so used to the repression of his warmer feelings, so accustomed to irony and languor, and the ridicule of all ardour and enthusiasm, that this delight which his presence caused was to him at once infinitely pathetic and deliciously responsive. He was thankful to be paid in such unwonted coin, and the beautiful sincerity of it was clear and radiant as the sunrise of a summer morning.

'I should have come before if I had known——,' he said, and paused with a pang of conscience. Was it not a reason rather to compel his absence?

Damaris was not sensible of any double meaning in either his words or his silence. She was abandoned to the pure and frank rapture with which she saw the living man of whom the memory abode with her sleeping and waking. There was so much youth in her, and so perfect a candour, that no thought of concealment entered her mind for an instant. He had been everything to her; he had stood between her and sickness and misery and death; he had made life bloom again for her when it had seemed engulfed in the blackness of poverty and solitude. To her he had been truly a ministering angel. She could have wept and laughed for joy at the touch of his hand, at the sound of his voice.

Othmar was embarrassed: she was not. He was conscious of the meaning of her happiness; she was not. He let go her hands, and moved beside her under the leafless trees.

'May we go into the house?' he asked. He remembered Blanche de Laon. [289]

'Yes,' she answered; her voice was tremulous with emotion, and had the thrill of an exquisite happiness in it.

'You see, it is quite near,' she added. 'It is so long since you came! Why have you been so long?'

Othmar did not look at her as he replied:

'My dear, I have so many occupations, so few moments that I may call my own. And I had told you to write to me if you needed me.'

'I do not write very well,' she said, with a blush of shame at the confession. 'And I thought you would come when you wished.'

'When I could, would be more nearly the truth. I am not my own master in many ways.'

'No?'

To her it sounded very strange; to her he seemed the master of the world.

'No, indeed,' said Othmar bitterly.

He walked silently beside her a few moments. His dejection of tone, his weariness of manner communicated something of their sadness to her, and threw their shade over the shadowless and innocent joys of her soul. He roused himself with an effort.

'And you—I have heard of you often from Rosselin. Believe me, I did not forget you, if I seemed neglectful. You love the open air still, I see, though it is the chill grey air of the Seine-et-Oise instead of your own warm winter sunshine. What were you reading or reciting?—Dona Sol?'

'Yes.'

She had ceased to look up at him with candid luminous eyes; her face was downcast and her cheeks burned. A vague sense stole on her of the utter difference between himself and her; of the fact that, though he was all the earth held for her, she to him could only be a mere passing thought, a mere occasional interest, a mere waif to be pitied and aided and forgotten. His life was so crowded, so absorbed, so full of the world's gifts and the world's honours, she could expect nothing in it but here and there an instant of remembrance. She led the way into the dwelling-house in silence. The recollection of his wife had come to her: of that great lady who had tempted her, ridiculed her, forgotten her, and been her fate.

Where was she?

What did she know of herself?

She did not ask him; her joyous face grew dark under the shadow of the crimson hood drawn above her shining curls. If the mother of Napraxine could have seen into her heart at that moment her aged lips would have given the kiss of peace to these young ones for sake of the hatred her young soul felt. [290]

'They are all away at work,' she said aloud; 'will you come into my room? I think the fire is not out.'

'I do not care about the fire,' replied Othmar. 'I wish I could bring you the sunshine of your own seas and shores—or take you to them.'

She did not answer; he asked again:

'Why would you not write to me?'

'I do not write very well, I told you,' she said, with the colour still hot in her cheeks; 'and I have no right to trouble you—in that way. It is cold here. Will you come to my room?'

She went up a few wooden stairs and opened the door of the little chamber, of which she had made her study. It had an open fireplace, and wood was burning on the hearth; its lattice window showed the wintry landscape. It was simple, but looked like the room of an artist: the books, the engravings, the water-colour sketches, the little statuettes he had sent there to make it habitable and picturesque, gave it that air of culture without which a palace is no better than a barn; a copper bowl was filled with ivy and bay and holly, there were some snowdrops in a glass which stood before a small bronze he had sent there, in the summer, of a Greek shepherd playing on a reed. What there was of art and decoration there was of his providing; but still a certain grace of arrangement and harmony of tones were due to her and to the same instincts in her which had made of her sea balcony on Bonaventure a little hermitage dedicated to the few nightingales and the many sea-swallows, and, amidst the sordid cares and the harsh accents which were around her, had enabled her to hear the voice of Ruy Blas or of Fortunio, as, hid in the orange-grove, she had read through drowsy noons in

A dim house of happy leaves, with shadows populous.

As he looked around this chamber with its union of elegance and rusticity, there passed over his mind the consciousness of how utterly his wife would mistake the motive which had brought him there, the feeling which had prompted him to have this child surrounded, as far as it was possible, with such simple pleasures as art and nature can bestow on poetic temperaments. The world was always with her; its influences had saturated her mind and coloured her judgments too deeply for her ever to judge otherwise than as the world would do. To her as to the world, if ever either became aware of this home which he had made for another woman under the ash-trees of Les Hameaux, he could only seem the protector of Damaris in a very different sense to that in which he actually was so. The certainty of such inevitable judgment oppressed him, and obscured to him the beauty of the girl's face, the lovely freshness and fervour of her welcome. [291]

The one great love of his life had been so long his only preoccupation, his only idolatry, that it hurt him with a sense of loss and of insult to think that to others it would seem as though he had been faithless to it. Even the sense which was present to his own heart and mind, that such infidelity might perchance become possible to him, humiliated him in his own eyes and made him feel a weak, irresolute, mutable fool.

'Perhaps she is right enough to disdain me!' he thought with impatience of himself.

His thoughts were far more with her than with Damaris; and yet the poor child's welcome of him sunk into his heart with a sense of warmth and of sympathy, to which he had long been a stranger. Her very personal beauty, too, seemed to retain in it the glow of her own suns, and to give to those who looked on it a vivifying warmth and radiance. He felt as though, in leaving the presence of his wife for hers, he had come out of the cool pale luminance of moonlight, shining on the classic limbs of a marble goddess, into a sunlit and fragrant garden, with birds at play amongst wild boughs of roses.

Absorbed in his own meditations, his words were dreamy and spoken with effort, his abstraction affected the sensitive nerves of his companion and cast a chill upon her buoyant and ardent nature. She grew silent, and watched him with eyes passionate with gratitude and dim with tears. She saw in him the saviour of her life, the lord of all her thoughts, her only friend; she longed to throw herself at his feet and strive to tell him all she felt. But she could not, she dared not; there was something in his voice, in his gaze, in the mere fact of his presence, which daunted and held her dumb. In his absence she had repeated to herself a thousand times the eloquent words with which she would tell him all she felt; but now that he was there before her, she was mute. The colour came and went in her expressive face, the veins in her throat swelled with emotion; she could find nothing to say which was worth saying; when she spoke in the words of the poets she was eloquent, but when she could only look in her own heart and long to speak, how poor she seemed to herself, how dull and dumb!

The intensity of the happiness his presence brought with it, in itself bewildered and alarmed her with a vague fear to which she could have given no name had she tried. She had been happy in her childhood upon Bonaventure, with the happiness of youth and health and vigour; the happiness of the fawn in the fernbrake, of the swallow on the wing; unconscious, delightful, instinctive happiness in the mere sense of sentient life. But this happiness which she felt now was new to her, and closely allied to pain, and nervous as its twin-sister, sorrow; she was afraid of it and mute. [292]

At last she broke the silence timidly:

'There was something I thought I would write to tell you because he is one of your friends, but then I thought it did not matter. It was only that M. de Béthune has been here twice or three times.'

'Béthune!' echoed Othmar with astonishment and some displeasure. 'How came he here?'

She told him, and added 'He has come back on different days. He brought me a jewel once; it was very handsome. It was because I attended to his horse's sprain; I asked him to take it back again and he did so. Since that he has brought me flowers. Those flowers are some of his.'

He looked where she looked and saw a group of hothouse blossoms of value and rarity. He felt an annoyance which he did not dissimulate. 'Do he and his flowers please you?' he asked, not wisely as he knew.

But the perfect candour of her eyes remained unclouded.

'I do not think about him,' she replied in that tone which was an echo of her free and fearless life upon the island. 'He is kind, and M. Rosselin says he is good. He is a great friend of hers, is he not?'

'Of my wife's?' said Othmar, with irritation. 'Yes. She likes him, he is often with her; he is one of those persons whom great ladies care to chain to their thrones.'

He had himself always had a vague jealousy of Gui de Béthune; the intimacy which his wife allowed him, although only, he knew, in accordance with the habits and usages of a woman of the world, yet was always more intimate than he cared to see. He knew the solidity and nobility of Béthune's character and the hopeless devotion which had so long absorbed his heart, but sometimes he thought that his wife might have found better ways of rewarding the one and of curing the other than the constant attendance on her which she permitted to a man who had adored her before the death of Napraxine, and had offered her his hand after it. He had said little against it, because he had known how absurd and vulgar a passion jealousy had always seemed in her sight, but there had never been any cordiality of intercourse between himself and Béthune, and it irritated him to hear that Béthune of all men should, by an accident of sport, have found his way to Les Hameaux.

The idea had caused him uneasiness, and associated with the remembrance of Blanche de Laon, made him conscious that the secret of the vale of Chevreuse had been very rashly and consciously kept by him from his wife. The Duc was a man of chivalrous honour and fastidious delicacy; he would in all likelihood feel bound to respect a secret which he had accidentally suppressed, but the influence of Nadège was unbounded with him, and if by any chance through the malice of Blanchette, or any other means, her suspicions should be in any way aroused, she would turn the mind of Béthune inside out as easily as a child can empty a bird's nest. He knew her great power over men, and the tenacity with which she would at times follow out an idea if it were one which appeared to elude her, or which others sought to conceal from her. [293]

'Does he know your story?' he asked, with some embarrassment. 'Have you mentioned me to him?'

'Oh no!'—the colour flushed into her face, there was indignation in her denial. 'Do you think that I would talk of—of—of that time and of you?'

Her voice trembled a little over the last word; she added after a moment,

'He speaks of her sometimes—of you never.'

'Ah!'

Othmar understood the meaning of that, though his companion did not.

The admiration and loyalty with which her visitor had spoken of a lady who was nothing to him, had seemed even to her unworldly ignorance something which Othmar would not like. She, who had only seen the homely lives of the toilers of the sea and soil, with their primitive passions and their single-minded ideas, did not dream of the easy relations and the elastic opinions which exist in the great world, of the friendships which have all the grace of love without its fatigue and its bondage, of the influence which brilliant women can exercise over the minds and lives of men, without giving in return one iota of their own freedom or feeling one pulse of tenderness. All those intricate motives, and half-dissolute, half-delicate, liberties which prevail in society, were to her unknown, unimaginable. She could understand that a woman or a man should die for love, or should in an hour of hatred slay what they were jealous of, or what had robbed them of their love. All the simple deep undivided emotions of life were intelligible to her and aroused response in her nature, but the refinements of caprice and of fancy, the subtleties of cultured minds playing with passions which they were too languid and too hypocritical to share, these were altogether unintelligible to her.

In her short life she had not lived with the rude labouring folk who had been her sole companions, without knowing that men could be faithless and women also. But in the only people she had ever known, fidelity had had a rude and literal interpretation, and infidelity had often been roughly chastised by a blow of the knife, or the scourge of a rope's end. All the refined gradations of inconstancy in the great world were wholly unimaginable by her. [294]

'You will have to live ten years more before you can play in Sardou's pieces,' Rosselin had said one day to her; 'as yet you must remain with the poets, with the eternal children, with the eternal *Naturkinder*.'

'Perhaps,' Rosselin had added to himself, 'she will never be able to play Dora, or Froufrou, only Adrienne Lecouvreur, or Marie Stuart. She has a character cast on broad bold antique lines; simple and profound feelings alone are natural to her. The intricacies of complex emotion, and the contempt born of analysis, are not intelligible to her. She would understand why the Duchesse de Septmonts throws the cup down so violently in "L'Etrangère," but she would not understand why Froufrou vacillates so helplessly between her family and her lover.'

She looked wistfully now at Othmar, afraid that she had displeased him, yet urged on by the unconquerable attraction which the character of his wife exercised over her:

'Why has she so much power over people?' she asked in a low voice.

'My wife?' asked Othmar, who was absorbed in his own thoughts. 'How can I tell you, my dear? Perhaps she has it because she does not care about it; perhaps because all men seem to her to be fools; perhaps because nature has made her cleverer than we are: how can I tell you? There are persons born into this world with a magnetic power over the minds of others: she is one of them. You have seen it yourself; she was an utter stranger to you, yet she said but two words to you, and you followed her, and all your peaceful, and innocent, and happy life went to pieces like a child's sand-city before the tide of the sea. She can always do that. She has done it a million times. She has done it with this man you speak of; she looked at him once years and years ago, and he has never been free any more. Other women hardly exist for him. He would prefer to be wretched following her shadow, than to be happy where she was not. There are others like him ——'

The face of Damaris grew troubled and embarrassed, there was a sound of indignation in her voice as she said: 'But since she is your wife?'

Othmar laughed a little bitterly.

'Ah, my dear child!—you belong to another world than ours. You have seen amongst your fisher-folk and your fruit-sellers a kind of union of labour, which is called marriage, and which makes the woman toil all day for her children and her house, and grow grey on one hearthstone, and live out her life with the sun shining on one narrow field. You do not understand that when a great lady does a man the honour to accept his hand in marriage, she retains her own complete immunity from all obligations whatever; she only remains beside him on the tacit condition that he shall submit to all her terms; she makes his houses brilliant, she amuses herself, and he can do the same if nature have not made him too dull; she has a number of friendships and interests with which he has nothing to do; and if his heart remain unsatisfied, that is nothing to her—he can take it elsewhere.' [295]

There was the bitterness of personal feeling in the words spoken, as if in impersonal generalisation. His hearer did not penetrate all their meanings, but she felt the personal offence and dissatisfaction which were in them, and they filled her with a wistful and sympathetic sorrow. She did not understand. How could people be so rich, so great, so beautiful, have so much power in their hands, and so much love at their command, and yet be for ever so restless, so weary, so dissatisfied? Her heart hardened itself more utterly than ever against this woman who had such empire, and used it with such cruelty; who was so beloved, and so contemptuous of love; who bore his name, dwelt in his houses, could see him when she would, and yet seemed to give him no more rest or kindness than she gave a stranger passing in the street. The reasons of it were all too intricate and too subtle for her mind to be able to guess one half of them. In her own simplicity of phrase she would have said only that he was unhappy, which would not have covered one half, or one tithe of the truth; but that scanty knowledge was enough to make all her own intensity of gratitude and devotion to him yearn with longing to console him, and sink heartsick before its own impotency to do so.

All through the months in which he had been absent, she had thought of him with wistful memories, vague troubled thoughts, of which he was the centre and ideal. The remembrance of his light grave kiss upon her brow had thrilled through her with a magical force, banishing childhood. All her warm and passionate heart, rich as the fruits of her native land, was given to him unasked, unconscious of all it gave. Never in any hour of her empire over him had the woman to whom he had given up all he possessed, his past, his present, and his future, known one single pulse of such love for him as filled the whole nerve and soul and nature of Damaris Bérarde.

She would have gone blindfold wherever he had led. She would have died happy if gathered one moment to his breast.

But as yet she knew it not. As yet her own heart was a sealed book to her. To him it was open; he could read on it what he would; but he was unwilling to read.

'Have we not done her harm enough,' he asked himself, 'that I should do her this last, this greatest? Shall I bind her to me in her youth and her ignorance when I can but give her, what?—an hour of my time, a fragment of my thoughts, the cold hospitality of a heart which has been swept empty by another woman?' [296]

He looked at her where she stood, with the grey light of the pale day powerless to dull or take away the warmth and depth of colour, the strength and grace of outline from the form and face. The shining curls, the luminous eyes, the mouth like the bud of the pomegranate, the warm soft cheeks with the bright blood pulsing in them, they were just what they had been in the sea-wind, and the sun of the south; the pallor and cold of the north had had no dominion over them.

She had the triple beauty of youth, of health, of genius. There was the lavish glory of the springtime in her, as in the April fields when nature flings down flowers at every step. She should

have been Heliodora to be crowned with white violets and blue hyacinths by the singer of Gadara, and he—if he had loved her, he might have opened his arms to her; but he looked in his own soul and no love of any kind was there.

Should he dare to offer her pale pity, mere tenderness, the fatigue of passions tired and chilled by another? What more unfair than for one weary and world-worn to lay his head upon the warm white breast of youth when he no more could dream there any of the dreams youth loves and love begets?

Damaris was perplexed and pained because he stayed so brief a time with her, for the low winter sun, already when he came so near to its last hour above the grey and purple of the plains, was still sinking red and dim in a western sky of smoke-like vapour, when he rose to leave her and return to Paris. She vaguely felt that there was some reserve between them, that all he thought was not expressed, that all he desired was not said.

In her ignorance of the waywardness and contradictions of the hearts of men, she could only think that he was angered with her for her persistency in a career which he had told her was not a happy or a wise one. To her it seemed that he had every right over her life, since without him she must have perished miserably amongst the unnoticed misery of the great city in which he had found her.

'You are not vexed that I was reciting the speeches of Dona Sol?' she asked him timidly, trying to find out what he wished.

'Vexed? Surely not,' he answered her. 'I understand that you still cling to this one thought, and since the ambition of it is so strong in you, it is no doubt best that you should give it an undivided devotion. We do nothing well that we do half-heartedly.'

'Does he tell you what he thinks of me?' she asked, still timidly.

'Rosselin?' said Othmar. 'Yes; he thinks greatly of your natural gifts; you content him, which is a rare thing, for he is hard to please; he believes you may move that dull, stupid, imitative mass which calls itself the world. I have never heard him say otherwise or say less. But neither Rosselin or I are gods, my child; we can push open the gates for you, but we cannot control what you may find beyond the gates.'

'You mean——?'

'I mean that his experience and influence will enable you to face the world with every advantage, will enable you to begin where others only arrive after long years of toil and of probation: but when he has done that he will have done all that he can do. The rest will lie with all the blind forces which govern human fates.'

There was something in the words, gently as they were spoken, which chilled her eager faiths and sanguine hopes, and brought back to her that fear of the future, that dread of the imprisonment of the art world, which had moved her after the recital of the Conservatoire.

'I begin to understand!' she said, with an impetuous sigh. 'It will be a slavery where I thought it a conquest. But—but—could not I have *one* triumph and then come back to the country and the quiet of it if I wished? Could I not make Paris crown me once, even if I gave the crown back to them? Why not?——'

'Because, drinking once, every one drinks as long as a drop is left of that *amari aliquid* called Fame. If you once taste triumph you will never return to obscurity. Did I not tell you so in the summer? Besides, why should you wish to triumph at all unless it be to give over your life to Art? I do not understand——'

The face of Damaris grew red and overcast.

'I want her to know that I need not be despised,' she said in a very low voice, through which there ran the thrill of a deep and sombre meaning. Othmar started and himself coloured at the menace which there was in the sound of her voice.

'You mean Nadège?' he said abruptly.

Damaris gave a gesture of assent.

She was ashamed of what she had said, but it had escaped her almost involuntarily. He was silent. He was uncertain what to say. There was a sense of reluctance in him to speak at all of his wife to her. Commonplace words could have been said in plenty; but these he did not choose to employ. He understood that the whole strong and ardent soul of this child was on her lips; it was not a time for trivial platitudes, for empty phrases, which in moments of great emotions seem more unkind than blows.

'If I be your friend, my dear, you must not think of her as your enemy,' he said at length. 'She admires genius—it is the one thing which commands her respect: if you show her you possess it she will be a better friend to you than I can ever be.'

'I do not want her friendship.'

Damaris had grown pale; she spoke with impetuous and almost fierce meaning; the darker instincts which were in the hot blood of the Bérardes were aroused; she did not pause to consider her own words.

It grew dark without: the sun had now sunk below the horizon; the red light of the fire on the hearth reached her and shone in her auburn curls, on her shining sombre eyes, on her lips shut close with scorn. She looked at him from under her level brows.

'You care for her very much?' she said suddenly.

Othmar was silent some moments. How much or how little should he show of his real thoughts to this child, who loved him and whom he could not love in any way as she deserved? He thought she had merited candour at the least from him.

'Yes, dear; I care for her very much, to use your words. She has been all the world to me; in a sense she will be so always. Every great passion has a certain immortal element in it; at least I think so. She has been the one woman for whom I would have sinned any sin, have done any folly, have given up place and name, and honour, and all I had, if she had wished. No one loves twice like that. Many never love so once. I do not pretend that life with her has been all I hoped for: those exquisite dreams are never realised; human nature does not hold the possibility of their realisation. I disappoint her perhaps as much as she chills me; it is inevitable, and is no one's fault that I know of; the fault lies with human nature.'

He paused. Damaris stood where she had been before, but the light had died down from the wood-fire, and the shadows of the twilight were upon her face. Her open-air, bird-like, flower-like life upon the island had made all life seem very simple to her, a thing regulated like the coming and going of the boats between the shores, broad and plain as the smooth sea sand of the mainland. All suddenly she saw that it was a thing of intricate mysteries, of cruel perplexities, of fathomless emotions, with whose disquietude and disillusion the learned played as with knotted threads which it amused them to disentangle, but before whose impenetrable secret the simple broke their heart.

Othmar continued with an effort, leaning against the side of the shut casement grown dark with the descending gloom of coming night.

'I cannot make you comprehend, my dear, with how great a passion I have loved her. You may have heard of one who bore my name before her, one who died on your own shores. She was lovely in body and soul, and had no fault that ever I saw, and would have died for me—did die for me, perchance—and to her I was without any love, always because my whole soul was set upon another woman. And that other is now my wife. And her, I tell you, I have loved in such wise that I believe no other love worthy the name will ever arise in me again. I do not say that it is impossible, for no man knows;—but so I think. She has disdained the place she took, and has left it empty, but no other can fill it after her. She has made that impossible——' [299]

The tears rose to his eyes as he spoke. He could not think of the woman he had worshipped, and whose heart he thought had never had one pulse of actual love for him, without a pain which overmastered him. He had never spoken of all he felt for her to any living being throughout the years in which her influence had reigned over his life.

Damaris looked at him in the deepening shadows which hid her own face. A passionate pain communicated itself to her as she listened.

'Is it she who does not care, then?' she asked. Her voice was hurried and had a tremor in it.

'God knows!' said Othmar. 'No; I think she does not.'

He sighed wearily; his reserve once broken through, it was a kind of solace to him to speak out aloud the disappointment mute for so long, for so long unconfessed even to himself.

'It is not her fault,' he continued; 'nature made her so. We all seem to her weak and sensual fools. Her own mind is so cultured and so hypercritical that men far greater than I am would seem to her poor creatures. She needed a Cæsar to share his empire with her, and she would have laughed even at him because his laurels could not have covered his scanty locks! She would have always seen his baldness, never his greatness. She is made like that. She does not care; why should she? We care for her. But that is no reason. Perhaps she would regret it if the children she has had by me died, but if I died to-morrow I doubt if the world would look dark to her. It certainly would not look empty!'

He spoke bitterly, with truth and irony so intermingled in his unconsidered words, that it was far beyond the powers of his inexperienced hearer to distinguish between them; all she felt was that he was unhappy, yet that his soul was set irrevocably upon this woman who had wedded him only to torment, to elude, to disappoint, to humiliate him.

She did not know enough of men and women and their passions to understand all that he meant in all its fulness of mortification, but she could understand that he suffered with a kind of suffering for which it was impossible for anyone to console him, and which severed him from herself by a vast and cruel distance of which she became suddenly sensible as she had never been before. [300] His presence was sweet to her with a sweetness which was akin to anguish; the sound of his voice thrilled through all her being, the touch of his hand was a magnetism over her, charming her to a sense of ecstasy in which she lost all power of will: but she was powerless to banish for an hour the remembrance of this other woman, she had no sorcery which could undo and replace the magic of the past; she did not think this or feel this because her thoughts and her feelings were all confused and inarticulate, but it was so, and an immense consciousness of loneliness and impotency weighed like lead upon the warmth and the buoyancy of her soul.

She was nothing to him.

They were alike silent, standing in the dusky windows with the cold dark country in its wintry silences stretched without.

'It is best she should know!' he thought with a sense of cruelty and ingratitude. It seemed to him terrible that she should waste all the treasures of her lovely youth, of her fresh emotions, of her

original thoughts, of her awaking passions, upon one who could not give her even one single heart's beat of love in answer. He stooped and kissed her on her shining curls.

'Good-night, my child,' he said with pitying tenderness. 'Good-night. Think of me as your friend, always your friend, and if you see me seldom believe that it is not due to want of sympathy, but only because—because——'

He paused, seeking for words which could render his meaning clear to her without wounding her by too plain and blunt a warning against her own heart.

'Because I meet you too late to be able to care for you,' he thought; 'because I have nothing to give you worth your dreams and your youth; because I would give you more if I could, but I cannot; because my heart is like a shut grave, it is too full of its own dead to be able to let in the living!'

But he could not say this, it would have been too harsh; so he said nothing. He kissed her once more on her soft thick hair gently and coldly, and left her, while the darkness of the night gathered around her, and over the silent fields the last snow of the winter began to fall, drifting noiselessly before a northern wind.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

That night he received a letter from Melville, written in answer to the one in which he had told him the story of Damaris. Melville was far away in Asia at a Jesuit mission station in the snowy mountains, and his reply had taken many months to cross the Chinese plains and seas. [301]

'What you tell me,' he wrote, 'of a child whom I knew so happy on her little island has startled and does distress me greatly. Was it any other than yourself who were her friend, I should be not only distressed but very apprehensive. She is of that ardent, impetuous, imaginative temperament which can be led to any madness if misled by its dreams or by its affections. I shall for ever blame myself that I did not see her before my departure for Asia. But I left the South of France for Rome very hurriedly, and thence came at once to these strange lands to examine and report on the state of all the Catholic missions of the far East to the Vatican. I had not a moment for any personal memories or personal farewells.

'I would that I were in Europe, but it will be impossible for me to execute my errand under another year. You will do, I know, all that is chivalrous and generous by her, but what I fear is that thus doing it you will inevitably become the angel and ideal of her poetic fancy. Let me urge on you to see her yourself as little as is consistent with necessity and common kindness, and to have her as much as possible occupied by intellectual pursuits and interests. You will not be offended with me that I say thus much. The vulgar successes of such easy seduction will have no attraction for you, and I am sure that the share which your wife originally had in thus bringing about her misfortunes will make this child altogether sacred to you.

'The dramatic art may be the only career, as you say, which is open to her. I remember that she was for ever reading plays and poems, and could recite her favourite passages with pathos and with fire. It is not what one would choose for her, but if she enter upon it, it may occupy her and save her from herself. I have no churchman's prejudice against that or any art. My time, when in Paris, has been largely spent amongst great artists, and I have found in them many great qualities of the mind and heart which might go far to balance before any judge the freedom and the passions of their unconventional lives. I believe the character of Damaris to be in every way that of an artist. That resistance to all inherited destiny, and to all habitual surroundings, always marks out the one who is born to separate himself or herself from the common herd, and she had this very strongly. Hardy, and loving all country things and seafaring ways, as she did, there was yet always in her something which was unlike her destiny, something restless, daring, and dreamful, something which, wherever it is found, presages woe or fame. She has at all times attracted me greatly, for from her earliest years she has had that about her which suggests the possession of genius, and there is in her that union of the peasant and the patrician which has before now made the most original, and most psychologically interesting, characters on the earth. Tell me more and at once of what you expect from her future, if she be not, indeed, as yet too young for its horoscope to be securely cast. I will write to her direct. Meantime receive my thanks for all that you have already done to save this poor sea-gull astray in a city, and believe in my respect and esteem. Of course you have told Madame Nadège: what does she say?' [302]

Othmar read the letter sitting in the solitude of his library in the small hours of the waning night; and a pang, which was almost that of conscience, smote him as he did thus read. He had done nothing indeed to forfeit the esteem of the writer; nothing which made him unworthy of the writer's confidence; yet a vague sense that he had been unwise in all which he had meant for kindness, and wrong in the reticence which had sprung from his own selfish sensitiveness, oppressed him with a useless self-reproach. How could he tell Melville that his wife knew nothing of the presence of Damaris Bérarde at Chevreuse, without appearing to him to have become that mere vulgar seducer which Melville would have thought it the grossest of insults to suppose him?

