

"During her absence, I expressed my thanks to my companion for his kindness in bringing me so long a journey, and added: 'It will not be necessary for you to take me any further for the brothers do not live far from here, and I can walk it in a few moments.'

"He began to protest that he could not think of allowing me to do so, when I stopped him by saying:

"No, my friend, I will walk, as in that case there will be no noise of the horses, and I can slip in quietly without waking the brothers."

"I was just making the latter part of this remark when the inn keeper entered, and as I finished speaking he slowly walked over to where we were sitting and said:

"You may well slip into that house to-night, my friend, without waking any one."

"Ah," said I, turning with a laugh to my companion, 'our good host will always have his jest. Yes, he is right, the good brothers do sleep somewhat soundly, especially Suger, but then after a long life of toil like his, one deserves his rest. Is that not so?'

"I turned toward the inn-keeper, and noticed for the first time that his usually jolly face wore a very quiet and grave expression.

"He said slowly: 'Suger never slept so soundly as he sleeps to-night—he is dead.'

"I uttered no sound. A strange feeling came over me. The lights in the room grew dim and indistinct, and yet I caught every word he said as he proceeded:

"Neighbour Francis was passing the brothers' house at the noon hour on his way from work, and seeing Suger sitting in his accustomed chair in the little yard, called to him wishing him good health. Not receiving a reply, he called back again more loudly as he had by this time passed the house, and again receiving no reply he turned back and entered the yard. When he approached the old man he found him sitting, as was his custom, with a smile upon his lips but quite dead. Neighbour Francis at once gave the alarm, but as I have said our good old friend had already passed from life. Word was quickly taken to his brother at the Convent, and the neighbours say it was an awful sight to see his face when his eyes first rested on his dead brother. Indeed they had to carry him down the road to the house of his friend Jean where he now lies, and to tell the truth, my friend, it would be hard from the look of his face to say that he was not the dead man himself."

"As he said these words I arose from the table, and without speaking rushed out into the night. As I made my way hurriedly through the village my mind ran back over the quiet scenes of the past year. I remembered the many kindly words he had spoken to me; the many little acts he had done to show me that he was my friend; the many times he had said in his gentle way, 'My son it is better to be good; it is always better to be good, and remember at all times that the greatest good in all this world is for him who is most like the Christ.' And he was dead. Ah, my friend, I felt that I had lost my father, and when I reached the little house the tears were fast rolling down my cheeks.

"I was unacquainted with their custom, and expected to find several of the villagers, but when I entered the house no one was there; it was deserted. I had seen through the window that there was a light in the room which the good Suger was wont to occupy, and as I stood there in the darkness of the hallway an intense desire to look once more upon my old friend's face took possession of me. I noiselessly opened the door, and stepped inside. The appearance of the room was unchanged since I left. I turned half in fear towards the bed, but the foot-board which was very high, intercepted my vision, and I could not see his face. I moved a few steps nearer. His head lay upon a pillow between two candles. His long white hair was brushed back off his high forehead, and I could see by the pale, flickering light of the candles that a smile still lingered around the old man's lips. His face was infinitely tranquil and calm. I gazed for some time upon it in silence, and then my feelings again overcame me, and I threw myself upon my knees beside the couch, placed my head in my hands, and wept aloud.

"Oh, my friend, I felt such a strange feeling of loneliness.

"I must have been on my knees for sometime, when I heard an infinitely tender voice say:

"Do not weep, my brother, he is better, far better, as he is."

"The voice thrilled through my soul down to the very foundations of my being. I knew it; there was only one such voice in all the world. I scarcely dared to raise my eyes. A strange shivering took possession of my body. I looked up. It was she. It was Winnie.

"Oh, my friend, it was Winnie; but it was Winnie with a white band drawn tightly across her forehead. It was Winnie robed in black, with a long crape veil sweeping to the ground. Winnie with her blue eyes dull and lustreless; with her face emaciated, and pale as the dead face into which I had just been looking. Yes, my friend," he began, but ceased speaking, and turning his chair away from mine, placed his head in his hands, and sobbed aloud. After sitting thus for some moments he again looked up, and said almost calmly: "Yes, my friend, it was Winnie."

"When I raised my head she was again speaking from the otherside of the bed where she had knelt to pray, but when she saw my face her lips ceased to move, and her voice became silent. A dull red spot came in each of her cheeks, and then faded slowly out again, and left her face as white as the snowy band that crossed her forehead.

