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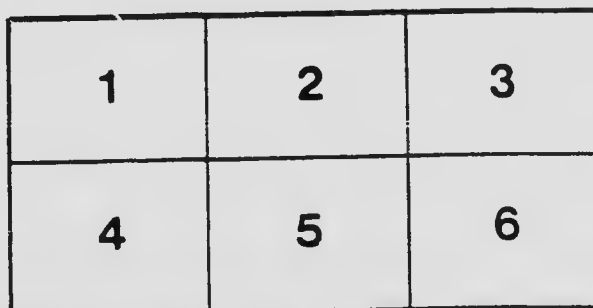
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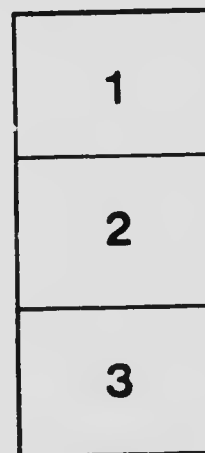
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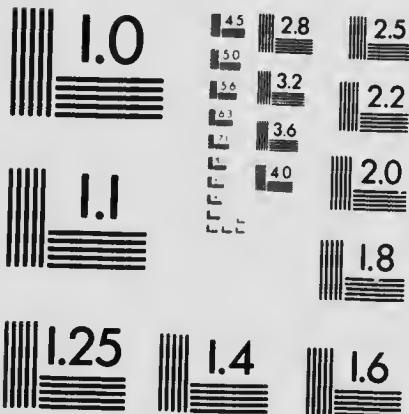
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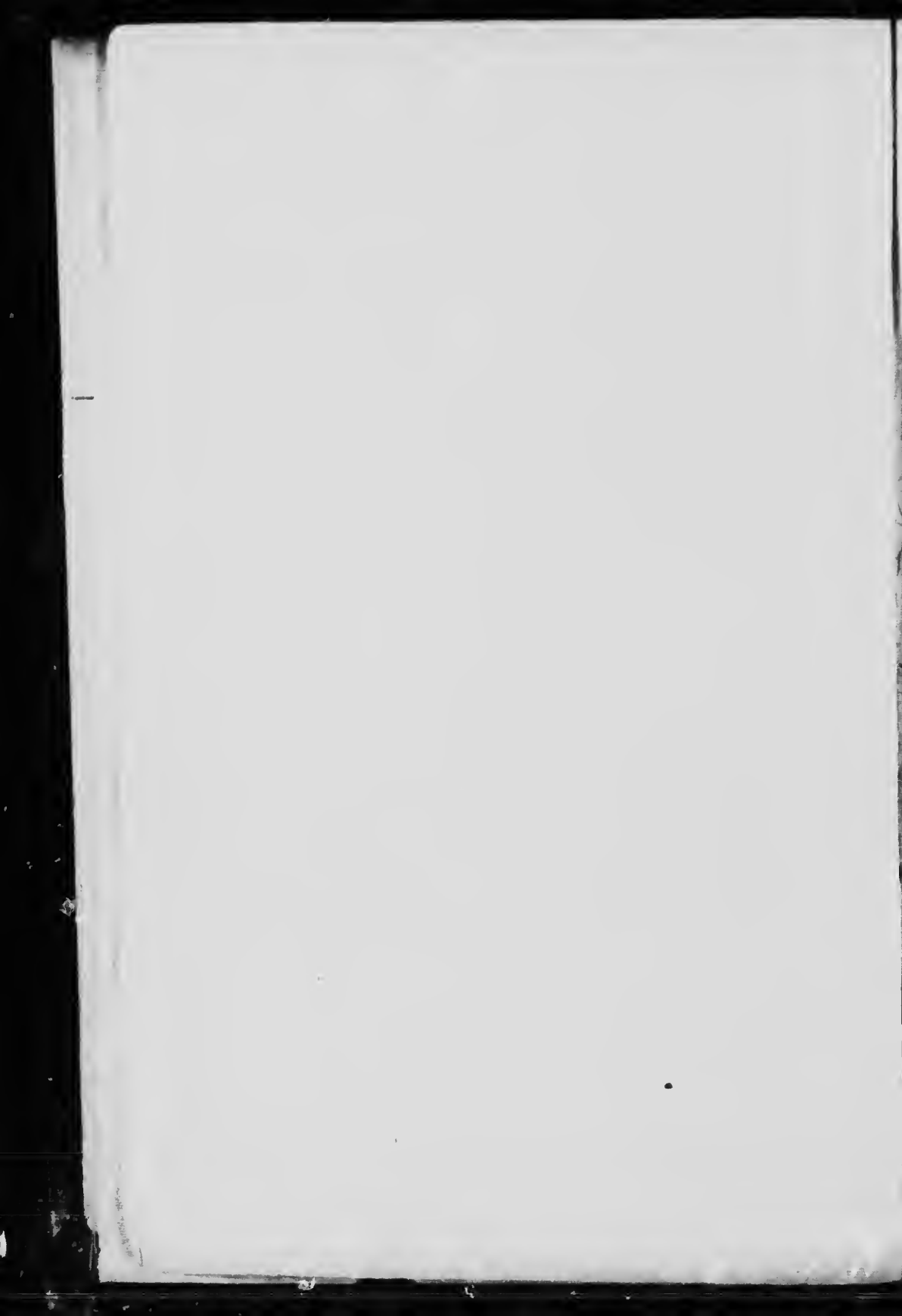
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Bindweed

BINDWEED

Love is a thing which is born of the intellect.

It is the brain which gives birth to this noble passion—do not believe that passion alone can be the parent of true love.

As there are two parents for the conception of the child, so two elements alone can create true love.

Passion—if alone—passes, since it belongs only to the life animal and material.

True love is eternal and born of the spirit; but demanding the abnegation of the whole—ever the body—thus true love is not perfect without passion.

But passion without spiritual love—cast it from you; for this belongs also to the beasts that perish and the eternal soul has no part in it.

True love is the marriage between the intellect—the divine side—of the human being, and passion—which is the animal and perishable side.

In this marriage the divine becomes human, and the human glorified unto divinity.

Passion is a hideous bindweed, which, when it has flowered, withers away, leaving nothing behind it. But love is the true vine which, binding in holy wedlock, brings forth fruit unto the world.

BINDWEED

:: By Gabrielle Vallings ::

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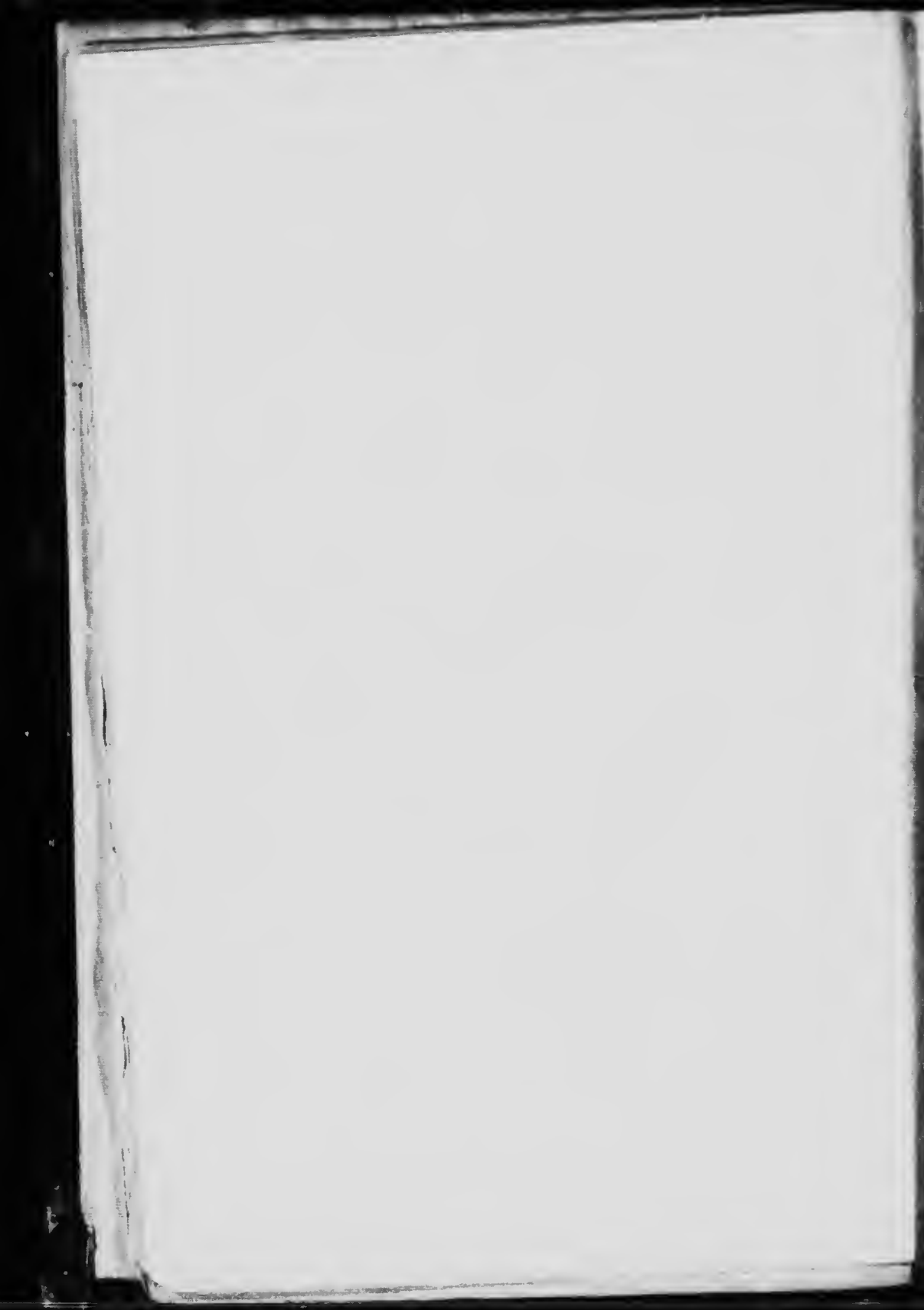
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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED
TO

LUCAS MALET

AS A TOKEN OF MY LOVE; IN ADMIRATION FOR HER
GENIUS; AND IN GRATITUDE FOR THE NOBLE
STANDARDS OF ART AND LIVING WHICH
SHE HAS SET BEFORE ME



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NOTE.—The Author herewith declares that the characters and episodes in this book are entirely the work of imagination, they bear no relation to any living persons or their actions.

BINDWEED

BOOK I

HIDDEN BYEWAYS

CHAPTER I

MADAME PÉRINTOT stood in front of the cheval-glass in her bedroom ; the reflection of her comely countenance looked back at her irritably. She gazed, with the penetrating glance of a woman no longer in her first youth—a woman determined to know the best and the worst of herself unflinchingly—at the handsome face in the mirror.

The long, heavy-lidded eyes with their thick eyelashes ; the slender, well-marked eyebrows slightly lifted at the corners ; the aquiline nose, delicately moulded at the nostrils ; the large well-shaped mouth with its short upper lip, above the firm square chin. Then—her eyes being well satisfied with the brightness of the eyes that looked back at her—she smiled, displaying white even teeth and dimples deeply dented in either cheek.

Decidedly she was a handsome woman, and well preserved for her forty-five years. Yes—the best was good ; and now for the worst.

The charming dimples disappeared, the large mouth hardened and the firm jaw stiffened, as her eyes travelled to the brilliant copper-coloured hair which crowned her head. Frowning slightly, she observed the deepening lines in her forehead, and—her eyes squinting slightly in the process—hastily pulled down, with quick persuasive fingers, some of the shorter curls from the demi-peruke arranged over

the front portion of her own abundant hair, till the offending wrinkles were hidden. Then, taking up a silver hand-mirror from among the medley of brushes, combs, pincushions and aids to beauty on her table, she proceeded to examine the roots of her hair, leisurely and minutely—in order to ascertain that no darkness of its original brown remained. Satisfied that the coiffeur had done his work thoroughly, as a good artist should, she turned her attention to the demi-peruke—also the handiwork of M. Roquin, of the rue Palatin. Chagrin here awaited her, since it seemed to her that it was slightly deeper in colour than the rest! She turned her eyes quickly to the box in which—discreetly concealed—she kept a spare peruke. Opening it she took out the neatly-curled contents and compared them with her new head-covering. Yes—decidedly it was of a better colour; she must take it down and change it before it was necessary to appear without a hat. She put it back, and, taking up her hand-mirror again, proceeded with the review of her person in charm and in defect.

Her eyes travelled with satisfaction over her figure, which, though still beautiful in contour, had lost the subtle delicacy of line which had been remarkable in her youth; yet, thanks to elaborate and careful corseting, it presented a straight line from waist to bust after the approved Parisian fashion for middle-aged women inclined to *embonpoint*, thus giving the carriage a tip forward in walking.

The hips—Madame Périntot's eyes had just reached this extreme point of dissatisfaction, since, in spite of the utmost skill of her *corsetière*, they would not be subdued as much as she desired—when a gentle knock at the door roused her from her reflections, both moral and physical. She slid the mirror amongst the paraphernalia on her dressing-table, and turned round with a resonant nasal "*Entrez!*" In answer to her permission the door opened and her mother, Madame Rouston, stepped timidly inside.

"Pardon, my daughter," she whimpered nervously, pausing on the threshold. "But the dress, the dress of ceremony, which I am to wear at the wedding of Cousin Marie-Anne, has not arrived, and it is barely three hours before we leave for Acquarelle. It is certain that without that dress I cannot go. The dressmaker promised me most faithfully that it should be here in good time this morning.

She is a good girl, I do not think she would deceive me without reason."

She stood twisting her knotted toil-worn hands in her black silk apron—a pathetic little figure with bent back and aged, wizened face. She belonged to the peasant class, and could never quite accustom herself to the comparative luxury of Paris life and the comfortable flat in which her daughter—formerly a successful provincial opera singer—now lived.

Madame Rouston sighed for her *pot-au-feu*, and constantly, when her daughter was engaged with her pupils, crept into the kitchen. There—under a pretence of superintending the work of the *bonne-à-tout-faire*—she spent many a happy hour over humble occupations; and, as she polished the saucepan lids bright as silver, or plunged her hands into clean cold water, rinsing and shaking out the cool lettuce for the salad, she sang in a little cracked voice old French peasant *rondes*—half-forgotten fragments that came to her dimly as the remembrance of her babyhood, when the pretty young peasant mother had rocked her to sleep in a low wooden cradle beside the sweet-scented fire of forest logs.

As she washed and cut the garlic, its harsh, penetrating odour took her memory back to the cottage, at Acquarelle, where she was born; and where, as a child, in the rich roadside pastures, she had spent long days herding her father's cow, resting at mid-day on a rock by the white road, one hand twisted in the head-rope, while she ate a slice of bread and that same pungent-smelling garlic. In vision she would see again the wide expanse of the pastured plain—undulating beneath the soft fanning breath of the spring wind; again, too, she would feel the cow—standing belly-deep in the long grass—pull at the head-rope to awake her from her reverie.

While she was still a girl of seventeen, an artist and his wife had come from Paris and taken a house at Acquarelle. The artist—of distinction in his profession—was also possessed of an apartment and studio in Paris, on the left bank of the Seine. When at Acquarelle he interested himself much in the peasant life of the village. Some months after he had settled there he had painted the portrait of George Cortot, Madame Rouston's father, among his sheep. This

same picture having brought him fame and fortune, he had presented Cortot with the freehold of four fields which adjoined the latter's small holding, and which Cortot had rented for many years—thus raising him from mere peasant proprietorship to the dignity of farmer.

In addition he had taken the young girl into his employment as *bonne-à-tout-faire* at Acquarelle; and, on one of their periodical returns to Paris, had taken her with them as *cuisinière*.

In Paris, Angèle Cortot had fallen in love with Jean Rouston, a handsome Basque, coachman to the Baron de Gonville, who lived in the great house backing on to her master's more humble apartment. The windows of her kitchen looked on to the courtyard where Jean's horses were stabled. She could see him below among his well-kept equipages, giving orders to his helpers. It was not long before he observed the shy, pretty little country girl on her way out to market, and often he would come out of the stable offering to carry the heavy basket up the steep steps of the service. After a month or two of ardent courtship, Jean had married Angèle, and later, when he was killed in a carriage accident, her former master and mistress had taken the broken-hearted young widow and her baby to live with them again.

M. de Fabrieux, the artist, had no children of his own, so that little Marguérite, born after Jean's death, had become very dear to him. He took much pleasure in the child's society; and—as, at an early age, she began to show both beauty and temperament—he gave her lessons in drawing. But the pencils and crayons were irksome to her childish fingers; nevertheless the studio became a place of fascination and charm to her. She loved to drape herself in some model's costume and pose, on the little raised platform, singing in a clear childish voice, with pretty gesture, to an imaginary audience; but she would become fiercely annoyed, and scold both her gentle mother and the amused M. de Fabrieux, when, in the interests of art, he would oust her from her little stage, and banish her to the kitchen, in order that he might obtain a quiet hour for work. She developed a passionate jealousy for the models who occupied her play theatre; though, when opportunity offered, she would creep into the studio and watch them, afterwards copying their postures with such clever mimicry that

M. de Fabrieux, discerning in her an unusual gift for the histrionic art, sent her, as soon as her age permitted, to the Conservatoire.

There Marguérite carried off—much to her mother's alarm and M. de Fabrieux's delight—first the second, then the first prize for operatic singing, as well as the second prize for tragedy.

After a preliminary *début* at the *Opéra Comique*, she had been engaged as the principal soprano at the *Théâtre Lyrique*, Cordeilles; where she had reigned supreme until her marriage with M. Périntot, the rich bourgeois lace-manufacturer, from Marille.

M. Périntot's relations did not approve of his marriage with the handsome singer; who, though she had been earning a considerable income in her profession, brought him nothing in the way of a *dot*. But—as for love of him she left the stage, threw a promising career to the winds, and lived the first fifteen years of her married life in the most exemplary manner—in time she overcame their disapproval, and they came both to love and admire the generous, able woman, whose undoubted devotion to her husband and son compelled their prejudices to subside.

Till the boy was fourteen years old, Madame Périntot's existence was a comfortable and uneventful one, then the peaceful serenity of her life became clouded.

M. Périntot grew nervous and irritable, unlike his usual genial self. Fits of silent moodiness, for which his wife could not account, attacked him. He spent long hours, under pretence of pressure of business letters, silently in his bureau, really, as his anxious wife believed—since the output of his letters became more and more meagre—in sitting quietly thinking with his head in his hands. At last, unable to bear the strain of the uncertainty as to what was troubling him, Madame Périntot determined to ask him the meaning of his restless nights and troubled days.

One evening, after supper, when her son Pierre was busy preparing his work for the *Lycée*, she quietly slipped into the bureau, where, under a pretext of business, her husband had retired as so frequently of late requesting that he might not be disturbed. Marguérite, pierced by the remembrance of his look of nervous weariness and disinclination,

had entered hurriedly with the determination to break down his reserve.

M. Périntot was seated at his writing-table, his hands outstretched on the pile of neatly-arranged papers in front of him, his head bowed over his arms, one hand—the hand with its gold marriage ring on the third finger—clutching a business letter, on thick parchment paper. Marguérite flung herself across the intervening space, something desolate and piteous in her husband's attitude, as of a little boy in trouble, giving her a sharp pain at her heart. Throwing herself on her knees, she put both arms round Périntot's neck and pulled him towards her, crying :

"My husband, my loved one, tell me what it is that troubles you ?"

She pushed her bosom against his shoulder caressingly, all her tenderness for him aroused by the thought that things were not well with him.

But only a silence answered her. M. Périntot's body fell heavily sideways in the chair, his head sank on his chest. The dropped jaw, and wide open eyes, told her that her loved one would never answer that agonized appeal, that, before she had been able to comfort him, he had gone out alone into the great silence. To the clasp of her arms he was insensible. M. Périntot was dead. The traces of recent tears on his cheek told her that not many minutes had passed since this thing had happened ; and that he must have wept much, since the pink surface of the blotting-paper—on which reposed a miniature of herself—was spotted with little wet patches as though he had laid his head on his arms and sobbed silently.

Madame Périntot, strong creature though she was, had much ado to pull herself together in the trying days that followed. The loss of her husband—from an attack of the heart, brought on by the knowledge that the bulk of his fortune had been lost in the smashing up of a Roumanian oil well company in which he had speculated heavily, and the consequent bankruptcy of the Marille lace business—left her with but a small remnant of his fortune to support herself and her son.

Self-reliant by nature, she could not contemplate a penurious existence at Marille—the eking out her small income, with such assistance as her husband's relations

might extend to her. Now that his business was ruined, the old murmur of prejudice against her began to be heard again, along with a certain show of patronage intolerable to her proud spirit. So that—when the first shock of his death was over—she took her courage in both hands and journeyed to Paris, with the intention of trying to pick up her artistic connection and thus earn the wherewithal to educate her boy and support her aged mother.

But those who leave the battle for artistic existence find a return to the front rank no easy matter. Fifteen years of ease and luxury had not improved her figure; her voice, too, had been neglected. Other and younger artists, fresh of voice and slender of form, filled her place. Nevertheless, undismayed, she pertinaciously searched until, as echo of her past triumphs, a little work came, though not enough to make both ends meet.

Finally, on the advice of an old friend—her master at the Conservatoire—she instituted, with his help, an opera class in the Rue des Masques, a narrow side street off the Boulevard Farnouchelles. Here, after the first year, she turned the great studio which she rented into a little theatre; and, teaching both singing and acting, began to earn a comfortable income.

Now, at the age of forty-five, the memory of her sorrow began to grow dim. Her natural good health and ability gave her a sense of security and success, so that she enjoyed her life in the old professional atmosphere. Pierre, too, was provided for—since the new owner of the Marille factory had promised to take him into business when his military service should be ended.

On the day in question, Madame Périntot and her mother were to go down to Acquarelle for the marriage of her cousin Marie-Anne Cortot. The wedding was to take place on Whit-Monday. Madame Rouston had been looking forward to this return, after a long absence, to her former home, with the greatest excitement. She had taken much pleasure in choosing a *robe de cérémonie* in which to go to the wedding. Marguerite had wanted to take her mother to a good dress-maker, but the older woman, with tears in her eyes, had begged her daughter to permit her to have a gown and cap of the traditional *paysanne* style, so that she might appear amongst her friends and relations dressed as they themselves

would dress. Something of innate peasant breeding told the old woman that she would be ashamed to be differently clothed to the mother of Marie-Anne; and that she would rather stand in the church where she had worshipped as a child in the cap of her peasant station. So when the old woman, with gentle obstinacy, had begged for a peasant costume, good-hearted Marguérite had yielded to her fancy.

"Have your own way, *ma mère*," she said, "only, since I know nothing of such costumes, it would be waste of time for me to accompany you when you make your choice."

Madame Rouston, secretly pleased to have complete freedom in the matter, consulted the *bonne-à-tout-faire*. The two old women laid their heads together, and, after many excursions to the boulevards, and much discussion as to material and price, went off happily to a certain young workwoman, known to the *bonne*, residing in the Place des Loups—a little, human, humble dressmaker, neat-fingered and conscientious, who could make just such a cap and dress for a small sum; and who would not trouble the modesties of Madame Rouston by the necessity of much fitting.

Marguérite, busy with her pupils, left the old ladies to settle the matter themselves—secretly and tenderly amused at their gentle whisperings and flutterings and the important solemnity of those expeditions to the boulevards. But, now that the day of departure had come the dress had not arrived, and Madame Rouston stood in the door of her daughter's bedroom, all *ahurie* and trembling.

"But, *ma mère*," cried Marguérite impatiently, "did not the young dressmaker clearly understand that it must be here in good time? It is more than a fortnight since you bought the material. You should have taken my advice and gone to my woman, who would have made you a beautiful dress in three days."

Madame Rouston folded her knotted hands over her black silk apron, and her small wizened face took on a slightly obstinate air—despite which mental stiffening, childish disappointment forced a large tear from her eyes. Perceiving which, Marguérite's good-heartedness triumphed over her irritation. With a quick movement, she put her arm round the fragile little old woman, and, stooping, kissed the furrowed cheek, saying in her clear, firm voice:

"*Allons ! ma mère*, do not weep. I myself will take a taxi

and fetch the things. Perhaps she has made a mistake in the hour of our departure. If it is not finished, I will bring it home, and we will work at it together. *Voyons* ! give me the address, I will return as quickly as possible."