CHAPTER XL.

The next day Othmar called upon Rosselin, and without preface said to him abruptly:

'You had better tell the Duc de Béthune all I have told you about your pupil. I do not know whether he will believe it or not, but it is wholly intolerable for us to allow him to suppose, as he may suppose from appearances, that there are relations between myself and her which have no existence in fact.'

Rosselin listened and made no reply.

Othmar continued with impatience.

'I do not know what he thinks, but he probably thinks something entirely and grossly unjust to her. He is a man of honour: he will respect confidence if it be placed in him.'

'Why not tell him yourself? He is, I believe, very intimate in your houses.'

'He is no especial friend of mine. He is often at my house, it is true, but personally I have no intimacy with him whatever.'

Rosselin hesitated; then he summoned his courage and said frankly:

'Pardon me, but it is not the Duc de Béthune or any other man who has any concern with the position which you have created for yourself and for my pupil; the only person for whom it can have any vital interest, or who can exercise any influence over it, is the Countess Othmar, to whom you will not speak of it.' [303]

Othmar coloured; he was greatly annoyed. He was conscious also that Rosselin was right in what he said.

'If my wife heard of her from others, I would tell her how she came there,' he said, with some embarrassment. 'But I can assure you that though M. de Béthune might believe in the facts as you know them, she would not do so. She never believes in any single motives. She would suppose that I tried to gloss over with sentiment a mere vulgar amour.'

'Men's natures,' he added, bitterly, 'are often as simple, and straight, and frank as a dog's, because, like dogs, we are stupid and trustful; but the mind of a woman of culture is far too critical in its survey and too intricate in its own motives ever to accredit us with the intellectual honesty we possess. It is a quality so stupid that it seems to women as incredible as it is uninteresting.'

Rosselin grew in his turn impatient.

'You, too, appear to me,' he said bluntly, 'to be too fond of Pascal's *esprit de finesse, jugement de sentiment*. Intellectual analysis is very interesting no doubt, but I never knew it serve in the least to solve the prosaic difficulties of active life. You cannot govern circumstances with theories.'

In himself he thought:

'You create a position in the frankness of your generosity which you perceive becomes equivocal in its aspect to others; you earnestly desire to prevent its appearing so; yet you do not take the one measure which would secure to it immunity from suspicion.'

'I have an idea,' he continued aloud, 'that the best way to test her talents and prepare the world for the appreciation of them, would be for her to recite at some great house, to be seen and heard by some choice audience. Why not in yours? Why not to your friends?'

'In mine? To my acquaintances?'

'Why not? It is, in my opinion, the easiest and most propitious way in which a beginner can try her powers. It is less alarming than a public stage, and the verdict given is more discriminating, and of greater value afterwards. The majority of neophytes have no such chance possible. They may go where they can; begin in the provinces; take anything they can get. But when it can be done, there is no question but that to make an entry into the world in the best society is an immeasurable benefit to any aspirant. It is to be famous at once if successful; whilst, if unsuccessful, the failure is passed over as the caprice of the host in whose house the neophyte is tried. As you are disposed to do anything for her, it seems to me that it would cost you little to ask Madame Nadège to permit the representation of some *saynete*, or some short piece like the "Luthier de Crémone," at one of her great winter entertainments. She likes novelty; and I believe she often has dramatic representations both in Paris and at Amyôt.' [304]

'She has them, certainly,' said Othmar with some constraint.

Rosselin looked from under his eyelids at him.

'Then what objection is there? You have said that Madame your wife, first of all of us, saw something like genius in Damaris Bérarde. She would not refuse to allow her prophecy to be proved true under her own auspices.'

'No; I do not suppose that she would refuse.'

'If you would dislike that she should be asked, that is another matter,' said Rosselin with some impatience, whilst to himself he thought, 'You have made a secret of this thing, and you find what a burdensome and stupid thing a secret is, especially when it is one that circumstances are certain to take out of our hands, whether we will or no.'

'I have no dislike to your project,' replied Othmar with hesitation; 'but,' he added more frankly, 'I

must tell you that my wife is not in the least likely to take interest twice in the same person; and I must also tell you, as I did some months ago, that she knows nothing of the present existence of your pupil. If you like to tell her, do so; I give you free permission.'

'I?' echoed Rosselin. 'My dear friend, if such a great lady saw a superannuated old actor enter her presence she would surely order her lackeys to turn him out unheard. I never spoke to Madame Nadège in my life, though rumour has made me feel well acquainted with her.'

'She always treats genius with respect. It is, perhaps, the only thing she does respect——'

'Are you sure she does not think it escaped from Bicêtre? Most *grandes dames* do.'

'No; she has too much intellect herself. She is a *grande dame*, but she is much more besides. She admires talent wherever she finds it; only she thinks that she finds very little.'

'There she is right enough; there is any quantity of mere facility, of mere imitativeness, in our time, but there is very little which deserves a higher name.'

'And you believe that Damaris Bérarde has more than mere talent?'

'Yes, I believe it. I may be wrong, but I have never been wrong in such judgments, though it seems pretentious to say so. It is because I believe that she has this, that I am anxious for the world to first hear of her in such a way that she may be spared the vulgar and tedious novitiate [305] which is generally unavoidable before a dramatic career; and also I should like to command for her such an audience as may become a title of honour to her, and a protection against false tongues. It is inevitable that your name has been, or will be, associated with hers. Modern life is one huge glass-house. If she be first seen at your house, in your salons, calumny can scarcely attach to your friendship for her. Pardon me if I speak with too intimate a candour. If I said less, I should feel myself almost dragged into the base collusion of a Sir Pandarus.'

Othmar grew pale with anger; he was unaccustomed to familiarity, and the words seemed to him wanting in delicacy and in respect.

'You are very hopeful!' he said bitterly, 'and wonderfully trustful, my good friend, if you imagine that in the world we live in she would be secured from slander by being seen in my drawing-rooms. The only thing they would say, if they were in the mood to say anything, would be that I deceived my wife into facilitating my amours. Society is not so easily persuaded of innocence as you appear to think, whilst it is thoroughly persuaded of the Countess Othmar's indifference to myself!'

In the impulse of his anger he said what he would not have said in a cooler moment. He was greatly irritated at all which was implied in Rosselin's latest words, and the allusion to his wife's indifference to his actions escaped him almost involuntarily.

'I regret if I offend you,' said Rosselin, whose keen eyes read his feelings in his face. 'I say what it seems right to me to say. I know the world has always *mauvaise langue*, I know it as well as you can do, but there are limits to its impudence. I do not believe that the lowest knave of it all would ever dare to say that you passed any insult on your wife. It has been too well aware of your devotion to her. However, let us abandon my idea. We can find some other way, perhaps; the preparation I have given my pupil has been short, and perhaps immature. She can wait awhile without injury. You have said, I think, that she has means enough of her own to live on as she lives now?'

'She has means enough. Yes.'

'Without wasting her little substance? I suppose her grandfather did not leave her much?'

'She has quite sufficient income for her wants; I believe they are very simple.'

He spoke impatiently and rose. Rosselin, whose tact was always of the acutest kind, understood the hint and changed the subject.

Left to himself, the anger of Othmar soon grew less, and the courtesy of his nature made him [306] regret his impatience with a man double his years and not his equal in station; one, moreover, who had only spoken honestly thoughts which were blameless.

The suggestion had annoyed him both by what it asked, which seemed to him difficult, and by what it implied, which seemed to him offensive. And he repented of his manner of receiving it, and of wounding a person who had warmly answered to his own appeal, and had aided him in regard to Damaris with a sympathy the more noteworthy because it had at first been reluctantly given. Before night he wrote a brief note to Rosselin:

'I regret my impatience, and apologise for it. No doubt you are right in your views. If I can see my way to comply with them I will do so. Meanwhile, believe in my friendship and my high esteem.'

He signed the few lines, and sent them by a messenger to Asnières.

When Rosselin received them he was sitting by his solitary lamp examining the condition of a much injured copy on vellum of 'The Birds,' which he had picked up at a bookstall on one of the quays the day before. He put the manuscript down, and read the note with its clear signature of Othmar at the end.

'A graceful *amende*,' he thought. 'He has a heart of gold, but his judgment is not so much to be trusted as his feelings are. He spoke of his wife's indifference. What could he expect? You cannot get out of a nature what it has not got in it. For five-and-twenty years she had lived for herself: did he suppose that all in a moment she would forget herself and live for him? I daresay he did.

He was ready to live for her. That sort of mistake is so often made; and it is always the highest nature which makes it.'

Rosselin lost interest in his Aristophanes for that night. He had a foreboding of some evil. Imaginative minds are like the birds: they know when storms approach.

CHAPTER XLI.

A week or two later he saw Othmar again enter his little parlour. Othmar made ministers wait on him, and would keep princes in his ante-chamber with an indifference which gained him the repute of arrogance; but he waited himself on Rosselin, a man old, poor, and solitary. These were his eccentricities, which the world hated as it would never have hated any vices in which he might have chosen to indulge.

'I have come to speak to you of your wishes, which I perhaps dismissed too hastily,' he said, as he seated himself. 'You really believe that to be first seen and heard, as you proposed, would benefit your pupil?' [307]

'I do not doubt it,' replied Rosselin, 'for the reasons I named to you, and also because to succeed before a choice and cultured audience is the greatest of stimulants, the most certain of practical tests. I do not think that a long novitiate would suit Damaris Bérarde. She is of the south; her beauty is nearly at its height now; she is fully matured in every way; she is of an impetuous and sensitive temperament; she is not easily governed; she would never brook the tedium and slavery of the theatres of the provinces; she must take the world by storm, mount its throne at a bound, or not at all. She would easily be irrevocably disgusted and eternally lost to art.'

'Would that be so much a matter for regret!'

'What fate can she have otherwise? You cannot make her a *duchesse*, she would not consent to become a *bourgeoise*. She is a *déclassé*: you have said it yourself. There are two asylums possible for a *déclassé*: they are Pleasure and Art. I prefer the latter.'

'Art is quite cruel enough. She will never be able to go back into privacy. What a loss!—what an irreparable loss! And you speak of it as a gain!'

'I speak as I spoke long ago, when first you named her to me. The publicity you lament is the price which is paid for fame. Some do not think the price too high, some do. It is you yourself who wished me to prepare her for an artist's career. She cannot become a great artist if she remain in obscurity.'

'Of course not. But it is horrible. Publicity is a kind of violation——'

'Recompensed like Danaë's!'

Othmar was silent. He was conscious that a strong personal dislike to her leaving the safe shadow of private life moved him to an exaggerated objection to her being seen and known by others. When once the world had beheld her, she would belong to the world. It might make her triumphant or it might make her wretched, but she would belong to it evermore.

Rosselin guessed what he was feeling, and answered his unspoken thoughts.

'Yes; she will never go back either to Les Hameaux or to Bonaventure. That is certain. She will belong to all men, in a sense, when once she has sought their suffrages. But what else can be done with her? What else? You would not hear of a conventional marriage for her and a house in the suburbs, and I suppose she would not hear of it either. She is half a poet, half a thing of the open air like a doe or a swallow. You cannot send her back whence she came. If you could do it in fact, you could not do it in spirit. The soul would never be the same—poor white seabird of a soul, which comes across the flames of ambition and burns in them! You might set her body down under her orange-boughs, under her blue sky, but you could not give her the heart of her childhood. You are a god in your way; the only god the nineteenth century knows—a rich man—but to do that is beyond your power.' [308]

'If I had that power I should be a god indeed!' said Othmar bitterly, 'and the whole sick world would come to me to be cured.'

He needed not the words of Rosselin to remind him that never would he be able to undo the work his wife had done in one idle moment of imperious caprice.

Though the words were harsh and, in a great measure, unjust to him, he did not resent them; he poignantly regretted the fate brought on Damaris, and when he saw her he felt a reproach greater than any which others could address to him. The breaking up of the happy simplicity of her life had always seemed to him as wanton an act as to shoot a seabird which falls in the sea.

Had he said so to his wife she would have laughed, and have denied all responsibility. She would have declared that fate, in some guise or another, always finds out female children with handsome faces; that Strephon always comes to them, or Faust. But he would not look at it thus. To him it always seemed the cruellest unkindness needlessly to have brought Damaris Bérarde and the world together.

'Why does he dislike a public career for her so much?' thought Rosselin. 'I do not think that he cares for her, except in kindness. I do not think he would give her any part of his own life. Passion has died in him, died under the coldness of his wife's nature, as flowers die in frost. This child would give him, I daresay, all the richness and all the heat of her own heart, but he would only give her in return *les cendres tièdes d'un feu éteint*, and, as he is a man more generous and more sensitive than most, he would never forgive himself for having sacrificed her to himself. Better for her all the dangers of life in the world than the consuming love for one who would never love her as she loved. Had I been the confessor of Louise de la Vallière, I should have said to her, "Remain in the crowds of Versailles if you wish to forget: do not go into solitude." No woman forgets who has no one to teach her forgetfulness. Solitude is the nurse of all great

passions, because in solitude there is no standard of comparison!'

Othmar, unaware of his companion's reflections, was lost in thought himself. He felt that he had resigned the direction of her life into Rosselin's hands, and had no right to dispute with her guide [309] the course which he deemed most desirable for her. He had sought the counsels and the assistance of a man of genius in a moment of extremity, and he felt that he had no title to dissent from whatever the vast experience of such a man might consider wisest on her behalf. He knew that she could not continue to dwell at Les Hameaux, unseen save by the dogs and the birds and the mild eyes of the cattle, if ever those desires for art and for fame which tormented her were ever to have any fruition. If he had had the power to close the gates of solitude on her he would not have used it; he would have felt that he had no right so to use it.

He was conscious that he had no title to stand between her and any career which might become possible for her. Since his last visit to her he had felt that he himself occupied too large a place in her life; that his memory coloured all her thoughts too deeply and too warmly; that her whole existence might be his utterly in any way he chose if he would take that gift as easily as a man may gather a half-open rose in the freshness of morning.

He had no vanity of any sort. The many women who had offered themselves to him in his life for sake of the riches which were behind him had taught him humility rather than vanity, for they had been so plainly idolatrous, not of him but of his possessions. He had always doubted his power to make himself beloved for himself alone, and he would willingly have put it to the proof, like the Lord of Burleigh, had it been possible. But even he, little self-appreciation as he had, yet could not doubt that with the life of this child whom he had saved from the streets he could do whatsoever he chose. Every expression of her ingenuous nature, every glance of her innocent eyes, every impulse of her ardent and untrained nature, told him that he could, with the first moment he chose, render himself wholly master of her whole existence. He was the god of her dreams and the providence of her waking thoughts. Had he had less charm for women than he possessed, he would still scarcely have failed to become, through circumstance, the one person dominant over all her mind and senses. Without any self-deception, he could not but be aware that he could become her lover when he chose. Gratitude, imagination, all the fervour of waking passions stirring in a southern nature as the juices of the vine stir in its tender flowerets; all the favour of opportunity and of circumstance, which idealised her relations with him; and all the impressionability of the first years of a youth early matured under the heat of Mediterranean suns; all these were combined together to make of him the adoration and the arbiter of her life. And he—what had he to give in return for all that glory of the daybreak of the soul? Not even, as Rosselin had thought, *les cendres tièdes d'un feu éteint*.

He had wider thought and bolder judgment than the timid and narrow laws which a vast majority [310] of mediocrities had been able to impose on a sheepish world. Could he have rendered her such feeling as she was ready to give to him, could he have given her the warmth of a genuine passion, the sincerity and the undivided force of a great emotion, he would not have considered that he sacrificed her to himself if he had kept her in eternal isolation.

Great natures and great affections do not need the companionship or the suffrages of the world. Its narrow and hollow laws mean nothing to them, and its opinions mean as little. Love is not love if it have any remembrance of either.

But he could not give her this, or anything like this. The great devotion of his life for the woman who had become his wife had left his heart empty, yet shut to any other visitant. That immeasurable and intense passion had been to him so supreme in its dominance, so voluptuous in its ecstasies, that all other love after it seemed pale as dead flowers beside living ones.

Men sometimes say to women that they have never loved but once, and those women if they know what men's lives are laugh, as well they may. Yet the meaning of the words is true enough, and not a mere form of phrase.

In the life of every man of higher soul than the vast majority there is some one passion which stands out unrivalled in his memory amidst a host of fleeting fancies, hot desires, dull affections, passing pastimes, which also have in their time been called love by him wrongly. In that one great passion he has attained, enjoyed, realised what he can never reach again; what no woman who lives will ever be able to make him feel again; and in this sense he is not untruthful when he says that he has only loved but once.

Such a love Othmar had known for the one woman who, despite the enemy Time, and the decaying worm of custom, had still, through her very mutability, cruelty, and negligence, retained a power to wound him and a power to delight him which no living creature could ever rival with him. Even when the chill of her own indifference now spread itself to his own emotions, and he felt life, as it were, grow cold and wintry around him, memory was there to tell him of the sorceries of the past, and even love was still there, which watched her wistfully, and would still have obeyed her sign had she made one.

What then had he to give Damaris?

Nothing which was worthy her.

Such baser ardours as a creature who is young and beautiful can always awaken in the breast of any man, and a pitying and gentle tenderness which would be, offered to love, the cruellest of tortures.

And then she owed everything on earth to him: she was his debtor for the very bread she ate. [311] That one fact seemed to him to stand between her and himself like a white wall made of ivory by

hands divine. That she herself did not know the extent of her debt to him made it the more sacred to him.

Circumstance being then as it was between them, and powerless as he was to feel for her anything more than the tenderness and the pity which she had from the first aroused in him, what title had he to stand between her and any possible triumphs and consolations which the world might offer to her? None, he thought. None that any generosity could allow him to claim.

He said aloud to Rosselin:

'Whatever you think best to do for her, do. Her career will be your creation. If she ever attains greatness she will owe it to you. I do not think that I have any right to interfere either one way or the other. To interest my wife in what she has forgotten is impossible. You might as well try to gather last year's raindrops. But it is possible that she might be pleased if her predictions were proved to her to have been accurate. Contrive for her to see your pupil before she hears of her. She may perhaps recognise her with interest. I dare not say that she will. But you can make the experiment.'

'It will be difficult,' said Rosselin.

'Not very. You have before now done me the honour to arrange dramatic representations at my house. Whenever the Countess Othmar next wishes for entertainment of that kind, which she is sure to do before long, I will place the arrangements for it in your hands. You can then bring forward Damaris Bérarde in any piece you choose. What you wish will so be done. She will be seen and heard under my roof; and, if successful, she may—possibly—reconquer a place in my wife's memory. If she fail she will certainly never do so.'

'She will not fail,' said Rosselin; whilst he thought to himself, 'She will not fail, because she will have the stimulant of your wife's presence and the memory of your wife's disdain. She will not fail if I have left in me any of the magnetism which I used to be able to communicate to others.'

Rosselin was a man of warm feelings and keen sympathies, but the artist in him dominated the friend. He was so saturated with the love of art that, as he had surrendered all his own existence to its claims, so he unhesitatingly surrendered that of others. The kindest of natures wherever there was no question of art, he almost became cruel where the interests of art were involved. To Othmar, the life of a girl seemed too tender and poetic a thing to be given over to the imperious exactions of any art; but to Rosselin, though he had at first been unwilling to draw her into its sphere, he became, the moment that he believed he saw genius in her, willing even to hurt her, if by such a hurt such genius could be stung or scourged into any ampler evidence of its own powers. He thought little of what she might or might not suffer if he brought her into the presence of the women who represented destiny to her. All he considered was, that no other spectator would be so likely to move her, to goad her into the fullest revelations of the resources of her talent. With the future consequences of such a meeting he had nothing to do, all he thought of was its influence on his pupil. He knew that the wife of Othmar had a fascination for her as strong as hatred, and irresistible as magnetism. It was an electric force which he could not afford to allow to lie latent in the desire he felt, a desire which had grown stronger on him with every week that he had paid his visits to Les Hameaux, to compel Damaris into the seizure of that fame which had at first seemed to him a burden too great, a passion too fierce, for this young daughter of the sun and of the sea. [312]

'She will ultimately be the mistress of Othmar, or of the world,' he thought. 'I prefer the world. I will do what I can that she shall give herself to it instead of to him. To throwaway genius on one human life is to take a planet out of the skies and bury it like a diamond between two human breasts.'

It was in pursuance of the same belief in what was best for her which had made him wish her the heart of Rachel, not the heart of Desclée. Rosselin had surveyed human nature in all its aspects, and his survey of it had convinced him of one fact, that all the higher and more delicate qualities of the soul are but so much penalty-weight to carry in the race of life. The weight is of gold without alloy; but, nevertheless, whoso carries it loses the race.

He with his fine penetration perceived that in her was that greater nature which will lose itself in a great love, and throw away all ambition and all possessions, as though they were but a dead leaf or a broken crust. In a little while such a love, now strong in her, but scarcely conscious of itself, would become wholly conscious, and would take its empire over her whole existence. He wished to oppose to it the only rival with any chance of success—the world.

CHAPTER XLII.

A few days later Rosselin, going to Les Hameaux for his usual recitation with her, found Damaris feverish, restless and despondent. She had lost, for the time at least, that buoyancy and enthusiasm which were the most prominent qualities of her nature; she seemed to him listless and taciturn, her eyes had a brooding pain in them, and she took little interest in the studies of the day. [313]

Rosselin heard from the woman of the house that Othmar had been there that week.

'It will end as such things always end,' he thought impatiently. 'All the fine sentiments on his side will not enable him to cast nature out of him; and to her, of course, he must seem an angel from another world. He has stood between her and all the misery of life. A dog which he had saved in such a way would adore him. He is a man, too, made to charm a poetic nature, because there is so much of the poet in him, and a melancholy which is in pathetic contrast with his wealth and power. One can always understand that women love Othmar; what one cannot understand is that his wife cares for him so little. And yet, why should I say so? All the world over one sees familiarity bring indifference, security create neglect.'

Aloud he said, with anger to her:

'What has come to you? If you do not mean to become an artist, and a great artist, adieu! My hours are not likely to be so many on earth that I can afford to waste them. What ails you? Your voice is dull; your face is no mirror for your words. You are not listening. If you have tame moments like this, do not dream of ever moving the world. It is a block of stone; you cannot stir it without putting out all your strength. And even then it will roll back and roll on to you if you relax your efforts. If you give yourself to art you may be great in it, I think; but if you love anything—any person—better than art, do not touch it. Go, and be an ordinary woman like the rest.'

The words were harsh. The tears started to her eyes as she heard them, and a hot colour rose over her face and throat. She was silent.

'She never speaks of him. How fine that is!' thought Rosselin. 'Most female creatures at her years babble of what fills their thoughts, as birds chatter of the spring in April.'

Aloud he said:

'You will not do any good to-day. You look ill, and you are restless. Come with me to Paris; I will show you something which will interest you—and the weather is fine though cold. Let us walk to Magny.'

She went with him in silence.

The day was drawing to a close as the train sped through the dark fields of winter and entered Paris. A city was always terrible and hateful to her. She loved air and light and the solitude of sea and land. Crowds hurt her, and the labyrinth of streets had never ceased to oppress and to bewilder her. She felt amidst the walls and roofs as a young eagle feels barred up in a cage. He talked to her of many things with that picturesque detail with which his great knowledge of the city and of the world filled his conversation. He endeavoured to interest and distract her; he strove to amuse and arouse her. But he felt that he succeeded but indifferently. Her thoughts were not with him; she was silent and she was nervous. [314]

When night fell he took her with him to the Théâtre Français; not for the first time. It was the night of a *première* of a great dramatist. The house was filled with the choicest critics of Paris; the most famous actors occupied the classic stage. Behind the grating of the hidden box to which he led her she could see without being seen. Before this she had been only taken to rehearsals in the daytime; she had never seen a great theatre in the full blaze of one of its gala nights. It blinded and oppressed her. She longed for the coolness, for the shadows, for the dewy stillness of the country. The pungent scents, the blazing lights, the multitude of faces, the hum of voices, made her afraid; afraid as she had not been all alone in the hours of night adrift in her boat on the sea.

'Watch and listen and learn,' said Rosselin. 'You may be on this stage one day, or on none.'

She did not reply: the new play had begun; the most famous players in Paris acted with that exquisite grace and ease which characterise them; the play was witty and brilliant; each scene had its separate success, each phrase its separate charm. Rosselin himself, vividly interested and keenly critical, gave all his attention to the stage, and for the time forgot his companion. When the curtain fell upon the first act he turned to speak to her; he was startled to see that her face was pale as death, and her eyes, wide open and fascinated, were fastened on the opposite side of the house. He looked where she was looking, and saw a great lady with a bouquet of orchids lying on the cushion before her, and several gentlemen in her box behind her.

'Ah, Madame Nadine!' murmured Rosselin. 'She does not often deign to honour a first night, even when it is Sardou's. She is going to some great ball afterwards, I suppose, for look at her diamonds, and she has her Russian orders on. *Voilà une véritable grande dame!*'

Damaris gazed at her without a word; her eyes were strained, her very lips were pale, she breathed quickly and painfully, the theatre seemed to circle round and round her, and across its intense light of all the many faces there she saw but this one. When the second act began she had no ears for it and no consciousness of what was said or done in it. She never once looked at the stage. Her eyes remained rivetted on the wife of Othmar; the voices of the actors were a mere dull babble to her: when the audience laughed she knew not why they laughed, when they

applauded, she had no knowledge why they did so; all she saw was that delicate colourless beauty on the other side of the house with the great jewels shining on it like stars.

She looked, and looked, and looked till her eyes swam and her heart grew sick. [315]

This was the woman whom he loved, this great lady leaning there with that look of utter indifference on her face, with that slight smile as this man or the other entered her box, with the diamonds shining in the whiteness of her breast, with her uncovered shoulders gleaming white as snow; a hothouse flower in all the rarity, the languor, the perfection, which the hothouse gives. The same sense which had come to her in the drawing-rooms of St. Pharamond came again to the child; a sense of rudeness, of rusticity, of inferiority, of coarseness in herself as contrasted with that patrician elegance, that pale and languid loveliness, that marvellous charm of the world and of its highest form of culture.

'What can I look like to him!' she thought with humiliation. 'Beside her I must seem to him like some rude peasant——'

All that she had felt vaguely before the mirrors of St. Pharamond came back upon her embittered, intensified, made conscious. She realised the immense distance that there was between her and Othmar as she saw his wife. She realised the grace and splendour of this life in the world which they led. She realised the passion which she had given to her. She realised that she herself could only stand outside his life, like a beggar outside his gates.

When the curtain fell again, Rosselin looked at her with impatience.

'You looked at that woman always, never at the stage,' he said angrily. 'She is a great lady; leagues above you, leagues beyond you; you have nothing in common with her. But one day you may force her to hear you in this very house if you choose. Will you choose?'

'She will not care,' said Damaris.

Tears were standing in her eyes; the sense of an infinite loneliness, and of a great inferiority, were on her. What would it matter if she ever became famous yonder on those classic boards? That great lady would come and see her for an hour—smile or censure—then forget. The dreams which she had nurtured of compelling the admiration of the world, seemed to dissolve like a mirage before the mere presence of Othmar's wife. 'She would not care,' she said wearily.