"She still said nothing, but gazed into my face. Oh, my friend, I will never forget that look. No sound broke the awful stillness. The wan light of the candles flickered slowly over her face, over mine, and then over the face of the dead man who lay so quiet and motionless between us, and still there was no sound.

"Presently I saw her lips move. I listened with all the intensity of my being.

"It is you, Paul," she said in the same low tender voice. 'It is you.'

"She ceased speaking as if to gather strength, and then continued:

"I have not prayed for this, Paul, but I have longed for it these many years, that I might yet once more look into your face even as I do now, and say 'Paul, I loved you most.' But there has been a prayer, Paul, which I have prayed unceasingly to God, that one day I might lead you from your sorrows to where the Lord Christ sits beyond the stars, and hear Him bid you welcome; that one day we together, bathed in light, might walk beside the quiet waters that flow eternally before His face—just you and I, Paul; and He has promised me that it shall be."

"She ceased speaking, but her eyes were still fixed upon mine, and her lips were still parted as though she would speak longer. I was motionless. I did not breathe. I only listened, but she was silent.

"Then the words so long dead within my soul, broke from me in my agony like a torrent. I besought her to fly with me, and leave that awful place; the world was wide, and we would seek a home in some far land, and live and love each other more for all the weary years that had passed. I called her by her name; I called her Winnie, but she was silent. I leaned far across the couch; I leaned upon the dead man, and gazed into her face. There was no answering gaze. A dull sensation stole slowly into my brain. I arose to my feet almost stealthily; I think I feared that I might wake the dead man, and he would find us there together and give an alarm. I stepped noiselessly around the foot of the couch to where she knelt. I whispered 'Winnie, Winnie,' close to her ear. I kissed her upon her cheek; it was cold."

The old man was silent for a few moments; then he arose slowly from his seat, and tottered towards me. He placed a hand heavily upon each of my shoulders, and lowering his head close to mine gazed into my face. His lips were quivering. His whole body shook. His eyes were dry and hard as stone, and blazed into mine like red agates. Such a look of agony I never saw. Then his lips slowly parted, and he whispered:

"My God, she was stone dead."

VIII.

During the early part of the evening which I have last mentioned, Professor Paul made what I considered at the time a somewhat singular request. He said: "My good friend, you have been so long a patient listener to the history of my life, and have during its relation expressed so many kind feelings towards me, that I feel well assured that you will grant what I am about to ask of you."

He looked at me very earnestly as he said this, and when he had finished I replied:

"Your history has indeed interested me very deeply, Professor Paul, and if there is anything I can do that will show how completely you have won my sympathy, and at the same time be of assistance to you, I will not only willingly do it, but will be more than glad of the opportunity."

"Ah, my friend," he answered, "you do not know what strength and encouragement I am able to draw from your words. You have indeed been good to me, and I felt sure, now that the crisis was near, you would not desert me. What I would ask of you is this, that you discontinue your visits to me until the fourth night from to-night, and that you then come to this place at twelve o'clock prepared to remain with me until the morning."

It was certainly, as I have already said, a very odd request to make; and now that the fourth night was rapidly approaching the midnight hour, and I found myself near the door of the Professor's little shop, I could not help again going over the whole matter in my mind. Why was it he had asked me to come? Certainly not for the mere purpose of listening to the completion of his story. Why, he had already himself told me that it was almost finished. No, it could not be that; but supposing it were, why had he wished me to come at midnight and remain till morning? Was not the early portion of the night more suitable? And then why pass over the three intervening evenings? No, this plainly could not be his intention. What it was I did not know, but at all events it certainly was not this. Perhaps he was going to try some dangerous experiment. He had himself called it a crisis. A crisis; ah, now I remembered it all: how he had spoken to me long ago of a great plan which he said was the one remaining purpose of his life. I remembered how earnestly he had expressed his belief in its success, and quoted so many names of men unknown to me as his authority for it. Yes, perhaps this was indeed the reason for his strange request. Perchance to-night would see the success or failure of his great scheme, whatever it might be. Here, again, arose the question, "What could it be?" I remembered well encountering it before, and at that time arriving at a somewhat vague conclusion that perhaps the old man was partially insane. Had I still reason to believe that this was so? Yes, I believed I had. His actions had certainly at times been unexplainable on any other grounds; and then had he not himself admitted that at one time he had been altogether out of his mind?