Madame Rouston smiled, the little wrinkles round her eyes and mouth puckered.

"You are a kind daughter, Mimi," she said, using the pet name she had called her as a child. "It is Numéro 5 bis, Place des Loups. You enter the *porte cochère*, next to the baker's shop, and the door is in the courtyard. It is not a grand place, Marguérite," she went on timidly. "I would go myself, but I am afraid I should not return in time, and without the dress," she repeated, "I cannot go to the wedding of Marie-Anne."

Madame Périntot pulled a toque of purple pansies over her copper hair, and threw a fawn-coloured cloak over her velvet gown. Hastily powdering her face, she took up her long gloves and gold chain-purse, and went from her room into the hall. As she did so, she turned her perfumed and slightly overdressed person towards her mother, smiling and saying :

"Since I go on your errand, *ma mère*, you must do mine. Will you finish packing my make-up ; my toilet aids, scents, and powder-puffs, in my dressing-case—and on no account forget my red lip-salve."

"You will not need them in the sunshine of Acquarelle, Marguérite," the old woman pleaded softly, "you were always a lovely child, and the air there will bring back your pretty colour."

"*Chut !*" returned the other, "those who are wise provide for the rainy day. You will wear what you please on your back and I shall put what I please on my face, then we shall both be happy in our own way."

And so saying, able, handsome and wholesome, she passed through the curtains that draped the door of the vestibule, and let herself out on to the staircase, descending with quick, careful steps to the street below.

She emerged from the dark flagged stone passage and stood on the edge of the pavement till she caught the eye of a passing chauffeur, then she held up one hand ; and, as he drew the taxi up at the kerb, she bent forward to speak to him.

"Numéro 5 bis, Place des Loups, and drive quickly, but with care—I am in a hurry, but I do not want to be killed."

Admiration, apparent and open, was in the man's glance. Madame Périn^tot smiled, whereat the beguiling dimples made their appearance and set the heart of the driver galloping with true Gallic rapidity, so that he caressed his neat black moustache with a look of intimate gallantry. She mounted into the car, well pleased that, despite her forty-five years, she was still *jolie femme* to the man in the street. She pulled her long gloves on complacently, as the car, turning out of the Rue des Masques, rattled up the paved Boulevard Farnouchelles and along the Avenue de la Lanterne to the Place des Loups. The light, gay little spring breeze was refreshing. Truly, she thought, it was ridiculous to go out at the last minute, on such an errand, to such a quarter; but, if go she must, at least she would enjoy the drive!

On reaching the Place des Loups, the chauffeur, unable to discover Numéro 5 bis, turned inquiringly round to her, slowing up his car as he did so. Madame Périn^tot leaned out of the window and directed him to stop at the baker's shop on the left, at the corner. Here she alighted, and, turning in under the *porte cochère*, passed into a small, cobble-paved courtyard surrounded on all sides by tall houses—the windows, set one above the other in the stained and mottled walls, flanked on either side by ancient venetian slatted shutters of faded, grey-green painted wood. The height of the surrounding houses made the small courtyard appear gloomy and sunless. Despite the warm spring day Madame Périn^tot shivered, as a draught—seeming in no way to belong to that light, gay spring breeze in the world without—swept past her, dank and chill, forced down the funnel of that walled-in courtyard by some wandering current of air. It seemed to whirl round her—pregnant as some wind of destiny, enveloping her in cold foreboding of unknown terror, and the blank mist of fear which presages dissolution. A wan glimmer of relentless fate brooded silently in the desolation of the place, penetrating her impressionable and sensitive mind. She paused, a sudden presentiment of evil, an apprehension of coming horror, of spiritual alarm, vital and positive, almost paralysed her. She longed to turn and run back into the cheerful sunlight again, away from the gloomy little courtyard, and the cracked, half-open door, with Numéro 5 bis, written in fading letters, above it.

A rattle of passing carts in the Place outside sounded

muffled and distant. The silence within the courtyard seemed to shut her in a prison of fear. Madame Périntot was taken with veritable panic. She looked to the right and to the left, at the windows shrouded in dust. What lay behind those windows? What creatures, obscure in their good and evil living, passed to and fro on their daily business from the outer world into the silent house? She listened, but no sound, save that muffled rumble from the street without, broke the stillness; only, in the corner a tap, encrusted with verdigris, dripped steadily into a pool of water formed in a depression of the cobbled pavement beneath.

Resolutely she tried to shake herself free of her phantasies; and, stepping over a meandering stream that flowed from the pool, she prepared to enter the door. As she did so a slatternly young woman of about thirty years of age, carrying a baby in her arms, a small child clinging to her skirt, came out of the doorway, and pushed roughly past her.

"Is this Nunéro 5 bis?" Madame Périntot inquired sharply, the colour mounting to her cheeks.

The woman stared at her before answering, putting back a stray wisp of hair, and pulling up the child that had stooped to dabble in the water. Insolently her eyes took in the good clothes and the air of prosperity of the other. Then, as she perceived the powdered face and dyed hair, she laughed coarsely, saying:

"It is—a poor house, but a respectable one. There are several families. What name?"

Madame Périntot paused. "It is a dressmaker," she said at last. "*Sapristi!* I do not know the name."

"Ah," suggested the woman, "that will perhaps be the niece who lives with old Victorine Dupont, fifth floor, third door on the left."

Pulling up the child again, she crossed the courtyard, and disappeared under the dark *porte cochère*.

Flushed and slightly agitated, Madame Périntot entered the door and mounted the bare wooden stairway. Panting, she stopped on the first landing for a moment. Decidedly her mother must not be allowed again to make her own arrangements! It was most unsuitable that her clothes should come from such a place. She felt extremely irritated.

She commenced to mount the second flight, then stopped

—leaning against the railing in amazement—for something quite unexpected arrested her attention.

From high up in the dirty, squalid house came the sound of a woman's voice singing—in tone so rich and full that it set her trained ear tingling with an almost jealous admiration. Round and strong, vibrating with the great clear ring that is so precious on the operatic stage for its power of piercing the heaviest scoring, the woman sang with natural ease and fluency, "*A che la morte ignora*," the soft liquid Italian words, throbbing, piercing, sobbing, with the familiar *rubato* of operatic tradition.

Madame Périnot held on to the railing, petrified by the volume and quality of the sound. The rickety balustrade shook and quivered beneath her weight, as she leaned forward and craned her neck, looking up the well of the staircase in her effort to distinguish from which floor the singing came.

Suddenly an impulse took her, imperative and urgent, at all costs to find the owner of the voice. She must, if the singer was untrained and unknown, teach her, and bring her before the public. Enthusiasm filled her. With a hasty movement she gathered up the front of her skirt, and with eager, hurrying footsteps, stumbled up flight after flight till she reached the fifth floor. But the singing had ceased, and, in place of the palpitating aliveness of its beauty, only silence, penetrating and mournful, along with the recrudescence of the same brooding menace which haunted the courtyard, reigned in the empty passage in which she stood.

For the first time since she heard the voice, she remembered her errand; and, turning to the left, she stopped in front of the third door and paused irresolute.

In the solitude and quiet, alone in this strange house, again the foreboding of evil took her—not the ghostly echo of past crime and consequent haunting by pallid spectres of remorse; but the more intimate concrete fear, of imminent future action, of the raising of the curtain on the first act of a drama, inevitable and cruel, in which she, a pawn in the hand of some unseen power, would play her part, moving powerless, yet none the less a connecting link, a needful factor in the consummation of that drama. So weighty, so vivid became that certainty, that to Madame Périnot it was almost unendurable.

She longed for the beautiful voice to begin, or for any sound,

however trivial, to change the current of her thought. In the stillness she could hear the beating of her heart and the labour of her breath.

Still panting, and a little pale, she advanced a step nearer. As she did so the voice began again to sing "*A che la morte ognora*." To her astonishment she found it came from behind the very door in front of which she stood.

"*Tiens!*" she said to herself. "I shall then penetrate this mystery," and, knocking sharply, she waited impatiently to enter the room.

At the sound of her knock the singing ceased. Light footsteps crossed the uncarpeted floor and halted for a moment.

Without Madame Périntot waited—curiously nervous and again filled with strong desire to take flight and leave this house which caused her such incomprehensible uneasiness. But curiosity about the unknown singer, and the necessity of securing Madame Rouston's *robe de cérémonie* held her, despite her superstitious fears.

Inside the door the owner of the voice, whose light footsteps she had heard, waited likewise. Was she, too, touched with that unaccountable instinct of fear?

Then Madame Périntot, common sense triumphing, smiled at herself, and smiling, shook off the yoke of the supernatural. She knocked again boldly.

Instrument of that unseen power, she had raised the curtain on the first act of the drama. The paw in the hand of fate had moved.

CHAPTER II

DIRECTLY she knocked, the door opened, but cautiously, only for about the width of a foot. The head of a young woman was thrust forward into the narrow aperture between the door and the jamb.

Madame Périntot, standing in the half dusk of the passage without, had the impression as of a vivid chalk drawing, in which the colour of the red mouth—slightly open with surprise or alarm—and the blackness of the eyes and glossy dark hair, emphasized the waxen paleness of the face. For a moment she was unperceived. The head

seemed to hang there, as if detached from the body—the expression one of acute listening. Then, as Madame Périntot stepped forward into the line of vision, the eyes, troubled and wide, met hers suddenly, with a glance of penetrating inquiry. Apparently the result of that scrutiny was satisfactory, for the aspect of the face became more normal, and the door opened, disclosing the graceful figure of a young girl, clad in a black serge petticoat and grey stays—above which was a spotlessly clean white chemise, edged with coarse lace.

From out the sleeves of the chemise her arms, bare to the shoulder, showed round and firm. The proud, well-shaped head was set on a strong column of throat. The even pallor of her face, neck, and shoulders, was of that rich creamy ivory which goes with the thick texture of skin so often found among the nations of Southern Europe. Her long silky hair, parted in the middle above a broad, rather high forehead, was twisted up loosely into a big heavy knot at the back of her head.

Above the handsome, opaquely black eyes with their long dark lashes, the brows were thick and well marked. The intense seriousness and directness of her glance lent a sombre aspect to the strong young face. The mouth was generously curved, soft and pouting, the straight little nose delicately pure in outline. The redness of the lips gave promise of passionate human feeling, and told of warm, clean blood, while, from the eyes—visionary with imagination—purity of living, intellect and nobility of mind, looked out dominant and arresting. Resolution, too, was apparent in the firm, square chin, cleft in the centre.

The whole effect was of the beauty and strength of a woman, rather than the half-fledged charm of a girl; nevertheless the extreme youth and freshness, perceptible in her, gave to that womanly dignity an added allurements.

Madame Périntot's eyes dwelt on the noble figure with admiration.

With the quick appraising glance of a person accustomed to judging young womanhood in view of its possible appearance on the stage, she noted approvingly the neat waist and narrow hips, together with other details of the girl's "possibilities." Her shrewd and practised judgment told her that if this

was the owner of the beautiful voice, then, indeed, those "possibilities" were immense.

The girl moved aside and, with a gesture, invited her visitor to come in.

"*Entrez, madame,*" she said. "What can I do for you? I ask your pardon for my hesitation to open the door; but, as you see, I am not fully dressed, and I did not know who stood without. The people in our quarter are rough, and I am alone."

"It is I who should ask your pardon, my child," Madame Périntot replied—"for intruding thus; but I come on an errand from my mother, Madame Rouston. I am looking for her dressmaker and, stupidly, though I have the address, I have omitted to write down the name."

The young girl brought forward a chair and placed it at a little distance from the deal table, on which lay an ironing board and iron, together with a black and white cotton blouse.

"Be seated, madame," she said, as she looked at Madame Périntot with surprise. Obviously she did not seem the kind of person whose mother would come to the Place des Loups for the making of her clothes!

"Madame Rouston?" she inquired; "yes, I must be the dressmaker whom you seek. I was to take a dress to the Rue des Masques this morning—but I understood that it would be in good time if I reached the house before one o'clock. I hope that I have not made any mistake?"

She looked with troubled eyes at Marguérite, such simplicity and truthfulness evident in her contrition, that the elder woman had not the heart to scold her, and, already subjugated by the girl's beauty, she smiled, making kindly reply.

"My mother, Madame Rouston, has been in a fine fuss because she feared it would not arrive in time; but all is well if it is finished, and now I will take it with me and save you the journey to the Rue des Masques."

"That is very kind of you, madame," the girl answered.

Madame Périntot noticed that, though she was obviously sorry to have caused them trouble in the matter, she spoke as an equal—as if the question of class did not enter her head. She was astonished at so much breeding and dignity.

The more she looked at her, the more puzzled and *intrigué* she became.

The girl, meantime, had hastily slipped on the blouse and buttoned it, now she took a black skirt from behind the door and stepped into it, man's trouser fashion.

"Wait but a moment, madame," she begged. "I will carry the dress downstairs for you. It is dark outside and some of the steps are uneven."

Madame Périntot had risen from her seat, but she made no movement to go. For her, the vital question of the voice must be settled before it would be possible to leave her absorbing find.

"One moment," she said.—In face of the young girl's proud, direct gaze, as she stood with the parcel poised on her hip, Madame Périntot paused. A certain anxiety, lest she should offend this beautiful child and let slip, through lack of the right thing said, an opportunity of extraordinary promise, made her choose her words carefully—"I heard someone singing, as I mounted the stairs. Can it have been you?"

The girl stood still for a moment and did not reply. She raised her chin slightly. Reserve had come into her expression. Then she again looked full at Madame Périntot, this time a little defiantly.

"Yes, madame," she returned quietly. "I always sing when I work. My aunt, Madame Dupont, does not like it; she says the noise troubles her head. But she does not love music as I do. When she is out—which is nearly always since she works at Les Halles, in the vegetable market—I sing all day because there is no one to hear me."

Madame Périntot leaned forward, watching her intently.

"Who taught you Italian? And where did you learn the song you were singing just now?" she asked.

The girl, whose eyes had grown luminous with enthusiasm, drew back, and again reserve, almost hauteur, was apparent in her manner. She looked at the ground and her complexion thickened as if, beneath its pallor, the blood flowed more quickly.

"The song," she stammered, "I did not know it was Italian, I fancied it was Latin."

"Latin? No, it was Italian. But do you know Latin?"

"Yes," the other answered, apparently eager to leave

the subject of the song—which seemed to embarrass her. “I learned Latin at the convent, where also I learned to sing. Sister Marie-Terèse, who played the organ and taught us the hymns and the music of the Masses, used to say that I had a beautiful voice. She was very good to me and I loved her dearly. I used to sing the Ave Maria, and sometimes the Salutaris at Benediction. Sister Marie-Terèse had sung much herself before she came to the convent. I was very unhappy when the nuns were sent away from France. Now I have no music save that which I hear in church.”

“You did not, I presume, learn to sing ‘*A che la morte*’ either at the convent or in church?” this from Madame Périntot, as she smiled a trifle maliciously.

“No, no,” the other asserted hastily. “I learned it, that is to say I heard it”—she stammered—“I have heard it sung many times by a street musician. He comes here every Saturday, into the courtyard, with his mandoline. He has a beautiful voice. From my window I listen; and I always manage to throw him out a *sou*, so that he may come again. He must be very poor, for he comes, always at the same hour, to seek that *sou*. And I have imitated his singing”—she smiled again—“I call it my singing lesson—all unknowing he has been my master. Listen!” she cried, and the play of her features, which, while she spoke of the convent had been visionary and mystical—became radiantly human, childlike with delight. “He is here, he has come!” and, running to the window, she pushed back the Venetian shutter and leaned out.

In the stillness, Madame Périntot was aware of the thin tinkle of a mandoline in the courtyard below. Then a man’s voice began to sing the passionate melody in the manner loved by the followers of the Italian school. To her surprise her practised ear could detect none of the vulgarities of exaggeration, in enunciation and delivery, generally inevitable in the street singer. The air was sung as she had heard it dozens of times by a certain well-known Franco-Italian tenor who had lately taken the French public by storm. Nevertheless a suggestion of restraint perplexed her—as if the musician sang beneath his breath, for the benefit of one person only. To her judgment and critical faculty the intimacy of that appeal was remarkable.

Looking at the girl—who hung out of the window, oblivious of her visitor, intent with listening, her whole person vibrant with vitality—Madame Périntot could not decide whether she was moved to this vivid aliveness by her intense love of the music only, or whether the singer's individuality had something to do with it. She became oppressed by that same absorption. Moving to the window, she laid her hand lightly on the young girl's arm, speaking in clear incisive tones.

"Listen, my child," she said. "I am going away for a day or two; but, when I return, I want you to come and see me. *Voyons!* you will find me on Wednesday, at No. 5, Rue des Masques—you have the address—ask for Madame Périntot. I will let you sing to me. If you have, as I believe to be the case, a gift for music, and, if you are serious in your love of it, I will help you to develop that gift."

At her touch the girl had turned round, and, as Madame Périntot spoke, her face took on again the visionary expression which had been remarkable while speaking of the convent.

"An answer, an answer," she cried, clasping her hands fervently, and speaking more to herself than her auditor—"le bon Dieu has heard me. Ever since I left the convent I have prayed to Him that something might come into my life that should help me with my music. Almost, for the sake of that music, I would have gone with the nuns into exile and become one of them." She turned to Madame Périntot who watched her with curiosity. "You mean it, you will not disappoint me now?" she asked urgently, her lips trembling, while she laid her hand on the other woman's arm.

"I shall not disappoint you, my child," Marguélite declared, much moved. "You in your turn must work with your whole heart. You seem to know something of music, can you read it?"

"Yes, I know a good deal about Church music; Sister Marie-Terèse taught me to read at sight."

"Ah," Madame Périntot commented dryly, shrugging her shoulders, "you will not sing that kind of music with me. Your work will be more in the style of the song you were singing when I came in."

As she spoke, again the thin tinkle came from the court-

yard below, and the man's voice began to pierce the stillness with importunate appeal.

A singular change had come over the girl's face. Again the visionary gave place to something eminently human. Unknown to her the passion in the man's singing awoke an echo in her heart. She seemed to struggle between two emotions, the human and divine in her battling for the mastery.

"*Mon Dieu!*" cried Madame Périntot sharply. "Perhaps you have to thank your street musician for your good fortune quite as much as the Deity. I doubt," she went on, "if I should have taken such an interest in your voice if I had overheard you singing an Ave Maria."

The girl turned troubled eyes on her visitor. "But surely *le bon Dieu* may have sent him," she said; "the Abbé Goujon says that all good things come from God."

"So long as you count me among the good things," Madame Périntot replied mischievously, "I care not from whom you think I come. At this moment the important thing is that I should go, and, with me, take the dress for which my mother is so anxiously waiting. Give me the parcel. No, do not descend with me, I prefer to find my way out alone."

On the threshold she paused as if struck by a sudden thought.

"Your parents?" she inquired, "they will not put any obstacles in your way and, by the way, I do not know your name."

"I am Eugénie Massini," the girl answered, "my only relation is my Aunt Victorine. My father, who was Italian, died before I was born, and my mother—when I was a baby. My aunt brought me up. She made many sacrifices to send me to the convent. She has been very good to me, but she does not understand my music."

"Ah," murmured Madame Périntot feelingly, "one's own relations have a little habit of not understanding. *Au revoir*, then, Eugénie, tell your aunt that I will do my best to help you to carry on the education for which she has made such sacrifices." She went out of the room, bearing the heavy parcel in her arms, and commenced her descent of the stairs.

"*Sapristi!*" she exclaimed. "Obviously my mother must be encouraged to make further excursions on her own

account. She has a *flair*, my mother, a distinct *flair* for *objets d'art*."

Entering the courtyard, she stopped, and, extracting a fifty-centime piece from her purse, advanced towards the mandoline player. Quick-witted, she made the excuse of offering him money an opportunity for investigation of his appearance. But here she was somewhat baffled, for an ancient *paletot* concealed his figure, while a broad-brimmed hat was pulled well down over his eyes. From where she stood reddish gold beard and moustache, and straight nose, were all that she could see of his face. As she held a coin she felt certain that he would willingly have avoided taking it, since he turned slightly away, and busied himself with the tuning of his mandoline. More *intrigué* than ever and determined now to inspect him closely, she came right up to him.

"*Tenez*," she said, holding out the money. She observed the hand stretched out to take it was well-kept and the nails had been lately polished. She looked up, and, as her eyes met his, she became aware that they were full of suppressed merriment. To her astonishment, she recognized the famous tenor whose voice she had so often heard at the Opéra Comique.

"*Nom d'un chien*," she exclaimed ironically, "what has befallen you, M. Hypolite, that you sing in the streets?"

"Ah, madame," he replied, laughing, as he swept off his hat with a courtly bow. "I am by nature a Bohemian. Also, perhaps, as so often happens among artists, I have retained in me some of the eternal youth of children. I still care to play at being that which I am not. In the days, not so long distant, when I was a penniless student at the Conservatoire I often went hungry to bed. I then devised this method—satisfying at the same time that childish desire of play, and the very urgent craving of my stomach—of earning a few *sous*. No meals since have tasted so luxuriously delicious as those first fruits of my professional ability. The peaches and nectarines of civilization cannot compare with the stolen fruits gathered at the wayside by the stealthy fingers of panic-stricken boyhood. No applause in the Opera House can be so grateful to me as the chink of those *sous* falling at my feet in reward of my first efforts. At times, satiate as I am with success"—he

laughed mockingly—"I feel the hunger of those meals upon me still. I go further, I yearn for the terror of stolen searchings, of marauding expeditions of childish daring, excited by the naughty laughter and spirited applause of baby comrades. Once more I must play—not on the stage, where everyone knows that I, Gaston Hypolite, stand there—but alone, in the great world, which is the most enchanting playground imaginable. Upon such days—when the spirit takes me—I disguise myself once more as the street singer, and tramp the streets with my little mandoline in search of *la bonne aventure*. Then, with the money I earn so hardly"—he wrinkled up his eyes with laughter—"I dine—in my old haunts—for one franc—sumptuously."

"But your voice?" put in Madame Périntot, with much amusement—she could not help laughing. Gaston Hypolite was good company; and, in spite of a reputation for quaint fancifulness, a certain freedom of living and unconventionality of habit, he was generally respectful to women who required it of him. "Surely," she continued, "you run great risk of being recognized? Your voice, and your method of singing are unmistakable. Even when I heard you from above, I thought of your interpretation of Manrico instantly."

"You are too good, madame," he replied. "But do you not see that in that spice of danger lies the charm and romance of my amusement. I never know what may happen! Until to-day, though I have visited many parts of the city, I have remained undetected. Who would have thought," he went on, raising his eyebrows, "that in the Place des Loups, I should meet Madame Périntot? Do you, too, search for interesting experience? Let me tell you, that this despised *quartier* is not without 'possibilities' in that line."

Madame Périntot was sensible of uneasiness. She remembered the look on the girl's face; and felt a quick and intense anxiety lest he should come into contact with her newly-found nightingale.

"M. Hypolite," she inquired searchingly, "what experience do you seek in the Place des Loups? For it is certain that *sous* are not plentiful here."

"Ah," he answered, fencing her serious mood, "you avoid my suggestion, madame. You cloak your own intention in coming here, under solicitude for a broken-down

singer." He looked at her, laughing mischievously, the suggestion of a teasing boy in his manner. "No, you are right, madame, I fear if it is the timid and fugitive *sou* of which you are in pursuit, the wolves, after which this place is named, have already tracked down and devoured all of them. Nevertheless, I receive one—but one only—every week from the owner of two bright eyes, a pretty maiden who lives on the top floor here. Is not that worth coming for? A small income, but a certain one—and in these days of competition a certain income is invaluable to an artist. Even now my thoughts are tinged with sadness. I have been here this six weeks, and that *sou* has never failed me. But alas! you have discovered my source of income! How do I know that you will not dispute possession of my pitch? It will be a case of *place aux dames*, and gallantry——"

"Be serious one moment," interrupted Madame Périntot. She felt her mouth beginning to give. In a moment she knew that his quick bewildering banter would conquer her. "On your own confession *sous* are not plentiful here, therefore, what other charm draws you to this region? Are you in pursuit of human quarry?" She looked at him questioningly, her jaw set with the spirit of combat.

"If so," he answered mockingly, "I have not had the good fortune to run down my quarry. But I do not despair, I am convinced that I have found favour in the sight of the owner of two bright eyes."

Madame Périntot's anxiety deepened, a hint of asperity in her manner as she said:

"Where did you see her first? How did you know of her existence?"