To this patrician she would always be a half-barbarian and uncultured creature. The heart of the child asked with longing to go back to her old life in the sunny air by the blue water, with the homely people, with the simple wants, with the sound of the birds in the leaves, and the feel of the wind on the sea. But she knew that never could she go back so any more.

If her feet were to travel thither, her soul would not go. [316]

The passion of the world, the aims of ambition, the heartsickness of jealousy and desire were all in her; where they have passed the soul is for ever a stranger to peace, even as where fire has burnt the soil of a green field, grass will grow no more.

'Why did she not let me alone?' she thought.

Between the second and the third acts, Rosselin left her to go to the foyer, where he had been for so many years so conspicuous a figure, and so dreaded a critic.

'Fasten the door after me, and if a thousand people should knock, let no one in until you hear my voice,' he said to her, drawing the door behind him.

Left to herself she drew back into the deepest shadow of the little den she occupied, and gazed as she would at the woman who had been destiny to her. She saw numerous gentlemen come and go in her box, make their reverence to her, linger if they were permitted, or withdraw and give place to others. Nadine had changed her position so that her profile only was now turned towards the house. She leaned her elbow on the cushion, and her cheek on her hand, a butterfly of emeralds sparkled under her shoulder; sometimes her face was hidden by the fan of white ostrich feathers, sometimes she furled the fan and let it lie unused beside the orchids.

Damaris watched her with the strange fascination of fear and of wonder, of hatred and admiration, which had moved her in the salons of St. Pharamond. All the words which Othmar had spoken a few days before, were sounding in her ears. Her simple and candid thoughts were beginning to gain something of the complexity, of the weariness, of the pain of his. She understood why he had loved this woman so much that, empty though his heart might be, it would remain untenanted. Innocent as Mignon, she yet watched her rival with something of the passion of Adrienne Lecouvreur.

'She is his, he is hers—and she does not care!' thought the child, in whom the ignorance of childhood still lingered, blent with the awakening strength and heat of a tropical nature.

As the curtain rose for the third act, Othmar himself entered his wife's box. Damaris shrank farther and farther back against the wall, though she knew well that the keenest eyes could not find her out in her obscurity. Her breath came hard and fast like a panting hare's; the great tears rose to her eyes; she suddenly realised what this world was which held him so closely. She saw his wife give him the same slight smile that she gave to others: no more. She saw him bend before her with the same low bow the others gave; she saw him converse with the gentlemen near him; from time to time he glanced round the house. Once or twice his wife turned her head and spoke to him as she spoke to the others. To this child who had the heart of Juliet, the soul of Heloise, the conventionalities of the world seemed like the frost of death. [317]

'She is his; he is hers: and she does not care!'

That was all she could think of as she watched them across that sea of light. The wit of the play amused him, and Othmar looked less weary and more animated than usual. To her he appeared happy.

Rosselin called thrice to her through the door before she heard him and let him enter.

'You should not dream like that when you are at the Français. You should study. What more admirable lessons can you have?' he said angrily. 'Poets may dream if they like. They speak best in their trances. Those who would only interpret them must never dare to do so. Have I not told you so a score of times? There is nothing poetic about the stage; it is all hard, prosaic, literal. If you will dream go and bury yourself under green leaves, under yellow corn; do not come to the theatres of the world.'

Damaris for once did not even hear him. He looked across the house and saw Othmar.

'Come,' he said to her, 'you will miss the last train that pauses at Trappes if you do not come away now. Never will they forgive me for leaving before the close! But that will not matter much. They know I am old; they can think I am ill. Come, or you will be too late.'

'Wait a little,' said Damaris, in a shamed, hushed voice; her face grew red as she spoke.

Rosselin glanced impatiently at the box on the other side of the house. He said nothing; he waited, artist as he was in all the fibres of his nature; his eyes and his ears and his art were all with Got, with the Coquelins, with the moving and speaking persons of the stage: yet a little corner of his heart ached still for the child.

'What wretchedness she prepares for herself!' he thought with pity and sorrow combined. 'She will never be a great artist, because with her feeling will always take the mastery. You are only a great artist if when you suffer, though you suffer horribly, you can study what you feel, you can make your own heart strings into a lyre. If you cannot do that, you are only a creature that loves another. Ah, my dear! No one ever conquered the world so!'

He let her alone until the piece was over; the box of the Countess Othmar had been vacated some moments before the termination of the last act. He did not speak to her whilst he hurried her through private passages and into the frosty air of the streets.

'Cover yourself well, it is cold,' was all he said as he took her with gentle steps over the pavement which his feet had trodden so many thousands of times, in the hurry of youth, in the ecstasy of triumph, in all the alternations of a manhood tossed up and down upon the stormy seas of public favour and of public caprice. All that network of streets about the Français was as dear to him as the banks of Doon to Burns, as the green wood and ways of Milly to Lamartine, as the sweet meads and streams of Penshurst to Philip Sydney. [318]

Damaris walked on beside him, her head bent, her face covered. The tears were rolling slowly down her cheeks.

'Let me do what I would,' she thought, 'she would not care.'

Rosselin took her home to his own little house that night, for it was too late to return to Les Hameaux. He made her seat herself by his fire; he dried the damp of the night on her hair and her clothes; he would have made her eat of his preserved nectarines and drink of his choice wines which were sent by his friends. But she would not touch anything. She sat lost in thought.

All she saw was that beautiful woman; all she heard was the voice of Othmar saying, 'I have so loved her that I shall never love any other woman ever again.'

No doubt it was so: she could understand. Only he seemed to go away from her, herself, utterly and for ever; to glide out of her life as the ships she had used to watch from her balcony, as the nightingales sang under the moon, used to pass away further and further, till the great distance and the shadows of night swallowed them up and they were no more seen, and all the wide sea was empty.

Rosselin watched her sadly.

'Poor Mignon,' he thought. 'Who shall transform her to a Mademoiselle Mars? How does the gymnast teach his child to stand and catch the metal ball, to tread and hold the rope in air. He works and kneads the tender flesh till it grows hard, he strains the soft limbs till they become like steel, he bends and twists and forces, and forges the immature sinews and tendons till they are like cords to resist, and in every separate muscle there almost seems a separate brain. When their nature has been driven out and the body has become an iron machine the teacher has succeeded. Who shall do for her mind and her heart what the gymnast does to his son's limbs and spine? And will ever anybody do it? Will she ever be Mars—be Rachel? Will she ever fling her soul away and keep only her body and her brain? And if she do not do that what success will she ever have?'

In that kind of cruelty with which the true artist would always emulate any living thing to art, he almost wished that Othmar were a man with less honour and less compassion, more license and more selfishness.

'If he would break her heart and rouse her hatred how much art would gain,' he thought. 'She would pass through the fire like Goethe's dancing girl, and come out of it immortal.'

He knew the weakness of love, and he knew the strength of genius. [319]

'Listen to me,' he said, as the wood-fire gleamed and murmured. 'You dream too much of Othmar.

I understand he was your saviour; he is your hero, your saint, your god: all that is inevitable; and he is a man whom women will always love, because he has a great grace and gentleness about him, and his discontent and sadness are in picturesque contrast with his magnificent and enviable fortunes. But he will never love you, my child: just because he has so loved that woman, that his heart has grown cloyed, yet cold; great passions always leave that kind of satiety behind them. And then the world holds him, a hundred thousand invisible threads bind him; if he had the heart left for it, which he has not, he would not have the time to turn back; his life is fixed, such as it is, and he and the world are wedded together, though it may not be the spouse he would have chosen. Do not either live for him or die for him. What will she say if you do either? That you are a love-sick fool. I do not talk to you as moralists would talk, because I do not believe in conventional morality; it is an absurdity, like all conventional things. No doubt your old friend Melville would speak much better than I do, but I speak honestly, and according to my lights. You have wished, and the wish has seemed to me natural, to compel recognition of your own powers from the person who first caused you to leave the happy obscurity of your life. You have said that you wish her to see you can have a greatness she has not. It is a personal motive, and art is best served by impersonal motives. Still it seems to me natural. I can understand it. But to do this you must be strong, you must be bold, you must be true to yourself. You must not be overcome because you see her looking like the great lady she is. There is only one thing which the wife of Othmar respects, it is genius; she respects that because her intellect appreciates, and her gold cannot buy, it. Prove to her that it is in you, and she will respect you. If you died for her lord to-morrow, she would only say that you had forgotten you were not upon the stage. I seem to speak harshly and roughly. Ah, my dear, my heart is neither; but I wish to save you from your own heart if I can. You are all alone, and you are scarcely more than a child, and the world, the world, is a beast.'

She did not answer; her head was bent down on her arms, and her face was hidden; all he could see was the hot flush on the ivory of her throat, and the curling hair which was made golden by the ruddy light from the leaping flames.

All her dreams and aspirations and ambitions seemed all huddled together, bruised and colourless, like a heap of child's toys broken and faded.

'She would not care!' that was all she thought. If the world were to give her fame, what would the best that she could ever reach seem to the unreachable disdain of that other woman? No more than the gleam of a glow-worm may seem to the planet on high. [320]

A rude sun-browned wench of the sea and the land, good to row through blue water, and mow down green billows of grass: that was all she would ever seem to Othmar's wife.

'Tell me what you wish,' she said in a low tone. 'If I can I will do it.'

The voice of Rosselin shook a little as he answered, 'My child I want you to do what she cannot. These people have all things; they have ease and mirth, and soft beds, and minds without care, and great riches, and great palaces, and great powers, but there are two things which often escape them, and ofttimes the poor have the one and now and then they are born to the other. I mean that great consoler of the humble, content, and that great redresser of injustice, genius. You have the latter. In your sea-gull's nest the Muses found you. Oh, child, be grateful! You are richer than the kings who ruled here in Paris—if only you knew your riches!'

She looked up at him suddenly, pushing her troubled curls out of her eyes.

'If I spoke before her my throat would dry up—my voice would be strangled in it. If I were to do well, she would never care. If I were to fail, she would smile. I should see her smile in my grave. He loves her you know, he loves her so much, but she has made his heart numb in him with her indifference and her scorn.'

He was awed and amazed at such intensity of dread in a nature which had always seemed to him bold as the winds, and resolute and headstrong.

'Yes,' he said, almost brutally. 'If you fail she will smile, she will laugh; she knows nothing of failure. But you will not fail. Only the weak fail. You are strong. You will not let that woman think that you threw away your genius for love of her lord!'

They were words which were hard and rough and brutal; but they seemed to him the wisest words that he could speak. She was a child with a passionate heart half broken; unless that heart were torn out and trodden under her foot, he thought that she would never walk straight to where the laurels, the bitter laurels, grew.

He meant to do well; he spoke according to his light; but he was only a man and childless, and forgot a little what easily bruised things the hearts of some women are when they are very young, and have hot blood in their veins, and are all alone in a world which feels to them as the stony road of the moorland feels to the shot doe when there is many a long mile to be covered between her and the herd. [321]

She turned her head from him quickly, and he saw the dark red flush which stained her throat.

She did not answer. The words brought no solace to her. Her heart was empty. He saw the great tears roll slowly down her cheeks. He realised that the hilt of this two-edged sword which he held out to her was too cold a pillow for so young a breast.

CHAPTER XLIII.

The weeks passed on, and Othmar returned no more to the fields of Chevreuse. The great interests and the vast operations of his house occupied his time, and the days of this man whom Nature had created a dreamer and a student, went away in the consideration of financial enterprises, in the audience of innumerable supplicants, in the emission of national loans, and in the study of political situations. He thought oftentimes of her, but he went to her no more. To let her alone he knew was, as Rosselin said, all that he could do for her.

His wife he scarcely saw at this season.

Now and then when it was unavoidable he went with her to some great dinner or reception; oftener they received at home themselves, and on such evenings he saw her in all the grace and elegance which the highest culture and the utmost fashion can lend to a woman already patrician in every fibre of her being. Sometimes she addressed a few words to him concerning the children, or the horses, or some matter of mutual interest; and he saw her carriage passing in and out, her friends and acquaintances coming and going on the stairs, her attendants carrying her chocolate, or her bouquets, or the offerings made her by her courtiers: that was all. In no year had she been more absorbingly *mondaine*; in no year had she been so conspicuous as the greatest lady in Paris; in no year had her balls, her fêtes, her banquets, her concerts, been more wonderful in their novelty and more exclusive in their invitations.

'*Dame! elle a un chic incroyable!*' thought Blanchette, angrily, watching her and conscious that her day was not done as she had hoped.

Meantime, in the brilliant movement of which his house was the centre, Othmar felt that he was becoming rapidly a mere cypher amidst it all, as Platon Napraxine had been, and he perceived no way by which he could recover his influence without her ridicule and the world's comment. That had come to him which he had said should never come: he was nothing in her life, not so much as one of her mere acquaintances.

Such a position had always seemed to him the deepest humiliation that any man could accept; he had always thought that any man might save his dignity if he could not secure his own happiness; but now, he saw how easy it is to theorise, how difficult it is to resist the slow insidious influence of circumstances. We drift into positions which we hate without being conscious of our descent, and the effect of others upon our nature and our actions is as subtle and as unperceived as those of climate or of time. [322]

He could not have said when the first coldness had come between himself and her, when the first irritation had crept into their intercourse, when the first frost of indifference had passed from her manner over the warmth of his own emotions. It had been unperceived, uncounted, but its results had grown and strengthened, until now they were like ten thousand other men and women in the world, living under the same roof, but wholly strangers to each other, only united by one slender thread, their mutual interests. It was a position which wounded him, humiliated him, oppressed him with a constant sense of weakness and of failure: he had not the slightest power over her, though she retained much over him; strong men, he thought, either left their wives or forced them to keep their marriage vows; and he did neither.

Of late she had become almost insolent in her tone to him; she seemed to take pleasure in passing the most marked slights upon him; she purposely withheld from him the slightest acquaintance with her movements or intentions, and at times her eyes looked at him with a cynical disdain.

It was absurd, he felt, and exaggerated, and probably wholly ungrounded in every way, but there were moments when he imagined that she wished to remind him of his social inferiority to herself, moments when the recollection of the origin of the Othmar fortunes spoilt for a passing hour her pleasure in the existence of her children. Though he did not harbour the suspicion, but threw it away from him as unworthy of both himself and her, it yet existed and made him over-sensitive to any slight upon her part, quick to perceive the faintest tinge of contempt in her tone to him. He knew that she could count her great ancestries far beyond the dim days of Rurick; whilst there were courts of Europe where feudal etiquette still prevailed strongly enough to make his presence in their throne-rooms impossible. These were mere nominal differences, no doubt, and he might perchance have saved from bankruptcy the very state in which he would have been forbidden to pass the palace gates if he had sought to accompany her through them; but still there were moments when the voice and the glance of his wife recalled these conventional things to him out of the limbo of absolute nullity in which, but for those, he let them lie. [323] Never by any spoken word or hint had she ever reminded him of them, yet now and then in her colder moments he thought: 'Perhaps she remembers that two hundred years ago if her forefathers rode over the plains of Croatia they could ride down mine before them, and drive them with their whips like so many acorn-eating swine!'

He began to believe that she was in truth as cruel as the world had always called her; and a feeling which was almost hatred at times awoke in him and blent with the suffering she caused him.

It seemed to him that no man on earth ever gave a woman such passion and such worship as he had given her; these might at least, he thought, have secured respect from her, even if they had failed to hold her sympathy.

He said nothing to her. Remonstrance would have been useless, supplication unmanly. He let

time drift them where it would: and in the ever-exercising burden of his pain Damaris became almost forgotten.

Some weeks after the performance of Lemberg's cantata, Blanche de Laon, calling on the woman whom she hated on her 'jour,' came late, stayed until the rooms were nearly emptied of their crowd, and then sank down beside her hostess on a low couch in a corner palm-shadowed, where banks of lilies of the valley gave out their fragrance under rose-shaded lamps, and great Japanese vases were filled with the rosy flowers of the gesneria and the philesia. She always paid great outward deference to Nadège, was coaxing and *câline*, and for her alone subdued the rudeness and the shrillness of her voice and manner. She leaned now beside her on the broad low seat of the cushioned corner, whilst the few people who remained in the rooms conversed in little groups, and the flowers, the porcelains, the stuffs, the pictures, the embroidered satins of the walls, the long vista of salons opening one out of another, made up one of those pictures of harmonised colour and of artistically arranged luxuries of which the modern world is so full. Blanchette had all manner of confidential things to disclose, secrets of this toilette and that, of this scandal and the other, of the true reason of a dear friend's sudden indisposition, and the actual cause of a coming duel; all these *secrets de Polichinelle*, which society loves to carry about and distribute, things which are mysteries of life and death yet whispered at every '*petit quart d'heure*' in every house known to fashion.

Nadine listened, leaning back amongst her cushions indifferent, scarcely affecting attention, thinking of her own costume at a coming ball she was about to give, in which the *règne animal* of Cuvier was to furnish the dresses. She had chosen a panther. All the yellow and black would make her delicate colourless skin look so well, and she would wear all her diamonds, and ——. [324] She was aroused from her meditation by the question which Blanche de Laon put suddenly to her.

'Do tell me,' she said, leaning down amongst her cushions: 'You know I like to be the first to hear things—when will the new genius make her *début* with you?'

'What do you mean?'

'Oh, you know what I mean; this young artist whom Rosselin is training, in whom your husband is interested, and who is to make her first appearance here? Who is she? Do tell me about her. I should like to have her appear at my house if you have no proprietary rights to her exclusive production.'

'I have no idea of what person you speak of; I am not fond of untried artists,' she answered, with perfect indifference, but Blanchette saw a shade of surprise and a coldness of displeasure on her face.

'Oh, surely you like a *débutante*?' she said carelessly. 'It always amuses people so much, something quite new, and I believe this girl is beautiful; does not Othmar say so?'

But by this time her hostess was on her guard, and her expression wholly under control.

'I think I know whom you mean now,' she replied indifferently. 'But as to a *début* here—that is quite in the future. I am not fond of untried artists as I say: one does not take out unbroken horses to drive in a crowd. Genius is admirable, but I think like wine it wants time and a seal set upon it before one offers it at one's table.'

Blanche de Laon was perplexed.

'Does she know all about her, or nothing about her?' she wondered. 'I want to know more myself before I go on with it.'

Some other people approached them at that moment; the conversation turned on the *règne animal* ball; Blanchette, disappointed, rose and went and drank *deux doigts de liqueur*, and ate a caviare biscuit, in another room, where Loris Loswa was drawing some caricatures of mutual acquaintances, as the beasts of Cuvier, on his visiting cards, and distributing them amongst some ladies of fashion.

'Meet me on Saturday at eleven at the Rond point,' she murmured to him as she took from him a sketch of her brother-in-law the Duc d'Yprès as a wild boar in top boots, over which she condescended to shriek her shrillest laughter and approval.

When her rooms were all quite emptied, and she was left alone in them, Nadine remained leaning back amongst the cushions motionless and with a cold contemptuous anger on her face.

'To think that I should accept such a part as that!' she thought. 'He must be mad and the whole world with him!'

[325] Weak women, indulgent women, women who were afraid and wanted pardon for their own secrets, these women did these things, aided their husbands' amours, received their husbands' favourites, helped their husbands to conventional disguises of equivocal situations, but that *rôle*, was not hers.

'And he came from this girl to me in Russia;' she thought with that physical disgust which is so strong in some women, and which men never understand.

One forenoon on entering his study, Othmar missed from the wall the sketch made by Loswa. There was only a blank space between the places of the Corot and the Aivanoffsky. He rang for the major-domo.

'Who has taken the portrait from that place?' he asked; he feared the entrance of some thief from

the gardens.

The major-domo, astonished and alarmed, replied that he had taken it down that morning by command of his mistress, and had sent it whither she had directed him to do; to a certain gallery recently built on the Trocadéro.

'You were quite right to do so if Madame desired you,' said Othmar; and dismissed the official without more comment.

As soon as he could be admitted to his wife's presence, he went to her and opened the subject with scanty preface.

'Philippe says that you ordered him to send the sketch by Loswa out of my study to the new gallery on the Trocadéro,' he said, when he had made her his usual greeting. 'Is that true?'

'Very true. One would think I had ordered him to blow up the Louvre or the Luxembourg!'

'May I venture to inquire your reasons?'

'Certainly. There is an exhibition of Loswa's works about to be opened there. You are aware that these exhibitions of a single master are very popular now. That head is one of the best things he has done. It will come back to you in three months. Cannot you live without it till then?'

Othmar felt that he coloured like a boy.

'I would, of course, have lent it,' he said with a little hesitation.

'I have sent all his portraits of myself and of the children,' she said with a cold glance at him. 'You do not appear to have missed those.'

'I have probably not entered the rooms in which they hung. If you will pardon my saying so, I do not care to know less of what you wish to do than my servants know—and to know it first through them.'

'If I had told you, you would have objected. When I know that people will object, I never ask them what they wish.'

'The method has the merit of simplicity.'

[326] He felt exceedingly angered; in the first place he did not care to have the portrait seen by all Paris at a moment when the original was living so near Paris with no friend but himself, and in the second place he indignantly resented being treated like a cypher in his own houses; he never permitted himself to intrude on her personal arrangements—could she not respect his?

Now and then, and above all of late, there had been something high-handed and even insolent in her occasional treatment of things which concerned him, and on which she did not consult him; something which made him fancy that in the deepest depth of the thoughts and feelings there was occasionally the remembrance that the great race of princes from whom she herself descended would have deemed her alliance with one of the princes of finance a gross mésalliance.

This was a trifle, no doubt, and he was not a man who ever disputed small matters. But the tone with which she had spoken had given it something of personal offence, and he could not shake from him the impression that she had purposely sent away the portrait. The exhibition was about to take place, no doubt, at the new gallery on the Trocadéro; Loswa having quarrelled violently with the committee of the Salon, had chosen to prove that the collection of his works would be more attractive to the public than anything which the Salon could offer without his assistance; but the manner in which this sketch had been removed from his study, conveyed to Othmar the impression of some personal motive, some personal meaning in the act.

Capricious as his wife always was, she yet was usually courteous. This insolence of the removal of his picture was unlike her.

She always held the very true creed that mutual politeness is the first of obligations to render the intimacy of daily life endurable.

He left her presence quickly, afraid of what his anger might bring him into saying. He had never as yet wholly lost his temper with her, though there were times when it was sorely tried.

Her cold, nonchalant, slighting tone was that which always tried it the most. Of all things which he most hated it was to be spoken to as Platon Napraxine had been; like the last of her lacqueys! as he thought bitterly now. She looked after him with some scorn.

'Is he gone to the Trocadéro to seize back his lost treasure?'

She had sent the sketch thither on purpose to see what he would do or say.

With an impulse which was as swift as thought itself and which he did not pause to consider, he turned back as he reached the threshold of her boudoir, and stood before her.

[327] 'Nadège,' he began with an impetuosity which yet had a certain timidity in it. 'There is something which I wished to tell you the other day. There is a reason which makes me especially regret that you should have sent that portrait for exhibition without referring the matter to me. Are you inclined to be patient enough to hear a little tale which might interest you perhaps if it were a sketch by Ludovic Halévy, but I fear will not do so told in my poor words?'

He did not observe the expression of her eyes, which surveyed him with a cynical coldness, as she asked:

'Do you mean that you have written a romance?—or played one?'

There was the mockery in the words which he had dreaded so much that he had put off this moment day after day, week after week, month after month.

'Neither,' he answered, curtly. 'I have not talent for the one, nor time and inclination for the other. You may believe me,' he added a little bitterly, 'if I had been foolish enough to tempt fate with either, your indulgence is the last mercy for which I should hope.'

Her eyes still looked at him coldly, steadfastly; with no revelation in her gaze of whether she were surprised, interested, indifferent, or already wearied.

She was leaning back in her long low chair; there was a great deal of lace ruffled at her bosom and on her arms; she wore a long loose satin gown of palest *rose effeuillée* of which the lights and shadows were very beautiful: her hands were tightly clasped upon her lap; her great pearls gleamed behind the lace; she looked like a woman of the time of the Stuarts or of the Valois. At her elbow stood an immense bowl of Louise de Savoy roses; as she looked at him she drew out one and put it in her bosom. She did not speak or attempt to aid him in any way to continue the conversation which he had begun. She only waited, and as he saw her in that impassible attitude, his task grew harder to him; that sudden sense of her cruelty, of her want of sympathy, of her immovable indifference, which had come to him so sharply on the night of her return from Russia, struck him once more and hardened in him almost to dislike.

Why should he tell her anything? She cared nothing for what he did or what he felt. She dwelt in that serene rarefied atmosphere of her own in which no passions or pains of his could disturb her. If she had once seemed to him to lean from it for a little while to share his emotions, that time was passed, long passed, never to return again.

She was silent many minutes, but she asked no question, threw out no conjecture, did not even by a glance assist him to begin his offered narrative. If she would only have said something— anything—it would have broken the ice at least. But the marble bust of herself which stood near her, carved by Hildebrand, was not more mute than she; and she was quite motionless, her hands clasped on another rose with which she toyed.

He was angered with himself to feel that his cheeks grew warm, and that his voice was nervous as he said at last:

'I regret that the portrait is gone to the Trocadéro, because the original of it is living near Paris, and it may lead to comment and conjecture which may be injurious to her; she is scarcely more than a child, and she will be an artist; she is better without the attention of the public until she challenges it directly.'

He did not notice a gleam like that of such which flashed over him one instant from the unrevealing eyes of his wife; the next moment the eyes of the bust were not colder and more impenetrable than hers.

'I have long meant to tell you,' he continued with rapidity, his words now coming with eagerness and eloquence from his lips. 'But I have been afraid of your ridicule. Long ago, in the midsummer of last year, I found the child of Bonaventure dying in the streets. It was at the time my uncle was on his death-bed. I did all I could for her, of course. She was long ill; when she recovered I placed her in the country with good simple people whom I knew. She is there now. Rosselin, the great actor whose name you will remember, though his career was over before your time or mine, has trained her these many months past; he believes she has great talents; that she has a future; that when you predicted the career of Desclée for her you showed your usual insight. She has had little but sorrow since that day you tempted her from her island; it has always seemed to me that we owed her a great debt, that we had done her a great brutality; but for us her life would have gone on in peace and prosperity, she would never have left her little kingdom; if you realised what you did that day you would regret your caprice. There are many more details I could tell you if you cared to hear them, but I know your intolerance of any demand upon your patience.'

She smiled slightly; the smile was very chill; it checked the expansion and the confidence of his words.

'You are pleased to ridicule my knight-errantry, no doubt,' he said, with heightened colour in his face. 'But no man living would have done less than I did, I think, being conscious as I was that the invitation which you gave her without thought was the origin of all her unmerited misfortune. I believe you were right that she has genius or something very nearly approaching genius, in her; and it may be that the world will in time compensate to her for all she has lost. But meantime——'

'You do so!'

The words were very calm and cold, but they struck Othmar like the cut of a whip. They cast on his words the dishonour of disbelief.

He strove to command his temper as he replied: 'I do not; no one can; she lost what no one ever can give back to her, when you showed her what the world was like, and taught her discontent. But for you, and that one evening in your house, she would have lived, and married, and spent all the even tenour of her days in her native air, on her native soil, as ignorant of ambition as any of the sea-birds on her coast.'

She looked at him with an expression of fatigue, and of exhausted patience; he saw that she was perfectly incredulous, that his words might as well have remained unspoken for any impression of their truthfulness which they conveyed to her.

'Is this all your story?' she asked.

'It is the outline of it all,' he answered. 'If you care to know more of the causes which drove her from her home——'

'They do not interest me in the least.'

Her voice was as chill as frost.

'Then allow me to apologise for having intruded even so much as this on your attention.'

He bowed before her, and was about to leave the room; but she, without rising a hair's breadth from the languid attitude in which she reclined, said, 'Wait.'

