

"Degenerate, when he is Sabine's husband?"

"I do not mean degeneracy of hand or of intellect."

"What then?"

"A moral degeneracy."

"That will be impossible when he is surrounded by such an atmosphere as this."

"I hope so, but who can tell? You know how fatally easy and insidious is the descent of an artist. Benedict only knows the great art, pure, religious, Christian, the art which is the softened shade of religious feeling. He is of the school of Fra Bartolomeo and Fra Angelico, who painted their Madonnas on their knees. But the current of fashion and of popular taste does not run upon that side. Art has become pagan. It has descended from the sacred heights. The Muse has become a Bacchante and dances with satyrs; a modest statue or a decent picture loses half its chance of success. The churches are no longer endowed with works of a religious inspiration, but rather the drawing-rooms are decorated with profane or indecent figures. Therefore, woe to the artist, however gifted, who sacrifices his power of inspiration to every passing whim, who says to himself, not, I am going to create something great, but, I am going to make a group which will sell. First, he tries to succeed, then to succeed again, then to be talked of in the papers. So far Benedict has escaped these perils. God grant he may continue so."

"Rest easy," said Nicois; "not only will he do that, but he will bring back your prodigal son."

"You believe so?" said Pomereul.

"Most sincerely; we were all foolish at his age, except you perhaps."

"And you too, I hope," said Pomereul, looking fixedly at his friend.

A dark shade passed over the banker's face.