"In my wanderings, I saw her in the market," he answered. "I was singing, and she stood among the crowd enchanted—exquisitely pleased. I followed her home, at a polite—yes, a quite polite distance. She had no idea that I tracked her."

Marguérite was silent for a moment—she hoped to goodness that M. Hypolite had not chanced to hear Eugénie's voice! Then she said gravely and earnestly.

"Listen, M. Hypolite. You would do well, *mon ami*, to confine your musical activities to the Opéra Comique; and your experiences—your search for human quarry—to a *quartier* more sophisticated. I do not like it," she repeated,

"your serenading of this young girl. Leave it," she urged, coming close to him in her anxiety.

The young man backed a little away from her, and shifted his mandoline to his other arm, smiling enigmatically.

"I have no intentions, madame," he protested. "I drift. I amuse myself; you need have no anxiety for your *protégée*."

"Nevertheless," insisted Madame Périntot, "I counsel prudence in this particular instance. I do not know," she added hesitatingly—seeing that he was slightly annoyed at her persistence—"I do not know, why I speak to you with almost frank impertinence, save that, on coming here to-day on an errand for my mother, I was taken with a terror of this place, and a presentiment"—she shivered, glancing around quickly and drawing her cloak more closely about her—"a presentiment of some appalling tragedy. It overpowered me. I had forgotten that foreboding—until I saw you; and now, despite my reason, it returns with renewed poignancy."

She looked round at the windows, caked in dust, and again, as on her first entry to the place, a cold wind of destiny chilled her to the marrow, as a dank draught, forced down the funnel, swept by, sighing and setting the strings of the mandoline quivering with a faint thin echo, as though ghostly fingers touched them in passing. Madame Périntot went closer to M. Hypolite, penetrated again by the terror of that outside influence.

"I must speak to you," she said. "Some instinct impels me to beg you to let your weekly pilgrimage here cease, lest"—she hesitated again, choosing her words carefully—"lest some evil happen to her." She had almost said—to you. The words trembled on her lips together, as if they meant the same thing.

The young man's elusive fantastic spirit was momentarily touched by her evident sincerity. Her pressing entreaty pierced the protective mask of cynical urbanity, beneath which he concealed his real power of feeling. The said power of feeling was a constant source of annoyance to him, since at times it betrayed him to the point of indiscretion.

"Do not distress yourself, madame?" he said, looking down at the cobbled pavement, and trying to move a loose stone with the toe of his boot.

Marguérite felt that she had the advantage of him now. She determined to pursue her victory further.

"Promise me to desist, M. Hypolite?" she said, laying one hand on the arm that held the mandoline, and looking into his light blue eyes.

"I never make promises, madame," he said, his cynicism returning. Along with it, the playful childish mischief—which was at once the weakness and charm of his character—dominated the more human sympathy that he had shown but a moment since. "I might find them inconvenient to keep, and uncomfortable to break. But, in this case, it is unnecessary to promise—odious occupation—belonging to the marriage service on the one hand, and ~~the~~ divorce court on the other—banal—you must agree with me?" He made a gesture of disgust. "In this case, I need not commit myself in order to alleviate your anxiety, for to-morrow I leave for a six weeks' season in London, so that, obviously, my pursuit of romance in this particular quarter must remain in abeyance!"

"*Eh bien!*" exclaimed Madame Périntot, laughing, "then you will be out of harm's way."

"Or out of mischief, if you prefer that," he answered, smiling at the relief in her voice. "I will come and see you, madame, if I may, when I come back, and recount to you my adventures in London."

"Come. It will give me the greatest pleasure," she returned cordially.

"*Au revoir*, then," he cried, as she hurried out of the *porte cochère* to the waiting taxi.

As the car shot forward, Marguérite heard the sound of Hypolite's singing.

"*Mon Dieu, mon Dieu!*" she said to herself, "what a mercy that he is going away."

CHAPTER III

AFTER watching her visitor descend the stairs Eugénie re-entered the room. Crossing to the window, she looked down into the courtyard below. To her astonishment she observed that Madame Périntot was in intimate

conversation with the musician. Curiosity piqued her, but an instinct of courtesy made her withdraw her head and retire from the window.

At last the murmur of their conversation ceased, and the sound of his voice rose rich and vibrant to the open window in the first stanza of the serenade. She was pushed by an impulse to speak to him—penetrated by the conviction that he would understand and rejoice with her. Madame Périntot's words, concerning the part he had played in bringing her good fortune, still throbbed in her brain. She was possessed by strong excitement, by an inward certainty that either her persistent beating on the Gates of Chance or her ardent pleading to the Creator for the fragile child of her musical life which feebly stirred within her, had been heard. The Gates of Chance had opened, and, tremendously alive, all the unborn genius of her musical gift cried aloud, struggling for birth.

She did not stop longer to think. The man who had unlocked the Gates of Chance stood below in the courtyard; she must tell him that he had been the messenger of fate. She would go down and speak to him, making the excuse of taking him his weekly *sou*. To-day, because of her great gladness, she would give him double portion. She went into her bedroom and, taking her purse from the top drawer of her dressing-table, extracted two *sous* from the meagre little store. Ordinarily she would have deemed the proceeding on which she was about to embark lacking in modesty—an imprudent action. Now it seemed to her a ceremony which it was her duty to perform without delay. Therefore she opened the door on to the passage and ran downstairs into the courtyard.

"Monsieur," she cried breathlessly, as she stood before him, bright-eyed and graceful, "here is your *sou*. I have brought you two to-day, because I am very glad, and because it is through you that happiness had come to me. I am here to thank you for the pleasure that your music had given me."

She paused, her breath still coming quickly. The musician looked at her curiously. She was obviously labouring under the influence of some strong emotion; for the blood, pulsing in her throat, beat rhythmically under the pale skin. The front of her cotton blouse rose and fell perceptibly with the

violent beating of her heart. If she had been beautiful at a distance, at this moment, when he stood close to her, looking into her eyes, his inspection proved her to be even more worthy of study than his first impression had promised. Truly her beauty was astonishingly high-bred for a woman of the people. Her speech, too, was educated. Hypolite, fastidious and easily displeased by lack of finish, had no taste for the common or brutal in quality. Here, face to face with a girl whose dress and dwelling proclaimed her eminently of the people, he was forced to acknowledge that, even to so captious a critic as himself, no fault presented itself worthy of comment. There was nothing about this lovely child that "jarred;" and the absence of that particular form of vice—for to a person of Hypolite's temperament the power of "jarring" is relegated to that category—enchanted him as combined with her extreme simplicity and youth.

He speculated, with curiosity, as to the cause of her evident emotion. Could it in any way be connected with Madame Périntot's visit? He was almost sure this must be the case. Had the girl mentioned him to Madame Périntot, and did that account for the latter's earnest counsel of prudence? Something of Marguérite's excitement had communicated itself to him. Over receptive of sensation—as is the case with so many artists—he had suffered conscientious scruples as the consequence of her strong anxiety. Now he was touched with the exhilaration of Eugénie's youth and gladness, and became buoyantly overflowing with sympathy. Only, as that mental and visionary exhilaration increased, passion took him like a sudden wave, and, as her light fingers, holding the coins, touched the palm of his hand, a sensation thrilled him, novel and peculiarly poignant, as if he had encountered an unknown and enchanting part of himself. Inwardly he was in a turmoil. He felt that he was losing his self-possession, inflamed by her eager youth and vivid aliveness.

"I am glad," he answered courteously, "if I have given you pleasure, mademoiselle. It is not often that the street musician has the honour of receiving thanks in addition to the sous of the passer-by. More often than not he is cursed for a very tiresome fellow—a disturber of the peace."

"Oh," she cried earnestly, touched by the picture he drew,

"I cannot imagine not caring for your singing. I can only tell you what a pleasure it has been to me. If any persons are stupid enough not to appreciate it, it must be because they do not understand."

"Alas, mademoiselle," he returned plaintively, "when you grow older you will realize that it is only the minority who understand. And the pity of it is," he added, his eyes twinkling, "that the majority are unaware of their shortcoming, they glory in their colossal ignorance, accounting lack of temperament a virtue."

Eugénie listened seriously. Hypolite, watching her intelligent and expressive face, was filled with veritable fury against Madame Périnot. It was all very well for her to counsel prudence. Here was the shy bird with the bright eyes under his hand. Impossible—he reflected impatiently—impossible, if not ungallant, to be prudent; for, in this case—he argued with himself irritably—the bird had fluttered down and perched itself on his finger unsolicited. It would be the act of a vandal, of a person devoid of the most rudimentary instinct of civility, to discourage its dainty attentions and frighten it away—maddening thought—perhaps to perch elsewhere!

Hypolite decided on compromise. He would encourage the shy bird to make advances, while he himself would remain strictly passive, receptive, sympathetic—above all things sympathetic. Mentally he took refuge in the word as non-committal but satisfactory. He was charmed, therefore, at the success of his policy when he observed that, meditating on his words, the shy bird seemed in no hurry to depart; but, eagerly devouring his scattered crumbs of conversation, waited expectantly for more.

"You may think me strange, monsieur," she began again pleadingly, "for speaking to you like this. But I felt that I must thank you, for, had you not come here every Saturday and sung in the courtyard, I should never have learnt your song. I felt so strong a desire to speak with you, that, impulsively, I obeyed my instinct."

"Another person within the half-hour! Two women—both attractive—who have found by irresistible impulse that they must speak to me," said Hypolite to himself, secretly amused. Then aloud: "You also sing, mademoiselle? But this is most interesting! I knew that you were fond of

music, but I had no idea that I was entertaining a *confrère* with my poor efforts."

Eugénie blushed.

"I sing a little, monsieur, and it has been my great desire to learn more. Thus it was that, perhaps impertinently, every week when you came here, I stole a lesson from you. That I have benefited by your skill you may know, for a certainty; since, to-day, the lady to whom you have just been speaking heard me sing what you had unconsciously taught me. She was so pleased that she has promised to give me lessons."

"Ah! but this is delightful," he exclaimed with enthusiasm. "I am enchanted that my song has been the means of procuring you pleasure. Had I known"—he looked into her eyes—"as I now know, that you, too, were a devotee of the God of Art, and that you longed to continue your studies, I would have offered you my services. Perhaps I might have been able to help you; but it seems," he added regretfully, "that you have already fallen on your feet. Madame Périntot"—and he laughed—"Madame Périntot is an accomplished teacher; she will, if you have talent, assure your future."

"Ah, yes! that is what she has promised to do," she answered exultantly. "A year I have waited, and have prayed *le bon Dieu* every day. In the most solemn moments of the Mass, have I entreated that He would hear me and send me a teacher in the place of the one I have lost. And He has heard me." Her eyes became alight with inspiration. "Though I did not know it you were the messenger and forerunner. I knew that your singing moved me strangely, but until to-day I did not know the interpretation of your message. I understand now. You were His messenger, and the voice of my fate."

Greatly affected, Hypolite began to comprehend Madame Périntot's earnestness. With the solemnity in the girl's manner remembrance of the former's warning touched him too. He was penetrated by unreasoning alarm. But, like a child, who has been told that danger lurks in some forbidden pleasure, he could not resist the fascinating allurements of prohibition. A certain jealousy, too, whetted his curiosity. Why should he be the forerunner only of another? Was it not possible that Madame Périntot, having discovered unusual

talent in the girl, wished to keep the knowledge to herself, in order that she might profit by it? He had, after all, the prior right, for he had made the discovery first. It was unjust, unfair on her part to claim exclusive rights. He felt indignant with the excellent Madame Périntot. And then, too, had not the girl's chance come through his singing? Would he not therefore be justified in continuing to take an interest in his *protégée*? He refused to admit the good lady's exclusive rights. Reason proved that she could not be altogether disinterested in her championship of the girl.

Prudence left him. True, he was going away, but, when he came back, it would be easy to see her again. Meanwhile a little sympathy, a gentle dalliance, was surely permissible and agreeable. Madame Périntot, with her melodramatic waving of scarecrows—figments of imagination—must take a back seat. Once more he spoke to Eugénie, wilfully striking the intimate note. He drew nearer to her, but the very nearness of his person in fact removed him further, as Eugénie, confused by the change in his manner, became troubled; and when his voice broke the silence again, she shrank back.

"Ah, mademoiselle, mademoiselle!" he cried, "you are so young, and the world is still a place of delicious revelation for you. Who knows but that you stand on the threshold of an infinitely fair future? I have a conviction, in that future, we shall meet again. Perhaps not just yet—since, on your own showing, my message is delivered. But, if kindly fate should fulfil my prophecy, and at the same time grant my very ardent wish, we will talk together and recount the result of our several experiences." He looked at her whimsically. "Perhaps, even, we will play together as children play, a pretty game of make-believe. Only then you must promise"—here he laughed with spontaneous mirth—"that you will not weep when the playing is ended because it does not come true."

Eugénie, half understanding, half bewildered, fascinated, yet afraid, stood silently looking at him.

"Who are you? What are you?" she asked gravely.

"I am a musician, and I ply my trade," he answered, impressed by his own fancies. "Sometimes I gain *sous*, sometimes I am without. I am often tired, I am often hungry"—at the thought of his purely imaginary sorrows his voice trembled—"but never do I forget to love my art, and,

the possibility of the schools being removed to England. The law for the expulsion of the Religious Orders had been passed, and the nuns, tremulous and aflutter, awaited the march of events.

"What shall I do if you go away?" the young girl had said weeping. "Who will help me with my music? I shall be utterly miserable without my long silent days of retreat here. And the babies—who will care for them, when their mothers are at work—those who are too little to be left alone?"

"Hush, my child," Sister Marie-Terèse answered, tenderly reproving her. "If we go it is God's purpose. Who knows but that He has more important work for us to do elsewhere? You, too," she added gently, laying a kind hand on the bowed head, "you too, may have work to do in the world."

But Eugénie, racked with bitter weeping, shook her head. "The convent is my home, cannot I come with you? Take me," she sobbed, "take me with you, let me too become one of the holy women. I ask nothing better than to devote my life to the Church. What has the world to offer but motherhood, and have I not here"—she smiled through her tears—"babies enough to fill my arms?"

Sister Marie-Terèse looked at her, smiling gravely.

"No, you have another duty, my child," she answered softly. "Have you forgotten that, if you come with us, the aunt who has brought you up, who has slaved for you, would be left alone? We Religious believe that it is not from the motive of obtaining what is pleasant to us, that we should give up the world. This is not vocation, but egoism. No," she repeated, her voice resonant, her face spiritual with strong resolve, "when the first rumour of this trouble came, I meditated long on the possibility of your future. I came to the conclusion that your duty lies in remaining with your aunt. You are too young to make the irrevocable decision. It is my counsel that you stay. Later, if you still wish to return to us, it may be possible to arrange for you to do so. Meantime, I will speak to the Abbé Goujon, who has been your confessor here. If you are in any difficulty he will advise you."

But the Abbé Goujon, kindly and benevolent, in answer to Eugénie's tearful pleading, had emphatically endorsed Sister Marie-Terèse's words. So, one misty morning in November, she had seen the nuns with their corded boxes, their

great white caps almost concealing their anxious and pathetic faces, depart from the Gare du Nord—a little company of saints and pilgrims setting forth, their eyes bright with the glamour of the first breath of persecution, into the unknown, to dwell in exile in a grey land across the sea. As the train was about to leave, Sister Marie-Terèse, leaning out of the window, her eyes full of tears, stooped down and put in her hand an ivory crucifix carved and yellow with age. Eugénie knew this had been her most cherished possession, having belonged to her mother.

"Good-bye, my child," she said, "be patient and your opportunity will come. It is grief to me to part from you, but in that parting lies some purpose of the Almighty—in the future it will surely be revealed."

Then the great train had steamed out, bearing the company of nuns, who fluttered like white doves at the window. An anguish of weeping took her. Claspings the crucifix, she hurried, blinded by tears, back to the convent, meaning to spend a quiet hour in the chapel; but, desolately empty, the bare walls and windows outside gave her no greeting. The doorway was guarded by *gendarmes*, who refused her entry. Thus from her life suddenly passed that which had been the most vital element of her being. Alone she was left to gather up the threads which had been broken. But in her sorrow she clung to the promise of Sister Marie-Terèse.

The Abbé Goujon had been good to her, and, realizing she was too refined to take kindly to rough labour, had, amongst his parishioners, found her a little *clientèle* of people who wanted skilled needlework done for them. Well trained in this direction, she succeeded in earning a modest living. But never, since the departure of Sister Marie-Terèse, had she been able to find an outlet for her musical talent. Victorine Dupont discouraged her from any effort to do so. The subject was a sore one with her. She had been angry at the way the nuns had petted the girl and taught her music, and, when they departed, expressed herself freely on the subject, declaring that she hoped Eugénie would not trouble her any more with "all that nonsense," but settle down to work like a good girl.

Eugénie did not forget, however, and ardently, morning and evening, she petitioned the Virgin and the goodly company of Saints to aid her. Therefore, when two years

after the departure of the nuns Madame Périntot suddenly stepped in with her offer, it was but natural that the highly strung and deeply religious child should take her coming as a direct answer to prayer.

Now, on entering her bedroom, she flung herself down on her little bed. Over her head hung the ivory crucifix which had once belonged to Sister Marie-Terèse—entwined with palm and a bead rosary. Beneath the crucifix was a bracket, on which stood a small jar, containing a bunch of lily of the valley.

She lay back on the bed, gazing at the square patch of sky seen through the window and the fleecy clouds which sailed across the blue. Madame Périntot's coming had been such an astonishing event, it seemed to her that a new and wonderful life was dawning before her. Remembrance came to her of the day of her parting with her former teacher. How she longed now to tell her that at last had come the fulfilment of her promise at parting! God had sent her definite work to do in the world. Exhilaration—ecstasy almost—filled her. She got up and took the rosary from the arms of the crucifix. Kneeling down she began to recite the decades, her eyes fixed on the shadowed ivory figure. Her prayer was a passionate outpouring of gratitude, and a plea for the power to fulfil her destiny worthily.

At the end of reciting the rosary she got up, and, thrusting the string of beads into her bodice, where they lay cold against her skin, she moved to the window. Outside the sunshine touched the roofs of the tall houses, as they mounted upward to Montmartre. High above them, pale, like the tabernacle of some visionary New Jerusalem bathed in golden light, the Church of the *Sacre Cœur* was uplifted. To-day the sight of it filled her with peculiar gladness. God had not forgotten her.

She turned from the window, went into the kitchen and began to busy herself over familiar tasks. Putting away the ironing board and her work basket, she made up the fire, filled a saucepan with water, placing it on the hob. Then, taking out a basin, she filled it also with water, throwing some garlic and potatoes in it, and began to wash and peel them, in readiness for the evening meal.

Usually, when she was alone at work, she sang; but now, though she longed to hear again the sound of the voice which

had brought her such good fortune, she felt afraid. A sudden reverence for her gift, a paralysing consciousness of the possibility of being overheard, confused and silenced her.

She thought of her conversation with the musician, and felt bewildered by the emotion she had experienced when he looked into her eyes. Eugénie—convent-bred—had never before been in so long or intimate a conversation with any man. Her knowledge of men was confined to mere passing salutations in the streets. Of love and sex she was ignorant. To her, marriage was a Sacrament ordained for the binding of those who love, and for the safeguarding of the family. Sin—in connection with the relations of the sexes—was a crude entity, represented mainly by the bald words of Biblical tradition. Therefore her conversation with the singer had been to her delightful—free from embarrassment, until the moment when Hypolite, casting prudence to the winds, had begun, although delicately, to sound the intimate note. Maidenly modesty, *farouche* and self-protective, made her shrink from him troubled because of her inability to analyse the aforesaid sensation, and uneasy because those light-blue eyes, which had looked so closely into her own, haunted her. Persistently and irresistibly she visualized those eyes. Wherever she turned she seemed to meet them, and to feel the clasp of his hands. Other details of his appearance, too, came before her clearly—the graceful form of his well-kept brown hands; the rakish tip of the hat, which gave him an air of gallantry and romance, the faint odour of cigarettes which clung about him.

She felt again the mysterious sense of comradeship between them, the tightening of the invisible bond of sympathy which drew them together. She was attracted, too, by his good breeding, though she did not realize it as such. At the convent many of the nuns had been women of noble family, and the child had unconsciously imitated their ways. In Hypolite's refined and polished manner, something, as belonging to a *milieu* other than the one in which she now lived, attracted her. Thinking of him she placed him, notwithstanding his apparent poverty, rather in that cultivated and well-ordered past, than in the coarser atmosphere of her present life—which, barren of art and of beauty, save in religion, in no way satisfied her craving for romance. Hypolite, essentially romantic in aspect, and

attitude, occupied her mind. She was conscious of his presence in thought, though in body he was absent. She resolved when he came again—for she never doubted but that he would come—she would report to him the result of her interview with Madame Périntot, should it indeed result in the good fortune she hoped. For—she repeated to herself as excuse for her constant thought of him—did she not owe it all to his persistent coming? She began to long eagerly to converse with him once more.

But here footsteps in the passage, and the sound of some heavy object set down roughly on the boarded floor, aroused her from her meditation. Eugénie knew that her aunt, Victorine Dupont, had returned from Les Halles.

CHAPTER V

VICTORINE DUPONT was an able and industrious woman who, from her girlhood, had worked in the vegetable market in Les Halles. Rough and forceful, almost with the muscular strength of a man, she did not know what it was to be ill. Belonging to the peasant class, she represented a curious mixture of narrow religion, inherited through the Breton blood of her fanatical father, and Revolutionary violence and hatred of the aristocrat from her mother. Her father, younger son of a fisherman, had been brought up in a small Breton seaport. Her grandfather Dupont was part owner of a fishing smack, and his son, as a baby child, could remember—even from the cradle—the strong odour of fish that clung to everything in his home. Vaguely he connected that odour mostly with his father, who, when he took him up in his arms, was scented with the fresh salt wind and the smell of fish, and whose boots and hands were always speckled with the little shining fish-scales.

At night he would wonder why the wind—which when it blew most fiercely only lulled him to the more peaceful slumber—disturbed his mother's sleep so often. Sometimes, when a violent gale shook the house, she would start up from her warm bed and kneel on the bare cold floor, rosary in hand. The impression of her, as she knelt in the moonlight, her lips moving in a silent agony of supplication, while her

startled eyes looked out with strained intentness into the darkness, gave him a troubled feeling. He would cry out, and she would come to him and take him in her arms, pressing him against her warm bosom and kissing him almost with violence. Then she would lay him down, tuck him in cosily, and, leaning over him, rock him till, lulled by the wind and her protecting presence, he would sleep until dawn.

One autumn night, when he was about eight years old, the boats had been out since dusk. Waking fitfully, conscious of his mother's restlessness, he had watched her pale face as she prayed. With the breaking of the grey dawn she had dressed him and taken him down to the shore. There, amongst a little group of anxious watchers, in the sound of the screaming wind and raging waters, the young woman and the frightened child had looked out to sea. The driving spray stung them sharply in the face as the great waves thundered in. He remembered clinging to his mother's hand, while the tips of his ears ached with the whistle of the wind.

Then, as the light began to brighten, and the eastern horizon grew livid, he had been pierced with terror, for a low cry from the little waiting crowd had gone up—pitifully shrill and feeble—and been lost in the howl of the wind. Out at sea, now rolling on the crest of the foam, now lost to sight in the trough of the waves, a black mass was being driven ashore.

"What is it, mother," he cried.

"A lost fishing boat," she answered, and her eyes—hollow with watching—burned like a flame that is almost spent at the day's coming. Her skirts, flung by the wind, whipped him in the face so that he wept; but his mother, staring out into the storm, took no notice of him. A little black speck was tossing on the incoming wave; lifted high, it was flung on the rocky shore. Pitched on a point of rock, it hung limp—the inanimate semblance of a man. On one side of the rock the arms, flung back, showed dark, while the paleness of a human face was visible between them. On the other side of the point of rock the legs, in their long sea boots, were grotesquely agitated as the water boiled up and submerged them. Then a wave, greater than the others, lifted the body and cast it at the feet of the waiting crowd. In a moment the men had caught the arms of the dripping corpse

and pulled it away from the dragging suck of water. It seemed to the child that the body resisted their efforts to bring it to safety—lying heavy on the shingle—while, even above the howl of winds and waves, he could hear the harsh noise of those heavy-heeled boots, as they grated on the shingle like a boat's keel, leaving a little double furrow in their progress.

The child felt himself pulled violently forward, and, in another moment, with a great wailing cry his mother had flung herself on the body. Looking on the face—pale, battered and bruised—he recognized his father. Later he remembered that, when the body was brought home, the little silver fish-scales still adhered to the dead hands and the big sea boots, and that a great pool had formed of water which dripped from the sodden clothes on to the floor.