He waited, in sanguine expectation of an impulse of sympathy in which those more generous instincts, those kinder emotions which sometimes swayed her, would be aroused on behalf of a life she had thoughtlessly injured.

Still without rising she stretched out her arm, and took up a blotting-book from her writing-cabinet, which stood near. In the blotting-case was a tiny note-book of ivory and silver; she opened it, and read from it in a serene voice certain dates.

'Before you give your idyl to Halévy—or to the journalists in general—let me renew your memory with these memoranda,' she said in the same soft cold voice. 'Your narrative, as you tell it, is bald and wanting, as you admit, in detail. I will supply some of those details. On June 10 you brought Damaris Bérarde to this house, where she remained ill for many days, even weeks. On July 20 you went yourself to visit her cousin, the present proprietor of the island of Bonaventure, and endeavoured to negotiate through bankers of Aix the purchase of the island, which, however, the owner refused to sell. On August 2 you had her taken, accompanied by her *gardes-malades*, to the farm of the Croix Blanche, which lies between the villages of Les Hameaux and Magny. On August 15 you visited Les Hameaux. In the last week of July, many objects of artistic interest and value had been already sent by you to the farmhouse. In the same week, rentes to the amount of [330] a hundred thousand francs, were purchased on the Bourse in the name of Damaris Bérarde. There are many more dates than these in my note-book, but those are enough to supply the lacunæ in your story. *On peut broder dessus* without any great imagination. A knowledge of human nature will suffice. You will do me the favour never to re-open the subject; and as a matter of good taste, to endeavour that your idyl shall not be too largely talked about for the amusement of the world in general.'

Then she slid the little note-book within the leaves of blotting-paper, and fastened the rose in the lace at her breast.

It was impossible for him to misunderstand her meaning.

A violent anger eclipsed for the moment all sense of astonishment at her knowledge, or of wonder as to how she had acquired it. All he was conscious of was the indignity, the insult, put upon him by her utter disbelief.

He felt it a task almost beyond his strength to forbear from some such words as men must never say to women, and in the bewilderment of his emotions he was silent.

'You have engaged an actor, once great, to give her lessons in elocution,' she continued, in the same unmoved harmonious tones. 'It is the fashion of the day to have a mistress on the stage. I suppose I cannot blame you for that. As it was I who first suggested the future possibility of a dramatic success for your *protégée*, it is, perhaps, natural that you should have remembered my suggestions, when you sought the cover of some artistic career for her. Someone has told me that you reserve for me the part of Mæcena to her Roscia (can one feminise the names?), that you intend to have her talents first essayed and pronounced on under my roof; that the world is to be invited to smile at my credulity, or at my good nature, with whichever it may most prefer to accredit me. Women often do such things as this, I know, because they are weak, or because they need indulgence in return. But it is not a *rôle* which will suit either my temper or my taste. I see the convenience to yourself of your project, but you must pardon me if I do not accept the part you would assign me in it. The world and Mlle. Bérarde will have opportunities for mutual acquaintance and admiration without their first meeting each other in my drawing-rooms. I should not have mentioned the matter unless you had done so first, but I should have prevented the execution of your and of M. Rosselin's intentions!'

She looked at him from under her drooped eyelids, with that critical observation which never deserted her in the most trying hour, or before the deepest emotion. She did not hurry him or dismiss him, only he knew by the look upon her face, that the discussion was, in her view of it, closed irrevocably. But for the sake of the other who was involved in her judgment, he put aside [331] his pride, his offence, and his dignity, and stooped to an appeal.

'I do not know,' he said, and he was sensible that his voice vibrated with fury, as well as with emotion, 'I do not know what steps you may have taken to enable you to tabulate my actions so exactly. I keep no diary, but I have no doubt your facts are correct. But as you put the data which have been given you by some creature you have stooped to employ, they would certainly seem to point to some selfish intrigue on my part, some vulgar use for my own ends of this young girl's illness and misfortunes. It may be even quite natural that you should take such a view of it as this, though it shows that you do not, after all, much understand my character. But I will admit that your suspicions may seem to you just. I will admit that my own reticence has been blameable and unwise, and I do not suppose you will believe how much your own habit of ridicule, of irony, and of cruel scorn, has made me shrink from provoking your malicious comments by any

confidences which would seem to you sentimental and melodramatic.'

He paused, hoping for some word from her. But she spoke none. She continued to listen and to wait, in unbroken silence and serenity, her fingers touching the rose at her breast. A momentary sense of rage passed quivering over him. He understood how men may in some moments kill the woman they have loved best.

He restrained his passion with great effort, and tried to keep his words within the compass of ordinary courtesy.

'You do not know, and if you knew you would not care for it, how many a time this story, like many another thought and memory of mine, has been upon my lips, and speech has been stopped in me, merely because I was conscious you would laugh. I am a fool in your eyes, worthy to die with Rolla, to fall with Desgrieux, or any other absurd sentimentalist. I dare say you will even despise me the more if you be compelled to believe that, though I might be the lover of Damaris Bérarde, I am not so, whatever your spies may have told you.'

Her face flushed haughtily.

'Spies! I set no watcher on your actions until you deceived me. When I know that I am deceived I have no mercy. Those who deceive me are outside my pale. I hunt them down. Foolish women can bear to be blinded. I am not foolish, and I do not consent to be so.'

'I have never deceived you.'

She gave a gesture of deprecation, slight but full of unuttered disdain.

'Long ago I told you that if you had strength enough in you to tell me when you were weak, I should not be like other women; I should understand: to understand is always to forgive; a greater woman than I am has said it. If you had come to me frankly, with no subterfuge, no pretext, no empty phrases of untrue sentiments, but had said honestly that you were no better than other men, I should have told you that follies of that sort need never disturb our friendship nor our confidence, but——' [332]

'But, my God, what had I to confess?' cried Othmar, with that passionate protest of the tortured man who calls in vain that he is innocent.

Infinite contempt swept over her face. What a fool he seemed to her! What a poor, weak coward and fool!

'If there were any lover whom I loved, how I should hurl the truth of it in his face!' she thought. 'Men are such cowards—so half-hearted and so tame, and never hardly even knowing what they do love! If he would only be truthful even now, what should I care!—a wretched child off the streets, a creature who owes her very bread to him—what rival could she be to me!'

She felt for him all the superb disdain that Cleopatra might have felt had she known that Anthony toyed with a slave from the market-place, and dared not plead guilty to his paltry sin.

He heard her with indignant and bewildered amaze. There is a great simplicity in every honest man, and he, despite his knowledge of the world, was single-minded as a boy. That she should refuse to believe him when he told the truth seemed to him incredible.

'Can you insinuate that I would speak such a lie—*I*?' he cried to her in violent emotion.

She answered coldly:

'Oh, yes: those untruths are always counted as men's honour.'

'They are not mine; nor my dishonour either. I never willingly spoke an untruth yet to man or woman. If this child were my mistress I would tell you so. You may remember that many a time you have bade me take my liberty. You would care nothing if I did so. Why should I have concealed what you would not have done me the honour to resent?'

He paused, expecting her to say some word of assent or dissent, but she remained silent.

'Certainly,' he said, bitterly, 'had I considered myself free in all ways I should have been justified in doing so. Few men of your world see less of you than I. Your very lacqueys know more of your engagements and your intentions than I do. You lend great brilliancy to my name, you give great distinction to my houses, you allow my children to sit by you in your carriage, and you permit me to receive kings for you in your antechambers. But more than that you deny me. If I sought elsewhere the tenderness I seek in vain from you, could you complain of my infidelity?' [333]

'I do not complain of the infidelity; it is immaterial; I complain of the long series of elaborate deceptions with which you have endeavoured, with which you still endeavour, to surround it.'

'I repeat, there has been no deception.'

She laughed, laughed slightly that cruel laugh of a woman, which can tell a man with impunity what a man could never dare to tell him—that he has lied.

'You dare to doubt me still!' he exclaimed, with that blindness and good faith with which a man, candid and honest himself, expects credence from others; he had never in his heart really doubted that when he should tell the truth to her she would believe it.

Conscious rectitude has a curious pathetic ignorance of its own impotence to move others; it imagines that it has but to speak and mountains will fall before it.

Because this thing was clear as daylight to his own knowledge, to his own conscience, he stupidly thought that it must stand out plain as the noonday to her likewise. Those who tell the truth

always fancy that the truth must be like those trumpets before which the walls of Jericho fell.

'You dare to doubt my word!' he cried again passionately; she looked him full in the face coldly and calmly.

'Told earlier,' she said in her serenest voice, 'your comedy might have deceived even me. Told now, I do not think it would deceive the most credulous woman living—and I am not credulous. I am like Montaigne; I do not accept miracles out of church.'

His face grew white and grey with wounded pride and breathless passion as he heard her. The same sense of hopelessness which had come over so many of her lovers when driven to appeal to a mercy which had no existence in her, came over him now. He felt that one might throw one's self for ever against the smooth white marble of her soul, and never gain from it either pity or belief.

His patience was at an end, and his bitter sense of wrong, done to himself and to one absent, broke down all his self-control.

'But as God lives you shall believe!' he cried to her. 'You shall believe it for her sake, not for mine nor yours. You can cover the whole world with the fine scorn of your scepticism if you will, but you shall believe this. I may have done unwisely what I have done for her. I may have acted with that mule-like stupidity which you consider the characteristic of men. I may even, God forgive me, have not done what was best for the child herself; but in all that I have done, I have been honest in it, and not a mere lecherous egotist. You have never deigned to try and measure the feeling with which I have regarded you, but you ought, I think, to understand enough of the common honour which I share with all men who are not scoundrels, to believe in my word when I give it you. The woman with whom she lives at Les Hameaux is of good repute and blameless conduct. Rosselin, who has become her teacher, is a man too upright to accord his assistance in any common intrigue. The money I placed to her credit she imagines to be a legacy of her grandfather, whose heiress she would have been if you in a moment of unaccountable and unconsidered caprice had not tempted her to incur the old man's anger. All these things are capable of the simplest explanations. Still, I will concede that, without explanation, they may have appeared singular and suspicious to you. But, however much they may do so, I expect from you that acceptance of my bare word, that belief in my common honour, which the merest stranger to me on earth would not dare to refuse.'

She preserved her perfect composure, the rose in her breast was not ruffled by one uneven breath; she looked at him with cold, calm, unkind eyes, which never wavered in their rejection of him.

'You are melodramatic,' she said, with her serene contempt. 'Perhaps *you* will appear on the stage, too! I shall be glad if you will spare me more words on such a subject. I shall not resent it publicly. All I request of you is to avoid publicity in it as far as possible. That is a mere matter of good taste.'

'Good God!' he cried, beside himself. 'Do you credit that I should stand here and lie to you? Do you believe that I should stoop so low?—do you think that I come here like a comedian to repeat a monologue of my own invention? You may think what else of me that you will, but this you shall not think. I am not the lover of Damaris Bérarde; I have never been so—I shall never be so.'

'If you swore it on the lives of your own children, I would not believe you?'

Some reflex and heat of the flame of his rage caught her soul also for one sudden instant, and drew it out for that one instant from its serenity and reticence.

There was the vibration of intensest passion in her voice; she half rose from her seat; her bosom heaved; the rose fell in a shower of leaves to the floor; for the moment he thought that she would strike him.

'You shall believe me,' he said in answer, 'or I will not live under the same roof with you!'

Then he looked at her with one last look, and left her presence.

CHAPTER XLIV.

Othmar went into his great library, and shut the door upon himself. For more than an hour he paced to and fro the length of the room, overcome with an agitation which he could not master. He had a sense that his life was over. He felt as though his very heart-strings had snapped and parted for ever. A great love cannot perish without some such throb as a strong animal life suffers when it is forcibly torn asunder. A kind of horror seized him at the idea of the years which were to come; the long, long years through which he would dwell in apparent amity beside her in the sight of the world.

His first impulse was to go out of the house, out of the city, out of the world, to leave her everything he possessed, but never to see her face again.

But a brief reflection made him feel how impossible such a course as that would be to him. Obscure people can do these things, they are happy; they are not set in the fierce light of publicity and society, and no one heeds it if they creep away to lay their aching heads under some lowly roof in solitude. But to a man well known and conspicuous in the life of the world, any such retreat into obscurity is impossible. He is bound hand and foot by a million threads, each strong as cables to hold him to his place. He cannot forsake his place without forsaking a mass of interests confided to his honour. Solitude is for ever forbidden to him, and liberty he can never more recover. Life never gives two opposite sets of gifts to the same recipient; it never bestows both the king's dominion and the peasant's peace. The sigh of Henry IV. upon his sleepless couch is the sigh of all eminence whatever be its throne.

Othmar's momentary longing to go far away from everything and everyone he had ever known, and never again behold the woman whom he had adored, and who had insulted him as though she had struck him with a knout, was the natural thirst for loneliness of all wounded creatures. But he knew that this desire, like so many others, was hopeless; he could never leave her or the world he lived in; there were his children, who must not be sacrificed, and the fortunes of others which must not be imperilled. He knew that he could no more undo the bands fastened—many by his own hand—around him, than he could sweep ten years off the sum of his past life. Such as his existence was now, so he had to continue it.

He walked to and fro the vast length of the chamber in the quiet of the noonday. He felt as if her hand had struck him.

[336] It had not been even an insult of unpremeditated passion, of hot anger, of inconsiderate haste—as such as he might have pardoned it—but, serene and deliberate and measured, spoken in cold blood, and matured on long consideration, it had been such an outrage as severs the closest ties, and destroys the most profound affections, cuts at the deepest roots of self-respect, and burns up all delicate fibres of sympathy. He would much sooner have forgiven a dagger's thrust.

He had been insulted by the one person for whom he had given up all his life, all his loyalty, all his devotion, all his faith, and all his years to come. The outrage of her insolence, of her disbelief, burned in his heart as the shame of a blow burns on a brave man's forehead. Never could he make her believe, though he were to swear the truth to her as he lay dying!

That perfect silence with which she had listened and led him on to speak, that perfect consciousness of all his actions which had existed beneath her apparent ignorance, that feline attitude of cold expectation and of watchful, motionless observation with which she had waited for the telling of a tale of which she already knew every smallest detail: all these seemed to him horrible, hateful, unnatural in a woman so near to him, so dear to him, to whom he had given up his life, and whom he had never wronged, or slighted, or betrayed. And then the espionage!—all his soul revolted at it.

'One might have known that the weapon of a Russian woman is always a spy!' he thought, with passionate indignation at what seemed to him this last and lowest of affronts.

If he had found in her any of the warm and fond, though unwise, angers of that jealousy which loves whilst it hates, he would have forgiven and comprehended it. But he could not hope that there was any single pulse of it in her breast. She had viewed and measured his actions with the accuracy and coldness of a judge of court overwhelming any prisoner with his logic, and had treated his own asseverations with utter and contemptuous disbelief, not deigning even to weigh as remotely possible the chance that he might tell the truth. He himself would have taken her word against that of the whole world, against all evidence of his own senses, all adverse witness of circumstance.

'I was mad to suppose she ever cared for me,' he thought bitterly, whilst the tears rose hotly in his eyes. 'For my children she cares, perhaps, but for me nothing: I have never been wise enough, great enough, strong enough to compel even her respect. She looks on me as a mere dreamer, a mere fool. All she is anxious for now is that the world may not have a story to laugh at, because it would lessen her dignity and offend her pride!'

[337] And yet he loved her still as he remembered her there sitting so still, so fair, with the cold challenge in her eyes, and the pale roses at her breast; and she was all his, and yet as far off him as though she were queen in another world beyond the sun; and he loved her still, and was filled with guilty shame at his own weakness, as men are when they still adore the women who have defiled their name.

CHAPTER XLV.

For the first time in her whole existence his wife had known the mastery of a strong and uncontrollable impulse of emotion; for the first time since her dreamy eyes had smiled at the pains and follies of men a wave of fierce and simple passion had passed through her as the seismic wave moves the still earth.

She was touched with the common infirmity of common lives.

The women in her laundry rooms, the groom's wife who lived above her horses' stables, might feel as she felt now. Jealousy! It could not be jealousy. Would Cleopatra have been jealous of that slave from the market-place, that Nubian seller of green figs, or Persian dancing girl?

For jealousy it seemed to her there must first of all, be equality. No—no: she was not jealous; she was only angered, bitterly angered, because he had stooped to subterfuge and to untruth: earths in which the fox of cowardice always hides. It was all ignoble, mean, unworthy, there was no manliness in it and no honesty. Any common knave could have woven such a net of falsehood and stupidity as this.

He had thought to deceive her! She could almost have laughed aloud at the idea!—was there any brain subtle enough, clear enough, wise enough in all Europe to invent a lie which would have power to blind her? Surely not; and he knew it; and yet he had thought such vulgar ordinary devices as have served in half the vaudevilles of half the theatres of France would serve to hoodwink and to satisfy her!

There was a vulgarity in such miserable intrigue, which offended her taste whilst it outraged her dignity. In all the innumerable women of their own world could he not have found some rival in some measure her equal?

It might have hurt her more, but at least it would have insulted her less.

She remained alone and motionless, except for such feverish mechanical action as that with which her right hand plucked the roses from the bowl one by one and tore their hearts asunder.

She did not know she did it. She shed the sweet, faint-smelling petals on the floor, and her fingers had the movement of a great nervousness as they played with the loosened leaves. No one came there to disturb her; no one would dare to do so until she rang; the slow morning hours crept on, the very footfall of time was muffled, and did not dare obtrude in these still fragrant chambers where the air was heavy with hothouse heat, and was sweet with a somnolent lily-like odour. [338]

She took the little written sheets from between the blotting-paper and read what was written on them again. There was more than she had read aloud to him. All the details of his intercourse with Damaris Bérarde were described there with searching minuteness. She studied them again and again. Their bare records were full of suggestion to her; they seemed to tell so much which was not said in words, to be pregnant with meaning and with cynical emphasis.

She sat still as any statue of a queen dethroned; the pale rose folds of the satin flowing about her feet, the ruin of pale rose leaves on the floor before her.

All her life she had laughed at the love of men and derided it, and starved it on graceful philosophies and ethereal conceits, and dismissed it with airy banter and disbelieved its truest words and its hardest pains: and now a love which she had lost escaped her, and she found no comfort either in her wit or in her scorn.

Certain of the words which he had said to her remained in persistent echo on her ear. Some sense that she had been cold to him and too capricious, and too negligent of what he felt, came to her. It might even be that he had sought the warmth of other affections because she had left his heart empty herself. He had always been a sentimentalist! Had she not called him Werther, Obermann, René, Rolla? He had wanted the impossible, the immutable, the eternal.

He had asked of love and of life what neither can give.

He had expected a moment of divinest rapture to be prolonged through a lifetime.

He had expected the song of the nightingale to thrill through the year. Senseless dreams and hopeless!—but had she been too cruel to them?

For a moment her conscience spoke, and her heart relented towards him. She remembered the many times when she had treated the warmth of his passion as an absurd delirium or an exaggerated sentiment, when she had again and again and again bidden him take his erratic rhapsodies elsewhere than to her.

If he had done so, was he so much to blame?

Almost she could have pardoned him. If only he had not lied to her she would have pardoned him.

'Good God, why could he not be honest?' she thought, with indignant scorn. 'Why could he not kneel at her feet, and lay his head upon her knee and own his folly? Men were weak always, and so easily misled whenever their senses ruled them, and such mere animals after all, even those in whom the mind was strongest!' [339]

CHAPTER XLVI.

'Send the children to me,' she said when at last she rang for her women, and the children came. They had come in from their morning's ride on their small ponies in the Bois. They were very pretty in their velvet riding dresses, with their golden hair flowing over their shoulders; they were very gentle and had admirable manners; the little boy with his cap in his hand kissed his mother's fingers with an old-world grace. She drew them both towards her.

'*Mes mignons*,' she said, looking alternately at each of them, 'I want you to tell me something quite honestly; are you afraid of me, either of you?'

The young Otho, a very sensitive and chivalrous child, coloured to his hair and was silent; his sister Xenia, less timid and more communicative, answered for him and for herself: 'We are both of us—a little.'

The brows of Nadine contracted with a sudden sense of pain.

'Why?' she said imperiously.

The children did not reply; their small faces grew serious; they were not prepared to analyse what they felt.

'Do you mean,' she continued, 'that if you wished for anything you would sooner ask your father for it than you would ask me?'

The children nodded their heads silently. They had lost their colour. She saw that the interrogation alarmed them.

'Why?' she repeated, in a softer tone.

They were still silent; they could not really tell; they only knew that a certain sense of timidity and awe was always upon them in their mother's presence, that they never dared to laugh too loudly or ask a question twice before her. They loved her, and had the passionate admiration of childhood for that which is above it and incomprehensible to it, and she seemed to them more wonderful and beautiful than any other living creature, but there was a tinge of fear in their sense of her presence.

She read their unformed confused thoughts, and she felt a sharp reproach in their tacit confession.

Had she been so engrossed in the ice of her egotism, that she had never taken the trouble even to stoop and draw to her these young hesitating half-opened souls?

Had she been cold and careless even to them?

Enfants d'amour, nés d'une étreinte!

she murmured as she kissed them with lips which trembled; had she been so little kind to them that even they feared her?

'*Maman était prête à pleurer*,' murmured Xenia to her brother in amazed awe, as with their arms wound about each other they passed down the corridor to their own apartments.

Otho drew a long breath.

'*Elle nous a embrassés, vois-tu*,' he murmured, '*comme on embrasse les petits pauvres*!'

'*Les petits pauvres*,' whom he had seen in the Tuileries or the Luxembourg gardens, kissed by their ragged mothers with eager tenderness on cold winter mornings, when perhaps the mothers had no food to give them except such fond caresses. Watching those happy hungry children, he had said more than once to his sister enviously, '*Si maman nous embrassait comme ça!*'

And then they had always kissed each other to make up for the caresses which they did not obtain.

And now she too had kissed them '*comme ça*!' They were not sure whether they had done something very wrong or something very good to move her so; one or the other they were sure it must have been.

As the children went from her presence a note was brought her which briefly announced that the Princess Lobow Gregorievna had arrived in Paris from Russia to consult some famous physician.

'As the vulture comes when there is death in the air,' she murmured with passion, as she tore the note in two. Must this mummied saint even change all the habits of her life and quit her country to be present here, when for the first time a rupture open and irrevocable had come between herself and Othmar, when in a few days' time, if it were not doing so already, all Paris would be speaking of the cause of their disunion!

All the vague dormant superstition which slumbered beneath her sceptical intelligence, made her see a fatal omen in this unlooked-for arrival of her bitterest enemy. More than once she had said in her heart, 'If ever I have misfortune, Lobow Gregorievna will be there to triumph in it.' And now she was there, within a few streets, residing in a religious house of Muscovite nuns, a dark still austere spectre, which seemed to her like the carrion bird which waits for those who die.

'Do I grow nervous and hysterical?' she asked herself in scorn.

She who had meted out destiny to so many, who had thought that it was only the timid and foolish who let life go ill with them, who had regarded the sorrows of sentiment and emotion with

an indulgent contempt, felt with anger against herself that such a trivial thing as the advent of a woman who hated her could affect her nerves and appear to her a presage of ill. With her delicate scorn and her consummate indifference she had turned aside all the efforts of others to move her or influence her; she had never known either apprehension or regret; it had always seemed to her that life was a comedy to be played ill or well according as you were wise or stupid. Suddenly, for the first time, emotions which were beyond her own control affected her, and a sense that circumstance escaped her guidance filled her with the sharp pain of irritated impotence.

She knew the world too well not to know that all the women who had vainly envied her, and many of the men who had vainly wooed her, would take pleasure and find solace in every whisper which should tell them of the offence to her pride; and she knew the world too well not to know also that there is no such thing as privacy in it, that all which she had learned through Michel Obrenowitch society would find out and gossip exaggerate; and that the whole of the society throughout Europe which she had dominated and influenced and been feared by for so long, would know that she—she—Nadège Feodorowna—was deserted for a peasant girl taken from the streets.

All the imperious blood which was in her changed to fire as she thought of the certain comments of the courts and drawing-rooms in which she had been so long so arrogant a leader, so dreaded a wit; she knew that eagerly as hounds at the *curée* would all her flatterers, friends, and lovers join her foes in exultantly rejoicing over her insulted dignity.

How many and many a time she had heard society laugh over just such a story as this! How well she knew all the cruel derision, all the gay contempt, all the equivocal jests, all the affected pity! How well she knew that precisely in measure to the homage which they yield us is the pleasure of others in our pain!

CHAPTER XLVII.

Blanche de Laon that morning rode her English horse slowly down one of the unfrequented roads in the Bois de Boulogne, and beside her paced the handsome Tunisian mare of Loris Loswa. They were good friends, although, or rather because, they went for their loves and their vices elsewhere than to each other. He was conscious of the use it was to him to be caressed and favoured by this pre-eminent leader of *la jeunesse crâne*; and she found in him a suppleness, a malice, and an ingenuity, in tormenting and in defaming, which made him an ever amusing and an often useful companion to a lady who had no better sport than the harassing of her friends and acquaintances.

Loswa was acutely sensible of the necessity which exists for any artist who would continue famous and fashionable to make his court to the new sovereigns of the great world, as turn by turn they succeed to their leadership. The obligations of old loyalties and the memories of old favours did not weigh a feather with his wise and self-loving nature; a woman's influence was the measure of her beauty in his eyes, and had Helen's self been *sur le retour* she would have commanded no smile from him. He saw in the Princesse de Laon an influence which would grow with every fear for the next decade, so entirely were her qualities those which her generation most admires and fears. Therefore to no one was he in semblance more devoted, and no one had he flattered more ingeniously, and immortalised more frequently with all the most delicate homage of his art, though in his secret thoughts he denounced as detestable the irregular colourless impertinent features of her *minois chiffonné*, and her myosotis-coloured insolent eyes which stared so arrogantly and so inquisitively on all living things. [342]

'It is a vile type,' said Loswa in his own mind. 'It is a vile type, all this *jeunesse du monde*. It is without grace and without seduction; it is insolent and noisy; it is over-dressed and over-drawn; it screams and it gambles; it wears the gowns of Goldoni's Venice with the head-dresses of the Directoire; it empties the bazaars of Japan into its salons of Louis Quinze; a vile type, with nothing in it of the great lady, and nothing of the honest woman, only a *diable d'entrain* which carries it away as a broomstick carries a witch!'

But, all the same, he was not willing to be left behind in the excursions of the broomstick, and was very conscious that unless *cette jeunesse* made him one of them, he would cease to be the painter whom fashion loved. It is so easy to become old-fashioned! so easy to become one of that joyless and disregarded band—'*les vieux*!'

Therefore to all the young beauties, even if he owned them hideous, he was careful to pay devoted court, and to none more, since none were so powerful as she, than to Blanchette de Laon. His last portrait of her was then upon his easel half finished; a study of pale tints, with her pale face seen above a necklace of opals, with a great mass of lemon-coloured chrysanthemum around and below, one of those dexterous and daring violations of conventional art of which he possessed the secret; and in it he had flattered her so delicately, yet so immoderately, that her *museau de chatte* had become actually beautiful in his treatment of it.

'That is what one wants when one goes to be painted,' she had said herself with cynical honesty.

She and he, good friends always and better friends still of late, rode now side by side through the solitude of a rarely-used alley of the Bois, and spoke in confidential tones together, as her perfect figure in its dark cloth habit seemed one with the perfect English hunter which she rode. She was not fond of any country sports, but she rode admirably, and knew that riding displayed all the graces of her form. [343]

'You are sure it is the girl of the island?' she asked.

'Quite sure,' answered Loswa. 'Madame Nadège asked me some questions, you gave me a hint, Lemberg spoke of some new *protégée* of Rosselin's. I inquired about the theatres, at the Conservatoire; I imagined this hidden miracle was the future Desclée of Bonaventure. I found out that she lived near Magny, and was visited by Othmar; Magny is not the North Pole that they should deem it unvisitable; I went there unseen myself, and a farm labourer pointed out to me "*la demoiselle*:" she was at a distance from me, walking by the river, but I recognised her at a glance. One might have guessed it before. When she disappeared from the island it was Othmar who knew where she went.'