By this time I had arrived at my destination, and was standing with my hand upon the knob of Professor Paul's door. I did not turn it, however, but remained in a state of indecision. If my conclusions were correct, and Professor Paul was really a lunatic, was it wise for me to enter? Ought I to trust myself alone with him at midnight in this lonely place? Perhaps to-night he would ask me to accompany him upon one of those mysterious visits upstairs. If he should ask me I could hardly refuse to go, for had I not consented to come that I might assist him in some unknown operation? What, then, if I should before morning find myself alone with him in the third story of this old building, and something should happen? Who would hear my cry for help? Would any one hear it?

It may have been that the night was cold, but as this thought passed through my brain a little shiver ran quickly over me. It roused me in an instant. Bah! I was becoming a coward. Had I not already promised Professor Paul that I would come and help him in what manner I could? Was he not a poor old man almost broken down by the weight of his misfortunes, and at the same time was he not a brother artist to whom I had pledged my word? Go in? of course I would go in, and without hesitating longer I turned the knob and entered.

I passed at once through the shop into the little back room expecting to find Professor Paul already there, but was disappointed as the room was empty. I knew, however, that he had already been there at some previous time during the evening, for the large arm chair, which he always occupied was drawn up to its accustomed place before the fire. Seeing this, I went over to the end of the room and, bringing my own chair also up to the fire, sat down to await his return.

I had not been seated many minutes when the little clock in the outside shop began to strike twelve, and as the last stroke died away there was a slight noise at the hall door, and Professor Paul entered.

He was apparently much excited. His fingers were twitching nervously, and his face was very white. Upon entering he had not in any way showed that he noticed my presence, but walking rapidly to his chair had seated himself, and ever since remained in silence. He now arose suddenly and began to pace up and down the room, but after continuing to do so for some moments he appeared to gradually become calmer, and resumed his seat. Shortly afterwards he turned towards me, and without any preliminary remarks began at once by saying:

"My friend, the man who studies well the history of the race, cannot fail to be profoundly impressed with the fact that at ever recurring periods in the course of its existence God has breathed into this world great souls. The periods of which I speak have at times lengthened into centuries, but there has never been a time when a new and great thought was essential to the wellbeing of the race, and God has refused to create a soul capable of containing it."

"Men of this nature walk through the world with their heads enveloped in the clouds. They gaze out into a night the density of which would appal the weaker sight of their fellow mortals, and yet they are enabled by the lightnings of their own genius to illuminate this obscurity, and in it to see and grasp secrets of the universe which would otherwise remain for ever hidden from men. Such a man was Krasés the Arabian."

"It had been given to the great alchemist Geber to discover the Infernal Stone and the parallelism between metals and planets; to Calid, the Cabalist, to discover the influence of the stars upon operations of alchemy, and to Paracelsus, Artephius, Avicenna, Kellir, and many others, to uncover the secrets of nature before the eyes of men; but it remained to Krasés alone to discover the greatest of all secrets—the secret of life itself. At his command the most occult and untried forces of the universe became luminous, and unveiled their mysteries to meet his glance. His was a nature that did not fear to scale the dim heights of the vast unseen, and when all other mortals fell back abashed before the unlit portal, he alone passed through. Long before his time, Heraclitus, of Ephesus, surnamed The Obscure, had maintained that fire was the principle of all things, and it had been written in the Zohar, the sacred book of the Cabala, 'The sun is the source of life.' In an earlier time the aged Sestros, while endeavouring in vain to discover the process of creating potable gold, had extracted from the recesses of his alembic the long sought Elixir Vitæ, and died with the great secret still locked within his soul, slain by the Gods, as men said, for his presumption."

"These and many others were indeed great discoveries, my friend, but a secret more subtle and elusive than all still remained beyond the grasp of man. The Elixir of Sestros would indeed prolong the human life for many centuries, but it still remained for some great soul to torture nature, and from her agony extort the elixir, in the pure light of whose flame the inanimate should awake into being. This man was Krasés the Arabian."

"Of his discovery he writes that the knowledge of it weighed so heavily upon his mind, that he would willingly have yielded it back again to the Gods, but was not able."

"It was commonly reported that the great alchemist had made a writing of his discovery, and after his death diligent search was made for this manuscript. It was not found, however, and as there had been a stranger from the kingdom of Persia staying at the house of Krasés shortly before his death, the disappearance of the manuscript was always laid to his charge. Whether this is the true ex-