The boy conceived so great a hatred of the sea, that, as soon as he was old enough, he went to Paris. There he obtained, through his knowledge of the fishing trade, the position of porter in the fish market.

Some years later, when he was about one and twenty, as he was carrying a heavy basket into one of the great alleyways of the market, he cannoned into an extremely pretty girl, by name Liberté Grogard, who, while abusing him roundly, helped him to pick up the fish. The acquaintance, thus formed by chance, continued until it ripened into love.

Liberté—daughter of a certain terrible and famous woman, Mère Grogard, nicknamed *La couleuse du sang*, who had been one of the most relentless and sanguinary Tricoteuses of the Terror—held in contempt all the delicacies and reserve which the simple Breton had been accustomed to regard as part of an honest woman's business in life. Sharp of tongue and witty, she stung him with her gibes, while at the same time she coquetted with him, fascinating the simple youth. Eventually the two married; and she became the mother of twin girls whom she named Victorine and Marthe.

After some years she died of a sudden fever, leaving him with the little girls, then barely four years old. Marthe was sent to a charitable institution—without the care she there received she certainly would not have survived, being weakly and ailing. But Victorine, sturdy and strong, was brought up in Les Halles. Her father having now, through

his wife, a considerable knowledge of the vegetable trade, had given up his business in the fish market and taken over the stall that belonged to Liberté.

He kept the baby always with him ; but, embittered by the loss of his wife, he turned for comfort to a narrow and fanatical practice of religion amounting almost to mania. Much of this attitude of mind he instilled into the child. Playing about in the great markets, however, she picked up the coarse speech and brutal attitude of mind belonging to the women who worked there, together with their hatred—an aftermath of the Revolution—of refinement, cleanliness, and all that appertains to breeding or luxury. When her father died she kept his stall. Marthe meantime, being particularly pretty and delicate looking, had been first *vendeuse* at one of the big shops, where her natural grace and slender figure had obtained her the post of *mannequin*. Later she obtained the place of lady's maid to the Baronne de Gonville—a client of the establishment who had taken a fancy to her.

The twins, having little in common, owing to differences of education and environment, during their girlhood did not see much of one another ; and when Marthe accompanied her mistress to Rome, where the Baron de Gonville held the post of Ambassador, Victorine, for a time, completely lost touch with her sister.

Late one winter night, Victorine Dupont was aroused by a knocking on the outer door of her tenement. Hastily putting a skirt over her nightgown, throwing a shawl round her shoulders and slipping her feet into list slippers, she went to the door, and opened it cautiously. In the flickering light of her candle she perceived her sister standing, leaning against the wall. Marthe was richly dressed in furs and velvet, but her expression was one of great despair and her face showed pinched and drawn.

" Let me come in, Victorine," she said ; and, flinging herself on Victorine's bosom, she sobbed as if her heart would break.

Victorine soothed her, and, after much weeping and distress on Marthe's part, extracted the fact that she had left the service of the Baronne de Gonville, some months previously, ruined and disgraced. She confessed to having carried on an intrigue with the young Prince Humberto Paleria, a frequent visitor at the Embassy. And he, having

kept her for a while, had now deserted her—she being *enceinte*.

Broken by his treatment she left Rome ill and desperate, and thus took refuge with her sister. But her constitution, undermined by humiliation and distress, was unable to survive the agony of childbirth. She died, leaving the three days old baby on her sister's hands. Victorine, bitterly angry with the man who had ruined her sister, had written to tell him of the result of his cruelty, omitting, however, to inform him that the baby survived. The young man sent her money, which she sent back with brutal abuse; and, piece by piece, she burned the costly clothes and furs which her sister had worn on her return. Victorine took a fierce pleasure in destroying the beautiful things—making those nightly burnings almost a religious ceremony, during which she cursed the aristocrat who brought this shame on herself and on the sister whom she loved. She brooded silently and angrily over the story of her sister's wrongs, till her hatred of one man developed into hatred of the whole sex.

Victorine, of tongue, coarsely made and unattractive, she was not sought by men; and when sometimes one, bolder than his fellows, struck by her ability and industriousness, would essay to become on more familiar terms with her, Victorine, savagely frank, would retort, with vitriolic abuse, that she had no use for lover or husband. Down in Les Halles they called her "*la vierge folle*," jesting coarsely on the subject of her hatred of the other sex—but never in her presence; for once, when a girl had laughed in her face for a *vieille fille*, Victorine caught her up bodily in her arms and carried her, struggling and shrieking, amid the laughter and jeers of the onlookers, out of the market, casting her terrified on a heap of fish offal and saying:

"Lie there, scum of the streets, on your own bed."

She made friends with no one; but, after the episode of the offal-heap, remained unmolested by their tongues, and it came to be acknowledged that, if it was impossible to sell her bad goods, she never gave short weight or sold rotten vegetables herself. Her honesty and justice were impeccable.

Though unmarried she chose to call herself Madame Dupont and to wear a wedding ring; and, because of the

tradition of her strength and fierceness, no one questioned her right to do so.

Until the expulsion of the nuns, she had seen little of Eugénie. Then the girl, more dependent on her aunt's company, began to feel it impossible that their life together should ever be a really happy one. Victorine, in her anxiety to keep her niece from harm, threw her, unconsciously, under the very influence which—had she realized it—she should have most dreaded. For the love of music and refinement had become so deeply rooted in Eugénie that life with her aunt, violent of speech and neither over clean nor intelligent, filled her with almost physical disgust.

Victorine, too, felt the irksomeness of the restraint she was obliged to put on herself in her niece's presence. Every time that the young girl showed a love of dainty and cleanly ways of speech and living, the elder woman was overcome by desire to break into the language of Les Halles. This refinement in her niece became a constant source of annoyance to her. In it she thought she detected the blood of the seducer who had so cruelly deserted her sister Marthe. Angrily she would rail at the girl's little attempts to introduce, into the somewhat rough and ready *ménage*, a measure of comfort. Furiously she would forbid anything but the barest necessities in clothes and food—and these of the commonest description.

Eugénie, being young and hardy, submitted, but many times she longed for the gentle converse with the nuns and her happy days at the convent.

Victorine did not permit her to go down to Les Halles; but Eugénie, in addition to her trade of dressmaking, undertook all the cleaning, cooking, and washing of the little establishment, also the making of their simple clothes.

The older woman was kind in her own fashion. Beneath her rough manner lay a deep and tender affection for the girl. All the concentrated passion in her nature she expended on the waif who had been left to her care. Devout and fanatical like her father, she saw to it that Eugénie never missed performing her religious duties. On Saturday afternoons she would fetch the child from the convent, and, as soon as she was old enough, would take her to the Abbé Goujon to lisp her baby confession. On Sunday mornings

they would go together to the big church near by, to hear Mass.

This going to High Mass was an exquisite pleasure to Eugénie, since the music of the great organ and the beauty of the ceremonial—far surpassing that of the convent chapel—carried her far away into visions and imaginings.

Often, in the dimness of the church, as she knelt beside her aunt in some quiet corner behind a pillar, when the swelling music rose echoing through the archways and the cloud of sweet-smelling incense mounted to the dome, the child's eyes would brim over with tears, and a great, immeasurable distance of beauty would seem unfolded before her—a beauty of thought and feeling which she could neither reach nor fathom, but from out which something called her faintly, alluringly, persistently—with reiterating reverberation as of a bell that clanged, silver-tongued, from the future.

So poignant and so real seemed that calling sometimes, that, trembling in every limb, she would stumble out of church in the crowd, her heart swelling within her. Always that calling filled her with such tremendous emotion that she could have swooned with excitement. Always, too, it came to her with the sound of music which stirred within her the nostalgia of childhood. Then the little awakening soul would shudder in the grip of the terror and wonder of the unknown.

Now, on the threshold of womanhood, she began to realize the immateriality of those visions—to realize that they belonged not to the commonplace life which she lived day by day, but to some world, as yet far off, and without the pale of normal existence. Would the eternal, relentless, never-ending wheels of time pass on without the fulfilment of the promise of those childish dreams and yearnings? Was the undiscovered joy and sorrow of living to be as great for her as her quivering childish soul had believed?

Something of her unformed conceptions, something great and intangible, to-day appeared to be breaking through the wall of the future. Since the departure of the nuns, the visionary side of her nature had lain dormant; now, called once again into active being—the more powerful for that period of quiescence—it awoke in her masterful and dominating. No longer did her brain weave dreams ethereal and exquisite, floating in misted vagueness; but the march

of definite and irresistible circumstance became a triumphant pageant to her thought. But whether that future, which shone from out the glory of her dreams, came to her from Madame Périntot's promise, or from her meeting with the musician of the light blue eyes, she could not discern. In the turmoil of her mind the two things had become indistinguishable.

So when Victorine returned—shrewdly observant of something unexplained in the young girl's manner—she noted the brightness of those usually vague and sombre eyes. Observed, too, that a certain flush of womanly beauty—heightening the charm and accentuating the vigour of her graceful body—irradiated Eugénie's whole person. It was as though she had awakened suddenly from the slumber of childhood, and, stretching out her hands, had grasped the mystery of womanhood, unwitting as yet what its meaning might be.

Victorine—flat-footed, and that surpassing *rondité* which attacks the French peasant woman in middle life—when she no longer cares to charm, but lives mainly for the sake of comfort and of the thousand little activities which surround her daily economies and expenditure—was still in the prime of life.

Her grey hair, thick and oily, was piled on the top of her head. She wore the tightly-fitting bodice and short full skirt affected by the women of Les Halles. A knitted woollen shawl of coarse, hairy texture half concealed her massive bosom and shoulders. The skin of her face, hands, and short neck was red and chafed from constant exposure to the varying temperature of the markets. Her thick lips—above the upper one of which showed a considerable shading of dark hair—were cracked and purple. Her eyes, strongly marked by eyelash and eyebrow, were slightly prominent; and, as she talked, she had a habit of looking restlessly about her, so that the round, red-brown bloodshot eyes rolled—unpleasantly suggestive of those of a bull. Her hair grew low on her narrow forehead, and her head was dwarfed by the proportions of her powerful arms and shoulders.

She entered the room carrying a string bag full of small parcels, which she set down heavily on the ground, as, breathless, she seated herself in a chair by the wooden table.

"Pouf!" she said, drawing her hand across her forehead

to wipe away the beads of perspiration which had gathered there, "the weather begins to turn to spring, and I begin to feel my fifty years. It is not for nothing that one dwells on the fifth floor. Fetch in the basket of vegetables that I have left on the landing, my girl, and then bring me a little cup of *vin ordinaire*—mix it well with water—for I am thirsty."

Eugénie fetched the big covered basket, and, going to the cupboard, took out a bottle of thin red wine. Filling a glass with water, she poured a little wine into it and handed it to her aunt. As she did so, the latter again noted a change in her niece's manner.

"*Tiens!*" she exclaimed, "what has taken you, my girl? You look as if the Spring was in your blood!" She paused—her hand holding the glass of wine a few inches from her lips. "Did you finish the dress and take it to the old lady in good time?"

"I finished the dress, Aunt Victorine." Eugénie moved to the back of the table, picking a cabbage, two lettuces and some sticks of chicory out of the basket. "But," she added, "just as I was going to take it out, the lady's daughter came and fetched it—before I had time to start."

"Then you have not been out, I hope you were not late?" demanded Victorine sharply.

"No, Aunt Victorine, there would have been plenty of time for me to reach the Place des Masques by the hour the old lady mentioned, but she seems to have been very anxious lest I should fail to come."

"Ah!—she was of a foolish and nervous disposition. I have no patience with such folly. She could have worn another dress at her niece's wedding and it would not have been noticed; for who will look at the aged," she scoffed, "when there is a young bride at the altar?"

Then she drained the glass of wine, wiping her mouth on her sleeve.

"The old lady's daughter is rich," put in Eugénie quietly. "At least she wore clothes which were beautiful and must have cost much."

"Then it is a thousand pities you did not make her mother pay more for the making of the dress," Victorine commented. "But these rich people are always avaricious. I know them," and she nodded. "They come to the market some-

times, poorly dressed, hoping to buy our goods cheaper than they can get them at the shops. But they cannot deceive us! We women of Les Halles know them! They cannot disguise their mincing ways, and we make them pay the same as they would in the shops—with their tram fares and heavy baskets into the bargain," and she laughed raucously.

"The old lady was not avaricious," protested Eugénie, repelled afresh by the unsavouriness and almost masculine roughness of her aunt. "She told me all about her niece's wedding. It is to be at Acquarelle. They are quite poor people and the old lady was born there. She wished this dress to be of the same kind as the ones she used to wear as a girl."

"Ah! ah!" grunted the other. "You are too kind-hearted, Eugénie; one of these days you will be taken in finely. Those who speak you soft have generally their own axe to grind, and the softer they speak the sharper the axe. But you will always be deceived, my girl, for you never will suspect ill of anyone. For my part I think it is more profitable to suspect ill—so that one may sometimes unexpectedly come across an honest person."

She took off her shawl, and, turning to the sink, washed her hands in a bucket of cold water.

Eugénie began nervously to store the vegetables on the shelves of a cupboard to the left of the sink. She was silent—meditating the best method of introducing a subject which she feared would arouse Victorine to resentful anger. At last she spoke, and a little tremor shook her voice.

"The lady's daughter came in here," she said. "She was very kind to me, she heard me singing as she came upstairs."

"It is a wonder she was not frightened away by your noise," returned Victorine harshly, drying her hands on a roller towel.

Eugénie stooped and picked up some scattered lettuce leaves that had fallen on the floor. When she stood up her eyes flashed, there was a new look of battle in them. She answered the older woman defiantly.

"She was not frightened," she asserted. "She has asked me to go and see her and to sing to her again."

Victorine turned round quickly, her expression was menacing, her face crimson. For a minute she did not speak,

then she burst out with coarse accent and threatening gesture :

"So that is the meaning of your bright eyes. I knew mischief would come of your singing. I will not have it, I tell you. Why cannot you behave like a sensible girl and hold your tongue? Who is this woman, with her fine clothes?" she demanded, fiercely sneering. "Can she do better for you than I have done—who have brought you up from a whimpering babe, and fed and clothed you, since you were motherless? Often, at night, when you were sick, have I rocked you in these arms. I have worked for you, slaved for you—starved well-nigh—to give you a decent start in life, and put you where you could lead a clean one. Would your fine lady have done as much for you? More likely she would have thrown you out on the pavement to eat the bread of charity." She smote her closed fist on the table. "Keep to your station, I say, and leave rich folk to theirs."

Eugénie facing her aunt, pale but determined to fight what she considered injustice, spoke again.

"You are unreasonable and unjust, Aunt Victorine. Because I care for music it is no proof that I am ungrateful to you for all you have done for me."

"Unreasonable, am I?" interrupted the older woman furiously. "You would stand up for your own way? I tell you that no good will come from those who do not belong to your station. I forbid you to have anything to do with her."

"No, no," cried Eugénie in agony, "You do not understand, Aunt Victorine, I must go and see her, I have promised, and she was kind——"

"Ah!" the other returned, bitterly. "They are all the same, fine clothes and soft living, mincing ways of speech—what do these hide but foul hearts and rotten souls? They are accursed, the rich; and to you, girl, if you knew it, doubly accursed. If I were to tell you how rich folk treated your mother, dragging her down to shame, ruin, and broken death, you would cut your own tongue out before you would speak with them."

Eugénie, trembling now with anger and emotion, had come close to her aunt. She looked at her for a moment speechless, then she clenched her hands passionately and,

breathing quickly, jerked out her questions between her clenched teeth.

"What do you mean? How dare you insult my mother! Answer!" she cried proudly, with a lift of her head. "Say what you like to me, but abuse her you shall not, you dare not."

Before the storm of her anger, Victorine, amazed, retreated. She passed her hand over her forehead and, moving backwards, her eyes fixed on the beautiful face now distorted by passion, she leaned against the table.

"I spoke truth," she answered sadly, with a certain dignity. Then, as the girl regarded her in unrelenting hostility:

"And you had better curb your temper, or you will hear things which will humble your pride."

"Answer," cried Eugénie once more—almost inarticulate, her face deathly white, her lips trembling, yet indomitable in her fury. "What lie is this about my mother? Speak, explain, I have a right to know."

Victorine put her fat red hands—their nails ringed with the black earth of her vegetables—on the table, and leaned forward, her head bowed.

"Yes," she whispered, and her voice wavering, and infinitely pathetic, seemed to come from a distance. "I will tell you no more lies. You have a right to know."

She sat down in the chair and sighed heavily. Her opposition appeared to have given way, only a great dejection and shame seemed to envelop her. Her mind had travelled back into the sorrow of the past. After a moment she spoke, and her voice sounded monotonously as if she were weary.

"I knew that the day and the hour would come," she said, "when I should have to tell you the truth."

She looked at Eugénie fixedly, but the latter had shrunk back against the wall, pale and almost cowed. In the girl's eyes was a great fear and horror, as if she dreaded the revelation that was about to be made. The ground seemed to heave beneath her feet, and the gross figure of her aunt, as she leaned on the table, became blurred to her sight. But the monotonous voice reached her again, the words shattering her mentally.

"You ask me for truth, and I tell it to you. Your mother

—and my sister, mark you, for she was more dear to me than she can ever be to the child who never saw her—was for six months the mistress of the Prince Humberto Paleria, and, when he cruelly deserted her, I took her in.” Her voice faltered, then grew strong again, while her hands clasped convulsively. “Yes I, Victorine of Les Halles, saved the mistress of a prince from the gutter, and worse than the gutter, when the rich lover had done with her.”

Looking up, she saw that Eugénie, with unseeing eyes, swayed where she stood, putting out her hands for support.

“Mother, mother,” she wailed, as the tears rained down her cheeks. “My poor little mother.”

Victorine, touched by the piteousness of that slender, swaying body and the bitterness of that weeping, held out her arms.

“Come here, my girl,” she said, “cry here. Barren woman I am, but these arms sheltered you as a baby.”

Eugénie flung herself across the room, and, dropping on the ground at Victorine’s feet, clasped her arms round the woman’s massive thighs, and hid her face in the rough serge lap.

For the moment Victorine was happy, for the child whom she loved was her own again.

“Forgive me,” Eugénie sobbed, “if I said harsh things to you. Never, never can I be grateful enough for your goodness to me and to her.”

“Do not cry so, my little girl,” Victorine murmured, her own fierce eyes overflowing. “It all happened long ago. The years that have passed have hidden the sorrow and shame beneath the soil where she lies buried.”

“Long ago,” Eugénie repeated, “before I was born. Yet for me it happens now—the story of my mother’s love for the man who was my father.” And she wept afresh.

“Shame killed her,” Victorine asserted. A tear fell from the woman’s eyes and splashed on to the girl’s neck. “I would not have told you this,” she went on, “had I not seen in you the same longing for soft and comfortable living that was the ruin of your mother. You think me cruel, my girl,” she added, as Eugénie, raising a tear-stained face, looked at her piteously, “but I loved your mother, and I love you as if you were my own, so, when I see you

hankering after the ways of the rich, for your own good I am stern with you."

Eugénie got up from the ground. Her tears still flowed, but she was calm and self-possessed once more. A certain dignity—after the abandon to the first shock of the revelation of the circumstances of her birth had passed—came into her manner. Only her eyes, swollen and red with weeping, remained childishly grieved. The fine mouth and jaw had become set and she held her head proudly.

"Do you think then," she asked sorrowfully and gravely, "that because I am the child of two people"—her voice faltered, but she went on again steadfastly—"two people who sinned, because I am bastard born and nameless, that I have neither strength of mind to resist temptation, nor cleanness of mind to desire virtue. Why should I not love what is beautiful, Aunt Victorine? Surely, surely—with this warning before me—you can trust me?"

Victorine became uneasy at the way her niece had taken her story. Instead of humbling and reducing her to a state of passive obedience, she seemed to stand more strongly than ever for her own way in the matter. Unconsciously the agony of sorrow and wounded pride, that Eugénie was suffering, brought out all the breeding she inherited from her father, thus widening the gulf between her and her aunt.

"I don't want to deny you any pleasure, my girl," she said. "But I feel afraid of your mixing with people out of your own class. I want you to be a good girl, so that you'll feel clean all your life and able to look everyone in the face. Those who are brought up to be good can never be happy in evil. Come what may, evil brings sorrow and disgust in the end."

"I do not believe that evil can come of the gift that has been given me by God," Eugénie declared combatively.

"I believe He meant me to cultivate it—otherwise He would never have given me a voice, would never have let me meet Sister Marie-Terèse."

"You're young," Victorine returned sadly. "To youth, black looks white, and it is only when the mischief is done, that the tears of shame clear your sight and you see black in its own ugly colour."

Then Eugénie, coming back, knelt down, and, clasping

her hands round Victorine's neck, looked up into the coarse, unlovely face above her own.

"Grant me my wish, Aunt Victorine," she pleaded passionately. "Have I not suffered cruelly to-night? Give me my music, that I may forget my humiliation"—a sob rose in her throat. "I swear to you before Almighty God and the stainless Virgin, that, if you trust me, you shall not regret it." Then, as the woman remained silent, she added bitterly—"Why should you fear my mixing with people above my station? My own class?—Of what class then am I, daughter of a prince and a work-woman?"

Painfully and reluctantly Victorine put her away. She got up from the table. With trembling fingers she began to gather up her purchases. At last she turned to Eugénie—who had also risen and stood immobile watching her—and spoke sternly.

"Make no mistake, my girl," she commanded—hatred of the aristocrat welling up within her—"you belong to the class of the mother who bore you—like all children born out of wedlock. Think of the cursed blood that flows in your veins as heritage of the man who ruined your mother, as shame to be purged and blotted out, as dishonour to be buried. Remember him, if you think of him at all, as a man who having begot you—knowing this—refused you rights of daughter."

Then, as Eugénie answered no more, but stood with bowed head weeping afresh, compunction took her for the pain she was inflicting on the child she loved, and she groaned, beating her hands together.

"Ah! my girl, my girl," she said, "you are all I have, and dear to me as the fruit of my own body might have been. Marthe was my twin, and, to me, what is hers is mine—since we two, little and helpless, were born on the same day. Do you think I would deny you anything that is for your good?"

She came to her, troubled and almost pitiful.

"See here," she went on, laying her hand on Eugénie's shoulder, "I will go round and see this woman, and talk with her. If I like her looks you shall have your singing. If not—you must abide by my decision. Come now, dry your eyes and help me. I have worked hard to-day, and I need food and rest."

Eugénie, as she set about the commonplace task of preparing the evening meal, was sensible of deep depression—a weight of shame and sorrow lay on her. Victorine had relapsed, after her outburst of tenderness, into curt monosyllable or sullen silence. Having weakened her position with regard to Madame Périntot, she brooded over the coming interview. Rancorously she determined to fight her at every point. Already she had, mentally, browbeaten her and wrested Eugénie from her grasp. She remembered with satisfaction her reputation at Les Halles, where it was commonly asserted that no one had ever got the better of *la vierge folle* when she chose to exercise her biting sarcasm in argument.

Sensible that her aunt's attitude boded no good to Madame Périntot, Eugénie became even more deeply depressed. The warring elements of discord and doubt clouded the horizon of that future which, but a short hour ago, had seemed so full of promise. Despite herself, she felt apprehensive; and the same haunting, insidious presentiment of evil, which had so distressed Madame Périntot, took possession of her also, engulfing her.

That night, in the darkness, she lay with her face buried in the pillow, sobbing bitterly; but, whether because of her mother's shame, or Victorine's desire to hinder her singing, she did not know. In her sorrow she turned yearningly for comfort to the knowledge of her gift. Out of the humiliation of the wreck of her childhood's romance, concerning her dead parents, emerged but one thing triumphantly intact—the possession of her voice. Victorine's drastic remedy had defeated its own end. She had made her cling to that gift as a refuge, rather than cast it from her as a snare. The heaviness of the blow had galvanized her to exert the strength of will which lay dormant within her, to refuse being crushed beneath the burden of sorrow. That very necessity of strength had solidified her character, so that she was the more capable of the resistance which Victorine had striven to break down.

When at last she fell asleep, the face of the musician visited her in her dreams. The blue eyes seemed to look at her fixedly, and the smiling lips to sing. But, from out the tinkle of the mandoline on which he played, the words of his song sounded thin and far away; and he sang, not

the serenade, but—with tender reiteration and pleading insistence—he begged her to wait for him, since, with most perfect certainty, he asserted “that assuredly he would come back.”