'It is very droll!' said Blanchette, showing her white small teeth in a grin of genuine appreciation. 'And do you suppose his wife knows?'

'Béthune knows, by his look the other day, and he will tell her: he will be only too glad *de lui donner une dent* against Othmar.'

'I have told her something,' said Blanche de Laon; 'though I did not know who it was I knew that there was an interest at Chevreuse; I saw him walking in the fields there: but is the girl truly a genius?'

Loswa smiled.

'Who shall say? But the *chère amie* of a rich millionaire will always find a public to swear that she is so. They already speak amongst artists of her coming *début*, and it is easy to see the value which is attached to the millions behind her. There is very little known about her, but that fact is known of Othmar's interest in her, and no doubt it will make it easy for her to appear on some great theatre.'

'They say she is first to appear at Othmar's own house.'

'That will be very clever, but very dangerous. Madame Nadège is not a person with whom *on peut plaisanter*. I should doubt her condescending to condonation of that kind.'

Blanchette laughed.

'He is very indulgent to her about Béthune. He may surely expect the usual equivalent in return.'

Loswa was irritated.

'He knows well enough that Béthune is nothing to her; Béthune has worshipped her for fifteen years. I admit that; but he has had his pains for his payment; she lets him follow her about, but it is only *pour rire*.'

Blanchette laughed and flicked her horse's throat with her little white switch.

'You speak as if you were jealous! You always admired that cold woman. To return to the coming Desclée. Paris already talks of her, you say?' [344]

'It is not my fault if it do not,' she thought.

'Vaguely, yes,' answered Loswa. 'It has an expectation of some new talent which has what all talent in our generation requires: a prop of gold behind it.'

'Have you discreetly whispered that it is one with the original of a sketch of a fishing girl?'

Loswa smiled.

'I have caused it to be whispered, of course; we never say those things ourselves.'

'Where does Othmar hide her at present, do you say?'

'At a farmhouse at Les Hameaux. He is not magnificent in his maintenance of her; it is a very simple place, and she lives very simply there.'

'That is just like a very rich man. Besides, Othmar always has a taste for black bread and bare boards. You know at one time he actually dreamed of breaking up the whole network of the Othmar power, and stripping himself of everything, and living like St. Vincent de Paul. That was before those children were born; their mother would certainly never take the vow of poverty! Well, shall you and I ride down to Magny some morning and see this prodigy of genius and simplicity? You can recall yourself to her, and you can present me. We will represent ourselves as inspired by what we have heard from Rosselin.'

Loswa hesitated. Othmar was not a man whom he cared to cross. Yet he had a desire to see again the face which he had sketched on Bonaventure, and he had a vague idea that by going thither he might in some way learn something which would enable him to pay off that old score which had so long cherished against Othmar's wife. He had had a restless and hopeless passion for her years before; he had served and flattered her docilely because he held at its just value the great power of her social influence; he had been of use to her in a thousand ways at her château parties and in her Paris entertainments; he had always been docile and devoted, and ingenious to please, and submissive under offence, but all the same, at the bottom of his heart there was a bitter rancour against her for her blindness to his charms; for her criticism of his talents; for her constant careless treatment of him as a mere *décor de fête*, as a mere amateur; and if he could see her pride hurt or her indifference penetrated, he felt that he would be happier and better satisfied. A thousand slighting words which she had spoken out of caprice, and forgotten as soon as they were uttered, had remained written on his memory and unforgiven. He would not have quarrelled with her openly for his life; he was too sensible of the pleasure of her acquaintance, the charm of her presence, the value of her goodwill; but if he could have helped unseen to put any thorns under the rose leaves of her couch, he would have done so willingly; he would have even chosen thorns which were poisoned. [345]

'Yes, we will go and see her,' said Blanchette, as their horses paced under the boughs. 'It is always amusing to be the first to inspect a person the world is going to be asked to admire. *On peut la dénigrer si bien!*'

'But,' suggested Loswa, with hesitation, 'if we *dénigrer* here, we shall please Madame Nadège. Is that what you wish to do? I think if we go at all we must, on the contrary, go to befriend, to admire, to assist the new talent.'

Blanche de Laon gave him a little approving caress with her whip.

'You are a clever man, Loris,' she said with appreciation. 'We will go to-morrow—no, the day after to-morrow,' she added. 'I will meet you at St. Cyr; the horses shall be sent there by train; I often send mine by train to places where I wish to ride; send yours also. We will go early because it is a long way. The day after to-morrow I know that Othmar will be at Ferrières; there is a great breakfast; he cannot escape from it; there will be no fear of meeting him in Chevreuse.'

'But are you sure what we shall accomplish when we reach there?'

'You will finish the sketch begun on the island, and I shall forestall the dramatic criticism of Francisque Sarcey.'

'Othmar will not like it.'

'Othmar need not know it. My dear Loris, do you suppose that by feeding her on buttermilk, and hiding her under a thatched roof, he secures the primitive virtues in his idealised peasant? You may be sure she already tells him nothing that she does not choose to tell. *On n'est pas femme pour rien!*'

Loswa rode on in silence awhile, then he said with a smile:

'I have an idea, which, if we could realise it, might possibly prove amusing. You will recollect that there are to be dramatic representations at Amyôt next week when the Princes are there?'

Blanchette nodded assent.

'And Madame Nadège,' continued Loswa, 'is always very solicitous for the success of her theatre; she spares nothing at any time on that kind of entertainment; and the representations of next week are to be really royal; all the greatest artists are engaged for them. I have always a good deal to do with arranging these things for Amyôt; and I know that it is most likely that the Reichenberg, who is to play there, will not have recovered the chill which she caught yesterday at La Marche. If she should not, shall we substitute Damaris Bérarde? I need not appear in the matter; I can send the director of Amyôt to Rosselin, and in any way we should have an [346] entertaining scene not included in the programme. If the new wonder succeed, the Lady of Amyôt will not be pleased, and will undoubtedly quarrel with her husband; if, on the contrary, the girl should turn nervous, or hysterical, or passionate, and forget her *rôle*, it will be diverting enough, and in any case will embarrass Othmar himself. I think in either event we should have a droll ten minutes.'

Blanche de Laon showed her white teeth in an approving smile.

'You are always ingenious,' she said. 'But if Othmar be already desirous of making the girl appear under his wife's patronage, perhaps your scheme would only gratify him? What then?'

'He is only desirous of that because he thinks that his wife does not know of Les Hameaux; but we will take care that she does know; and I think she may be trusted to resent it. She does not care a straw for him, but she cares immeasurably for her own dignity, her own influence, her own empire.'

Blanchette nodded again.

'We will see what the new star is like, first,' she answered. 'It is not a mere handsome nobody with a turn for the stage who will excite her jealousy: she is too proud to be easily jealous.'

'The girl is magnificent,' said Loswa, as he thought. 'Jealousy is always alive, even if love has been dead a century.'

CHAPTER XLVIII.

The day after the morrow they kept their word to each other. She descended at the little station of St. Cyr, and found her horse and groom and those of Loswa waiting for her. Loswa and she bade their men stay at the station there, and rode themselves through the country ways which lie between St. Cyr and Les Hameaux. That if anyone chanced to see them their meeting would look like an assignation, did not trouble the thoughts of the Princesse de Laon for an instant; there were far too many much more weighty imputations which she incurred daily to allow so trivial a possible charge as this would be to have any terrors for her. She delighted in the creation of scandal, in the risks of equivocal positions; and challenged both the admiration of her husband and the long-suffering of her world with the most daring and shameless of provocations. She knew that to those who dare much, much is forgiven; she knew that the world would never quarrel with her. It feared her tongue too greatly.

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It was scarcely noonday when they reached the quiet fields which stretched around the Croix Blanche. There were the greenness and freshness of very earliest spring in all the land; little birds were flying and twittering, with thoughts of coming nests, to be hidden away under orchard blossoms, and the sheep were cheerfully cropping the short grass which covered the ruins of Port Royal. All these things and the memories which went with them said nothing to Blanchette; all she knew of spring was the dates of the various races, and all she knew of history was that it gave you travesties for costume balls.

They left their horses in charge of a labouring servant, who was sitting resting under one of the ash trees to eat his noonday bread, and then, crossing the courtyard, pushed their way without ceremony past the dairy-wench who tried to stop them and learn their errand, and so, without either announcement or apology, opened the door at the head of the wooden stair and found themselves in the chamber of Damaris.

She was sitting reading at a table, the white dogs lay at her feet; a great volume was open on the table before her, her head leaned on her hand, which was hidden in the masses of her close-curling hair. As she started at the unclosing of the door and rose to her feet, and restrained the dogs with a gesture, the intruders upon her privacy were both astonished to see the development which her beauty had taken since the night two years before when she had stood, bewildered and astray, like a young night-hawk brought into a lighted house from the shadows of night, in the drawing-rooms of St. Pharamond. She did not speak; she remained motionless, her hand on the head of the male dog; she recognised Loswa instantly, with a sense of pain and of regret that he had found her there; his companion she was not conscious of ever having seen before.

'Here is Loris Loswa, whom you will remember, and I am Madame de Laon,' said Blanchette, advancing towards her, with her abrupt familiarity, her eyes roving all over the place and coming back to fasten themselves with envy on the beautiful lines of the girl's throat and bosom.

'We are come to see you,' she continued, 'because you will be a celebrity very soon; Rosselin is going to bring you out at the Français or the Odéon; you will have no trouble; everything is arranged; Othmar's name is enough, and your story will please Paris when it is in a romantic mood. It is romantic sometimes, despite the naturalists. You are very handsome, my dear, very; you have an antique type, and what blood and what health there are in you!—enough to make a million of our *anémiques*! Why do you go on living in this hole among pigeons and dogs? I should have thought he would have given you an hotel in the Avenue Joséphine or the Boulevard Hausmann before now!'

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Damaris looked at her from under bent brows; she did not understand, but she had a sense of offence in the way she was addressed; this great lady seemed to her rudely familiar, brusquely intimate; she did not like her tone, her face, her manner; and the use of Othmar's name bewildered her. She was silent because she had no idea at all what she should reply.

Loswa tried to propitiate her.

'I have not forgotten my day on the island,' he said to her, 'nor all your goodness to me. Is it true that you are going to dazzle all Paris in "Dona Sol" as you charmed us on that island with "Esther"? Why does Rosselin delay to give the world so much pleasure, and why does he keep you so hidden?'

Damaris heard with impatience and anger.

'I do not suppose I shall ever play Dona Sol,' she said abruptly; 'and if I did, most likely Paris would laugh, and you first of all.'

'Paris does not laugh at handsome people,' said Blanche de Laon, cutting short the flattering protestations of Loswa. 'Not, at least, till it gets tired of their good looks. But it is quite true, is it not, that you are being taught by Rosselin to rival Bernhardt?'

'I do not know as to rivalry,' said Damaris, with constraint and displeasure. 'If I ever follow art I shall endeavour to be as true to it and as far from imitation of others as I can. M. Rosselin is very kind and patient with me.'

Blanchette smiled.

'You are very grateful. Be sure he finds as much interest in training you as you can find in being trained! I should think you might dispense with study—with such a face as yours, and such a friend as Otho Othmar!'

Damaris coloured angrily.

She resented the intrusion of this stranger, whose impertinent and familiar manners offended her, and seemed to her a personal insolence. At Loswa she did not look. His presence was unwelcome to her, and brought back the memories of Bonaventure so strongly that it was with difficulty that she kept the tears from rising to her eyes. How far away it seemed, that sunny noonday, when she had made him welcome to her little balcony amongst the orange boughs and the lemon leaves! And then how basely he had repaid her and betrayed her, and brought his friends to laugh at her, as he had brought this woman of fashion now!

Blanchette continued to gaze at her with unsparing examination, and Loswa continued to make to her those pretty speeches of graceful compliment of which he was a finished master. She grew angered and stubborn under the eye of the one and deaf and contemptuous to the flatteries of the other. Why had they come? When would they depart? These were the only two questions in her thoughts.

She was troubled, too, by the abrupt mention of Othmar, and uncertain what she ought to say, how she should reply. If only Rosselin had been there! He would have known how to meet these insolent gay people, who stared at her as though she were some curious strange beast; he would have stood between her and their persistent inquisitive examination. But the visit of Rosselin had been paid on the previous day, and he would not return until the morrow. The woman of the house was at the market of Versailles; she was wholly alone; and she had lost the dauntless, careless courage with which she had treated Loswa on the island, the courage born of childish ignorance and of childish audacity. Life seemed now very difficult and intricate to her, and her steps in it were shy and unsure. [349]

'If I ever do go before the world I shall probably fail,' she said wearily, in answer to their continued allusions to her coming career.

'Fail!' echoed Blanche de Laon, breaking in roughly on the graceful protestations of Loswa. 'You will not fail, you shall not fail; it would please her too much. *Dame*! how unlike you are to us! You look as if you were made of some other stuff than we are made of; you look as if you had come fresh out of the sea like the Greek goddess that is in the Salon every year. Has she seen you again? You ought to let her see you now.'

'Who?' said Damaris.

'Who?' said Blanchette, and muttered in her small white teeth '*Ah! ça fait l'innocente, ça se pose!* ——'

Aloud she said to her companion, 'My dear Loswa, go and sketch the nymphs of the farm; there are always nymphs on a farm, are there not? I want to be alone a moment with Mademoiselle Bérarde. *Allez-vous-en!*'

As he obeyed her unwillingly and with a look of eloquent regret, Blanchette scanned with all the penetration of her pale keen eyes the poetic and classic face of Damaris; she was a skilled appraiser of female beauty, and there were a force, a colour, an ideality here which she had never seen before, which were as unlike the beauties of the women of her own world, washed with *lait d'Iris* and shadowed with kolh, as a warm morning on southern fields, where the sun shines on wine-hued wind flowers, is unlike a waxlit evening in a conservatory.

'Paris has had nothing like her for ages,' she thought. 'But she is stupid; she does not know her own power; she lives on at a farm; if she waits for Othmar's leave she will never be seen by the world; she does not understand; perhaps she mixes sentiment up with it; she has the head of a Sappho; that type is always romantic.'

'Now he is gone,' she said aloud. 'Do not be afraid and do not *pose*. Tell me truly, has Othmar's wife seen you since you left your island?' [350]

'No.' Damaris coloured at the name.

'No? What a pity! Look you, my dear,' she continued, as she leaned familiarly towards her and poured the sharp pale rays of her penetrating eyes into the face of Damaris. 'I will befriend you because you hate her. She had power once, but now I have more than she had. *Le jour est aux jeunes.* I will use my power for you. You shall become great if my world can make you so, because she will suffer in seeing it. You must be great, I tell you; it is all very well to *filer le parfait amour* with him under these trees if you like it—I wonder you like it, it is such waste of time, and you should have had your hotel and your major-domo, and your blood-horses by now, and men never think much of a woman for whom they do little; it is the woman they are ruined by whom they esteem;—but you must be great, you must shine, you must set all Paris talking or you will not hurt her in the least. I do not think she cares what affairs he may have, all that is beneath her; she will only care if you can oppose her *de puissance à puissance*, if the world admires you, adores you, and flatters him and insults her every time that it praises you. Do you understand? I do not think you understand. Are you stupid or do you only pose? Do not feign with me. Why should you feign with me? All that serves nothing. You only hurt yourself and lose influence if you let him think you are content to be shut up like this, adoring his image. You are one of the sentimentalists I see; you must change all that. It is not of our time, it is not in our manners; it is silly and provincial, and you may be sure does you no good with him. Let Rosselin bring you out on any theatre he can, any is better than none; but with Othmar behind him he will be able to buy all the theatres in Paris. You are magnificent to look at; they say you have talent, and you have a lover who is a Crœsus; it will be your own fault if you are not the admiration of all Europe at a bound. Then she will hate you, and she will be wounded to the soul, and she will realise that her

day is done; *le jour est aux jeunes*. And then I will kiss you on both cheeks before all Paris if you like. Yes—I, even I—Blanche de Vannes, Princesse de Laon!——'

Her voice had risen into a swift enthusiasm, a faint flush had come on her pale features, she smiled with pleasure at the vision her words conjured up; her cold narrow world-encrusted soul expanded with the sweetness of a satisfied hatred and the honesty of a genuine sentiment. Love she could not, but she could hate, and in all the cruelty and the wickedness of her there was thus much of candour and of feeling; she was true to the childish affections and the promised revenge of a day long gone by. Even as she spoke she was thinking of the poor little verses hidden with [351] the dead roses in the drawer at Amyôt; even as she spoke she was saying in her heart, 'My pure angel, I do not forget; better people than I forget, but I do not. She shall suffer what you suffered; she shall lose what you lost; she shall feel that she is the laugh of the world; she shall know that she is as powerless to hold the heart of her husband as you were, and she shall see him chained in public to the triumphal car of this child. And I shall be by the child's ear, and I shall tell her all the secrets of power and all the vices that make men like sheep to be driven, and I shall make her dupe him and deceive him, and keep other lovers on his gold, and ruin him body and soul; and no one will know I am there behind her but myself. I shall know, and what a jest it will be!'

All these thoughts floated before her while her hands clasped the ivory handled white whip and her eyes flashed their pale fires over the face of Damaris.

To tempt, to corrupt, to revenge: they are a triad sweeter to those who love them than are ever all the Graces and Persuasion, or Charity and her gentle sisters.

Damaris still did not speak. The colour was hot in her face and her eyebrows were drawn together; a look of intense suffering had replaced the momentary stupor of bewilderment and surprise; she breathed loudly and slowly with effort; the blue veins of her throat were swollen. Little by little she had gathered up the sense of all which had been said to her, and ravelled it out bit by bit, and comprehended it.

The swift shrill voice of her temptress still went on in her ear.

'Perhaps you wonder what business it is of mine, why I mix myself up in it, why I care what your lover does. Well, I care nothing at all for him; he may have a harem as large as Versailles for aught I care, but I hate her; I have always hated her. She is insolent, she is arrogant, she has that power over men still which it irritates one to see, and she killed my cousin. You may have heard of Othmar's first wife and of her death. I was fond of my cousin; she was of a type so rare—so rare!—one that one never sees now; she was only a child, and she took her own life because Othmar loved this woman who is his wife now; she thought she would make him happy in that way—poor little sweet generous fool! So she died by the sea there, in that country of yours. I was sorry then; I am angry still; I have always said that I would live to see this other woman humiliated and abandoned as she was humiliated and abandoned. And that is why I will be your friend; openly, freely, I cannot be so, but I will do all I can in my world to make you great, and I can do a great deal, because great you must be. She will not care if he only make love to you *à la derobée* under these ash trees. You are nothing now; you are only a little peasant whom it has [352] pleased him to set in a dovecot—it does not matter to her even if she knows of it. But, if you triumph in the sight of all Paris, then it will wound her. If you be a second Desclée as she prophesied for you, so Loris says, then it will make her bitterly mortified if she sees herself deserted for you.'

She paused to take breath after the rapid, voluble, unstudied sentences which had followed each other so fast and in so impressive a whisper off her lips.

Damaris made no word in reply. She listened as though she were made of wood or stone; her full curved lips were pressed close together, her eyes were sombre and had a dusky ominous gleam in them, the only expression on her face was that of a vague, half-stupid bewilderment which left her companion in the same doubt as before, as to whether she were stupid or feigning.

'If she have no more intelligence than this,' Blanche de Laon thought, impatiently, 'how can they think to make her famous for all her beauty? To be sure, great artists are sometimes great imbeciles.'

She leaned still nearer till her eyes seemed to plunge themselves into those of Damaris; she had drawn off her gloves, and her thin small hands with their glittering rings were clasped on her riding whip where it lay on the table in front of her; her voice rose swifter and shriller as she resumed her argument.

'You do not understand your own forces,' she said, with the impatience of a keen intelligence baffled by a slow one. 'You do not see that now—now—now is the moment for you to do everything you choose, to get everything you wish; if you let time go by, Othmar will refuse you a piece of pinchbeck where now he would give you a river of diamonds. If you waste your best years living in obscurity to please him, he will recompense you by leaving you to obscurity all the rest of your days. Men never appreciate sacrifice. If he cannot do better for you than a room or two in a farmhouse, what use is it to you that he is worth millions of millions as he is? You are only a handsome child, only a handsome peasant; but if you come into the world you will be a beautiful woman. You will lead men any way you like, and he will love you all the more because he will be afraid of his rivals.'

Suddenly she rose and stood erect.

'I know what you mean,' she answered, with the vibration of a great passion in her voice 'At first I did not know. I think you cannot understand. He saved me from the streets, as a man may a dog.

He has been as an angel to me. He does not care for me except in pity. He loves her. I would give my body and my soul to him if he wished for them. But he does not. He is not mine in any way, nor will he ever be. You do not understand. If I could make him happy for one hour I would burn [353] in hell for all eternity with joy. But I have not the power. I am nothing to him, nothing; no more than the world is to me. You do not understand—go, go.'

Her voice lost its intensity of expression, and sank exhausted at the close; the colour faded from her face; she leaned against the wall with a sense of sudden weakness on her.

Blanche de Laon stared on her with hard unsympathetic sceptical eyes; she laughed a little, coarsely, rudely.

'*Dame*! You have a mind to show me you can act! If you were on the boards now you would bring down the house. You are no simpleton I see. No doubt you know the *rôle* which pays you best. I spoke to you in sincerity, and you answer me with a tissue of untruths. *C'est bien du midi ça!*'

Damaris looked at her wearily: the pain in her was too great for anger to have any place in it.

'You can believe what you like,' she said with effort. 'Go!'

Blanche de Laon, who had never in her life known any impulse of submission or any sense of fear, was vaguely awed and touched into involuntary acquiescence. Her swift, ready, insolent, and cruel tongue was silent.

She was baffled and angered. She had spoken so frankly and so cynically, because she had been certain that her words would fall on a willing ear, and be received by a mind open and ready for them. The possibility that Damaris might refuse to hearken to them had never presented itself to her. She had made the usual mistake of an ignoble mind. The possibility of a mind being noble had never suggested itself to her.

She was sure that Othmar was the lover of this child, and that the girl denied it to save him from all comment of the world, and all jealousy of his wife.

Such a denial was stupid and exaggerated, and unwise, because the force of all women lies in their power to make themselves feared, and in their unblushing employment and proclamation of their triumphs: still it was fine, even Blanche de Laon felt that. She did not for a moment believe the answer given her, and she was bitterly incensed at the rejection of all her overtures and the failure of all her counsels; but she was moved despite herself to a certain unwilling admiration of so much courage and of so much loyalty. It was a lie she felt sure; but there were a grandeur and utter oblivion of self in such a lie which impressed her by their utter unlikeness to herself.

She looked at the averted face of Damaris; then gathered up her gloves and whip, and without any other words went from the chamber.

'May I not go back to make my adieux?' asked Loswa, who waited for her in the courtyard of the house.

'No,' she said sharply. 'What should you do there? You are no student of the antique. That child is [354] a daughter of the gods—a sister of Phædra and of Medea—no contemporary of yours or mine. Let her alone. She will not suit your canvas.'

'Will she play at Amyôt?'

'I do not think so.'

She mounted her horse and rode in silence through the fields and lanes. Her tireless incessant voice for once was mute, and her face was troubled and surprised. All the malice and the vileness which had been in her thoughts, her hopes, her suggestions, had been scared and confounded by the sense of a great unintelligible passion, the nobility of which was incomprehensible to her, yet affected her with a dim sense of its strength and its strangeness.

Once she laughed aloud and turned to Loswa.

'Desclée! Desclée never equalled Damaris Bérarde. What an incomparable actress the future will enjoy whether we get her to Amyôt or not!'

'You mean——' asked Loswa perplexed.

'My dear Loris! Almost she persuaded me that she loves Otho Othmar for himself and not for his millions! Almost she persuaded me too that he is not as yet her lover, though he may be when he will! You will grant that she surpasses Desclée.'

CHAPTER XLIX.

When the echo of their horses' feet had ceased from the stones of the courtyard, and the quiet air had no sound in it except the twitter of the sparrows pecking among the food of the poultry in the yard below, Damaris remained motionless, leaning against the wall of the chamber. One by one all the words which had been spoken to her returned on her memory, bringing with them a clearer meaning, a fuller comprehension, a deeper disgust.

Little by little she understood all which Blanche de Laon had meant, all which she had promised, all which she had supposed.

'They think that I live on his money, and that all I care for is that,' she muttered with the sick sense of a loathsome imputation stealing all the strength out of her nerves, and all the peace out of her life.

Othmar to her was as a deity. But the very exaltation and intensity and ideality of the passion which moved her for him, rendered all the coarse suggestions and conclusions of this woman of fashion most intolerable to her, most cruel, and most degrading. Because she would have followed him to any fate with joy and with devotion, therefore was she most tortured, most outraged, by the supposition that she could regard him as the means to riches and to fame. Nothing on earth suffers so intensely as a loyal and lofty passion, which sees itself classed with venal and avaricious lusts. [355]

Perhaps even he himself might suspect her of some such vile hopes as these!

She leaned against the wall, sick at heart in her utter solitude, her lips white, her brow red with dusky colour, her breathing slow and loud, her limbs cold. The white dogs watched her with wistful eyes as they had once watched her little boat go away over the moonlit sea. The morning crept onward, the pale sunbeams strayed across the floor, amorous pigeons cooed in their little homes under the eaves, distant voices of labourers, calling one to another, came through the stillness; there was the sound of the strokes of an axe in the copse.

She was conscious of nothing.

An hour and more passed uncounted by her, when the step of Rosselin, still so firm and so light, mounted rapidly the wooden stairs and his voice called gaily to her before he had reached the door of her chamber.

'My child, where are you? I have great news for you. You had no expectation of a visit from me to-day. I have great news for you, my dear; it would not brook delays; the Fates have sent us the very chance we wanted, there is always a *dea Fortuna* for genius, the very stars fight in their courses for it——'

His gay and excited voice dropped suddenly, for his eyes caught sight of her leaning against the wall of the room, where she had stood during the last words spoken by Blanche de Laon. She turned her head and looked at him, but without much recognition in the look, her face was suffused with dark colour, she had an expression in her eyes, stunned, disgusted, bewildered, and yet one of intense anger.

'Who has been with you?' said Rosselin, abruptly. 'What have they done to you?'

She did not reply.

Rosselin repeated his question impatiently.

'Have you not trust enough in me to speak? You look as if you had seen ghosts. Good God! what has happened to you? Child, cannot you answer me?'

'There is nothing to say,' she replied slowly. Not for the universe could she have repeated what she had heard.

'Nothing to say! and you have lost faith in me in a night! I left you as usual yesterday. You have been graver, shyer, stiller of late it is true, but you have never been like this. I came to tell you of a great chance. There may be no more gods for the vulgar, for aught I know, but there is a divine providence still for genius! Mdlle. Reichenberg is ill from cold; she was to play in the great theatricals at Amyôt. Louis Loswa, who directs them as he always does, has just sent to me to suggest that you should take her place in two scenes from the "Misanthrope." He says that Othmar suggested it; that he wishes his wife to see you there. You are letter perfect, I say, in the part of Célimène, you have recited it so many times with me. True you have never played on any stage, but I am not afraid of you if you will be courageous, if you will speak as you speak when we are alone. Child, you have genius. What is the use of having it if you are dumb as the stocks and stones? Why do you look so? What has happened to you since I left you?' [356]

Damaris stared at him with dilated eyes.

'Amyôt!' she repeated.

'Yes, Amyôt,' said Rosselin angrily. 'The great country house of Othmar. It is what I always most desired. It will be the finest *début* you can have, and will, perhaps, stay evil tongues. You have said that you would be dumb if you stood before her, but that pusillanimity is wholly unworthy of you. What is she to you! A woman who once predicted fame for you. Show her that she predicted aright. You can succeed if you choose. Succeed then, to do honour to me and justice to yourself ——'

She did not reply.

'Cannot you trust me to know what is best for you?' said Rosselin, still with anger and upbraiding. 'I have arranged everything. You will go down to Beaugency to-night with me; rest one day, rehearse twice or thrice there, and on the next play the part at Amyôt. It will be perfectly easy. You are neither weak nor nervous, though you are impressionable and take strange loves and hatreds. All is arranged; I have your costumes ordered; the people who will act with you are all my friends, and will aid you in every way. God in heaven! What can you hesitate for? What can you want? At your age had I had such an opportunity to take my place at a bound on the highest steps of French art I should have gone mad with joy!'

Damaris was silent. Her face was in shadow and he could not see its expression.

'Does he wish it, you say?' she asked in a low voice.

'Othmar? Yes, I believe so. He gave his permission for such a presentation of you to his wife months ago; he will be present, and he will certainly be glad to see your triumph. He knows well that there is no other life possible for you. You cannot go back to the life you left; you will not be content with the paths of obscurity; you have touched the enchanted cup and you must go on to [357] drink of it, whether you will or no. There are a score of reasons, which it is not necessary to detail, why it is much to be desired that you should be seen first at Amyôt, beyond all other places. I think you should trust me. I am not likely to mislead you after having passed so many months in striving to develop the talents Nature has given you. Your natural gifts are great; if you do not throw them away in a passion of mistaken feelings or of childish despair you may live to reign in France as a woman of genius can reign in no other country in the world. You make me angry to see you so—Othmar's wife! What is Othmar's wife to you that you should fret your soul for her? What matter to you, child, are your own gifts, your own future, your own victory? Love Art and follow it. It will be more faithful to you than any lover that lives!'

She still did not reply.

He grew impatient and indignant with her. He had the conviction which is so sincere in a great artist, that all passions, affections, joys, woes and desires, loves and hatreds, were of no weight whatever put in the scale with Art and with renown. He had given up his whole existence to Art, and now that he was old his devotion to it had remained in him whilst he had forgotten the force and the despair of the affections and of the passions when they govern the early years of life.

It seemed to him intolerable, incredible, that the mere weight and sway of Othmar's memory should stand for a moment in the same scale with her as her destiny in the world, her place in fame. As a youth he himself had swept away all the flowers of feeling whenever they had threatened to choke the growing laurel of his genius: why could she not do the same? Was it because she was weak with the weakness of women?

After love there is nothing so cruel as the tyrannies of art, and Rosselin was art incarnated. Moreover he believed in the magnetism and vivifying force of unexpected events and of sudden emotions. They were a portion of those drastic and searching medicines with which he thought an imperfectly developed genius needs treatment. Once he had wished and wished sincerely that Damaris Bérarde should remain in the cool and shady paths of private life; but he had long ceased to wish it; he was impatient for the world to crown the novitiate on which he had bestowed so much care and labour.

The thought of the fêtes at Amyôt captivated and stimulated his own imagination. They seemed to him the occasion she most needed; a very frame of Renaissance carvings, in which the portrait of Célimène as portrayed by Damaris would show in its finest colours and its finest lines. He dreaded for her the coarse and ugly trivialities of a theatre with its throng of actors, its imperious direction, its hired applause, its niggard criticisms; he feared that she would feel in it like a hind [358] caught in the toils, would rebel against it all and flee. But at Amyôt it would be pure art which would claim her, refined praise which would salute her, an atmosphere of delicacy, of culture, of magnificence which would be about her. If such a scene and such a stimulant would not arouse all the soul slumbering in her, then he thought that he would be ready to confess: 'I mistake; she has no genius; let her go and till the earth and reap its fruits; of the fruits of art she shall have none.'

If she failed in such an air with such an opportunity, he thought that he could be as cruel to her as Garcia was to Malibran when her Desdemona was too timid and too tame.

'I want you to be seen at Amyôt,' he said once more, with irritation at being forced to explain. 'Othmar's friendship for you is only an injury unless you have his wife's countenance too. You can feel for her what aversion you will, but you must be seen by the world in her presence: then she can do you no harm. You are too ignorant and too young to see the perils in your path, but I see them. I will save you from them if you will be guided by me. If you are afraid to act, if you are unwilling to be with the others, they must find some other substitute for Reichenberg; there are many eager enough to replace her; and you yourself shall only say some legend in verse, some monologue, some simple poem, the "Révolte des Fleurs" or the "Vase et l'Oiseau;" anything will do; you will be heard, you will be seen, you will be known to have recited on the stage at Amyôt; it will suffice.'

He did not add that he expected so much from the charm of her voice and from the beauty of her face that the slightest cause which should afford a reason for her being seen by the great world would, in his anticipations, suffice to give her a place in its admiration, and rank in its realms of Art.

'Come,' he said imperiously, 'there is little time to lose. We must reach Beaugency to-morrow in

the forenoon. All the rest are already there. You must rehearse with them thrice at the least, for you have none of the habits of the stage, though I think they will come to you easily; I have taught you all there really is to know. Come: why do you stand like that? Have you been moon-struck or sun-struck since I saw you the day before yesterday? You have an opportunity given you for which you should go on your knees with thanksgiving, and you look as though you were doomed to your death! Oh, child, what did I tell you the other day? If the hate of this woman be in your soul, let it spur you on to great efforts, let it move you to high endeavours, let it force her to own that you are dowered by nature with what she has not. Hate is an ignoble thing, and I do not think it the parent of noble actions, but if you cannot cast it out of your breast, compel it to inspire you nobly. You have wished for the world's applause, for the solace of art, for the joys of [359] moving the minds of multitudes: all these may become yours, if you choose. But not if you consume your soul in vain passions.'

The face of Damaris grew duskily red. She knew his meaning.

'I cannot play at Amyôt,' she said slowly. 'Do not ask me, I cannot. I should disgrace you. My tongue would cleave to my mouth. You would curse me.'

'Great God!' cried Rosselin, furious and amazed. 'Because that one woman has such terror for you?'

'Not that,' said Damaris.

She was mute some moments, the blue veins swelled in her throat, a mist of tears gathered hastily in her eyes.

'I was starving and he fed me, I was friendless and he befriended me. He shall not think that I look on his kindness as a mere stairway to climb by to fame and the ways of the world. His wife and his friends shall not say that I am made by his gold and sustained by his influence; a mere thing of selfish, covetous, ambitious, mercenary greed—like so many, many women—so they say. I did not understand; now I have thought—and I do understand. You are angry and I must seem thankless. But I will never go upon the stage—never—never—never—because his wife and his world, and perhaps his own thoughts, would always tell him that all I cared for was the help he could give me, the reflection his wealth could cast on me. I never saw it like that before, but now that I have seen it so, once, I cannot go back into blindness.'

The tears rolled slowly from her eyes down the burning crimson of her cheeks; her voice was lost in one great sob. Rosselin seized her arm with a violent gesture.

'Who has been with you?' he said, fiercely. 'Who has dared to spit on you the venom of the world's lying mouth?'

'I have thought it out all myself. Before I did not know,' she answered briefly, and more than that he could not force from her.

She could not have told him the temptations and the suggestions made by Blanche de Laon to save her life. All their shamefulness had burnt into her very soul, as vitriol burns the flesh.

He stayed with her till night had fallen, and urged, implored, commanded, persuaded, entreated her, with all the might of that golden speech of which he was master. But it was all in vain. The rocks of her own island were not more deeply rooted in their deep-sea bed, than was her immovable purpose—never to try and force her way into the world's publicity.

'Do you mean to say,' he asked, with incredulity and despair, 'that you give up all idea of a dramatic career?'

She made a sign of assent. [360]

'You cannot know what you do,' he cried in amazement and indignation. 'You have gifts which are not given to many. Do you mean to say that you will let all these lie and rust because of some sentimental fancy which has rooted itself against all reason in your mind? Your objections are absurd. They are the morbid, exaggerated feelings of a child who has lived too much alone, and knows nothing of the world except what books can tell. What has Othmar to do with it either way? If it be a sacrifice made for him he will not care for it. He has been kind to you; he is kind to half a million people; but your future is nothing to him, except as he wishes you well, assuredly he wishes you well, and the more success and happiness you gain the less remorse will he feel that he and his broke up your life in the south. Oh, my child, my dear, be wise while it is time. The world is all before you, do not take a false step on its very threshold. The gods are seldom benevolent; if we refuse the good that they would do us, they leave us alone ever afterwards. They will never return to ingrates.'

She was silent; but by the look upon her face he saw that he had not altered her resolve.

'I seem to speak harshly no doubt,' he pursued, 'for you cannot see in my heart, and for the first time since I have known you, you refuse to believe in my judgment. I tell you that your idea is absurd, that Othmar will never attribute to you the motives you fancy; he is too wise and too generous, and no one could look at you, child, and think of you an ignoble thing. You may be a great artist if you choose. If you are not that, you will be of all creatures the most wretched, for you will live against all the instincts of your nature, against all the bend of your mind. What made you, when you read your poets on your island, dream of a life wholly unknown to you, if not the forces of genius which made you dissatisfied where you were, and cried to you "Go." Fate has been kind to you: it has set open the door; it has left you free. If you are thankless and refuse what it offers, you will deserve to perish in misery.'

She was still quite silent.

'But what will become of you?' he cried in his amazement and his grief. 'Child, you are so young, you cannot pass all your life living down all the vital powers that are in you. Genius struggles like a child in the womb to force its way out to light. You cannot go against your nature. What will you do? What will you do? We have made you for ever unfit for the existence to which you were born. If you do not go and sit where Fame beckons you now, you will stay out in the cold, friendless and homeless for life. Have I not told you so before? There is nothing on earth so wretched as the genius which is born to speak, yet fettered by circumstance, stands dumb.' [361]

She heard, but she remained unmoved. She was but a child, and she had a great hopeless passion shut in her heart, and the vileness of the world had touched her like the saliva of an unclean beast, and what could the fame which such a world could give seem ever worth to her? All the youth and the warmth, and the awaking senses and the wasted tenderness in her all yearned for gentler, simpler, tenderer things, than the glittering corselet of fame and the noisy applause of a crowd. Rosselin was so used to being all alone himself so many a year, that he could not measure the loneliness of a girl who has no mother to weep with her, no sister to laugh with her, no lover to kiss the dewy roses of her lips. He forgot that when he spoke to her of fame and of art, all her young life called out in her, 'Ah—where is love?'

He stayed until late in the evening, bringing to bear on her all the arguments and all the persuasions of which his fertile memory and eloquent tongue could arm him; but he failed to pierce the secret of the change in her, and he abandoned in despair the effort to form her steps to Amyôt. He left her in anger and in reproach in the soft vapours of a sweet night of early spring, fragrant with the scent of opening fruit blossoms and of violets growing under the low dark clouds of rain. He was alarmed, afraid, and full of impotent anger and of unsatisfied wonder.

'Who has been with her? What has she heard?' he asked himself in vain, as he walked through the cold shadowy sweet-scented fields. His own heart was heavy with anxiety and disappointment. She was the last ambition of his life. For her his own youth, his own genius had seemed to live afresh, and ally themselves with the awaking forces of a coming time.

What some men feel in their children's promise he felt in hers.

He recognised in her the existence of great gifts, of uncommon powers, which would move the minds and the hearts of nations. That such things should be wrecked because the mere common useless sorrow of a human love held her soul captive and made her mouth dumb, seemed to the great artist the cruellest irony of fate, the crowning anomaly of all gods' grim jests.

Was Love ever, he thought bitterly, any better thing than the satire of success, the curse of genius, the ruin of imagination and of art?

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[362]

CHAPTER L.

Damaris remained unmoved by the departure of her old friend—almost unconscious of it. His words had drifted by her ear, bringing little meaning, and no conviction. He spoke as an artist, as a man, as experience and the world suggested to him; but his arguments could avail nothing against the instincts of her own heart and the horror which the charges and the offer of Blanche de Laon had left upon the ignorance and innocence of her mind. What would have been as nothing to one who had dwelt in the world, to which evil is familiar and disgrace immaterial if of profit, was of an overwhelming disgust and terror to a child whose brain was nurtured on the high unworldly chivalries of the great poets, and who had dwelt in a solitude of imaginative meditation amongst the solitudes of nature, amongst the simple and noble lessons of 'the world as it is God's.'

She passed the whole day in a kind of trance. She ate nothing; she drank water thirstily. She scarcely replied to the questions of the woman of the house. The night went by, bringing her no sleep, no dreams; she was in that kind of agony which nothing except youth, in all its exaggeration, its magnificent follies, and its pathetic ignorance, can suffer. At daybreak she went out with her companions, the dogs, and roamed half unconsciously and quite aimlessly over the pastures which in the days of Port Royal had been trodden by so many restless feet, along the margin of the little stream which had heard the sigh of so many a world-wearied heart.

The morning was clear and cold and very still. Far away where Paris lay there was a dusky, heavy cloud. By noon her mind was made up.

A great and heroic impulse came upon her, born out of the innocence of her soul and the infinitude of her gratitude.

With its instinct of self-negation and noble efforts moving impetuously in her as the warm sap moves in the young vines, she took no time to reflect, sought no word of counsel. She covered herself in her great red-lined cloak, and took her well-known way once more across the pastures, bidding the woman of the house keep the dogs within.

The movement of walking, the coolness of the wind, the scent of air full of all the promise of the spring, renewed the health and youth in her, gave her courage and exaltation and force. Her dual nature, with its homely rustic strength and its patrician pride, its peasant's stubbornness and its poet's illusions, moved her by dual motives, dual instincts, on the path she took. To do something for him, however slight, to try and move for him that only soul which had the power to please his own, to prove that she was not vile or mean or basely counting on personal gains or personal glories—this seemed the only thing that life had left her to do. [363]

All her innocent ambitions were dead; the career of which she had dreamed with delight now seemed to her only loathsome. Rosselin had said aright: she was half a child and half a poet, and with the rude primitive faiths of a peasant she had the unworldly and unreal imaginations of a student of imaginative things. All the stubbornness and the simplicity of rustic life, and all the idealisation and unwisdom of a romantic mind were blended in her; and to both of these the accusations and the invitations of Blanche de Laon seemed as hideous as crime. The world could hold no laurels and no treasures she would ever care for now. Were she to reach fame what would the world think? Only that, as that woman had said, she had loved him and had used him to make of him a ladder of gold to a throne of power.

He himself, even, would think so.

He himself might come one day to believe her sorrows and her hunger, her sickness and her loneliness, all parts of some mere drama studied and played to touch his pity and to win his aid.

The thought was sickening to her: sooner than let such suspicion lie on her, she felt that she would seek death as Yseulte de Valogne had sought it. They would believe then, she thought.

She walked on over the fields, past the grazing sheep, and along the stream where Pascal had mused and Racine dreamed; and with the rapid resolute movements of a mind strung up to some great action and committed to some course accepted past recall, she reached the station of Trappes and took her way to Paris.

She had gone on that road so many a time with Rosselin that it seemed to her she could have gone blindfolded along it.

She sat motionless and unconscious of anything around her as the train went on to Paris; her clothes were dark, her face was covered. She reached the Boulevard Montparnasse and mingled unnoticed with the crowd, though twice or thrice men looked after her, attracted by the supple elastic freedom of her walk, which had in it all the ease and vigour of movement which had come to her in those happy days of childhood when she had raced over the sands with the goats, and leaped from rock to rock, and sprung into the waves with headlong joyous greeting of the sea as her best comrade.

She remained an open-air creature, a daughter of the winds and the waters, of the sun and the dew; and all the exigencies of life in the streets and the constraint of movement in a city could not take from her that liberty of movement, as of the circling sea-gull, as of the cloud-born swallow. [364]

She took her way straight to the house of Othmar, to the house which had sheltered her in her sickness and need. Many times as she had been in Paris she had never seen its portals since she had been carried through them to go to Les Hameaux. It stood before her now in the sunshine;

the vast pile behind its gates and rails of gilded bronze, which Stefan Othmar had purchased in the days of Louis Philippe from a great noble, compromised and exiled for the Duchesse de Berri. The Suisse in his gorgeous uniform was standing in the grand entrance; liveried servants were going to and fro, through the archways of the courtyard there was a glimpse of the green gardens and the shining fountains. The sight of it all gave her a strange sense of her own utter distance from him.

She remembered how she had said to him, 'Is this house hers?' and how he had answered, 'Surely, my dear, what is mine is hers,' and of how then she had longed to rise and go out, homeless and friendless as she was, and die in the streets rather than stay under that roof. Standing there now, a lonely, dusty, obscure figure before that lordly palace, she suddenly realised how utterly apart she was from him, how eternally she would be nothing in his life. She had been sheltered there for a few weeks in charity, that was all. He was the whole world to her, but she was no more than a passing compassion to him. All the pomp and pageantry and power of his material existence oppressed her, symbolised as it was in this great palace, with its hurrying servants, its liveried guards, its waiting equipages, its stately gardens: whilst the knowledge she had of the thwarted affections, and emptiness of heart, and vain desires, which haunted him, master of so much though he was, filled her with an agony of longing to be able to give him that simple herb of sweet content which will so rarely blossom in the gardens of the great, in the orchid houses of the rich man.

She stood in the sunlight which shone and glittered on the gilded gates, a dark and lonely figure so motionless and still that the *concierge* spoke to her roughly, bidding her not stand so near. At that moment through the gateways there came the Russian equipage of the mistress of the house; the three black horses were rearing and plunging, their silver chains glistening, their bells chiming; amongst the cushions of the carriage Nadine reclined. Her face was very pale, her expression very cold; she was about to pay her ceremonious visit of welcome to the Princess Lobow Gregorievna.

Full of the purpose which had driven her thither, and not wholly conscious of what she did, Damaris stretched her hands out and caught at the sable skins of the carriage rug as the wheels passed her. [365]

'Wait—wait!' she cried stupidly. The horses dashed onward. Nadine threw her a silver piece, seeing only a supplicant figure between her and the light.

One of the men in the gateways picked up the coin and tendered it to her. She repulsed it with a gesture.

'When can one see her?' she asked in a low tone.

The servant stared. 'See her? Why never, unless you know her and she sends for you;' then, being good-natured, he added, 'what is it for?—all petitions go to the secretaries.'

'I want nothing of her,' said Damaris. 'I want to speak to her.'

'Then you will wait for a century,' said the young man, and looking at her he thought, 'I think it is the girl who was here last summer. I heard that they had made an actress of her, and that Othmar kept her somewhere out Versailles way. What can she be doing on the streets?'

Then, being of a mischievous humour, and deeming that it would be good sport to bring about any scene which would be disagreeable or embarrassing to the master whose bread he ate and whose livery he wore, the fellow added, as if in simple good nature, 'you could get speech with either of them more readily at Amyôt: they go down there in a day or two for Easter; they have some royal people.'

Damaris did not answer him; she turned away with one long look at the house which had sheltered her in her homelessness and misery. Was the master of it there, she wondered? She did not ask. She did not dare. After what Blanche de Laon had said to her, she shrank from the thought of meeting his eyes.

She went wearily from the gates as she had come to them; her purpose was baffled, but not beaten. The vague impulse which had taken her there, had been only strengthened by momentary defeat; the momentary vision of his wife's face had made her the more passionately long to clear herself from disgrace in those cold eyes. She remembered a garden-door in the garden wall opening out into a bye-street: when she had been carried out under the trees in her convalescence, she had seen gardeners go to and fro through it, and dogs run in and out when it stood ajar; she turned away into the quietude of this little side street, and walked beneath the garden wall until she came to the little entrance which had been a postern-gate in older Paris days. It was standing open as she had so often seen it, the gay branches of budding lilac and laburnum showing through it. She passed in unseen, and waited under the shadow of the boughs.

The gardens were as still as though they were the gardens of Amyôt; the peacocks swept with stately measured tread across the lawns, the fountains were rising and falling under the deep green shade of groves of yew and alleys of cedar. It was three in the afternoon, the shadows were long, the silence was complete. She sat down on a rustic bench, and waited; for what she scarcely knew. But the purpose in her was too deeply rooted in her heart to let her go thence with its errand undone. [366]

She could see the marble terrace, and the rose-coloured awnings of the western front of the great hotel, she could see the banks of flowers which glowed against its steps, the white statues which rose out of the evergreen foliage around them; the massive pile of the building itself was, from the garden-side, almost hidden in trees.

She saw two young children come out gaily, and laughing, their shining hair floating behind them in the light, they mounted two small ponies and rode away with their attendants beside them, out of the great garden gates. She watched them with a strange suffering at her heart.

They were the children of the woman whom he had loved so much.

She remained hidden in the little ivy-grown hut, watching the house. No one came near her; only some birds flew near and pecked at the ivy-berries. When several hours had gone by, she heard the carriage roll into the courtyard; she imagined that the mistress of the house had returned. Long suspense, long fasting, for she had taken scarcely any food since very early in the previous day, the exaltation of a purpose romantic to folly, but unselfish to sublimity, all these had made her nerves strung to high tension, her mind little capable of separating the wise from the unwise, the possible from the impossible, in the strange act which she meditated.

But oftentimes, in moments of irresponsible excitement, the will can accomplish what in calm moments of reflection would seem utterly beyond its powers.

She waited yet awhile longer, till the gardens grew dark, then without hesitation she crossed the lawn, and ascended the terrace steps. To the servants waiting there she said simply:

'I come to see the Countess Othmar. Say that I am here—Damaris Bérarde.'

The men hesitated; but some amongst them recognised her, and were moved by the instinct to do mischief with impunity, which is so characteristic of their class.

'It is the girl from Chevreuse, the girl who was here last summer,' said one idle lounger to another, then they laughed a little together in low tones; and she heard one say, 'It is a pity Othmar is still at Ferrières!'

Then one of them indolently showed her a staircase.

'Go up there,' he said to her. 'My lady's apartments are to the right. You will find her women.' [367]

The man added in a whisper to one of his fellows: 'She came in through the gardens, we can swear that we never saw her enter if any mischief come of it;' and they watched her with languid curiosity as her dark figure passed up the lighted staircase, with its blue velvet carpets, its bronze caryatides, its great Japanese vases filled with azaleas, its arched recesses filled with palms and statues.

Presently she came to a wide landing place, where corridors branched off from side to side; it was lighted also, and here also its masses of blossom, its green fronds of ferns and palms were beautiful against the white marble and the blue hangings of the walls.

A servant was walking up and down awaiting orders. To him she said the same words: 'I come to see the Countess Othmar. Tell her I am here. I am Damaris Bérarde.'

CHAPTER LI.

She whom she sought was alone in her apartments within.

She was resting, after her drive, in her bed-chamber, which was lighted by silver lamps, and of which the furniture was all of ivory and silver, with hangings of white plush embroidered with spring flowers in silks of their natural colours. The bed in its alcove was watched over by the angel of sleep; a statue in silver, modelled by modern artists from a design of Canova's. White lilac and white jessamine filled large silver bowls of Indian artificers' work. The portrait of her children in the rose gardens of Amyôt, painted by Caband, stood on an easel draped with some cloth of silver of the fifteenth century. The floor was covered with white bearskins. It was a temple dedicated to rest and dreams; but it had given her neither of late. She was restless, disquieted, ill at ease, and dissatisfied with herself.

She had the same pale rose satin gown on her; in another hour she would dress again for a dinner at the Duchesse d'Uzès'; her hair was a little loosened, her face was weary, she had a knot of hothouse roses at her bosom; her women were asking instructions as to what jewels she would wear. Her old sense of the dulness of life was strong upon her; was it worth while to go on with it, all these days so alike, all these dressings and undressings, all these amusements which so seldom were amusements—*tant de frais pour si peu de chose*?

[368] In ten years'—twelve years'—time she would bring out her daughter and marry her, probably to some prince or another—and afterwards?—well, afterwards it would be the same thing, always the same thing; what else could it be? She would not be able, like Lubow Gregorievna, to solace herself for lost loves with church images.

She was tired, the day had dragged, she had been unable to put off from her the sense of loss and of bitterness which had come to her for the first time in all her life. She had not seen her husband since the hour, three days before, when he had left her, insulted beyond words, outraged, and stung to the quick by the dishonour of her contemptuous disbelief.

In a day or two more there would be the fêtes for Easter at Amyôt; royal guests were bidden to them; he would of necessity appear and play his part in his own house; he and she would meet with the world around them. Was not this the supreme use of the world?—to cover discord, to compel dissimulation, to efface the traces of feud, to bring in its train those obligations of surface-courtesies and outward amities which restrain all violent expression of emotion?

One of her women with hesitation approached her, and with apology ventured to say that some one was waiting who entreated to see her; a young girl, Damaris Bérarde. Was she to be permitted to come in? or should she be dismissed?

'Damaris Bérarde!' she repeated with amazement.

The women were astonished to see that this plebeian name, unknown to them, had an effect on their mistress for which they were wholly unprepared.

'To see me!' she echoed, 'to see *me*!'

She half rose from her reclining attitude, and a look of extreme surprise was on her face, which so seldom showed any strong expression of any kind.

'To see me!' she echoed aloud.

So might Cleopatra have said the words if the Nubian slave from the market-place had approached the purple of her bed and Anthony's.

Her first impulse was to give the instant refusal for which her women looked; but her next was to wait, to hesitate: perhaps to consent; the strangeness of such a visit outweighed with her its insolence and intrusion. She disliked all things which were sensational, emotional, romantic, ridiculous; and yet the more uncommon circumstances, the more singular situations of life, had always an attraction for her. Curiosity to penetrate the motive of it, and to see with her own eyes this creature whom she despised, was stronger with her than her haughty amaze at such a request, whilst the morbid love of analysis and of penetrating to the depths of all emotions, and of playing on them, which is common to the century, and in her reached its extreme indulgence and development, impelled her to allow the entrance of Damaris into her presence, that she [369] might see the issue of a situation of which the peculiarity allured her.

'If she come to assassinate me, it will at least be a new sensation,' she thought, with her habitual irony.

The women felt afraid: they never dared to name any visitants to her whom they had not previously been directed to receive; they awaited her commands in apprehension.

'Can he have sent her?' she wondered; then she rejected the supposition. He was too well-bred for that. What, then, could bring this girl to her?

Her first impulse was to have her thrust out shamefully by her household, the next was that intellectual inquisitiveness which was the strongest characteristic of her mind. Despised, contemned, abhorred as this girl was by her, she yet felt a strange desire to see and to examine what she believed possessed the power to reign, if only for a passing season, over the thoughts and the feelings of Othmar. She herself had no more doubt that Damaris was her husband's mistress than she had that the roses she wore in her breast were her own. But the disgust, the offence, the aversion which she felt, in common with all other women, before such a rivalry were overborne in her by the psychological interest of the moment which it offered.

Always mindful to preserve her dignity before her inferiors, she said to her chief woman-in-waiting:

'It is a young girl whom I knew at St. Pharamond; yes, say that she may come to me for ten minutes.'

The woman obeyed, and in a moment more Damaris stood between the satin curtains of the doorway: a dark, tall, slender figure, with the light shining on the dusky gold of her hair, the changing painful colour of her cheeks.

The women, at a sign from their mistress, withdrew and closed the door behind her. Othmar's wife made no gesture, said no syllable which could help her. She remained seated afar off, the intense light of the room reflected from the many mirrors in their silver frames showing her delicate cold features, the pale rose satin of her sweeping gown, her reclining attitude, languid, haughty, motionless.

The girl trembled from head to foot.

But she advanced.

'It is I, Damaris Bérarde,' she said, in a low voice.

She paused in the centre of the room, bewildered by the beauty of decoration which was around her, the intensity of light, the hot-house-like warmth and fragrance, the merciless gaze of the great lady who gazed at her from a distance unmoved and chill as death. The heart of the child beat thickly with terror and emotion:

'Madame—Madame,' she stammered.