CHAPTER VI

THAT same evening, M. Hypolite stood on the balcony of the handsome apartment he occupied on the top floor of one of the big houses in the rue Pérugine.

Sentiment had drawn him to this part of Paris, in spite of the fact that it is neither a bachelor nor artistic quarter. It was dear to him from its association with the Conservatoire; since often, in the days of his studenthood—when walking the length of it to seek the delicious greenness of the lovely little Parc Monceau—he had looked up at the fine houses, determined, should fate lead him in paths of success, to make his home in one of those same tranquil and stately dwellings. Thus it was that, finding his wants generously provided for by kindly fortune, he had furnished, luxuriously and solidly, the apartment in which he now lived.

A “*bon viveur*” in many ways, but a fastidious one, Hypolite was a man who enjoyed and conserved his mental sensations. Profoundly egoist, he never embarked on any adventure without, figuratively speaking, taking his own temperature. This habit of reasoning out the why and wherefore of his sensations, generally made the said sensations cease to exist before they became dangerously possessive.

If he “lived” in the Parisian sense of the word, he was careful that such “living” should not overstep a certain limit. Inordinately proud of his gifts, he believed himself to be super-sensitive. Consequently, in his anxiety to preserve himself from any situation which should demand, what he considered, unwarrantable expenditure of sympathy or emotion, he was in danger of both becoming selfish and lacking in generosity of mind. Interested in himself, he forgot that the other factor in the bargain was also possessed of strong personal rights. Thus, among the women of his acquaintance, Hypolite was looked upon with a certain measure of contemptuous reserve. For he was believed,

though willing to flirt pertinaciously—and even, within certain limits, dictated by his own convenience, willing to proceed to more than flirtation—to be incapable of the self-sacrifice demanded by a *grande passion*.

Hypolite, thus occupied with his own ideas, had hitherto been in constant pursuit of the exotic and unexpected; but, since he searched mostly among those pretty, *petite* and childlike women, who were willing to flatter him, he invariably grew dissatisfied with their company and skillfully extricated himself from the toils of each fair syren in turn—not without an uncomfortable little feeling of shame in the back of his mind as tribute, less to their wounded feelings than to his own delicacy and breeding. But, facile of brain, he always managed to argue with his conscience, pleading that his art was the one real love of his life, which demanded that he should extend to it the consideration and protection that should not be permitted to a less gifted person.

So, light of love, he amused himself with passion—not of the grosser kind, but a quick conflagration, flavoured by romance, to be delicately sampled now and then in hidden byeways off the beaten track. The glaring excitements of the boulevard had no charm for him. He preferred the exploration of the fantastic and the unknown rather than the obvious, which had, to its misfortune, been discovered already many times by others.

Hypolite was not a really bad man—since the only religion he practised was the worship of art—but he believed women were incapable of any deep feeling save passion; and that, fundamentally, all their sensations and ideas began and ended with that word—hence a certain unscrupulousness in his attitude towards them, a certain contempt for their mental standpoint.

Men, he held, were capable of a very different outlook; but that outlook was concerned with the intellectual side. If ever a woman, so he reflected sometimes, shows intellect, it is a sure sign that she has either ceased to be, or never has been, really attractive to men, or that she is not a normally feminine creature.

It must be admitted that, as yet, Hypolite's judgment—certainly in as far as his experience of intimate relations with the other sex was concerned—had not been altogether

at fault. But he did not realize that his field of observation was limited to a world of women whose standards are of the material order; and whose market, both for sale and purchase, is passion. Intellect, even if they possess it, is neither asked for nor offered. Hence the unsatisfied fastidiousness of his nature began to grow tired of the sameness of these periodical experiences, and, seeking for novelty, he reinstituted the troubadour peregrinations of his studenthood. But this time, money being a negligible quantity, he diligently solicited romance.

Thus far his rambles had resulted in little besides the fugitive amusement gained by pursuit of charming paths which invariably turned out to be blind alleys—from which unsatisfactory *impasses* he would dejectedly retrace his steps. True, this last alluring path held out a promise of something more attainable and tangible; but now, at the very outset, the large, well-preserved, essentially commonplace figure of Madame Périntot blocked the way provokingly.

Hypolite, standing on the balcony and looking northwest up the rue Pérugine, felt distinctly exasperated.

Why had she elected to stir his slumbering conscience with her ridiculous anxiety concerning the young girl? He sighed, rocking on his heels, disconsolate. And, since no better form of consolation presented itself, he took out his cigarette case. Selecting, with melancholy interest, a choice specimen of its contents, he proceeded to light it, and inhale the fine dry scented smoke with chastened self-pity, while he continued his mental arguments designed for the destruction of all obstacles in his path.

Why had he been so impressed by Madame Périntot's stupid remarks? Yes, stupid—he said to himself—and impertinent. What, after all, did it matter—since in any case he was going away to-morrow? The disagreeable voyage to England must be accomplished—the crossing of that intolerably unquiet sea. He remembered the last time he had crossed it. He had been so ill that he was unable to sing at the first performance at the Opera. This time he was allowing a longer margin for recovery. But the fact that a margin should be necessary he felt degrading. No well-bred person should suffer from *mal-de-mer*. Obviously no civilized country, no country with nice feeling, would require one to traverse the sea in order to reach it!

He dismissed the subject disgustedly, and turned his thoughts again to the picture of Eugénie, standing in the dimly lit courtyard, against the background of grey wall and grey-green Venetian shutter.

He saw her eager face and soft dark eyes—with their fringed lids—looking gratefully into his own. He remembered the droop of her fresh red mouth; and, in imagination, held between his own the soft warm hand that seemed to flutter like a bird between his enclosing palms. Then, with the remembrance of this touching of her, came to him the mysterious sense that he handled something which, though enchantingly different, was yet a delicious and unexplored part of himself. He felt the tightening of an invisible link, which seemed to grow strong and draw him to her; and again the sudden wave of passion, which had filled him in her presence, took possession of him. He put his hands in his pockets and set his teeth upon his cigarette, leaning back against the iron shutters of the window, striving to master an emotion which astonished him.

"Decidedly it is better," he said grimly to himself, "that I go away for a time, if the thought of this child stirs me so deeply—it is better for her, and better also for me."

On the face of it, he reflected more calmly—beginning, as was his habit, to analyse the situation in order to dissolve its intensity—it was preposterous. He declined to be attacked suddenly like this, it was unreasonable. He essayed to introduce into his contemplation of the episode something of that habitual cynicism which had, hitherto, been an unfailing weapon of defence against any too violent exhibition of feeling in matters connected with the affections.

After all—he reflected—he was but human, and must gratify a certain side of his nature. But depth of sentiment is apt to upset the mental equilibrium, and that the mental, or, as he called it, intellectual, side of his nature should be disturbed by the lower and animal man was intolerable. A thing not to be permitted. No—a thousand times no—the intellectual, the divine side must be devoted solely to his art. No woman—he declared to himself heatedly—should claim any part in it.

Having thus argued, as he considered, satisfactorily, with the baser element in himself, he turned and looked down the length of the street.

A crescent moon hung in the limpid sky, and myriad stars sparkled in the vault of the heaven. The spring wind carried on it sweet soft odours and fragrance from the blossoming lilac and other flowering shrubs in the Parc Monceau. The rattle of passing vehicles, and the whir and hoot of motors, pierced the stillness, together with the endless tap of footsteps in the street below. Hypolite, forgetful of that successfully concluded argument, remembered the sound of light footsteps, which had stirred him so deeply as they ran up the stairs of the house in the Place des Loups. He fancied he could hear the patter of them mingling with the hurrying feet that echoed beneath his balcony. Were they coming or going—those light footsteps—or endlessly passing and re-passing his house? He leaned over into the dimness below, almost with the thought that he should see Eugénie. But the small black figures, moving in the lamplight, were indistinguishable at the height of the fourth floor.

Hypolite drew back, and as he did so Andrea, a tall pale fair Italian, who acted as his valet and *courier*, came out on to the balcony.

"Pardon, monsieur," he said, with melancholy deference—"but it grows late, and monsieur begged me to remind him that he must take the sea-sickness precaution in good time before sleeping. The doctor was insistent that monsieur should retire early before the sea journey to-morrow."

"Ah, my good Andrea," the young man replied, rousing himself and stepping from the balcony into his luxurious bedroom, through the open window. "I will come and take it, you are quite right." And, as he returned to himself with the measurement of the exact dose, Hypolite fussed around, completely engaged for the moment with the endlessly interesting subject of his health and its cure and the chances of avoiding the ignominy of sea-sickness.

Andrea, solemn-faced, and for no known reason permanently melancholy, yet—to Hypolite's mercurial temperament—restful and soothing, had, as his master always informed his friends, "adopted" him in Milan.

"Andrea," he used to exclaim, "waited on me, as floor valet, when I was basely deserted by a villain at the hotel I stayed at when singing in Milan. Andrea attended to my clothes execrably, and when I, excited to frenzy by his

treatment of a favourite pair of trousers, essayed to teach him in the interests of my wardrobe the art of valeting, with much abuse and chastisement, he wept, imploring patience, and saying that 'in time he would repay me.' You had but to exercise, and the quickness with which he assimilated instructions, in a weak moment I offered him the post vacated by the miscreant. Since then his melancholy presence has become a habit to me. I shelter from my own exuberant nature in the soothing shade of his unmoving and small form. When I ask him why, at intervals he says to me that 'the dust of Milan has settled on his eyes,' though he assures me solemnly that so long as I permit him to remain with me. Although a little melancholy of course, I have just of this afternoon, he discreetly excuses himself; on occasion he is a little out, from which he returns, melancholy but with nevertheless a suggestion of satisfaction when his sorrow.

Having given him his medicine Hypolite began to divest himself of his clothes with the help of Andrea.

He said, "my Andrea, we make an early start tomorrow. It is best that I should be in bed for in London there will be many late nights."

Then when the servant, gathering up his clothes for breakfast had departed, Hypolite turned on his lights and, perceiving the iron Venetians, looked a little more at the lantern light. His journey to London, the strain and wear of the season, were singularly grateful to him. Paris in May, like an ever youthful, ever passionate laughing, gay-hearted woman, seemed exquisitely tempting. And, with the thought of passion, he turned, irresistibly drawn as if by the call of some tremendous force, towards the *quartier* where lay the Place des Vosges. To the greatness of that call he responded, took off his feet—the argument of his cynical reason standing. With a warm tenderness he stretched his arm towards the place from whence that calling

"Look with the woman's eyes," he said, beneath his breath, "if you are sleeping, dream of me." Then he added, smiling, perversely defiant of Madame Périnot, "Do not forget me, wait for me, hid in the beautiful heart of Paris.

Think of me—for, to teach you the meaning of love, I shall return."

Charmed by the poetry of his own conceit, he closed the iron shutters, obliterating the glittering panorama of starlight and the confused murmur of the city.

CHAPTER VII

AFTER her explanation with Eugénie, Victorine Dupont passed a restless and troubled night. Memories of the girl's mother haunted her. Feverishly she confused the two. The young Marthe—as she had known her when they were girls together—and the young Eugénie became, in her mind, merged in one personality. Certain physical attributes—such as the wide opaque eyes and long black silky hair—they possessed in common; but, to a mind with greater powers of observation than Victorine's, Eugénie, both in nature and person, would have suggested a force of character that her mother obviously lacked. Her build was at the same time more lithe and more solid, her throat, shoulders and bosom fuller, her whole expression calmer and more serious.

At the age of eighteen Marthe and her daughter alike gave promise of passion in the full over-red mouth; but with this feature the similarity in the lower part of the two faces ended. Marthe's chin had been small and indecisive, while Eugénie's was square, and the jaw finely set. Had Victorine been a psychologist or a student of physiognomy, the marked difference in the contour of those chins would have given her the index to the difference in the two natures. But—since she was merely an ignorant, prejudiced woman—she was confused by a likeness purely superficial.

Weakness, and inability to deny herself to a lover, had developed in the mother a sensuality which had been her undoing. Whereas, in the daughter, strength of body and intelligence went hand in hand—thus directing her passionate tendency more on the line of artistic temperament than mere animal desire for a mate. In the eyes of Victorine, art—in as far as she recognized its existence—meant love of luxury, temptation, and consequent certain fall from virtue.

She did not realize that, in her desire to eliminate all love of beauty from the girl's instincts, she was damming up the tide of an impetuous and turbulent spirit from its only safe outlet.

In the daughter's love of music and refinement, she saw only the reincarnation of the mother's self-indulgence; and, as she tossed and turned on her bed, Victorine's distress of mind and discomfort of body increased.

Was it possible—she asked herself—that Eugénie—child of her mother's abandoned passion—should escape wholly the contamination of her origin? Would not the deep impression of the lover's rank and position—so precious in the eyes of the pleasure-loving mother—have sunk deep into the nature of the unborn baby? Was it not her duty to pull down, to exterminate by rigid denial, every attempt which might be made to lead the innocent girl into a danger zone of which she was practically ignorant? Ought she not to force her to be content with her present narrow existence, lest, following in the footsteps of her mother, the child should fall? Would not the temptations of dainty and pretty living, and the promise of amusement held out to her through Madame Périnot's offer, arouse in Eugénie a taste for things which might prove a subtle poison in her system?—She could not permit this thin end of the wedge to be thrust in, lest her authority should be set aside in more important matters.

To her seeing, Eugénie had been contented before this intrusion into their peaceful existence. Victorine fully believed that the girl had ceased to regret her convent life. Fiercely she resented this new distraction. Turning again roughly, on the hot pillow, she argued with herself that all would be well if she refused permission for the matter to go further. But the pillow slipped from beneath her shoulders and fell on to the floor, so that her uneasiness, physical and mental, became acute.

Sitting up in bed—her heavy, unwieldy body redolent of her day's labour, her thick greasy hair piled on the top of her head—anger possessed her. She combated it, but, the more she strove to repress the bitterness of her feeling, the more violent it grew. She hated this unknown woman who, as she told herself, had come by stealth in her absence and entrapped the girl's fancy.

The vision came to her of Eugénie's glowing face on her return. She was unaware that sudden radiant awakening was more the result of the encounter with the musician of the blue eyes than of Madame Périntot's promise. Nevertheless, she compared it mentally with the look on Marthe's face when, nearly twenty years ago, she had come to tell her of the projected journey to Italy with the Baronne de Gonville—that journey from which she had returned broken-hearted and disgraced.

As the dawn began to lighten remembrance grew so poignant to the woman, staring mournfully across the poor little room, that she could no longer endure it. Stepping heavily from her bed, she moved, with slow tread, across to the tightly closed window and threw it open. Her white long-cloth nightgown did not reach to the ground, but disclosed a length of vein-swollen legs and thick broad feet—the heels of them grey with dirt, the toe-nails crooked and black-ringed from long neglect. She rested her elbows on the window-sill, leaning her face on her coarse red hands, feeling with blunt, unclean fingers the harsh hair that shaded her upper lip; while her prominent rolling red-brown eyes roamed the vista of the empty Place des Loups. In the pallor of the dawn it showed bare and chill. No turmoil of traffic redeemed the banality of its mediocre and irregular architectural form; only—a blot against the paler grey of the pavement—the hollow blackness of the tunnel leading to the *Metro* Railway showed like the wide-open mouth of a corpse turned up in speechless abandon to the livid sky.

Victorine, feverish and nerve-racked, started, putting up her hands to her forehead and pressing her throbbing temples, as the scream of a locomotive, with sudden and insistent violence, pierced the stillness, followed by the distant roll and roar of a train as it thundered north out of Paris. The sound died away and was followed by another, profoundly and eminently commonplace, yet, to the listening woman, strangely and unaccountably important. Footsteps, heavy and dragging, echoed in the Avenue de la Lanterne, the thoroughfare which led south from the further end of the Place, as if someone—infinately weary—stumbled homeward to a forlorn and joyless destination.

Leaning outward, Victorine strained her eyes in an effort to observe the figure which approached. It seemed to her

those footsteps in the dawn presaged the coming of an event vitally important to her. She fixed her glance on the black speck moving slowly forward. Mechanically she watched its slightly erratic progress up the avenue. Would it come her way, or go up one of the side streets? Holding her breath, she perceived that the nocturnal walker held on steadily, and, looking neither to right nor left, moved now more swiftly, coming across the empty Place.

To Victorine—as she looked down—it appeared that its destination was the house in which she herself stood. A sudden terror seized her lest this being should be some supernatural agent—the bearer of evil tidings. Cold dew of panic broke out on her forehead and she would have turned away: but some force—powerful and horribly attractive in the moving figure—which she felt rather than saw, held her rooted to the spot. She felt compelled to wait, until this creature of the night should have delivered its message. Shaken with fear, which she could neither banish nor fathom, she held on to the sides of the window for support.

The being, whose footsteps sounded irregularly on the pavement, had come to a standstill by the mouth of the Metro. In the greenish yellow glare of the lamp over head Victorine perceived that it was a woman dressed with ridiculous exaggeration—as if she had attempted to collect and combine all the most *outré* fashions of the moment, in order to attract the eye of whomsoever it pleased to attend.

As the figure leaned against the low wall that masked the entrance to the Metro, her pose was that of a person utterly dejected in body and spirit. Victorine observed, with a shudder, that she was quite a young girl—no older, if so old, as Eugénie, and that—in obedience to a desire to make herself yet more youthful in appearance—she wore her long black hair in heavy curls down her back.

Under the rakish little hat her eyes showed hollow, with great black shadows beneath them. Her face had been whitened and her mouth reddened, until—in the stark light of the morning and the flare of the lamp lights' waning power—it gave her the appearance of a clown.

She remained for a moment without moving, only in the stillness Victorine could hear her sigh deeply. Then, stooping suddenly, she unbuttoned her absurdly high-heeled, thin-soled patent leather shoes and, pulling them off, limped

in her stockings across to the side of the roadway immediately below Victorine's window. It seemed to the woman above that the girl had walked long on the hard pavements till the soles of her feet were blistered and agonized with her ghastly promenading.

The girl looked around. Seeing no one about she sat down on the kerb, and, setting down her shoes beside her, put her tired feet into the little stream of water which bubbled up from the pipes at the edge of the pavement. For a moment she remained thus—scooping up the water with her fingers and laving her hot ankles. Then, her feet still in the flowing water, she rested her elbows on her knees and her chin on her hands.

Victorine, watching from the window, was seized by nausea. A great choking horror closed her in. She understood now the terrible expectation which had been upon her. She comprehended the meaning of the silent messenger below. With eyes staring and breath coming short, she strove to find voice to bid the thing begone, for she could not endure its presence. To her overwrought mind the sight of this pitiful victim of passion was a hideous symbol of the fate that might await Eugénie. Terrified, she believed that the spirit of Marthe had assumed this frightful garb in order to warn her.

In her dread, she backed away from the window, and, wrenching open the drawer where she kept her greasy market purse, took out a five-franc piece. Then turning and leaning out of the window, she screamed fiercely—a raucous sob tearing her throat:

"Be off! Go! Be off!"

Stretching out her arms, she flung the money with all her force in the direction of the figure at the edge of the pavement.

The girl had risen and was putting on her shoes, looked up at the sound of the voice. Her hollow eyes stared fearfully in the direction from which it came, while her red mouth hung open stupidly. The five franc piece hit her full on that gaping mouth. The heavy outer edge of the coin cut her upper lip—causing her to step backward with a stifled cry of pain, as the blood ran over her chin in a thin streak. Then, one hand over her mouth, she stooped, scrabbling on the ground with avidity, till her fingers closed over the coin which had rolled into the gutter. Without straightening,

or drawing herself up again, she ran—like some lost dog that has received a kick, and, whimpering, expectant of further cruelty, flies crouching, with the bone that it has stolen from a waste place—across the Place and down a narrow alley to the left. As she ran her skirt flapped against her legs and her black hair streamed out behind her.

Victorine, leaning out of the window, was appalled by the belief that she had driven Marthe from the door; and not Marthe only, but the young and innocent Eugénie. She wanted to shut out the sound of those flying feet, the echo of that startled cry, and the remembrance of the blood on the girl's chin.

With a violent movement she pushed the heavy casements together with her right hand, closing them on the fingers of her left. The agony for the moment maddened her so that, wrenching open the window again, she hung over the sill, the wooden ridge of it crushing the full flesh of her paunch.

"Ah! ah! my God! my God!" she wailed as, fainting, she clawed the window ledge. But, through the open window, the sound of those flying feet came again. Victorine, tortured by their sinister import, staggered backward and slipped—her head crashing on the sharp corner of the chest of drawers. Moaning feebly, she sank to the ground, the great bulk of her bosom and stomach sinking together, like a sack of flour resting against a wall. Her legs doubled under her, her head hung forward unconscious.

Then, from without, the scream of a locomotive—piercing and long drawn—again rent the stillness; and, as accompaniment to the shriller note, the deep rumble of wheels and the stamping of stallions filled the Place with harsh echoes, as a string of great wagons laboured into Paris.

The night was past and the unrest of the city began to clamour in the dawn.

BOOK II

THE WEDDING OF MARIE-ANNE

CHAPTER I

THE rush from Paris of the Whitsuntide exodus was in full force. At the Gare de Lyon, hustling and excited holiday crowds seethed, an animated parti-coloured froth of humanity, under the great arches of the roof, before the *barrières*, and along the platforms.

The vast station echoed from end to end with the sound of voices—calling, directing, scolding, laughing, vociferously complaining—and the hurrying of thousands of feet. At intervals the great engines let forth a sharp warning whistle, or—like some great impatient beast breathing deep before strong running—sent forth fierce clouds of ardent heated steam, adding their voices, dominant and strangely living, to the volume of confused noise that came from the moving throng. One by one the great monsters—drawing carriage after carriage, snake-like and smooth in motion, filled to suffocation with their human burden—forged out of the terminus. A hundred wheels gave tongue in deep resonant rumble, as they rolled on the gleaming track of steel down the great highway to the sunshine of the south.

Into all this flotsam and jetsam of humanity came Marguérite Périntot, shouldering her way with difficulty, followed by the little bent black form of her mother, who clasped the precious parcel containing her peasant clothes tightly in her arms.

"Keep close to me, *ma mère*, while I get the tickets," Marguérite admonished, as she saw that the old woman was in danger of being separated from her and lost in the crowd.

Madame Rouston, slightly bewildered, a pink spot of excitement on either cheek, a wistful expectancy and antici-

pation of pleasure in her bright old eyes, nodded as, with difficulty, she regained her daughter's side.

When at last—propelled by Marguérite's vigorous and determined pushing—she had passed the *barrières* and reached the great train, Madame Rouston, still clinging desperately to the big parcel, as refuge from the constant buffeting of the passers-by, followed patiently while Marguérite searched the length of the train for seats.

"*Enfin*," she cried at last, "get up quickly, *ma mère*. I have found two places——"

In a few minutes—with a high-pitched scream—the train passed out of the great station, between high-roofed houses and long regular streets. Leaving the outskirts of the city, it reached the beautiful stretch of country that lies between Paris and Vauclou.

"Are you comfortable, *ma mère*?" inquired Marguérite, fanning herself with "*Commedia*," and tucking up her feet upon the dressing-case that lay on the ground between them.

Madame Rouston nodded, she did not want to speak. Her little black figure sat neatly immobile—her head turned, her bright, watchful eyes observing the flying landscape.

Marguérite, on her part, leaned back in her corner comfortably and, pulling down the blind beside her, closed her eyes. She began to meditate on the strange adventure of the morning, and to evolve active schemes for the education of Eugénie as an artist. Now, in the cheerful bustle of departure, she laughed at herself for her earlier superstitious fears. How ridiculously suspicious she had been of poor Hypolite! Without doubt he had played on her anxiety, deriving considerable amusement from her folly. Nevertheless he had been quite charming, and his conversation *spirituelle*. She smiled as she mentally visualized his whimsical expression and slight, graceful figure cloaked in the faded *paletot*. What a child he was in some ways! And that element of childishness was attractive, though confusing. With a man who was *très homme* a woman knew where she was; but with Hypolite, his witty speech, overflowing temperament and sympathetic intuitions betrayed a woman into intimacy, from sheer inability to withhold it from his quick persuasive coaxing. Yes—with Hypolite it was another matter.

Marguérite decided the very lack of that quality of being *très homme* enabled her to treat him more leniently than would otherwise have been permissible—since she judged that he would be less attractive to women, less easily moved by them, than men of the markedly virile order. But, in this, Marguérite—though in many things both astute and quick witted—woefully erred. It is not the normal healthy-minded and honestly masculine man who is dangerous in his attitude towards women. For it is the strong man who makes a noble and constant lover; while those of the Hypolite type—whose passion, quick to come and go, often renders them curiously unscrupulous and cold-blooded in their fugitive affections—are unwilling to commit themselves to a pledge of permanent sympathy, because the lack of strength in their nature warns them that sooner or later—most probably sooner—they will tire of the object of their existing adoration.

Marguérite felt considerably annoyed at the thought that Hypolite had possibly been laughing at her. She determined to ask him to come and see her on his return. She would, if the young girl turned out to be as fine a singer as she promised, ask him to meet her. Certainly, with his influence at the Opéra Comique, he would be a useful friend for her. He could, if he chose, "push" her. As for Eugénie, by the time he returned she would have become accustomed to the professional atmosphere and would take his presence for granted; while Hypolite, by that time also, would have found something else to amuse him. Besides the girl looked as if she had plenty of character, she was probably fully capable of taking care of herself. Here Marguérite's rambling thoughts merged comfortably into little wandering dreams—she slumbered gently, lulled by the noise of the train as it rushed on through the fresh spring country and brilliant sunshine.

She did not open her eyes until Madame Rouston, moving in her seat, began to gather together their various impedimenta as the train neared Vauclou.

"*Tiens!*" she said, sitting up, patting her curls, and feeling the pansy-covered toque to ascertain whether it rested at the proper angle on her copper hair. "Have we already arrived? *Voyons, ma mère*, do not strive to reach the parcel, you will injure yourself—attention! There, it is down!

Heaven grant there may not be too great a crowd on the *petit train* ! "

The train drew up at the wayside station, and the passengers who descended there detached themselves from the sides of the waiting monster like small flights of gaily-coloured birds.

Madame Périntot and her mother, in three minutes, were left stranded with a little island of baggage.

The younger woman felt a sensation of loneliness and desolation, an intolerable stopping of the wheels of life, as the roar of the departing train died away, and the great trail of smoke, marking its passage, dissolved in the clear air, leaving only the sunshine glittering on the long perspective of metallated track—now void and silent. She regretted that quitting of the big train. Infinitely she preferred the bustle and life of Paris, to this smiling country—so terribly young and unsophisticated in the simplicity of its ignorance and the egoism of its isolation—where she would have too much to think of and too little to do.

As they came out of the station Madame Rouston looked round her seeking familiar landmarks of white houses and white roads. She breathed deeply—drawing in the fresh clear air with ecstasy.

"How sweet it is and how clean, the air that comes from the plain," she sighed; "ah, who can live in the city when the gracious peace of the country is within reach."

Marguerite smiled, conscious that a certain humour lay in the diametrically opposite effect of the country upon their two natures.

But up the white road the *petit train*, puffing fussily and discharging evil black smoke from the engine funnel, came slowly towards them. On the swaying platform, at the back of the last car, a sunburnt peasant man, in blue blouse and black béret, smoked and exchanged conversation with two peasant women in white caps and short full skirts. Marguerite watched them as they descended, mingling with a little crowd of passengers from the inside of the car. The fresh wind caught their full fluttering petticoats and tossed them, as they made their way to the market and town. Turning, she climbed into the empty train, and prepared to suffer martyrdom on the altar of family affection.

"*Sacré*," she ejaculated to herself, "never again will I leave Paris. It is horrible, this country."

The track of the road train, which runs along the highway from Vauclou to Croix-St.-Jean, forks at the latter little roadside station—one line turning to Forêt fleur, and the other, following the high road which skirts the edge of the plain, to Acquarelle.

In the days of Madame Rouston's youth this mode of transit had not existed. At first, when its noisy progress invaded the quiet main street, the inhabitants of Acquarelle had deemed it a desecration. But, after the first year, they had become accustomed to the innovation. They began to find it a most convenient way of reaching Vauclou, and to profit by the constant stream of sightseers and tourists who used it. So, in time, the *petit train* was deemed indispensable; and, perhaps because of its association with picturesque Acquarelle, and the novelty of its slow, rocking, old-fashioned progress, was considered by tourists as an agreeable and amusing feature of the journey there.

Madame Rouston remained seated until the train—now filled with a fair complement of passengers—with a final hoot started from Vauclou and began to climb the hill to the plain. Then she rose and stepped out on to the open platform at the back of the car.

"*Allons, ma mère*," protested Marguérite, following her on to the platform. "You cannot stand here—you will fall."

"Leave me, my daughter," pleaded the old woman gently. "I am quite safe, I want to pass along the road beneath the blue sky as I did once long ago. I want to breathe the air of the plain and hear the sheep bells tinkle, and see the long grass sway in the wind."

"*Mon Dieu!*" said Marguérite, touched, but hiding the softness even from herself, "you will have plenty of opportunity of breathing the air when we arrive! But, have your own way—only keep your hand on the railing and hold it tightly. For myself, I prefer to stay within—the dust and sunlight trouble me."

And, with that, she re-entered the car, leaving the little bent black figure—obediently holding the railing with her knotted hands—on the platform without.

Last time Madame Rouston had travelled down the white

road it had been in company with Jean, her newly married husband, and the recollection of that journey filled her with a wonderful sense of life. The romance of returning, after so many years, to her old home filled her mind to the point of absorption, she wanted to live over again the memories which the road from Vauclou to Acquarelle would call forth.

"Truly it was well indeed"—she reflected—"to have fathomed the mysteries of marriage and motherhood."

Those mysteries had been but a brief experience for her, yet they had satisfied her fully and completely.

Many women pass through life with no knowledge of these things, save that they exist for others; and, just in proportion as they realize their existence for others, do they suffer a bitter sense of deprivation, and a feeling that nature has been cruel in providing them with life and the desire of life-giving, while withholding its natural fulfilment. Of the unloved, the mateless, the barren, the tragedy is one of the most terrible in existence. There are women, within whom lie noble possibilities of motherhood and wifedom—women sometimes charming, and with a measure of comeliness—to whom romance never comes; and who, in purity of living and gentle resignation, are scorned by their more fortunate sisters as something to be amused at or passed by since others have passed them by. To these, love has been a tragedy as for them it has never truly existed; and the tragedy of the unattained is greater than the thing attained and lost. They die without crossing the threshold of the inner court; its mysterious secret remains to them for ever untold.

Madame Rouston had crossed the threshold in the bloom of her youth. In her memory that sojourn in the inner court remained as a period of most perfect happiness. After her husband's death she had wandered on alone, yet not alone, for the spirit of the husband who had loved her seemed to walk with her hand in hand.

She was still a young and lovely girl when he died. Since then many men had sought her favour, but to none of them did she turn one moment's consideration. Her heart had been given for ever to Jean; and, in her simple faith, she had asked for no other presence than that unseen spirit husband whom she fancied was for ever at her side.

This journey to Acquarelle was fraught with tender and sacred association for her. As the train hurried on its way down the white road, though she gazed at the flying landscape through a mist of tears, her gentle soul was filled with a great peace.

The white dust of passing motors arose, now and then, in her throat and eyes; the swaying of the car shook her fragile body; the grind and jar of the wheels, the panting of the engine, sounded harshly in her ears, but her soul was uplifted. In imagination her spirit companion stood beside her, as on her wedding journey. The little bright flowers in the tall grass by the wayside, the distant view over the plain, the glint of the sunshine, and the flocks of round, pale buff-coloured sheep, were to her the same as those which had been the setting of the scene of that enchanting prelude to the night of beauty and mystery, when, yielding up her virginity, she had become wife to the man she loved. The spring flowers of eternal youth bloomed as they had done on that day nearly forty-six years ago. To the old woman, withered and wrinkled, they brought back, for a brief space, the glory of youth and love.

CHAPTER II

ACQUARELLE—beloved of poet and painter—lies on the border line, where the primeval splendour of the forest meets the rich pasture of the plain. A little cluster of white houses, nestling half in shadowed woodland, half in the brilliant sunshine of open country, is gathered into a straggling village street, one end of which loses itself in the forest of Crépuscule, the other, turning at a sharp angle, joins the main road from Sable-d'Argent to Croix-St.-Jean and Vaucloû.

Once, in past ages, over the lovely tract of forest flowed a restless ocean, peopled by great monsters and creatures of strange aquatic life. When the retreating tide laid bare a desert strewn with sandstone rocks, worn and fantastically shaped by the moving tides and twisting currents, these lay naked and ashamed in the sunlight, pale, arid monuments of the past. Then Nature—repentant of the barren scar that made hideous

the fair surface of the earth—planted, with lavish hand, the radiant verdure of the forest of Crépuscule. Around the piles of scattered sandstone, oak and pine, thicket and grove, now meet and intermingle, clothing their desolation. But, because, on hill and in valley, no gentle springs and cooling streams ripple, the wind, tossing the feathery plumes of the tree-tops, bids these last sing of rain and the grey clinging mist to the thirsty sandstone. And the rocks, listening, hear again the distant crooning murmur of the sleepless waves that in past ages lapped their sides.

Attracted by the shadowy, wistful beauty of the forest, many a poet and painter—now canonized as immortal—has sought and found inspiration in the wild which still lurks, untouched by time and civilization, as heritage of the untamed sea.

At the corner of the village street, farthest from the forest, the inhabitants of Acquarelle are wont to gather and linger for idle gossip at the end of the day. For here, at certain intervals, the *petit train*, with much hooting and evil smoke, arriving important and bustling, sets down the women returning from the Vauclou market. Here, too, the cabaret and the conversation of Mère Coupérin, of the baker's shop, afford excellent amusement to the men; while any visitors who may sojourn in the village are certain to pass at this hour, on their way to the post-office, thus affording further food for comment.

On the day of Madamie Périntot's arrival the warm spring weather had collected quite a crowd of idlers. As they stood waiting, Jean Cortot came striding down the road from the farm. He was a fine looking, large-featured, middle-aged man, who wore his grizzled hair cut *en brosse*, and his long moustache sweeping down below the line of his jaw on either side, after the fashion of his youth. In his young manhood he had been considered the handsomest man in Acquarelle. This fact, combined with his industry and good character, had enabled him successfully to woo and marry Madelaine Baudaire, the only child and heiress of a farmer. Inheriting from his father La Maison Grise, and the four fields belonging to it which had been the gift of M. de Fabrieux, he lived there until the death of his father-in-law gave him possession of the larger farm. Then La Maison Grise had been let on lease to an artist who had built on to, and con-

siderably improved the house and garden. At the time of Marie-Anne's marriage, the lease having expired and the tenant not being desirous of renewing it, Jean had restored the old furniture to his former home, and, adding various new pieces, made a present of the whole place to the young couple.

Rich, prosperous, and vigorously healthy, Jean Cortot lacked very few things which the simple world he lived in could give him. Occupied with the conduct of the big farm, lying on the south-west of the village at the edge of the plain, his long days in the clean air made him clear-eyed and brown. Of late years, though still keeping up the considerable number of his flocks of sheep, he had diminished the stock of cattle on the farm. The coming of the road train made communication with Paris easier; and, since it seemed to him profitable to do so, he had turned a goodly portion of pasture into asparagus beds. Here, beneath little round mounds, the fat white stems and mauve-green heads of the asparagus pushed upward, later to be cut and bound in great bundles for the Paris markets. This source of income being so profitable, the Cortots year by year increased in substance—their only sorrow being that no son had been born to carry on the business. Nevertheless, Marie-Anne, practical and devoted to the country life, bid fair to fill the place of farmer very adequately.

Despite their growing wealth they lived simply, keeping up peasant traditions. Marie-Anne and her mother wore the white peasant cap—now falling into disuse, even in country districts—and the little maiden's tastes were singularly simple. For this keeping to peasant ways they were greatly loved by their neighbours.

Hence, when Jean, gaily whistling, came down the side road from the farm, he was greeted with familiar affection on all hands.

At the same moment the road train, passing the first scattered white houses of Acquarelle, entered the little street and drew up at the corner.

Jean Cortot forced his way good-humouredly through the crowd and came up to the step of the train.

"Welcome, Aunt Angèle," he said, as he took the tiny old woman up, and, lifting her to the ground, set her on her feet. He kissed her on either cheek. Madame Périnot

descended also. Her mother turned to her, holding out her hand.

"This is my little Marguérite," she explained tremulously.

Marguérite felt her hand enclosed in a big, warm clasp, and Jean Cortot looked at her jovially.

"Welcome, cousin Marguérite—but little Marguérite no longer. Come," he added, "Antoine will collect the luggage, we will go on together. Madelaine and my child Marie are anxiously awaiting you."

Marguérite, standing on the uneven cobbled pavement, in her Paris clothes and high-heeled patent leather shoes, felt singularly forlorn and out of place. She was sensitively aware that the watching peasants regarded her with curiosity, if not suspicion. Her expression became defiant—a little hard. She held her head high, setting her mouth firmly; but, seeing her mother's eyes fixed pleadingly on her, she responded to Jean's welcome with a gracious smile.

"Ah, cousin Jean," she said, "it is most charming of you to receive us. Indeed, I am looking forward most eagerly to making the acquaintance of your little Marie."

Marguérite's smile, which had been on the stage one of her most valued assets, instantly captivated Jean, and not only Jean but the greater part of the company, who eyed her with much interest.

Marguérite, stepping bravely along over the narrow, uneven pavement, the slender heels of her shoes slipping on their rounded surface, followed her mother and Jean Cortot. Unaccustomed to such rough walking, she was obliged to go carefully, so that Madame Rouston, eager as a child, absorbed in conversation with her nephew, did not observe that she was left behind.

As the two on ahead turned the corner of the street, a fresh wind, something of spring incarnate in the smell of the clean earth and springing grass, met them. The old woman went forward gladly, breasting the gusty buffeting. She was aware of a sudden return of vigour and strength, an echo of youth, pathetic in the eyes of the kindly farmer who walked by her side. He looked down pitifully at the little fragile bent figure and delicate, shrivelled face. A faint pink tinged her cheeks, and she breathed quickly, gazing out over the plain to the distant horizon. On the crest of the hill she stopped.

"Jean," she said, "I cannot tell you what it means to me to come back here. I thought that I should feel it terribly—this coming here once more, alone and worn with many years of living; but now that I have come, the place calls me. I do not feel any longer the sadness of things past, but only the sense that I am here—in the place to which I belong. When you are young the wide world calls you, but, when you grow old—if you are peasant born and country bred—the brown earth to which you will soon return cries out to you that your native place is rest. For as the young girl rests on the bosom of her lover, so the aged on the bosom of mother earth find peace. When I die—and that time cannot be far distant—I should like to lie here, in the place which I loved in my childhood, where the little flowers among the long grass would grow like the memories of lovely thoughts and prayers that brightened the grey days of sorrow."

Jean looked down at her, his eyes moist.

"You shall come home to rest here, Aunt Angèle," he promised, "here among your own people; and my child's children shall plant flowers where you lie."

Madame Rouston smiled, her face tender and lovely.

"I shall sleep sweetly—dreaming of the sound of those little feet," she murmured.

Marguerite, turning the corner, saw that her companions, absorbed in conversation, had forgotten her. The wind met her, whipping open her cloak and tearing at her floating veil. She stood still, wrestling with them irritably.

"My mother is quite happy," she said a little bitterly, "that is evident. It is not often that I take a back seat. *Sapristi!*" she exclaimed, tearing the refractory veil from its moorings with a vicious tug. "What possessed me to come here? I am altogether out of my element! It will be a marvel if I remain here till Monday without breaking windows or committing suicide! What, in heaven's name, have I to talk about with these people? I cannot play at simplicity when there are no comforting footlights to aid my deception."

She flung the veil away, and, caught by the wind, it fluttered foolishly in the road, then fled into the long grass.

Then she moved on again. Nostalgia filled her for Paris civilized and profoundly alive—alive with its human

population, loving, hating, dying, giving birth, pervading, completely and absolutely, the grey avenues and houses. Nostalgia for the narrow street, leading to the little theatre where she felt herself a person of some importance—even of some charm and beauty—and where, in the atmosphere of art and intelligence, she lived forgetful of the flight of time. She hated this smiling, silent plain where nature, and not mankind, dominated; and verdure, insolently young and beautiful, barely tolerated the presence of human life. Rebelliously she regarded the fair prospect, the straight road and stark buildings of the farm. "An artist," she said to herself, "feels too discovered, too exposed to the world, in the abominably clear light of this unpretentious country. The stage is more kind, it does not accuse one of subterfuge, but welcomes the appearance of youth which we artists are compelled to keep up. Here"—she looked at the blue sky and unlimited horizon, shrugging her shoulders—"youth alone is young, art is at a discount, mercilessly and cruelly the blemishes traced by the hand of time are exposed."

At the gate of the farm Jean Cortot and her mother waited.

"You walk quickly, *ma mère*," she said reproachfully, "and I am not shod for the country."

Madame Rouston looked at her with compunction.

"I feel so strong here, Mimi," she pleaded apologetically.

Marguérite, too, felt compunction. She admonished herself for her momentary jealousy. "Be ashamed of yourself, Marguérite Périntot," she said inwardly, "that you grudge your mother her little hour of happiness." She turned to Jean Cortot with a friendly gesture.

"I am congratulating myself on my decision to come here. My mother is looking already better for the beautiful air, and I myself am gaining new experience. I am learning now ignorant I am of the country and its ways."

"Not more so than we are of the city," Jean Cortot answered, with dignity. He opened the gate, and the two women passed through into the courtyard of the farm. Scurrying chickens fled before them, and the sound of sheep bleating and cattle lowing came from the closed doors of the great barns. From the house Madame Cortot advanced—a grave-faced woman, clad in check apron and white cap—followed by Marie-Anne.

Mother and daughter resembled each other strongly, and, despite her forty-three years, Madelaine Cortot retained an air of youthfulness and almost childlike simplicity of expression. As she approached towards her guests Marguérite—shrewd and quick to fathom character—knew that this woman's, in spite of a timid and diffident manner,—was the strong hand on the little household. Madelaine Cortot loved both husband and child passionately, but deep in her heart she hid from them both a burning sorrow which would never leave her. All the good things of this life had fallen into her lap, yet one thing—though desired more than all—had been refused. God had been pleased to deny her a son, and the pain of that denial lay heavy on her soul. Nevertheless, she hid her trouble from all human knowledge, even from Jean lest it should distress him; but the silent and secret grieving left its mark on her calm face—giving her rather the look of one who is patient than one who is contented.

In Marie-Anne—dainty and exquisitely fresh with the cleanness of youth and health—the resemblance to her mother was one of features only; for the charming little face was full of happiness. The light in her rather round dark eyes, and the upward curve of her small, smiling mouth told all who looked at her, that she was radiantly content. Her pretty dark hair was dressed high on her head, and at the nape of her soft brown neck lay downy curls. Everything about her was eminently feminine, from the oval face, with its small pointed chin, to the little feet clad in stout shoes, beneath full short petticoats. Below middle height, and inclined to be plump, she gave the impression of a sweet, cosy child, rather than of a woman. Marguérite, surveying this smiling and attractive little person, was captivated and bent down to kiss the round cheeks.

"Why, little Marie," she said, "I had no idea you were so pretty."

Marie put two well-covered arms round her new cousin, and returned the kiss fervently.

"Oh, cousin Marguérite," she said, "I knew you were clever, but I had no idea you were so beautiful or half so nice."

Whereat they both laughed, and Marie-Anne, laying her hand on Marguérite's arm, said:

"I thought that I should be afraid of you, Cousin Marguérite, but now I know that I shall not."

"No," said Marguérite, her eyes filling with tears, "it is I who am afraid, because this way of living is new to me."

Madame Cortot turned to her, and, overhearing Marguérite's speech, understood that her visitor needed a welcome which would set her at her ease. She placed her hands on her shoulders and, smiling with grave affection, said:

"We are simple people, Marguérite, but not too simple to understand and appreciate all that you have done in the world, and to account it an honour to welcome you under our roof."

Marguérite bent forward and kissed her impulsively and gratefully.

"Ah!" she said, "thank you. I felt a stranger here—now I shall be happy."

"Go and rest, my dear, you must be tired after your journey," said Madame Cortot, patting her shoulder; and obediently, Marguérite followed Marie-Anne up the shallow stairs, to the clean low-roofed bedroom bright with spring flowers set on table and mantelshef.

Marie-Anne ran to the window and pulled back the lace curtain. "See," she said, "we have given you this room because you can see both the forest and the plain—it is the loveliest view in Acquarelle."

The elder woman came and stood beside her and looked out at the glory of the setting sun, as it sank into rosy banks of cloud.

The garden beneath the house was brilliant with flowering thorn and lilac, amid which birds called to one another, singing of love and spring. She looked down the white road. Along it the figure of a young man, tall and strong, moved with swinging step, as one who, gallant and wholesome, comes on a glad errand. As he came he whistled, and the sound of his whistling mingled with the singing of the birds. He seemed to be imitating them, calling, too, in round appealing sweetness, to his mate. Some instinct made Marguérite turn to the girl at her side. Marie-Anne had been watching the man as he advanced. Her expression was rapt and exquisitely happy, and a rosy flush which was not all the reflection of the setting sun dyed her cheeks.

"It is Jacques," she whispered.

"Ah! my child," said Marguérite, moved with unfathomable longing for the lover and husband who no longer greeted her with outstretched arms.

Marie-Anne held her suddenly in quick, close embrace.

"I love him," she said. "I cannot say how much I love him"—her voice broke in a little sob.

Marguérite kissed her tenderly.

"Go, my child," she commanded, "he will want you."

And Marie, dreaming, went to her lover, passing out into the spring twilight with the song of the birds crying round her.

Marguérite, left alone, laid her head on the window-ledge, weeping for the lover who would come no more, for youth that was dead, and the husband whose arms would no longer hold her close. Sobbing she moved away from the window, and bathed her wet eyes, unable to bear the sight of the lovers who walked in the garden below.

"Allons, Marguérite Périntot," she admonished herself bitterly. "Do not be ridiculous. Have you not tasted life in its fullness? Console yourself. The past is finished with and the present is not to be despised. Recall to yourself that none of these people could, with all their simplicity, play the Marguérite of *Faust*!"

So saying, with a sob still rising in her throat, she descended the stairs, and entered the kitchen, where, with gay insistence, she threw herself into the business of helping with the preparations for the wedding.

CHAPTER III

LA MAISON GRISE, the house which had been the ancient home of the Cortots, and in which Jacques and Marie-Anne were now to live, stood on the right-hand of a little lane which runs a short way back from the main street of Acquarelle. The original structure was a small, two-storied, grey stone cottage, with a garden behind it—set in the angle of the lane and main street, where a big lilac overhangs the wall.

When M. de Fabrieux bought four fields for Jean Cortot's father he had, in addition, acquired the strip of orchard which

running parallel to the lane, reaches the boundary line of the Baudaires' farm land and the first scattered rocks and trees which standing like sentinels, detached, to guard the serried ranks of thick woods behind.

The artist who for so many years rented the property had added a wing to the old house, making it into a moderate-sized and comfortable dwelling ; and, while planting the little garden with a profusion of climbing roses, clematis, jasmine, and sweet-scented bright-coloured ground plants, had starred the further fields with apple, pear and cherry trees, so that, looking from the windows, he might see their dainty blossoms against the green of the long grass and the changing pageant of the clouds. Beyond again, intermittently obscured in spring by those pale blossoms, in autumn by rosy clustered fruit, to the right lay the broad expanse of the plain, to the left the rolling forest.

As now constructed, the house, so to speak, turned its back on the village street. The front windows, filled with leaded casements, looked out to the garden and orchard, while two lower floor windows gave on the lane.

On the opposite side of the road, parallel with La Maison Grise—Marie-Anne's new home—lay another property, belonging to an artist of considerable fame. Originally it had consisted of two cottages in their little gardens ; but he had knocked down the wall dividing the two plots of land, and built a huge studio in the centre.

One cottage contained a big bedroom on the ground floor, which he himself occupied, and two fair-sized guest chambers above—reached by an outside stone staircase. The other he used as a lumber room and cook-house ; while the big building in the garden served the double purpose of living room and studio. He had enclosed the whole property with a high stone wall, pierced by an entrance gate from the street ; and by a wrought-iron gateway opening on to the lane at the further end of the garden—through which the passer-by might see the riot of brilliant flowering shrubs and plants, the great side of the studio, and beyond, the uneven steps of the stone staircase mounting up the rough side of the cottage till they were lost in a canopy of ivy.