In her ignorance she had fancied that because she was received she would be welcomed, that because those doors had unclosed to admit her, that behind them she might hope to find a friend. [370]

This silence, this coldness, this unspoken but all-eloquent disdain made her feel herself the intruder and alien which she was, there in the house of Othmar, in the presence of his wife. Her very soul sank within her.

The cold contemptuous eyes of the woman whom she dreaded swept over her with withering scorn.

'You have mistaken the apartments,' said Nadège, with her cruellest intonation. 'Those of Count Othmar are on the other side of the house.'

The intensity of emotion which possessed Damaris, the intensity of resolve which was in her, the high-strung and overwrought feeling which had nerved her to her present act made her deaf and callous to all that was implied in the words and to the look with which her great rival repulsed her. She crossed the room, and caught the shining satin folds of the gown in her hands and hung on them.

'Let me speak to you once, only this once,' she cried. 'I only came to Paris for that——'

'What can you seek from me? Surely my husband gives you all you want!'

All the icy disdain, the cruel irony, the scorn of her as of a creature beneath contempt, passed over Damaris almost unfelt. She had the intense self-absorption which a strong purpose and a passionate generosity inspire.

'I came to Paris to see you,' she said boldly. 'I tried to stop your carriage; you thought I was a beggar, you threw me a coin; I have come here because I hoped that I might speak to you. Listen to me once, this once; then I will go away for ever.'

Her hearer looked at her with less bitterness of scorn, with a slowly awakening wonder. What was strange, unusual, startling, had always a fascination for her; a position which was intricate and unintelligible, a character which was mysterious and for the hour unfathomable, always possessed for her an attraction which nothing else could have. Had an assassin been at her throat she would have stayed his hand only to ask his motives. The supreme interest of the enigma of human life with her surpassed all other more personal considerations. Psychological analysis far outweighed with her all personal emotions. What the young mistress of her husband could seek her for, or want of her, seemed to her so odd that for the moment the strangeness of the supplication outweighed her pitiless scorn of the suppliant.

Her dignity would never have allowed her to cross the width of a street to see this girl who had caused such division between herself and Othmar; but the wish to see her had been strong in her for some time. Her philosophic inquisitiveness before all mysteries of human character, and her artistic appreciation of all human beauty combined to make Damaris interesting to her as a study, though hateful as a living creature. [371]

'I will hear you,' she said, and drew her skirts from the touch of Damaris, and seated herself with the coldness of a sovereign who listens but does not forgive, of a judge who examines but does not pardon.

'Great heaven, how handsome she is!' she thought with involuntary admiration; and beneath her haughty calm and scorn there burned the fires of a jealousy which scorned itself. Was this the child whom she had brought over the sea? The peasant in blue serge and leather shoes whom she had seen hidden from others in her drawing-rooms like a startled stray sheep under a hedge?

Damaris stood before her pale, infinitely troubled, passionately pained, but so nerved with the force of her purpose that she had lost all sense of fear and of hesitation. Her voice came from her

lips quick and low, and her hands were clasped together in earnestness as she spoke at length to this woman who had been the terror of her dreams so long.

'I do not know what they have told you of me,' she said, 'but I am come here to tell you the truth. I think there are those who believe that I am coarse, and selfish, and base, that there are those who believe that he who saved me out of the streets, and from death, only seems to me the mere means to an end, and that end my own renown, my own riches, my own gain. But that is not true. So little is it true that now that I know they say it, the world shall never see me whilst I live. You know, it was you yourself who first told me that I could make the world care for me. You put that thought in my head and my heart, and it worked and worked there, and left me no peace. He tried to dissuade me, because he said that an obscure life was best, but I would not believe. I wished to be great, I wished to come before you some day, and to make you say, "After all she has done well; after all she has genius——"'

She paused, overcome by the rush of her own memories, by the flood of thoughts she was longing to utter.

Nadège looked at her with her cruellest irony.

'Why do you come to tell me this? Be great if you like—if you can! You say quite truly: my husband can easily build you a golden bridge to the temple of fame. But you can scarcely expect me, I think, to come and crown you upon it!'

The chill, sarcastic scorn cut the soul of Damaris to the quick.

'Oh, my God, can you believe it too!' she cried, in an agony of despair. 'Only because he took me in when I was half-dead with hunger, as he would have taken home a starved dog! He has been good to me with the goodness of angels. There is a tale of a beggar whom a king befriended, and [372] the beggar cut the gold fringe from the king's robes in return; do you think me as vile as that beggar? I know that my debt is great to him, so great that I cannot pay it with my life; but if you can believe that I dream of taking of his gold—that I would use him, or rob him, or ask his help for my own ambition——'

Nadège looked at her with cold, impenetrable, unmerciful eyes of unrelenting contempt and pitiless examination.

'I am still at a loss to know why you come to me. I am not interested in the terms that you may have made with him. Whether he give you a cottage at Chevreuse or an hotel in the Champs Elysées, what does it matter to me? Do you wish for my advice upon the architecture of either?'

She spoke with her usual languor and irony unaltered, she sat erect with the roses at her breast, and the pale rose of the satin gown flowing to her feet: her eyes were cold and hard as jewels, the only trace of any anger, or of any feeling repressed was in her lips, from which all colour had gone.

Why did she let an interview so hateful be prolonged? Why did she not summon her people, and have this stranger thrust in ignominy from her chamber? Why did she not send for her husband and confront him with the truth he had denied? She did not know why she did none of these things, unless it were that all exposure and publicity were hateful to her, and also because the psychological interest of the instant was strong enough to hold in suspense both her offended dignity and her aroused passions. What brought this girl to her? Until she knew that, she would not send her from her presence.

The simplicity and strength of the nature of Damaris, in which single motives and undivided instincts reigned, meanwhile made the complexity and the variety of sentiments in this cultured and satirical intelligence wholly incomprehensible to her. That any woman could see matter for jest, for derision, for amusement, in passions which bitterly offended and mortally alienated her, was a contradiction which was utterly beyond her comprehension. That the wife of Othmar, believing what she evidently believed, might have struck her some mortal blow, or bidden her servants scourge her from the house, she could have understood; but this complex mind, which could play with its own pain, and dally with its own injuries, she could not follow. She only felt that such a mind scorned her herself as something too low to be believed, too poor to be quarrelled with, too far beneath contempt to be even accepted as a foe.

'You think—you think—I do not know what it is you think,' she said in a voice broken by great emotion. 'I have done whatever he told me, he has told me nothing but good; he does not care for me—in—in in that way which you believe. I am nothing to him. He loves you——'

'I thank you for your assurance of it!' [373]

The poor child in her ignorance had spoken the very words which could most fatally offend and arouse the dignity and the passion of her hearer. To be assured of her husband's love by the subject of her husband's illicit amours! Even the ironical patience and the contemptuous tolerance of her habitual temper could not remain in silence under such an outrage to her position and her dignity as this.

With a gesture as though sweeping away some unclean things, she motioned Damaris away.

'Leave my presence; leave my house,' she said with an intense rage, only controlled by pride still greater than itself. 'How dare you come where I and my children dwell? Go—go at once, or I will disgrace you before my people.'

But Damaris, whose dread of her had been so great, did not shrink or quail before her.

'You cannot disgrace me for I have done no wrong,' she said in desperation. 'I am nothing to him

—nothing, nothing, except a thing he pities. Why should you think that I am? Are not you far above me? have not men loved you always and died for you? do not you know that he himself is sick of heart because you care so little? You will not believe. Oh, God, what shall I say to you! Madame, it is for this only that I came. I wanted to tell you that my heart will break if, through me, any pain comes to him; you think things which are not true, and which would offend him bitterly if he knew them; and he has spoken to me of you as the only woman whom he could ever care for. Why are you angered that I say so? He thinks that you do not care, he thinks that you are weary of him, he thinks that he has no power to please you any more. And I said to myself that perhaps you did not know this, that perhaps you would care if you did know, that perhaps you would put some warmth in his heart, give him some kinder words. I say it ill, but this is what I want to say. He thinks you do not care.'

Her hearer listened with the scornful rage of her soul held in check for an instant by her own knowledge of the likeness in the words thus spoken to the reproach, which Othmar himself had cast against her. In her innermost soul she acknowledged, that if Othmar loved this creature, he was not the mere sensualist she had thought; she recognised the spirituality and the nobility in the beauty and the youth of her disdained visitant; she acknowledged that a man might well lose his wisdom and break his faith for such a face as this; and would have for his madness some excuse of higher kind than would lie in the mere temptation of the senses. The highest quality in her own temperament had always been her candour in her acceptance of truths which were unwelcome to her. This truth was loathsome to her; but it was a truth, and she confessed it as such to her own mind. Yet, even whilst she did so, it pierced the very centre of her soul, and filled her with a new and intolerable pain. [374]

Her insight into the minds of others also told her that this child's mind was honest, innocent, and candid, and though she would not believe what her own penetration said, she could not wholly resist its influence, she could not wholly continue to doubt the good faith of the speaker, even whilst her anger remained unabated at the daring and familiarity of such a scene as this.

Damaris took the brief instant of silence for consent, and sustained and nerved by the pure unselfishness of her romantic purpose, she persevered in her supplication.

'Listen to me for one moment more. You are an aristocrat and I am nothing; I had only some little talent and that is dead in me; you will live beside him all the days of your life, and I shall never, perhaps, see his face again. Believe what I say as though I were dying. You are all that he thinks of on earth, and he is tired, and chilled, and empty of heart because you have never cared for him as he cared. I shall go where I shall never trouble you, and if ever he think of me it will be only with pity just for one passing moment. Will you remember only this, that I have come to beg of you to make him happier, to make his dreams true—it is only you who can do it. You have his heart in your hands; do not throw it against a stone wall, cold and hard, as they throw a bird to kill it. You are a great lady, and the world is with you, and you have many lovers and courtiers, they say, but what will it profit you, all of it, if one day he looks at you and you know that he thinks of you no more because you, yourself, have killed his soul in him?'

'I am flattered that Count Othmar has made me the subject of his discourse with you!'

Damaris perceived the fault she had committed, the offence she had excited. Resolute to follow out the purpose which had brought her there, she drained the cup of bitterness which she had voluntarily taken up to the last drop.

'He hardly ever spoke of you,' she said. 'But I think he wished me to know that all his thoughts and memories were yours, so that I should not ever—ever—be misled to dream that they were mine. I have seen him seldom; very seldom; only once this year; but that once he did speak of you, and I knew that all his life was in your hands, and that he thinks you do not care——'

The words were simple, and not wisely chosen, and spoken out of the fulness of her heart, but they carried a sense of their sincerity to the sceptical ear of their auditor. Almost for the moment she believed that they were truth. A sense of compassion touched her.

This girl, so young, so ignorant, so hopelessly devoted to a man who could be nothing to her, seemed to her childish, melodramatic, plebeian, absurd; and yet had a certain nobility and force, and pathos, and mystery in her which stirred to pity this heart which had never known pity. She had been only a peasant, born and reared amongst the rude toilers of the sea and of the soil; what fault was it of hers if she had given away her life to the first man who had been kind to her, and in whom she saw the charm of gentleness, the grace of culture? The infinite comprehension which she herself possessed of all the frailties and all the errors of human nature, almost supplied in her the place of sympathy. She did not pity because she disdained so much; but she understood, and that power of understanding made her in a manner indulgent, though indulgent with contempt. [375]

But the memory of things which seemed to her damning witnesses of fact rose to her thoughts, and checked as it arose the softer and more intelligent impulse which for awhile had held her passive.

She repulsed Damaris coldly, drawing once more her skirts from her touch.

'You are a good actress. Do not neglect your calling. Rise and go. You have been too long maintained by Count Othmar to be able to play the *rôle* of disinterested innocence with any chance of duping me. Why you come to me I cannot tell. Perhaps he sent you, teaching you your part.'

Damaris rose to her feet, and her face grew scarlet with honest shame and with indignant wonder.

'I have never had anything of his except his kindness,' she said passionately. 'I have never taken a coin from him any more than I took yours in the street to-day. What he did for me in my illness I know was charity—a debt I could never pay—I said so. But what I have lived on has been my own, always my own, what my grandfather left to me when he died.'

For the moment even her listener believed her; her candid luminous eyes flashing fire through their tears, her flushed indignant face, her truthful voice, all bore their witness to her innocence and ignorance, all told even the prejudice and arrogance of her judge, that whatever the facts might be she herself believed the truth to be that which she said.

Mercy and generosity for a moment held the lips of Nadine silent; she was a child, she was a peasant, if she were the dupe of her lover, was hers the fault? But that jealous scorn which has no pity and no justice in it, swept over her soul afresh, and extinguished in her all the finer charities and nobler comprehension of her mind.

'It is useless to tell me this,' she said with cold contempt. 'Whether you know it or not, your grandfather left you nothing; you are living, and you have lived, only on what my husband has given you. Leave me, and try my patience no more. Count Othmar's amours are nothing to me, but I do not care to have a comedy made out of them to be played for some unknown purpose on my credulity.' [376]

Then she rang for her women.

Damaris said no other word, all the light and warmth had gone out of her face, there had come on it a pallid horror of incredulous and stupefied doubt.

Silently and quite feebly, as if all strength were gone out from her, she passed across the chamber, and felt her way through the curtains of the door. On the entrance she turned her head and looked back: her great eyes had the look in them of a forest doe's when it is wounded unto death. She looked back once, then went.

Nadine smiled bitterly.

'When she found that I knew all, she could say nothing!' she thought. 'She will be an acquisition to the French stage. Her melodrama was so well acted that almost it deceived me. Why was it played?'

She could not see the motive. For the first time in her life the reasons for the actions which she watched escaped her.

And think as she would that the scene had been a melodrama, an invention, yet there were certain tones, certain words in it which haunted her with a persistent sense of their truth.

These had not been common entreaties, common reproaches, which Damaris had addressed to her; there had been an impersonal generosity, a noble simplicity, in them which lifted them out of the charge of sensational and dramatic affectation. There was an enigma in them which she could not solve. They were unselfish and founded on accurate knowledge; they were out of keeping in the mouth of a paid companion of a man's passing amourettes. It seemed wholly impossible to her that they could have been spoken truthfully, and yet if they were not true there was no sense in them.

Some pang of self-consciousness moved her own heart as she pondered on these passionate supplications to her to make the life which was spent beside hers happier—'happier!'—that one simple word which was so ill-fitted to the complex feelings, the capricious demands, and the hypercritical exigencies of such characters as theirs.

She had no doubt that her husband was the lover of this girl; the denial of the one had moved her no more than the denial of the other; all her knowledge of human nature told her that it must be so; but as she sat in solitude a certain remorse came to her, a certain sense that from her own unassailable height and dignity and rank she had stooped to strike a creature not only unworthy of her wrath, but unprotected by youth, by ignorance, and by the quixotic temerity which had made her thus bold. [377]

She honoured courage. She could not refuse her respect to the courage of this child.

She could not class her with the common souls of earth.

'Why did I not let her alone at the first? She was so content and so safe on her island,' she thought, with that pang of conscience which others had tried in vain to arouse in her.

It had been a caprice light as the freak which makes a butterfly pause on one flower instead of another. But the fruits of it were bitter to her.

When her women came she began her toilette for the dinner at the Duchesse d'Uzès'. It was long, and nothing contented her.

From that dinner she went to various other houses; she returned to her own house late; she heard that Othmar had come back from Ferrières and gone to his own apartments. The following day they would be obliged to go to Amyôt. The great party there could by no possibility be postponed; royal people were bidden to it. If such a gathering were broken up at the last moment, for any less cause than death or illness, the whole world would know that there was subject for separation and dissension between her husband and herself. She would have given ten years of her life to prevent the world ever knowing that.

For the first time in her life, as her woman unrobed her and took off her jewels, she was conscious that she had been unwise in the management of fate. She had been desirous that the world should see that her influence could even withstand and outlast all those adversaries of time and custom and disillusion which saw stealthily at the roots of every human happiness and sympathy; yet she had been so careless and so indifferent, that she had allowed the very changes which she wished the world never to see, to creep in upon her unawares.

It had never occurred to her that she had been as inconsistent as one who wishing to preserve untouched a fragile vase of crystal, should set it and leave it in a crowded street for anyone to use or break who chose. She had not cared to keep her crystal vase herself, and yet she was enraged that it was broken.

CHAPTER LII.

Damaris went out blindly, down the staircase and across the vestibule and halls into the open air.

She had no knowledge of what she did; the serving-men looked at her and then at each other, and laughed, and whispered some coarse things, but no one attempted to arrest her steps; on the contrary, they put her right when she mistook her way in the corridor, and almost shoved her into the street, where the light of day was fading. [378]

She was strongly made in body and in mind, and in all the tumult of her thoughts, the sickness of her shame, she did not grow faint, or forget her road, or fall upon the stones, over which her feet were dragged so wearily.

She found the streets which led to the station of the West, and sat down in the waiting-chamber, and heard the roar of Paris go on round her like the roaring of wild beasts calling for food: that those beasts had not devoured her was due to him; she did not reproach him or forget her debt to him, only she wished that he had let her die that night upon the bridge.

The doors flew open, the bells rang, the crowds hastened; without any conscious action on her part she was pushed with the others to the wicket, paid the coins they asked her for, and found her way to a seat in the crowded waggons.

The train moved. Soon the cold country air of evening blowing through an open window revived her, and brought her a clearer sense of where she was, of what had happened. She saw always that cold, still, regal figure looking down on her with such ineffable disdain; she heard always that chill, languid, contemptuous voice, sweet as music, cruel as the knife which severs the cord of life.

'She does not believe,' she muttered again and again. 'She will never believe.'

Those who were in the carriage with her heard the broken stupid words said over and over again, while her great eyes looked out, wide opened and startled, into the shadows of the descending night.

One or two of them spoke roughly to her, being afraid of her; then she was silent, vaguely understanding that they thought her strange and odd.

She leaned in a corner and shrank from their comments and their gaze.

It was now quite dark; the flickering lamplight seemed to wane and oscillate before her eyes; she had not touched food or water for many hours; her throat was dry, her hands were hot, her head felt light; she had done all she could and had failed. The only thing she had gained was a knowledge which seemed to eat her very soul away with its shame and misery.

She was so young that she did not know that if she had patience to live through this agony it would cease in time, and grow less terrible to her with every year which should pass over her head. She did not know the solace that comes with the mere passage of the seasons; to her the shame, the torture she endured were eternal.

She had taken his money innocently, ignorantly indeed, honestly believing it to be her own; but she understood now why to his wife she seemed only a wretched paid creature of hazard; she understood now why the Princess de Laon had spoken to her as to one of whose avarice and whose vileness there was no doubt. [379]

To the haughty, frank innocent soul of the child it was such unspeakable degradation that it seemed to stop the very pulses of life in her.

She could have torn the clothes off her body because they had been bought with this money she had ignorantly accepted as her own.

Not for one moment did she do him the wrong that his wife had done him; she never doubted his motives, or thought that any intention save that of the kindest and most chivalrous compassion had been at the root of his generosity to her. Her mind was too intrinsically noble, her instincts were too pure and untainted by suspicion, for any baser supposition to attach itself to him in her thoughts, even in the moment of her greatest suffering.

Only she wished—ah, God! how she wished—that he had left her to die on the bridge in that summer night.

Intense pride had always been existent beneath her ardent and careless temperament; the stubborn self-will of the peasant united to the finer, more impersonal, pride derived from a great race. She had been always taught to suffice for herself, to repel assistance as indignity, to hold herself the equal of all living creatures; and now what was she?—only what Jean Bérarde, had he been living, would have driven out of his presence as a beggar, only what all the labourers in the fields of the vale of Chevreuse would have the right to hoot after as she passed them. Her imagination distorted and her sensitiveness exaggerated all the debt she owed to Othmar; to herself she seemed nothing better than any one of those wretched paupers who stretched their hands out to him as he passed. The shame of it made all the devotion she bore to him seem a horror, a disgrace, a thing cankered and corrupt, which he must despise utterly if he knew aught of it. And what should he know? What should he care? What could she be in his sight except a friendless, lonely thing, whom he had saved from want, as he might save any ragged, homeless, child who asked for a sou from him in the streets.

She loved him with the passion of Juliet, of Francesca, of Mignon, and she found herself so disgraced in her own sight that nothing she could ever do, it seemed to her, would make any utterance from her, even of gratitude, worth the breath spent in speaking it. To him and to his wife she would be for ever, all their lives long, only a peasant who had not had strength or courage to earn her own daily bread. [380]

The cold scorn which had gazed at her from the eyes of his wife seemed to pierce through and through the very core and centre of her life. She had dreamed of being great in this woman's sight, of compelling her admiration, her applause, even her envy!—and all the while she had been nothing more than any dog which lived on the food thrown from their table.

The train went on through the descending darkness of the night, and the scent of the wind blowing over grass-lands and wheat-fields came to her in her trance, and filled her with a strange dumb longing to be put away for ever in silence under the cool and kindly earth, the budding leaves, the sprouting corn. The aged hate the thought of death, and fear and shun it; but for the young it has no terrors, and in their pain it always beckons, with a smile, to them to rest in the arms of the great Madre Natura. Death seemed to her the only stream which could wash her soul white again from the indignity it had, all unconsciously, accepted. A passion which was hopeless and cruel, and ashamed of its own force, burned up her young heart like fire. Dead, only, it seemed to him that she might keep some place in his compassion and his remembrance without indignity.

She descended at the familiar road-side of Trappes, and passed through the wicket, and took her way through the country paths she knew so well. It was not yet a year since they had first brought her there, and she had laughed with joy to see the country sights and hear the country sounds once more. Now they only hurt her with an intolerable pain.

The night was dark, and a fine slight rain was falling, but she was not conscious of it. She found her way by instinct, as a blind dog finds his; it was long, and went over fields and pastures, but she kept straight on unerringly, going home, why she knew not, for she felt that she would never dwell there another day: now that she knew.

Now that she knew, she could not have touched a coin of that silver and gold which lay in her drawer in her room at Les Hameaux; she would not have eaten a crust of the bread which had been purchased with it. She had no idea what she would do; she was alone once more, as utterly alone as she had been when her solitary boat had been launched on the world of waters, to reach a haven or to founder as it might. Her only instinct was to go anywhere on the earth, or under the earth, where the eyes of Othmar's wife could never find her in their merciless scorn.

Everything had gone from her, all her dreams of a future, all her love for art and for the poets, all her bright and buoyant courage, all her innocent and idealised ambitions: they were all gone for evermore; she was alone without that companionship of a fearless hope which had sustained her strength upon the lonely seas, and in the hell of Paris. She had no hope now of any kind; and youth can no more live without it, than flowers can live without the air of heaven. She was weakened from fasting, and her brain was giddy; as she walked on over the rough ground through the chill rain, she thought she was on the island; she thought her grandfather was calling to her not to loiter, she thought dead Catherine was stretching out her arms to her, and crying, 'Hasten! hasten!' She smelt the odour of the orange flowers, she heard the sound of the sea washing up amongst the pebbles and the sand—'if I could only die there, if I could only die there,' she thought dully, as she stumbled through the wet grass and the fields of colza. [381]

Death would be so easy and so sweet, amongst the blue bright rolling water, in the scented southerly air, under the broad white moon of her own skies.

She came with a shock to a knowledge that she was entering the village of Les Hameaux as a peasant driving furiously shrieked to her to move out of his road, and in the cabins around the lights twinkled as the people of the house sat at their suppers of soup and bread. Burning tears rushed to her eyes and fell down her cheeks. She knew that she would never see the shores of Bonaventure again in life.

She went through the village with weary steps, she was very tired, her wet clothes clung to her, her face was white and drawn, her hands and her throat were hot. Some people leaning against the doorposts of their houses looked at her, and wondered to see her out so late, so wet, so jaded, and all alone. She went through the hamlet without pausing and without hearing any of the words called out to her.

Outside the village and on the road to the farm of the Croix Blanche, there stood a lonely cottage, half hidden in elder trees and built two centuries before with the stones and rubble of the ruins of Port Royal. A woman whom she knew dwelt there with four young children: a widow, very poor, making what living she could from poultry and from fruit; a laborious, patient, honest, and good soul, always at work in all weathers, and happy because the four fair-haired laughing children tumbled after her in the grass or in the dust.

As she passed down the road in the grey film of rain, this woman ran out of the house to her, weeping piteously, and catching at her clothes to make her stop.

'My Pierrot is dying!' she cried to her. 'He has the ball in his throat—he will be dead by dawn—for the love of God send some one to me. I am all alone.'

Damaris pausing, looked at her stupidly. Indistinctly roused from her own stupor, she was unconscious for the moment where she was or who spoke to her. The light through the open doorway streamed out into the road; she saw the wild eyes, the tearful cheeks, the dishevelled [382]

hair of the wretched mother; she understood by instinct what woe had come upon the house. Pierrot was the youngest and the prettiest of the four little children who lived huddled together, and happy under these elder trees like small unfledged birds in a nest.

'Do not come in, do not come near him,' cried the woman, 'oh, my dear, it would be death; but send some one who is old and will not mind; the old never take this sickness—and I have been all alone till I am mad. My pretty baby—the prettiest, the youngest!'

Damaris looked at her with dull, blind eyes. A strange sense of fatality came on her; here was death—not death in the clear blue water which would never more smite her limbs with its joyous blows, and rock her in the cradle of its waves; but death which would end all things, which would put her away to rest under the green earth, which would purify her from greed and from baseness in his sight. She turned and entered through the doorway of the house.

'I am not afraid,' she said to the woman. 'I will stay with Pierrot.'

The woman strove to draw her back, but she would not be dissuaded from her choice.

'If God will it, I shall die,' she thought; 'and if I die, then perhaps she will believe, and he remember me.'

CHAPTER LIII.

The great Easter fêtes at Amyôt were successful with all that brilliancy of decoration and novelty of wit for which their mistress was famous to all Europe. The weather was mild, the guests were harmonious, the princes and their consorts were well amused; nothing more agreeable or more original had been known in the entertainments of the time; and the choicest and rarest forms of art were brought there to lend the dignity of scholarship to the graces and frivolities of pleasure.

No one noticed that the host and hostess of Amyôt never once spoke a word to each other throughout this week of ceremony and festivity, except such phrases as their reception of and courtesy to others compelled them to exchange. No one observed or suspected the bitter estrangement between them, so well did each play their parts in this pageantry and comedy of society. No one except Blanche de Laon, who thought with contentment: '*ça marche*!'

Othmar had not seen his wife for one moment alone since the day when he had left her with the bitterness of her incredulity and her insult like ashes in his soul. [383]

The world with its demands, its subjugations, and its perpetual audience, was always there.

Que de fois fermente et gronde,
Sous un air de froid nonchaloir,
Un souriant désespoir
Sous la mascarade du monde!

He knew not whether he most loathed, or was most grateful to, this constant crowd and pressure of society which spared him thought, postponed decision, gave him no leisure to look into his own soul, and sent him to his joyless couch more tired out with the fatigue of so-called pleasure than the labourer in the vineyards or the forests by his day of toil.

The six days passed without any cloud upon their splendour or their gaiety, so far as the three hundred guests gathered there could see, or even dreamed. The sunshine of the early spring was poured on the glittering roofs, the stately terraces, the towers and fanes, the gardens and the waters, of this gracious place where the old French life of other days seemed to revive with all its wit, its elegance, and its good manners, as they had been before the shadow of the guillotine fell over a darkened land. With the eighth day the royal guests and most of the others took their leave. Some score of friends more intimate alone remained there.

A certain dread came upon him of the first hour on which he should find himself alone before his wife. He felt that it was the supreme crisis of his life with her; the frail cup of existence in which their happiness, such as it was, was placed, was set in the furnace of doubt to be graven and proved, or to be wrecked and burst into a thousand pieces.

'If only she would say to me that she believed me,' he thought, 'I would, I think, forgive the rest.'

But this she never said.

Man-like, the very indignity he had suffered, the very sense he had of her cruelty, her insolence, her injustice, seemed only to re-awaken in him that passion for her which had so deeply coloured and absorbed his nature. The very knowledge that legally and in name he was her master, her possessor, whilst in fact he could not touch a hair of her head or move a chord of her heart, sufficed to re-arouse in him all those desires which die of facility and familiarity, and acquire the strength of giants on denial.

He had almost forgotten Damaris. The gentle and compassionate tenderness he felt for her could have no place beside the bitter-sweet passion which filled his memory and his soul for his wife.

In these days, when he was constantly in her presence, constantly within the sound of her voice, and compelled by the conventionalities of society to address conventional phrases to her, whilst yet severed by the world from her as much as if a river of fire were between them, something of that delirious love which he had felt for her in the lifetime of Napraxine returned to him, united to a passion of regret and a poignancy of wrath which was almost hatred. He was her husband—her lord by all the fictions of men's laws—and he would not be permitted to touch one of the pearls about her throat or obtain five minutes' audience of her! She was the mother of his children, and yet she was as far aloof from him as though she were some Phidian statue with jewelled eyes and breasts of ivory! [384]

Whilst he went amongst his guests outwardly calm and coldly courteous, fulfilling all the duties of a host, his heart was in a tumult of indignation and despair. The failure of his whole life was before him. Without her the whole of the world was valueless to him.

Yet of one thing he was resolved. He would not live under the same roof with a woman who believed him guilty of a lie to her, who insulted him as he would not have insulted the commonest of his servants. He would sever his existence from hers, let it cost him what it would. The cost would be great: to bring the world as a witness of their disunion; to admit to society that his marriage had been a failure, like so many others; to let his children, as they grew older, know that their parents were strangers and enemies: all this would be more bitter than death itself to him. All the reserve and the delicacy of his temper made the idea of the world's comments on his quarrel with his wife intolerable to him, and the rupture of his ties to her unendurably painful in its inevitable publicity. He was lover enough still to shrink from the thought of any future in which he would cease to hear her voice, to see her face. True, of late their union had been but nominal. She had passed her life in separate interests and separate pleasures. She had allowed him to see no more of her than her merest acquaintances saw, and to meet her only in the crowds

of that great world which separates what it unites. Yet absolute severance from her—such severance as would be inevitable if once their existences were led apart—was a thing without hope, would make him more powerless to touch her hand, to approach her presence, than any stranger who had access to her house. Once separated, her pride and his would keep them asunder till the grave. He knew that, and all the remembered passion which had been at once the strongest and the weakest thing in him shrank from the vision of his lonely future.

Yet all the manhood in him told him that to continue to live under the same roof with a woman whose every word was insult to him, would degrade him utterly and for ever in his eyes and in her own. And he had loved her too passionately for it to be possible for him to continue to dwell in that passive enmity, that alienation covered with ostensible cordiality and external courtesy, with which so many men and women deceive society to the end of their lives, and sustain a hollow truce, of which the hatefulness and the untruth are only visible to themselves and to their children. Such insincerity, such hypocrisy, as this, were to him altogether impossible. Sooner than lead such a life, he felt that he would end his days with his own hand, and leave mankind to blame him as they would: they would not blame her. [385]

On her part, unknown to him, she watched him with a new interest, bitter, painful, and more absorbing than any which had ever had power upon her; a feeling of disdain, of scorn, of impatience, of regret, of forgiveness, of tenderness, all inextricably mingled in an emotion stronger than any she had known. When she thought of him as in any way with however much indifference as the lover of Damaris, she was conscious of an intense disgust, of a wondering scorn, which were not wise or cold, or temperate with the judicial severity of her usual judgments, but were merely and strongly human, and born of human emotions. They humiliated her with the consciousness of their own humanity, and the uncontrollable bitterness of the sentiments which they aroused in her. Jealousy it could have scarce been called. For jealousy implies a recognition of equality, a fear of usurpation, and these to her haughty soul were impossible in face of a peasant girl, a *déclassée*, a waif and stray, with no place in the world save such as Othmar might choose to give her. Jealousy in this sense, jealousy intellectual and moral it was not; but jealousy physical it was. She thought and hated to think of the personal beauty of Damaris; she thought and hated to think of all those summer hours in her own house in which that beauty had been helpless and dependent before him. Like all women who know much of the natures of men, she knew that the senses were often beyond control, when the heart in no way went with them. She had always thought that it would never matter to her whither such undisciplined vagaries might lead him. She had always felt with the disdain of a nature over which physical desires have little power, that wherever his caprice took him there he might go for aught that she would say to restrain him.

She was startled to find that it did pain her, that it did revolt her, to believe that this disloyalty had been done her, that this child had had from him even the slightest, most soulless kind of love.

Her world had never seen her more full of wit, and grace, and brilliancy, than in those days when in her inmost soul she suffered more mental pain and doubt than she had ever known. Life had become touched with humiliation, indignation, emotion of a complex kind, contemptuous anger, and a vague remorse; but it had thereby become to her once more a thing of interest and of vitality, her languor had been startled, her self-love shocked, her whole nature stirred. She gave no sign of it that any one, either foe or friend, could read, but she was conscious that these emotions which she had ridiculed in others could become the dominant forces and tyrannical preoccupation even of her own thoughts and life. [386]

A sensation of failure, of loss, of humiliation, was always with her; not so much for this fact of what she believed to be his infidelity, as for her own consciousness that she herself had been untrue to all the theories and philosophies of her existence, that she had failed to guide their lives into that calm haven of friendship and mutual comprehension which had always seemed to her the only possibly decent grave for a dead passion; and had failed also in this crisis of their fates to preserve that wisdom, patience, and composure, which can alone lend dignity to the woman who sees her power passed away.

All her life long she had woven the most ingenious and elaborate theories as to the failure of men and women to secure fidelity and peace; she had reasoned with perfect philosophy on the causes of that failure, and turned to ridicule that childish passion and that fretful inaptitude with which the great majority meet those inevitable changes of the affections and the character which time brings to all. But now, she herself, having been met with such changes, had done no better, and been no wiser than they all. She had suffered like them, she had made reproaches like them, she had allowed indignation and offence to hasten her into anger which could only gratify her enemies and all the gaping world.

'Any fool could have done what I have done!' she thought, with bitter impatience against herself: any fool could have reproached him, and denounced him, and placed him in such a position that out of sheer manliness he had no choice left but to reiterate the untruth once told, and go on in the path once taken.

Yet she knew that were it to be done again, again she would do the same. When she thought of him as the lover of this child, she was only conscious of the mere foolish, irrational, personal, bitterness of emotion which any other feebler woman would have felt.

Had she not said under the oaktrees yonder in her Court of Love, that inconstancy, being only involuntary, should be blamed by none: had she not again and again said and thought that what a woman or a lover cannot keep, they well deserve to lose: had she not quoted from the poets and the philosophers of a thousand years, to prove by a thousand lines of wisdom that it is 'not under

our control to love or not to love:' and was this not most supreme truth?

[387] Why then in face of the first faithlessness which she had ever known, had she had no better or wiser impulse in her than that of anger?—such stupid, witless, unwise anger, as Jeanne in the kitchens would feel against Jeannot in the stables. What use were the most subtle intellect, the most delicate and penetrating perception, the most intimate and accurate knowledge of human nature, if all these only resulted in producing, under trial, such primitive instincts, and such simple emotions, as would exist in the untutored brain and the rude breast of any peasant woman passing under the trees of the park yonder with her herd of milch cows, or her flock of sheep? If the higher intelligence could not reach a nirvaña of perfect tolerance, of perfect comprehension, of perfect indifference, of what avail were its culture and its pride?

All men were inconstant; she knew that. It was not their fault; they were made so. She believed that, had he told her frankly of his frailties, she would have been perfectly indifferent and indulgent to them. It was the long deception and concealment which had seemed to her so contemptible. 'Such a coward—such a coward!' she thought bitterly. Cowardice was to her the one unpardonable sin.

As she and Béthune walked on the seventh evening before dinner through the outer gardens, where these joined the woods, they chanced to see in the distance the same Lubin and Lisette, whom they had seen as lovers two years before, and who had been wedded with many gifts and much gaiety in the August weather a week or two after the sitting of the Court of Love. The man was walking far ahead this time; the woman lagged behind; the cows were the same happy creatures, serene and mild, going through the sun and shadow, pausing to crop a mouthful of sweet grass between the beechen banks; but the lovers were only now a lout who whistled and smoked, a scold who fumed and wept.

'Let us ask how the idyl ends,' said the Lady of Amyôt. 'It is easy to see that it is ended.'

'Ah, Madame,' said the woman being interrogated, '*voilà qu'il regarde déjà la petite Flore*!'

Her châtelaine laughed with a certain bitter tone in her laughter.

'"*Voilà qu'il regarde déjà la petite Flore*,"' she repeated; 'and she is so stupid that she knows no better than to be angry!'

Béthune glanced at her wistfully. After a moment's silence he said in a low tone:

'There are those who never look—elsewhere.'

She smiled, knowing his meaning, and touched by the remembrance of his long constancy.

'Ah, my dear friend,' she said, with some pang of conscience, 'I have had too much affection given me in my life, and perhaps I have given too little.'

[388] As she walked back through the gardens, under the long arcades covered with tea roses and the banksian creepers, she thought with that ridicule of herself, as of others, which was always sure to succeed any emotion:

'*Nous voilà en plein mélodrame!*—the contrast of the husband's infidelity makes the lover's fidelity touch the hard heart of the deserted wife! We are all grouped ready for the stage of the Gymnase!'

She seemed absurd to herself in her anger and her humiliation. She had always been so contemptuous of life when it grew melodramatic, although so impatient of it while it remained dull.

Othmar watched her cross the gardens from where he stood in one of the windows of his library. Under the excuse of many letters to dictate to his secretaries, he had escaped for awhile from his guests.

It was near sunset, the light so clear and cool of earliest spring was shining on the terraces and rose walks, and clipped bay hedges of the garden to the south which had been left unaltered from the Valois time. The peacocks were moving up and down on the grass, the first swallows were wheeling above the glowing colour of the azalea thickets, a light breeze was blowing the spray of the fountains this way and that; he watched her as she came through the dewy green foliage and under the white and yellow tea roses; she wore a gown of white velvet, she had a high ivory handled cane, there was a white greyhound before her, and the graceful figure of Béthune at her side. He saw her gather one of the Maréchal Niel roses above her head, and fasten it in the bosom of her dress; Béthune said something to her; she gathered another and let him take it.

Othmar watched them with a pang.

'If I died to-morrow I suppose she would give him her hand as she gives him that rose!' he thought, and the thought was intolerable to him. 'She thinks me faithless to her, and she does not care; she was angered for an instant; only that; then her days pass on the same; she has all her courtiers and friends about her; she does not need me, or miss me amongst them.'

And he watched her with eyes which studied her incomparable grace, her divine languor, her indolent movements, as though he saw them then for the first time; so great a quickener of sleeping love is the sting of a jealous fear.

But his heart was very weary. She had wounded, insulted, injured him, well nigh beyond forgiveness; she had dishonoured him with the secret observation of his actions and the open accusation of his falsehood. She had had him followed and tracked like a criminal, and had refused to believe his word, which all Europe honoured as the surety of unimpeached truth.

Greater insult surely no woman could do to any man.

And yet, if she would only say one word, he felt that he was ready to forget that she had done so; he was ashamed of his own weakness, but he knew that he would forgive everything:—and he reminded himself of his own offences to her without extenuation, willing to find in blame of himself excuse for herself. [389]

He watched her now as she came slowly and smiling under the trellis of the roses: to look at her it seemed that she had no care, no regret, no desire.

'And if I went out and shot myself to-night,' he thought, as he watched the two figures pass on under the trellised roses, 'she would have called Béthune to console her before the year was out?'

He believed it; but, man-like, the belief only gave her a stronger dominion over him.

He thought of some verses which he had read not long before, written by that poet who, more perfectly than any other, mirrors the dissatisfaction, the wistfulness, the intricate emotions, the unsatisfied passions of our time.

Que n'ai-je à te soumettre, ou bien à t'obéir?
Je te vouerais ma force ou te la ferais craindre:
Esclave ou maître, au moins je te pourrais contraindre
A me sentir ta chose, ou bien à me haïr.

J'aurais un jour connu l'insolite plaisir,
D'allumer dans ton cœur des soifs ou d'en éteindre,
De t'être nécessaire ou terrible, et d'atteindre,
Bon gré, mal gré, le cœur jusque là sans désir.

Esclave ou maître, au moins j'entrerais dans ta vie,
Par mes soins captivée, à mon joug réservée,
Tu ne pourrais me fuir, ni me laisser partir.

Mais je meurs sous tes yeux, loin de ton être intime,
Sans même oser crier, car ce droit, du martyr,
Ta douceur impeccable en frustre ta victime.

For seven years he had been always the nominal, sometimes the actual, possessor of her life, and yet he had never once known whether this woman whom he had possessed had ever had one moment of what could be called love for him! Many women had loved him for whom he had felt nothing; but by one of those strange and melancholy ironies of which life is so full the only women he had loved—the courtezan who had ruined his boyhood, and his wife who had ruined his manhood—had given themselves to him, without love.

He shut the window at which he stood, and turned away with a bitter sigh:—without her life would be for ever valueless to him.

Nadège and her servitor, unconscious of his observation of them, entered the house; it was the moment when people gathered in the conservatories for tea; the most pleasant hour of the twenty-four was spent thus amongst the flowers; often there was music in the music-room adjoining; the children usually came there with their pretty grace and gaiety, their long loose hair, their bright costumes, looking like larger butterflies under the fronds of the palms.

As she went towards her own apartments to rest there a little while before joining her guests and friends in the orchid-houses, one of her confidential servants brought her a note which had been sent by hand from Beaugency, and was marked urgent. She was about to send it unopened to her secretary, for letters wearied her and she seldom read them herself unless their superscription told her that they were of some especial interest, when she saw written in the corner of the envelope the name of Rosselin. She knew that it was the name of the great artist who had been the teacher of Damaris Bérarde. [390]

She took the packet with her to her own rooms and once alone there opened it. There were two letters inside it. One was written in a feeble unformed hand, the words were ill-shaped, and the lines were uneven. The fingers which had traced them had never been very skilful in the management of the pen, being more used to guide the tiller ropes of a boat, or the handle of a scythe.

The characters were ill-writ and very pale, but she could read them; she knew even without reading them, that they came from Damaris; they were brief:

'When you get this, Madame, I shall not be living. Then I think you will not be angered any more, and you will believe. Do not let him know, because it would pain him. I mean, do not let him learn that I sought this death myself. Perhaps it was wrong, but I saw no other way; I could not live any longer on his charity now that I know. Before, I did not know. I could not bear to live either without seeing him sometimes, and I should never see him. Nothing wants me except the dogs, and they will be happy on the farm here. My master would only be disappointed in me if I lived. The world would not care for me. I should not have any strength in me to make it care. I used to think that I had genius, but it is all dead in me, quite dead now;—perhaps it was only imagination, and the wish to be something I was not, and the mere love I had of the poets. Forgive me that I write to you; I want to beg you to believe. I would have given my life for him, but he never thought of me in that way. I pray you to make him happier. I wish I could have seen him once ——.'

The ill-written words ended abruptly, as though the pen which had written them had suddenly fallen from a hand too weak to hold it any more.

On an outside sheet was written in the fine clear writing of Rosselin:

'She died last night as the moon rose. I write to you, Madame, instead of to your husband by her desire. You will tell him as much or as little as you choose. I had not seen her for four days. God pardon me for it! I shall never pardon myself. I had left her in anger because I could not persuade her to play before you at Amyôt, and in anger I had stayed away from her. When they sent for me I found her already dying. The woman of the house told me that she had been one day alone to Paris, and what had been done to her there this woman did not know, but on her return she was quite silent, and very feverish and strange. She wandered about the village and the fields, and would scarcely come into the house to bed. At one of the cottages a young child she had often played with was lying ill with diphtheria. Damaris remained day and night with him, and when he was dying kissed him on the mouth: she never confessed it to me, but I believe that she sought death that way, for I think life for some reason or other which I know not had become wholly intolerable to her. She suffered very much. I brought her all the aid that science could give her, but it was of no avail. She had no wish to live, I think. She talked often of her island, and of the sea, and of the boats. Latterly she could not speak at all, then she wrote to you. It is a hideous death: heaven spare you and yours the like. You feel no sorrow for anything they say, but I think you would have been sorry for her. Perhaps it is best so. The world would have broken her heart; it has no place in it for such dreams as hers were. To the last she bade me never to let your husband know. Her last thought was of him. He was very good to her, but a worse man would perhaps have injured her genius less. I know not what passed between her and you. I only know that she had seen you. Whether you said anything which made her despair of living I cannot tell; all she said when she became delirious, which she did become towards the end, was only this always: "She will believe now, she will believe now." So I suppose you doubted her. I send you the few lines which she wrote three hours before she died when she could scarcely see. I have not read them myself. I think she would not wish me to do so. I am over eighty years old; it is hard to live so long only to see the last thing that one loves perish miserably. But she had genius, and the world hates it, so perhaps after all it is best as it is.' [391]

She put the letters down, one on another, and her face had a great blankness of horror on it. Like Yseulte, this child had died for him, through her.

She shuddered as with cold in the warm fragrant air of her room, and large tears sprang into her eyes.

She could not doubt now.

She locked her doors, and no one entered there for an hour.

CHAPTER LIV.

When that time had passed she descended the grand staircase and joined her friends in the conservatories; the tea roses renewed in the white velvet of her corsage, the great pearls lying on her white soft breast. No one was aware of anything changed in her manner or aspect. Twice or thrice she looked nervously at the doors; that was all; she was afraid of seeing her husband enter. [392]

When he came she looked away from him, and Blanche de Laon, who was near her, saw a certain tremor on her lips, and thought with victorious pleasure, though uncertain of the cause: *Ça vous blesse, hein? Ça vous blesse?*

At the long dinner she was somewhat silent and absorbed, but her world was used to her caprices, and knew that she was seldom pleased long. Men endeavoured all the more to amuse her. They thought that they succeeded. They did not know that instead of the brilliant room, the faces of her friends, the flowers and fruits of the table, and the frescoes of the walls, she only saw a little low dark chamber with a girl dying miserably in it, like a strangled dog, as the moon rose.

She had never believed in sacrifice or in remorse, or if forced to believe in them she had said with disdain, 'What melodrama!' But she believed now.

Shame and remorse approached the delicate hauteur of her life and touched it for the first time. What she had thought so low had humbled her.

The dinner seemed very long to her, the evening slow to pass; the burden of the world can be at times as heavy as the travail of the poor; there were the usual pastimes, and wit, and gaiety; Paul of Lemberg was there, and the ineffable sweetness of his music thrilled through the flower-scented air; people laughed low, and played high, and made love in shadowy corners; it was all pretty, and graceful, and amusing. But she, amidst it all, only heard a voice which cried to her:

'Why will you not believe?'

She only saw a grave made in dark wet earth, and a girl's body thrust into it in cruel haste, and sods thrown in one on another on the lifeless limbs, the dull hair, the disfigured throat; it was horrible—horrible! Why had she not left her alone in the gay sunshine, under the orange trees, by the blue water?

With all the pressure and the distraction of society upon her she was endlessly pursued by the self-accusation which had been brought to her by those simple lines traced by a dying child.

A consciousness of the supreme good fortune with which fate had always lightened her own life, came to her, for the first time, with a sense of unworthiness and ingratitude in herself. A consciousness of the greatness of the gifts she had received, and of the little she had given in return, smote her heart with a vague repentance and a vague fear. What had she done with all those lives which had been put into her hands, with all the loyalty and the devotion which had been spent on her oftentimes, without receiving from her even a passing pity in recognition of it? [393] Would not life tire one day of blessing her, when she gave no benediction in return?

She had always cared so little, she had been always so indifferent and so dissatisfied. Would fate not strike her with a rough, wild justice, if it took from her her children, her husband, her intellect, her fortune, her beauty? Would not destiny be only fair and honest if it forced her on her knees beside some death-bed of some creature well-beloved, and said to her:—

'You have never been content in happiness; henceforward you shall dwell with sorrow.'

Fear touched her for the sole time in her victorious and indifferent life; she was afraid lest one day she should stand alone with only the graves of what had been once dear to her as her companions and her friends: one day when youth and power and beauty and wit would all be gone from her:——like the great sovereigns of the world, she shuddered to remember that she was mortal.

With all her philosophy and epigram, she had discoursed full many a time of the only cruel certainty life holds: the certainty that *tout lasse, tout casse, tout passe*. She had played with the dread problems which Time, the merciless master of the highest, sets before all his scholars with no solution to them possible to the clearest brains. And whilst she had toyed with their subtleties, this child had had the courage to cut the knot and pass away for ever to the eternal night of nothingness!

Some perception of the utter selfishness of her whole existence smote her as she sat alone in the stillness of the after-midnight hours.

These children dwarfed her in her own sight. They had been mere children, both of them, foolish, romantic, unwise, exaggerated: but they had been in a way sublime. And he had loved neither of them. He had only loved her who had left his heart empty, his affections cold, his life dissatisfied and solitary.

For the first time since she had thought at all, a passionate repentance and regret came on her; a sense of her own cruelty weighed heavily upon her. Why had she not been more tolerant, more merciful, more willing to acknowledge that innocence and generosity of which she had been so unwillingly conscious all the while that Damaris Bérarde had stood before her? Why had she not been guided by that serenity and tolerance of judgment on which she had so long prided herself; why had she crushed to the earth with the weight of her scorn, and her rank, and her place as his wife, this lonely creature who had loved him so humbly, so silently, so perfectly?

There was a greatness in her own nature, obscured as it was by the languors of self-love and the

vanities of the world, which forced her to recognise the greatness of the simple words sent to her. She herself, in her anger, in her incredulity, in her cruelty, seemed to her own eyes very poor beside them. She had judged as the common herd always judged: coarsely, superficially, brutally. No better. [394]

She was humbled in her own eyes. The sentimentalists had conquered throughout, they had been greater than she!

Poor Mignon, with her heart breaking in a love which she dared not avow, which no one wanted!

A few kind words might have saved her; might have healed the bruised child's heart and made it strong for the burden of life; and she had not spoken those words.

If she had read this story in a book of poems, if she had seen it unfolded on the scene of a pastoral as of an opera, it would have touched her; but as it had been in real life she had not cared; because the living, throbbing, aching nerves had been alive before her she had not cared; she had turned away, and had left them to bleed to death as they would—as they might.

A sense of guilt was upon her. She felt as though she had killed some humble, wounded animal which had crept to her feet for safety. She had always declared that genius was sacred to her; and now she had dealt with it as a mere common noxious thing, and driven it away from her to perish.

'And we are such wretched shallow egotists,' she thought. 'I grieve for her now, and I know that she has been greater than I shall ever be, and I know that we have killed her—he and I and the world which had no place for her; and yet how often shall I remember her, how often shall I be gentler to others for her sake?—once or twice, whilst the memory of her is warm perhaps—no more; one has no time.'

Rosselin would remember every hour of all such few days as might remain to him on earth; but no one else.

'Oh, foolish child,' she thought, 'to die for that! Why not have lived, and reigned over the souls of men, and put a curb on the slavering mouth of the fawning world! It is never worth an hour of sacrifice.'

Yet all overwrought, unwise, useless, as such sacrifice was, it had a nobility in it which awed her, and a generosity which made her own egotism seem poor and pale beside it.

'Make him happier.'

The unselfish prayer of the dead girl touched her conscience and her heart as no rebuke would ever have done. She had the power to do so still; that she did not doubt. He was hers in every way if she chose to stretch her hand out to him.

A sense of the infinite patience, and fidelity, and devotion of the great love which he had always borne her from the first hour his eyes had met hers came to her with the force of a reproach from the grave itself. His submission to her caprices, his constancy under her neglect, his instant response to the faintest kindness from her, his unchangeable tenderness which outlived the many [395] mortal wounds she dealt to it; all these came to her memory with a sense of her own debt to them, of their own sweetness and patience, and long suffering. In him she could if she chose find a friend, whom no fault of hers would alienate, and no passing of time make weary. She had had too much love given to her in her life; she saw that she had been too careless of this, the greatest gift life holds: and death had come too often where she passed.

The chill of its ghastly presence seemed with her as she moved through the silent house in the still small hours. This child had had force in her youth to seek death, but she feared it: she who had feared nothing on earth or in heaven.

When all the guests were gone to their chambers, and the great house was still, she did what she had never once done in the years of their marriage: she went to seek Othmar instead of sending her women to summon him. She had on her pale rose satin chamber-gown, and even in that moment, with an impulse of care for her person and its charms, a coquetry which would never cease in her whilst she had breath, she paused a moment before one of the mirrors, and glanced lingeringly at her own reflection, and put some fresh roses in her bosom. Had she been on her way to the scaffold she would have done the same: had the same remembrance of her own power to charm.

As she passed one of the great windows of the hall, she looked at the night without. The moon, which rose late, being on its decline, poured its whole light over the gardens and the forests beyond. A white owl flew through the clear air; the shadow of the great palace fell black over the silvered grass, distant bells for daybreak prayer were ringing very far away over the hushed country.

And the night before, 'as the moon rose,' Damaris Bérarde had died in her narrow chamber, in all her beauty and strength, in all the height of her dreams and hopes, in all the vigorous promise of life which had been as full and as fair in her as was now the promise of spring in the woods: and these were all gone for ever and for ever, the body laid in the earth to perish, and the tender and valiant soul passed away like a dew that dries up before the heats of the noonday.

'Heaven spare such death to you and yours!'

She remembered the words with the first sense of terror her nature had ever known. They seemed less like a prayer for good than like a menace of evil. She thought of the fair lives of her children: not fairer than had been this other young life which she had first seen under the starry

orange flowers above the edge of the sea.

Why could she not have left her alone?

She passed through the length of the quiet building to her husband's rooms. He was writing at a writing-table with his back turned to her, and did not raise his head at the sound of the unclosing door. [396]

But as the sweet rose-scent came towards him on the air, a consciousness of her presence came with it: he started violently and rose to his feet. He was very pale as he bowed low before her, then stood waiting for her to speak. She was silent some moments.

To her temper so imperious, so arrogant, so indifferent, to praise or blame, it was not without great effort that she could say what she had come to say.

A strong emotion moved her. She had never believed it possible for her conscience to pain her, for her heart to ache with self-reproach, as they did now.

'Make him happier.'

The childish words haunted her. After all, what had she ever given him in return for the supreme devotion of his life? A few hours of physical ecstasy; and years of indifference, mockery, and neglect.

'Make him happier.'

To her critical intelligence and satiated mind, happiness in such simple reading of the word could not exist; it needed faith, it needed ignorance, it needed youth; it is never possible to those whose passions demand what nothing mortal can satisfy. Yet some reparation she knew she might still give to him; some gentleness, some sympathy, some response. These children who had loved him so well should not have died wholly in vain.

She leaned towards him, and the fragrance of the roses in her breast swept with dreamy sweetness over him.

'I came to ask your pardon,' she said in a low voice. 'I wronged you, I insulted you——'

He bowed low, and his lips, as they touched her hand, were very cold.

'Pardon is no word between you and me,' he said wearily. 'How could you doubt me? Had I ever lied to you, or to anyone?'

'No: I was wrong.'

Her proud mouth trembled.

'How much or how little shall I tell him?' she thought; 'men are such children!'

He looked at her with hesitation; and a great and sudden joy touched his life.

'Do you love me at all, then?' he said with wonder and with doubt.

She smiled a little: her old slight mysterious smile!

'I suppose so—since I doubted you. Love is always blind!'

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