In the garden of La Maison Grise, on the Sunday afternoon, the day following their arrival, Marie-Anne and Marguerite, after prolonged examination of the house and its

contents, walked slowly down the long pathway. Madame Rouston, who had gone with them, turned, and silently—almost stealthily—re-entered the house. For a moment an almost febrile jealousy clutched her heart. This house had been her home, it was hers no longer.

But the two who wandered along the pathway did not notice her defection, and Madame Rouston climbed the stairs, her eyes blinded by tears of passing jealousy. Moved to a depth of emotion by the sight of her old home, a sudden cry went up within her for her vanished youth—not so much for the return of love and the fruit of that loving, as for the childhood—passionless and pure—that had been hers in this house and garden. Stumbling she mounted the dark, narrow stairway, and the familiar creaking of the boards beneath her feet racked her with remembrance, till the slow, painful tears of age flowed down over her furrowed cheeks.

"They, too, are old," she sighed, weeping.

She turned along the passage and, with trembling fingers, fumbled for the handle of the door of the little room which had been hers. Save for a small iron bed with a box mattress, it was empty. She crossed to the window and threw open the casement. The air was heavy with the scent of pinks and may-blossom. In the distance, from the fir-crowned summit of the hills, the echoing sweetness of the cuckoo ricocheted among the rocks—which last showed their stark opaqueness, at intervals, between the trees. From the street, behind the house, came a murmur of voices and the uneven footsteps of passers by as they picked their way over the cobble-stones.

She clasped her hands on the window-ledge and looked at Marie-Anne standing in the garden, remembering, as she did so, that the young girl stood on the threshold of that tremendous experience—the passage from virginity to wifehood. A certain shame and delicate prudery filled the old woman. It was not meet that she should vainly regret the lost youth that had reached so rich a fulfilment; rather must she call a blessing on the young pair who, to-morrow, would pass from love's borderland of mystery—beneath the sheltering roof of the old home—into the inner court of knowledge. Bowing her head over her clasped hands, in silent humility, she bade good-bye to the momentary selfishness which had touched her.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, and Marguérite's incisive tones called her. She turned to the doorway, smiling.

"I came to see my old room, Marie-Anne," she apologized; "this was where I slept as a girl of your age."

"Ah, *ma mère*," cried Marguérite, touched, "without doubt this visit causes you great emotion," and she stooped and kissed the old woman.

"If it is an emotion, it is a tender and happy one," Madame Rouston answered, smiling still, bravely, though her lips trembled.

"Marie-Anne and I have just been planning that you should come her for a week sometimes," Marguérite went on; "the country air will refresh you."

"Yes," added Marie-Anne, "I will take great care of you, and this room—your own room—shall be always ready for you."

Madame Rouston looked at her lovingly.

"I will come, then," she whispered, "if I shall not trouble you and your good husband."

"That is a promise," cried Marie-Anne, clapping her hands with childish pleasure. "Now we must return—for it grows late."

"And I grow hungry," Marguérite murmured, beginning to descend the stairs.

Marie-Anne locked the door and they passed out into the lane. Opposite to the iron gateway of the house next door, Marguérite paused.

"What a pretty garden!" she exclaimed. "How I should like to enter. Who is your neighbour, Marie-Anne?"

"He is an artist—a M. Drouot. We are fortunate, for he is very quiet; indeed, he is away sometimes for months at a time, and, when he goes to Algiers, the house remains empty. No one comes here but Annette, his *bonne*, to air the rooms, and her husband—who keeps the garden for him—they live a little way up the street."

They had reached the end of the lane, and now, passing by a narrow pathway through the orchard, came to the edge of the plain. Here the paths forked—one turning down to the left, skirted the edge of the field, the other passed through Jean Cortot's land to the farm.

Half way between the village and the forest the left-hand path reaches a little oasis in the open land—once a pretty

garden, surrounding an old cottage, long since fallen into decay. Some of the shrubs and trees—overgrown now, and luxuriant—remain. The fruit trees—uncultivated—have returned to the wild, and the flowers have been exterminated by grass and weeds. Among the foliage giant rocks lie half hidden.

Tradition says that this singularly lovely and romantic oasis, overlooking the plain and backed by the forest, was the favourite haunt of Alfred de Musset. And that here, lying on the grass, he composed many of his passionate and exquisite poems. Certain it is that the little pathway from the village is worn by the pilgrim feet of a multitude of his admirers.

At the top of the slope the three women had stopped for a moment to look towards the sunset. Marguérite observed that a tall man, clad in a well-cut grey tweed suit and grey felt hat, stood leaning on his stick by the poet's rock. Immobile, he regarded the plain glowing beneath the long rays of the setting sun. From the thorn tree behind him the rich notes of a blackbird broke forth with sudden vigorous warmth. Those clear notes—standing out against the background of vaguer and more distant twitterings and calling of lesser birds, from the thicket on the edge of the forest—awoke him from the reverie into which his thought had plunged. Slowly he turned and began to mount the slope to where the three women stood.

"It is M. Drouot," whispered Marie-Anne, as, breasting the hill, his head and figure outlined clearly against the glowing sky, the man came towards them.

With his back to that dazzling light, his features were indistinguishable; but Marguérite received an impression of quiet strength—of one who feels deeply but who holds his personality in the hollow of his hand, subordinating temperament to will.

Looking up at the three women illumined by the sun's dying flare, his eyes rested on Madame Périntot's face. It was to her that he spoke, as he stood still, and, with a sweeping gesture, indicated the glory that marked the setting sun.

"Are you not glad that you have come here?" he demanded without preliminary. "I watched you this morning at Mass," he went on, "and I came to the conclusion

that you were an artist. Therefore, impertinently, with the freemasonry of art, I claim acquaintance."

Madame Périnot answered him quietly and with dignity.

"I am glad that you should recognize me as an artist—it is true that I am one."

"Ah! I knew it," he exclaimed. "Well, is not Acquarelle a place to inspire artists? Do you wonder that we painter people come here to drink of nature undiluted—unspoiled—glowing with the crude and exquisite poetry of life—filled to the brim with the *brut*-passion of realism, clean and wholesome? Acquarelle will have none of the stifling, subtle nuances of the decadent. If we dream here it is the drunkenness of pure air, our subtleties are those of nature, our *nuances* the changing seasons and the passing days."

"Was de Musset so healthy a realist?" inquired Marguérite, moved by his eloquence, yet determined to hold her own.

"De Musset," Drouot replied, "brought his atmosphere along with him. He came here to find Paradise, and, dreaming, he wrote of earth. You have read the '*Nuit de Mai*,' madame? Perhaps such a night as this inspired that exquisite word-picture. To the artist this place is Paradise, for we see pictures on every hand. To live in Acquarelle is to live in art."

His eyes, alight with enthusiasm, regarded Marguérite as she stood listening. For a moment her evident understanding made him forget the other two.

"I have heard that de Musset brought something more solid with him than atmosphere," she answered, refusing to be overborne by the strength of his personality.

"You cite a bad example, madame," he said roughly. "For de Musset—though an artist—was not of the Acquarelle school. He was an exotic transplanted here for the time being by passionate emotion."

"I, too, am an artist," Marguérite asserted; "but I do not find the country inspiring. For me the city, and the vigour of life that pulses there, holds greater inspiration."

"How so?" he asked.

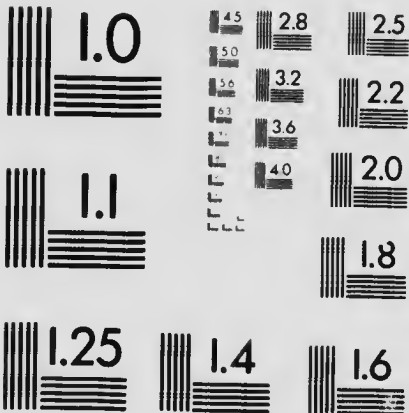
"I belong to the stage—I am an opera singer," she answered.

"Ah!" he said, and—at the mention of her profession—his voice softened, "I understand. I am no musician



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myself, but I love the art—indeed in some ways I am very much in touch with it. For your profession the city and the immediate applause of the crowd are necessary."

He turned to Marie-Anne meditatively.

"You will have a fine day for your wedding. Forgive my rudeness, but the colour and beauty of evening have stirred me. Coming back here, after my wanderings, into the enchanting sweetness of spring, I lose my head and begin to dream of things which I have put away; therefore nothing but the harshness of my own art, and the unmannerliness of realism, can recall my confused senses."

He spoke with a violence that surprised Marie-Anne. M. Drouot, as she knew him, was reticent. The effect of Marguérite's personality seemed to rouse him curiously.

"You were not rude, M. Drouot," she said, touched by a pathetic penitence in his manner. "I was about to tell you that we should be so pleased if you would come to our wedding feast. Madame Périntot, my cousin, will be still with us—I am sure your presence would give her pleasure also."

M. Drouot regarded her smiling. The roughness had gone from his manner.

"To-morrow is a great day for you, Marie-Anne. I will certainly come and wish you good fortune," he said.

He raised his hat and disappeared into the orchard.

"I have never known M. Drouot talk so much," Marie-Anne observed with surprise. "We have always thought him such a silent, sad man. I wonder if he will come!"

"He was not silent to-day," commented Marguérite.

"The dew is falling," Madame Rouston put in; "let us go home."

"And again," exclaimed Marguérite, "*sapristi!*—I have a wolf's hunger on me. If I lived here every remnant of pride would go, together with the strings of my corsets."

The young girl had relapsed into silence. As they neared the farm she dropped behind for a moment, and, turning, looked back at the last reflection of the sunset, as the purple pall of night began to descend on the mist-wrapped valley. The little white pathway lay like a silver ribbon through the grass, and the great, formless mass of the tree-crowned hill was blotted into twilight. Only the birds, singing still from out that confused vagueness of dusk, called passionately. Marie-Anne, standing there, silently clasped her hands.

Beyond, in the shadows, lay the familiar forest and plain. When next her eyes should light on that landscape, and her feet press the spring grass that bordered the pathway, these things would be the same. But she—Marie-Anne—would have changed.

"To-morrow," she whispered, as she turned homeward, "to-morrow I shall be his wife."

CHAPTER IV

EARLY on Monday morning, while the sun was still below the horizon, and the mist of the valley hung heavy and thick over the dew-drenched meadows, only the birds—in the forest and woodland—sang in the rosy dawn.

In the little bedroom, in which she had passed the last night of her maidenhood, Marie-Anne lay sleeping. The casement windows stood wide open. The first shaft of sunlight stole into the room, and lit on the white gown which hung over the chair by her bedside. It stole further and touched the face of the sleeping girl. She rested her cheek on one hand, her firm young throat hidden in her hair; the other hand was flung over the coverlet, the pink fingers half closed over her coral rosary. She breathed sweetly and evenly—a smile on her lips.

The intrusive shaft of sunlight shone on her eyelids, and sent them fluttering open as she stirred in her sleep. She stretched herself, rubbing her eyes as a baby does, on awaking, and looked around at the familiar room in the growing light. Familiar—yet with a strange presence there, for her glance fell on the white gown that hung over the chair. Then she remembered, and a sudden pang shot through her heart; as, with full consciousness, came the realization of what the dawning of this day meant to her. Stepping out of bed she ran lightly to the window, and leaned out towards the forest.

She remained at the window for some minutes. Then the chill of the early morning causing her to shiver slightly, she pattered back swiftly to her bed; and, kneeling down, took up her rosary and began to recite her morning prayers. For nearly a quarter of an hour she knelt—the soles of her bare

rosy feet showing beneath the hem of her nightgown—her head raised, her eyes fixed on the small blue-robed image of the Blessed Virgin on the bracket above her. Then she crept back into bed, and, pulling the clothes over her shoulders, turned on her side, so that she could obtain an uninterrupted view of the landscape without.

Her heart beat with an unaccustomed violence, agitation growing in her; not from thought of those strange new experiences which should come to her before the breaking of another day, but from a sense of the ordeal of the ceremony; the eyes of her friends and relations upon her; the wedding feast, and the bandying of kindly compliments and laughter which would go with it.

Marie-Anne longed for the moment when she and Jacques would step quietly through the grey gateway; and, taking the path through the flower-sprinkled grass, reach the quiet garden in which stood La Maison Grise—the old house that was to be their home.

Upon the entering of that home her thoughts dwelt with happy insistence, as on a charming and lovely prospect whose beauties lay half-veiled in mist—a prospect which would gladden her eyes fully when the long trying day should be over. Beyond the crossing of the threshold of the house her imagination did not linger. Marie-Anne, modest and virginal of nature, did not speculate as to what lay in the inner court of the temple of love. Vaguely she trusted to Jacques. To be with him, and to belong to him, was all that she wished for ardently yet very simply.

At the thought of him a burning blush stained her face and neck and she hid her face in the pillow. She longed with a great yearning to be alone with him.

Lying on her bed, and listening to the song of the birds, she once more became gradually drowsy, her eyelids closed, and she slept again, dreaming of the walk through the orchard and meadow to the grey house in the lane.

Long after, that day's happenings seemed to Marie-Anne as the continuation of her dream. She remembered her mother bringing a bowl of bread and milk and a cup of hot coffee, and how lovingly she had pressed her in her arms. She remembered how, with extreme care, she had washed her fresh young body with elder flower water; then the clothing of herself in clean beribboned garments, and the braiding up

of her long silky hair under her muslin cap. Followed by the putting on of the white dress of soft silk, made peasant fashion, with a white muslin cross-over open at the neck, exposing her brown neck. Round her throat she had fastened a coral necklace, and in her ears the tinkling coral ear-rings given her by Jacques. She remembered the strange feeling of her new white gloves, and first pair of white shoes and stockings; how her mother had come and put the finishing touches to her dress, and old Madame Rouston had placed a white sheet on the floor so that the new shoes should not be soiled before starting. Jacques had sent her, that morning, a tiny bunch of orange blossom which she pinned in the bosom of her gown.

All these things, in a hazy way, Marie-Anne remembered. Then the long wait sitting with her white prayer-book in her hand; and how cousin Margu rite, coming to kiss her, had told her that Jacques would be proud of his lovely little bride. The drive to the church with her parents, the holding of her mother's hand, and Madame Cortot's tears falling on the white book. The walk up the church garden, with the swinging May blossoms, whose red and white petals showered on her as she passed. The knowledge of faces that she knew watching her, and the whispered comment of the neighbours. And, lastly, the sense that she had reached a haven of rest, as she entered the cool church, and took her place by Jacques—Jacques pale and moved, but strong and protective.

After that feeling—of the presence of Jacques—Marie-Anne was conscious of no more personal responsibility. At the touch of his hand a new sense of security awoke in her. The vague numbness left her, she felt stronger and more alive; a subtle connection with him seemed to calm her. She felt the hand which held hers trembling slightly. Then awoke in her a new element of motherliness, and a longing that he should know that she was thinking of him, with the utmost sympathy and love. She tightened her grip of his hand and almost a faintness came over her, as the pressure was returned, with a strength that pained her.

Kneeling there, through the remainder of the service, as the ceremony followed its course, a curious abandon took her. She felt glad that Jacques was so strong and wholesome and that no man but he had ever touched her lips, or held her in his arms.

Then, the ceremony closing, they made their way to the sacristy, and Jacques, stooping, pressed a warm and lingering kiss on her lips. The feel of the new gold ring on her finger was strange and heavy to her hand. It reminded her that she was no longer a child but a woman, and that the lover who had kissed her was her husband.

CHAPTER V

AFTER the wedding feast the company had risen from the table. Some standing about in groups in the house, others wandering in the garden, while awaiting the departure of the young pair.

Madame Périntot, who had passed into the garden, surveyed the animated scene with friendly amusement.

Hearing a man's footsteps she turned round and saw that the artist, M. Drouot, was advancing towards her.

"Ah madame!" he cried, "I find you at last. Now, tell me, were you not singing at Cordeilles in the year 18—?"

"Why, yes," she answered, surprised and pleased that he should remember. "You have a good memory, monsieur, for that is twenty years ago, and you must have been quite a boy. It was just before my marriage—truly I was more slender then," she added reflectively.

"The impressions of one's boyhood are very lasting, madame—especially those created by a first experience. I had just returned from Algiers—where I had been on a visit with my father. I was only sixteen and my boyish mind was on fire with the colour and splendour of the South. I had never before been to an operatic performance, and when I went with him to see *Aïda*, there on the stage was the echo of all which I had but just left. The same crude colours, the same burning, pulsing life of the sun-warmed South. Besides," he added, "though it is true that I should not have recognized you had I seen you only in *Aïda*, may I confess that : y first tender passion was for your voice and your acting. We remained at Cordeilles for a fortnight, and, every time your name appeared on the bills, I besought my father to take me to the opera."

■ Marguérite smiled, while he continued eagerly :

"Consider, too, that I have the draughtsman's eyes for contours. Even at that age I memorized the shapes and colours that appealed to me. It has always been the same. Whether I will or not, mentally I reconstruct the anatomy of a face, and unforgettably it remains photographed on my brain."

"*Tiens!*" exclaimed Marguérite, laughing outright, as they moved slowly down the path to the gate. "You spoil your romantic little history, monsieur. I should not care to reduce most of my friends to skeletons. I confess to a weakness, even in my own case, for a wholesome covering of flesh."

M. Drouot paused.

"Each art has its technique," he said. "To me the sound of scales and exercises, however beautiful the voice or instrument, is an abomination. I care for music only when it is finished—articulate. But the formless mechanism of its construction is as abhorrent to me as a knowledge of anatomy is, apparently, to you."

"Ah! since you put it like that I understand," cried Marguérite, her face keen. She liked this rough, eloquent and "unusual" man, whom she knew the world of art acclaimed as a great painter of the realist school. "The bare bones of his art are perhaps dearer to the artist than the gaudy decorations in which he dresses them, in order to make them comprehensible to the uninitiated. Only the artist can clothe the bare bones with flesh, and breathe life into the dead clay."

"Until the creation lives, and, shouting, declares its living to a heedless world," he continued, watching her mobile face. "Are you staying here for any length of time? If so I should like to show you my pictures, and, if you would permit me, I should be greatly interested in making a sketch of you."

"You would have much difficulty in discovering the bones, monsieur," Marguérite put in mischievously, her dimples showing. "I should like nothing better, but, alas! I must return to Paris by the early train to-morrow. My pupils claim me."

"I am sorry," he said. "I had promised myself that you would give me the pleasure of visiting my studio."

"Come and see me if you happen to be in Paris at any

time," Margu rite answered, smiling. "I cannot promise you pictures, unless they be living ones! My address is Number five, rue des Masques—if you forget you will always find it in the telephone directory. On most afternoons I am at work in my theatre, but not too busy to exchange a little conversation with my friends in the interludes of my work."

"I shall be delighted," he answered. "I am very seldom in Paris, so the visit may not be paid for some time; but rest assured I shall take advantage one day of your kind permission. This place is my workshop, where I am quiet and can, when I am busy, be as morose as I please. I am here when I return from Algiers, with the sketches I have made and many mind-pictures as my only companions. This material, collected on my travels, is the nucleus around which I weave my big paintings. Out there I can only gather the rough impressions—here, where sunshine no longer burns my brain and eyelids, I digest my raw material and see things in perspective. Then I portray, not the flaring, exaggerated, hectic passing view of the traveller, but the sane and solid substance of fact. How long I remain here depends on how my work goes. If it pleases me and I become absorbed, I may not move for months. If I am troubled and cannot fit in the pieces of the puzzle, it is different. I seek distraction in the company of my many friends in Paris."

"Does all promise to go well this time?" Madame P rintot inquired, looking at him with sympathetic interest. "I can well understand your wanting to be alone at times. You creative artists are sensitive, and it is not everyone who has the gift of understanding. A jarring note will sometimes spoil the finest composition."

"Yes," he agreed, "and here the simple peasants who live round me are too far away in personality to trouble me. Save for one or two artist friends who are as misanthropic as myself, I see no one. At present I am intensely happy, I have a mass of material under my hand, and my brain is alive with ideas. It is unlikely I shall move until it becomes too arid in the forest to suit me—by then I fear you will have left Paris for the summer vacation. I used to keep a tiny apartment in the rue de Seine, but I found it too much of a tie to me. Generally I have a refuge open to me which I am accustomed to look on as my own. My friend, Gaston

Hypolite, possesses a charming flat overlooking the Parc Monceau, and he is always willing to put up with me and my vagaries."

"*Mon Dieu!*" cried Marguérite, standing still, an expression of extreme surprise on her face. "You are speaking of Gaston Hypolite the singer?"

"None else," he returned, quietly observing her. "There is but one Gaston Hypolite. He is my very dear friend. Perhaps also he is known to you?"

He looked at her with increased interest. Gaston's women friends were legion. Charming as Madame Périnot was he did not suppose her to be the type of woman who would attract his friend. He judged her to be neither young enough or sufficiently malleable.

Marguérite put her little scented handkerchief up to her nostrils, dabbing delicately; then she answered with a slight hesitation in her manner which intrigued her listener.

"Most of us in the singer world know Gaston. Your mention of him surprised me, as it was but Saturday I was talking to him. Somehow I never connected him with pictures."

Drouot was puzzled. Madame Périnot's mind was, to his sensitive feeling, obviously occupied with some private train of thought which the casual mention of his friend's name called up. Deliberately he probed her thought.

"You probably know him," he suggested—"since you saw him on Saturday he was on the point of leaving for London."

"Yes," she asserted, still preoccupied, more—as he observed—with her own thoughts than his speech. Drouot waited watching her as she stood thinking.

"It is a curious thing," she said at last, "that I should have met you here. I have been considerably exercised in my mind concerning a matter that is connected with Gaston Hypolite. I have an instinct that perhaps my coming here has more meaning than I was at first aware, especially"—she raised her hand and daintily put back her fluttering veil that she might see him more clearly—"especially since I seem to be constantly thrown into your company."

Drouot looked at the fine face opposite him. The dark eyes were innocent of *arrière pensée*. The fine mouth was grave, whatever her intention there was honest sincerity in it.

"I am at your service, madame," he said seriously.

Marguérite looked at him penetratingly. Could she speak to this man of her fears concerning Eugénie? She felt drawn to him by a feeling of confidence as strong as her distrust of Hypolite. Yet convention made her hesitate.

"Tell me," she said at last, "if it is not an indiscreet question—I ask it neither lightly nor impertinently—Gaston Hypolite is your great friend, is he not? Tell me then in confidence—I had thought of enlisting his sympathies and interest on behalf of a *protégée* of mine—a young girl. Is his reputation such that you think I should be justified in doing so?"

M. Drouot was silent for a moment. He took a silver cigarette case from his pocket, and choosing a cigarette he turned to her, saying, "You permit me, madame?"

Marguérite bent her head. Then she fixed her eyes with almost childlike anxiety on his face, as he deliberately lit the cigarette, inhaled the smoke, and expelled it after a moment through his nostrils. She was aware that he wished to gain time, and that the elaborate courtesy of his last words hid a warning that she had touched on a difficult subject.

Drouot remained silent. He disliked being made responsible for Hypolite's good behaviour. The question of how far loyalty to his friend demanded that he should keep silence, and loyalty to his conscience demanded that he should speak, needed consideration.

"Madame," he said at last, "may I ask you why you should select my friend for the honour of assisting your *protégée*?"

Marguérite looked him full in the eyes.

"You may," she said, "and I will tell you frankly, it is because M. Hypolite has already shown considerable interest in her."

"Then," he asked, "why is it necessary to encourage him further, and why, if he already knows her, are you exercised in your mind?"

Whereupon Marguérite, seeing that there was no help for it, told him the history of Saturday's meeting with Hypolite, and her belief in Eugénie Massini's great gift.

Drouot listened quietly, without interrupting her. When she had finished he said:

"Madame, Gaston is my friend, and it is one of the rules of our friendship that we never interfere with one another. Perhaps this independence—this reserve—between us is the reason that our friendship—which began at the Lycée, and continued through our military service—has endured so long. I may say to you that, as a man of the world, I have never known anything in his slightly erratic existence which I could seriously condemn."

"As a man of the world," repeated Marguérite slowly. "Forgive me, I see that my question was indiscreet."

"There is nothing to forgive," M. Drouot answered, smiling. "Gaston is as other men. I cannot say more or less. You, as a woman of the world, must know that no man could be wholly indifferent to a lovely young singer—especially if he be a man of exceptional temperament."

"Then you warn me to be careful?" demanded Marguérite.

"I warn nobody," he returned a little stiffly. "It is not my business. I merely ask you to regard the matter as one in which I can have no influence—can take no responsibility."

"Good," observed Marguérite, slightly annoyed. "You wish to punish me for an indiscretion?"

Drouot turned to her and his face was friendly.

"No," he assured her. "I respect you for your frankness. I beg you will not think that of me."

His expression was so charming that Marguérite put out her hand.

"We shall be friends, M. Drouot," she said, smiling.

"I own that I put you in an awkward position. I am penitent. Forgive me."

Drouot took the hand held out to him.

"Do not put it in the future," he pleaded. "Say rather we are friends already. When Gaston returns we will both come and visit you."

"And you will then be responsible for his good behaviour?" Marguérite inquired, making a naughty face at him.

Drouot did not reply, but pointed to the door where the guests had gathered in a little crowd.

"Marie-Anne is going," he declared; "let us bid her good-bye."

CHAPTER VI

JACQUES waited for Marie-Anne at the foot of the stairs. Now that the moment of departure arrived, he was taken with confusion and a certain timidity. He could have wished that the wedding feast had lasted till later, or that the pathway by which they would reach their home had been of greater length. As he stood, one foot on the lowest step of the staircase, the murmur of conversation and the sound of laughter came to him from the dining-room. Through the open doorway on to the garden he could see Madame Périntot and M. Drouot standing together. M. Drouot's face, with its strongly marked profile and pointed beard, was silhouetted against the background of green without. He leant lazily against the side post of the door, and the well-cut grey suit was eloquent of his fashionable origin, as also the grey Homburg hat he held in his hands while he talked. Madame Périntot had drawn down her floating veil, and the wind swayed it lightly to and fro. Jacques was glad when M. Drouot and Madame Périntot passed down into the garden, and he was left alone with the thought of his young wife. Then came to him a tremendous and overwhelming realization of the meaning of their marriage, and again a tremor shook him, as it had done in church at the pressure of her light fingers. Remembering that light pressure and its singular effect on him, his face flamed. He listened eagerly for the sound of the opening door above. He could hear footsteps passing to and fro in Marie-Anne's bedroom. He wondered what she was doing in those last few minutes in her old home. Then, suddenly, with an abruptness that set his heart thumping, the door opened. Jacques gripped the balustrade firmly; the blood mounting made the veins stand out in great knots on his forehead, as he remembered what the end of the journey—to which Marie-Anne's coming was the prelude—held for them both.

Marie was descending the stairs. Madame Cortot, in grey silk dress and muslin cap, came with her. The girl's white-sleeved arm was round her mother's waist and the elder woman's arm was about her daughter's shoulders

as if she held her, sheltering in these last moments not the grown woman, but the one baby she had borne. Jacques noticed that the resemblance between the two was singularly marked—since gaiety no longer predominated in the girl's expression, but rather a reflexion of her mother's seriousness. Marie-Anne smiled at the sight of her husband, but there were traces of tears on her lashes and her soft lips quivered. Jacques had never seen Marie-Anne sorrowful, and the sight now moved him to a passion of yearning tenderness. He perceived that the leaving behind of her old home was not without regret now, when it came to the moment of parting.

He looked at her dumbly, pleading that she should forgive the sacrifice which he asked—forgive that passion which demanded the surrender of her person, the sharing of that self which had, hitherto, been so completely her own.

Madame Cortot released Marie-Anne. Now she put both hands on the young man's shoulders and kissed him on either cheek.

"Be good to my little daughter, Jacques," she said. "Be tender and gentle, and may she be as good wife to you as she has been child to me."

The young man bowed his head and, hoarsely, his voice strangling in his throat, he answered:

"I love her——"

He did not look at Marie-Anne. Madame Cortot placed the girl's small firm hand in his, and together the two commenced their farewells to friends and relations. At last, after a parting kiss to Madame Cortot, the two passed down the garden path, out of the familiar grey gate and through the orchard to the edge of the plain. The company stood watching Marie-Anne's white figure and the tall one of her husband as they were lost to sight among the apple trees.

The sun was beginning to sink low on the horizon and great trails of vaporous mist floated over the plain. Marie and Jacques walked side by side like two children. With beating hearts, and in silence, they followed the path bordered on one side by rank grass starred with flowers, on the other by a field of clover. A certain embarrassment and shyness had fallen between them; only, when Marie-Anne stumbled over a tussock of grass, Jacques, placing his arm under her elbow, felt her place her left hand in his.

They clasped each other's fingers warmly with lingering touch. Both were conscious of, and could feel, the new ring that he had placed on her hand a short time before.

At last they reached the place where the path divided in three—one leading to La Maison Grise, another down the slope to the Poet's Rock, while the third passed through deep forest to *Sable d'Argent*. Here they stopped for a moment and loosed their hands. A desire to prolong this enchanted journey was present in both, and a certain hesitancy, before crossing the barrier which, until now, had seemed to them the one thing desirable to remove.

"Let us go down to de Musset's Rock and sit there awhile, Jacques," said Marie-Anne quickly. "I feel that I want to breathe the fresh air of the plain for a little while.—So much has happened to-day."

Silently—the young woman leading, the tall figure of the young man following—they made their way down the slope to the oasis. Each was acutely conscious of the other's presence. They seated themselves on a flat rock beneath the overhanging branch of a thorn tree. Jacques did not attempt to kiss her, only his hand again sought, and held tightly, the hand which wore the wedding ring. He began to pluck the grass and flowers which grew by the rock, and to scatter them over the white surface of her lap. Marie-Anne bent her head and, raising his hand, pressed it against her bosom. Cradling it, in the crook of her elbow—as a baby's head—she pressed her face into the palm of it. The softness of her lips filled him with an ever rising tide of passion, so that he trembled.

"Marie, Marie, my little Marie," he murmured hoarsely, pulling his arm away, "my wife, my wife."

"Husband," she whispered, leaning against him.

The touch of her soft pliant body, clean-scented, but human and warm, became almost intolerable to him.

Suddenly, from the forest behind them, came the sound of the nightingale singing its spring song. They listened breathless to the intermittent sweetness. A gentle draught of air passed over the plain, shifting the trails of vapour, then died away, leaving them again immobile. Nocturnal mystery began to surround them, creeping forth from the shadows of purple dusk in the forest, as the wild came into possession of the deepening twilight. The rank mist of

evening rising, floating, enwrapping the plain, shut out the forest and the horizon into silence, vague and palpitating.

"The mist is rising, Marie," he whispered, "let us go home."

He drew her to her feet, and, with his arm still clasped round her, they mounted the slope, went along the pathway by the wall, and down the lane through the open orchard to La Maison Grise. In the doorway Jacques took the key from his pocket and opened the door. The fading daylight made the house seem dark within, but for that darkness they were thankful. Hand in hand they entered, and Jacques, drawing her unresisting to him, pressed his mouth on hers, holding her tightly against him. "My wife, my wife," he murmured.

Then, releasing her for a moment, together they closed the door on the spring night.

BOOK III

VISIONS AT THE GATES OF CHANCE

CHAPTER I

WITH the wedding day of Marie-Anne the spell of beautiful spring sunshine had ended.

In the night the wind had arisen and, crying in the trees of the forest, called up hurrying vaporous clouds, till the wind-swept sky became a lowering canopy. Towards morning a thick driving rain began to fall, sighing and hushing with the wind among the fir trees, and blotting out the brilliance of the plain into grey-green distance.

Marguérite departed by the morning train for Paris. But Madame Rouston, at the earnest request of her relations, decided to stay on for a few days more at Acquarelle.

It was not without a feeling of relief Marguérite settled into a corner seat on the big train, and set forth on the rush back to Paris. The rain-swept country, with its dripping trees and dashed flowers, seemed discouraging to her. The first sight of the tall roofs—shining in the rain—as they entered Paris gave her a sense of security. She looked with affection at the long rows of white houses and their green shuttered windows. No longer would she have the annoying sense she was surrounded by a simple and self-complacent civilization. Charming—she admitted—but, to her seasoned palate, slightly cloying; and in which she, though endowed with a distinct personality, had no place. With the return to Paris, the wheels of life began to move again, and she felt her natural self-reliant self once more.

"Truly," she murmured, "the country is admirable for the aged and the very young—for these need health-giving air and tranquillity. But, for persons of a certain age—at least those of them who are unfortunate enough to possess

temperament—the pavement and the boulevard have their attractions! The city is not so intolerably and impossibly possessive as the country. It permits you to exist, even to go out and mix with its kindly crowd, without labelling you with your exact age and station. Thus it is indulgent to the woman who is no longer in her first youth! In the country it is impossible to be for a single instant unknown, and detestably dreary even to desire it!”

And so, rejoicing inwardly, she stepped out into the cheerful bustle of the Gare de Lyons, and made her way into the big station restaurant. There she consumed the excellent white wine and good food with a hearty appetite.

But later, shut up in a taxi, she rattled along the road beside the Seine, depression began to assault her as she looked out at the dismal prospect of streaming streets and wet pedestrians hurrying along under dripping umbrellas.

“Decidedly it is time I returned to work,” she told herself. “A holiday is an abominable thing, and these weddings are all very well for the bride and bridegroom, but, to the mere onlooker, they are distinctly discouraging.”

Her thought turned to Drouot, and from him to Hypolite and Eugénie. She wondered if the young girl would come to-morrow as she had promised. A keen desire came over her to hear the beautiful voice again, and to see that remarkably attractive face.

She looked out, striving to discover through the drenched panes how far she had advanced on her way home, but the glass was so clouded that her sight could not penetrate it. Impatiently she loosened the strap and let down the window, through which the rain-laden wind swept in, scattering little drops of moisture on her face. The taxi had reached the Boulevard Farnouchelles, and, in another moment, it turned down the narrow rue des Masques.

Madame Périntot stepped out on to the wet pavement. Hastily she paid the man, and, holding up her skirts, went in under the *porte cochère*, and nodding to the *concierge* bade him bring up the luggage at his convenience. Then, with a sigh of relief, she mounted the stairs and let herself into the flat with her latch key.

Inside, dreariness and silence reigned in the dark vestibule. She pushed her way through the curtains into the inner hall, and, taking off her cloak, laid it with her gold chain purse

and umbrella on the centre table. Then, opening the door into the kitchen, she called :

"Euphrasie, Euphrasie!" but no answering sound broke the stillness save the ticking of the great clock in the hall behind her.

"Evidently Euphrasie has gone out," she murmured, as she retired to the hall, and, crossing it, passed through the swing doors into the back of the theatre.

The blinds were drawn down over the great windows, and dusting sheets covered the semicircle of seats in the auditorium. The dark cavern of the stage yawned black and forbidding; while, from the heavy curtain which hung as background to the scene, tragic and comic masks, forming a frieze, grinned and glared at her with ape-like faces. The air was dead and breathless, and the scent of decaying flowers filled her nostrils unpleasantly.

"*Sapristi!*" she exclaimed, stripping off her gloves, "I do not believe Euphrasie has opened the windows here since we left—very certainly she has not removed the dead flowers! What an abominable stench!"

She made her way past the front of the proscenium, along the vacant space between the grand piano and the semicircle of velvet seats in their formless shroud. Reaching the other side of the room, she pulled back the holland blind, and, taking hold of the wooden handles of the pulleys, raised the centre window. As she did so a great gust of wind bellied back the blind, till it broke loose and flapped behind her like a thing demented, oversetting a little table on which stood a tall vase of flowers, together with a mass of theatrical photographs and a silver-framed mirror.

"*Mon Dieu!*" cried Margu rite, as she struggled with the unruly blind, while vase, mirror, and photographs crashed to the ground. "*Mon Dieu!* What possesses the things!"

She closed the window again, despairing of reducing the tormented strip of holland to reason. The silence and stagnant air depressed her. She felt unaccountably nervous and irritable. Stooping, she tried to gather up the fragments of the vase; as she did so her hands, groping in the half light among the mass of flowers, slimy stalks, wet photographs and foul smelling water, came in contact with the jagged edge of the mirror, which lay detached from its frame, in two pieces. The sharp edge against her flesh sickened her.

She was conscious that she had gashed the tops of two fingers. Hastily she got up and wound her handkerchief round them, but the blood began to soak through the thin cambric in a crimson stain. The episode, slight as it was, distressed her, bearing on her already overstrained nerves. Naturally healthy minded, she did not attach much importance to superstitions; yet remembrance came to her of the last time she had smashed a mirror, and how she had laughed at her mother's agitation. Three days after that first breakage, M. Périntot had died. She could not, therefore, look upon this second happening without a certain uneasiness. Then she pulled herself up, trying to rally her commonsense and humour.

"*Allons, Marguérite,*" she admonished, "do not be foolish. It is that ridiculous country, with its blatant simplicity, which has given you nerves. And, without doubt, with this rain and wind, the glass is very low. It is enough to depress a *cigale*."

She moved into the vestibule—with the intention of entering her room in search of sticking-plaster. Her hand on the bedroom door she paused—someone was ringing persistently at the front door, the sharp whirl of the electric bell sounded in the kitchen, stopped for a moment and then continued.

Irritation seized her. Why had not Euphrasie returned? How undignified she would appear opening the door herself, with her fingers tied up in a handkerchief—dressed, too, for travelling, and without the careful make-up she practised before receiving. She had half a mind to leave the importunate visitor under the impression that the flat was empty, hoping that, his patience exhausted, he would beat a retreat. But the possibility occurred to her that the *concierge* might have said she had returned. Flinging back her veil, she gave a hasty glance at the hanging mirror in the hall. Having patted her hair, she disconsolately pulled down her hat over the loose ends of fringe, which, uncurled by the wet, lay in damp wisps over her forehead. Then she made her way to the outer door and opened it.

Victorine Dupont, hatless, and holding a dripping umbrella, stood without. Her red-brown eyes, sombre and bloodshot, stared—their fierceness accentuated by the great dark half-circles pouched beneath them. She rested her left

hand, with its black-rimmed nails, and wedding ring half buried in the red flesh, on the door jamb. As she stood there silent, Madame Périntot received an impression of brute strength, and of bitter hostility in the woman's manner. She was at a loss to account for her presence, since to her certain knowledge they had never met before.

For a moment the two remained thus, each waiting for the other to speak. At last Victorine, harshly, and with a lift of her head, opened her firmly-closed lips and said :

"Madame Périntot ?"

"Certainly," answered Marguérite sharply, piqued by the woman's stare, and again unaccountably assailed with nerves.

Victorine deliberately put down her umbrella beside the door. From the point of it a little pool of discoloured water began to form at the edge of the carpet.

"I want a word with you," she asserted, and her tone was overbearing—almost threatening. She put her hands on her hips, surveying her adversary.

Madame Périntot did not move from her position in the doorway. She looked calmly at the woman in front of her.

"Speak," she answered. "I am waiting to know your business."

"It is concerning my niece, Eugénie Massini."

Marguérite started, giving vent to a little quick ejaculation. She was enlightened concerning her visitor's identity. But, though the girl had told her that her aunt worked in Les Halles, she had not expected that she would be of this—to her seeing—degraded type; for Victorine, with her massive bulk of body, her violent expression and bruised temple, looked a most unsavoury and unattractive virago.

"Ah !" she murmured ; "yes, I told her she might come and see me to-morrow."

She felt a great dislike to this rough-looking woman, with almost masculine aspect. The insolent hostility of that direct gaze roused the combative spirit within her. So strong was her feeling of repulsion, that it was with the greatest difficulty she made up her mind to invite her visitor to enter. But, since the latter obviously desired to speak with her, it was impossible to keep her standing in the doorway while she discussed her niece's future. Reluctantly, therefore, Madame Périntot stepped aside and motioned

her visitor to pass before her through the vestibule into the empty theatre.

Victorine looked distrustfully at the walls, hung with a multitude of portraits of Marguérite and her pupils clad in fantastic theatrical garb. Their posture, and, in some cases, the extreme inadequacy of their clothing, filled her with contempt and distaste, so that, hastily, she averted her gaze. Turning, she faced the black gulf of the proscenium, and was startled by the yawning cavity from out which the pale distorted faces of the tragic and comic masks seemed to leer at her mockingly, as she stood in her rough clothes with the wet dripping from her skirts.

Outside the wind and rain shattered against the windows, beating upon the panes and howling as though some tormented elemental being sought entry. Between the gusts the ticking of the clock was audible in the silent hall. From without, mingled with that cry and rush of the wind, came the tang-tang and rattle of trams as they passed the end of the Rue des Masques on their way down the Boulevard Farnouchelles. From below, in the narrow street, the "Huyp! Huyp!" of a carter sounded warningly, as he urged his team of great dappled Percheron stallions to renewed effort while they staggered up the slippery roadway, steaming, and straining with taut muscles at the haulage of a heavy cart.

Marguérite, meanwhile, became conscious that the near neighbourhood of her visitor was offensive in more senses than one, since a odour of unwashed humanity emanated from her person, as well as a confused suggestion of strong-smelling raw vegetables, pungent garlic, and highly cultivated earth. Nevertheless, essaying to overcome her dislike, she pulled forward a chair for Victorine and herself sat down on the sofa.

"*Tenez*," she said, "pray seat yourself. I am more than glad to have a little talk with you about your niece. I believe her to have great talent. It is my intention, if, on further experiment, I find that I am right in my supposition, to interest myself in her and to educate her musically."

Victorine was silent. She took no notice of Madame Périntot's invitation to be seated, but remained standing, her eyes fixed penetratingly on the face of the other woman. Mercilessly she studied the details of dyed hair and obviously assisted complexion; but, despite her pitiless scrutiny,

Madame Périntot returned her gaze unflinchingly. Grudgingly Victorine admitted to herself that she could discover nothing in her expression but honesty and sincerity. Against her will she was prepossessed in her favour, but she strove to whip up antagonism, refusing to be cajoled.

She put her hands on her hips, standing with her stomach forward—a position habitual to her in the market when she intended to do battle with other women of her class. That pose, and a certain bullying coarseness in her voice, never failed to strike a warning note in Les Halles. It was a bold woman who would argue with "*la vierge folle*" in such a mood. Madame Périntot should learn that she was not to be hoodwinked. Raising her voice she addressed her angrily.

"I have no desire that my niece should be educated. I do not think music suitable or useful for her station. She has been a good girl till now. What right have you to make her discontented with our way of living? By what right, I say, do you come when I am out and steal away the confidence of an unprotected girl, putting ideas into her head which had much better not be there?"

She stopped short in her tirade, passing her tongue over her parched lips. Her throat was dry and her voice trailed from its bullying note into a harsh, husky whisper. Intelligence failed her. She felt no match for this elegant woman with her education and cultivated surroundings. Angrily she felt her power of hectoring vituperation fail her, yet, pausing for breath, she tried to raise her animosity to boiling point. Could she but let loose the madness of her fury on her enemy, she believed that triumphantly she would wrest Eugénie from her.

Madame Périntot, meantime, realized that the woman meant battle. Deliberately she chose the weapon which must eventually blunt her enemy's shafts. To that shattering of loud words she presented a front of impenetrable calm, thus confusing and depressing the other, whose mode of attack needed retaliation to stimulate its best effort.

"Are you sure," she asked slowly, raising her hand and straightening a cushion on the sofa beside her with elaborate care, as though the trivial occupation absorbed her, being more important [than] her visitor's conversation—"are you sure—that it is I who have put ideas into your niece's

head? Personally, I think you are in error. For, from what she told me, I am under the impression that a taste for music is already strongly developed in her. Had the idea of singing been the result of my chance visit, I grant that you might have had cause against me for annoyance. As it is"—she shrugged her shoulders—"I consider your anger unwarranted."

Victorine's hostility deepened. She could not but admit the justice of the argument. Nevertheless, she clung to her attitude obstinately.

"I do not want to be encouraged," she repeated, as she moved slightly and slipped on the polished floor, regaining her equilibrium awkwardly.

Madame Périnot looked up, and, seeing that the woman was at a disadvantage, troubled and ill at ease, spoke more gently.

"What do you propose to do with her then?" she asked. "A girl of considerable beauty, and with, apparently, a great gift—do you think it possible that, with the knowledge of her talent, she will settle down contentedly to be a washerwoman, or even a shop assistant or lady's maid?"

Victorine's eyes turned in her head. For a moment their aspect was terrible—suggestive of those of an angry bull. With her big strong arms and violent face, she gave Madame Périnot the uncomfortable reminder of a great animal entrapped and furious within the circle of the bull-ring. This impression so distressed her that she altered her position slightly so as to move a little farther away from her visitor. As she did so the handkerchief fell from her hand on to the floor between them, where it lay unrolled, exhibiting its crimson stain. Hastily she gathered it up, but the sight of that red stain had a singular effect on the woman who stood looking down at it. Victorine, with sudden vivid vision, as if a flash of lightning had illumined the cells of her brain, beheld mentally the figure at the edge of the pavement, and the thin stream of blood that had flowed from the gaping mouth of the white face which had looked up to her in the dawn. This, in connection with Marguerite's casual mention of the two professions of Eugénie's mother, infuriated her. An access of rage took her. Advancing closer to the other she stood over her,

towering, dominant, her face convulsed and crimson with a rush of blood to the head.

"Lady's maid, lady's maid," she muttered hoarsely. "Not that—rather would I strangle her with my own hands I tell you she shall not touch rich folk."

"Rich folk," put in Marguérite, quietly, "there are no rich folk in this house. I am a working woman like yourself. You follow your trade—I mine. My mother was a peasant woman, but I, thanks to my talent, passed into the Conservatoire, and became an artist. What do you suspect me of? My life has probably been as honest and hardworking as your own. I propose to do your niece a kindness and you insult me as though I wished to do her an injury."

Rising to her feet she faced Victorine proudly, with an anger equal to her own.

For a moment they remained thus, a silent battle of will again making itself felt between them. Then Victorine, passing her hand across her cracked lips, said:

"It is not that I distrust you, madame. It is that I fear for the girl's passionate and pleasure-loving disposition. I fear—lest she should not be able to resist temptation." She bowed her head, her eyes on the ground, her hands clutching her skirts nervously. "You had better know that she has wild blood in her—though it goes ill to betray the sin of my own flesh and blood. Her mother, my twin sister, was seduced and deserted by an Italian noble. *Sacré!*" she cried fiercely—"by Prince Paleria; may he attain damnation! On her death-bed she confided her baby to me, praying that I would keep it from the temptations which had been her own undoing."

Madame Périnot was supremely interested in Victorine's recital, since it gave her the key to the girl's astonishing refinement and beauty, for which she had been at a loss to account, coming—as she told herself—from such a stable.

"Bah," she exclaimed impatiently, "why is the child to be accused of an intention to sin before she has shown any desire to do so? If you imagine that by shutting her up and giving no legitimate outlet to her nature, you are keeping her out of danger, you are greatly mistaken. Such a nature as hers will find an outlet somehow, and the more you keep it pent up the greater the danger. No—

let her come to me and sing. I will teach her to utilize her power of feeling in her art—to throw her passion into her acting. There is not the slightest reason why, in my school, she should run any risk of harm. I allow no one here who does not know how to behave, and I would undertake to look after her as if she were my own child."

Victorine's coarse hands gripped the harshness of her serge skirt. The rasp of the heavy material gave her a measure of courage. She felt that she was weakening; that one by one her arguments were being battered down by the other woman's superior intellect, and the ground cut from beneath her feet by subtle arguments which her wits could not follow. She was angry, but she could not despise the handsome woman who confronted her. She respected, too, the indignation aroused by her accusation. But she felt confused, her mind worked slowly, and she could not think clearly. Her head still ached from the blow which she had received, when in the grey dawn she had fallen senseless. Later, when she came to herself, she had been conscious of a dull pain in her temple which had remained with her ever since. Now, in the supreme effort to rally her brain and retrieve the situation, the pain returned, throbbing like the regular beat of a hammer, so that she put up her hand to her head, pressing the injured place in an effort to arrest that reiterated pulsing of the blood. After a moment she spoke, her voice uneven and guttural.

"You wish her to come here and play at love-making, on the stage." Her left hand swept out, indicating the black cavern, with a not ungraceful gesture. "But how can you tell that, even though you trust those people, they may not stir up the bad blood in her? She is still a child, ignorant of sexual desires"—her voice faltered and again she put up her hand to her forehead, as she swayed slightly, "a child whom I hold in trust for her dead mother."

Madame Périnot was touched by the woman's rude eloquence.

"Listen," she said gravely, "before you make any decision on the subject, let me tell you something that may alter your opinion as to the question of the desirability of further education for your niece. When I came to the Place des Loups the other day, I found your child singing a passionate love-song, overflowing with warmth and feeling.

She astonished me—not so much by the beauty of her voice as by her interpretation of the song. No singer, after years of study, could have rendered it with a finer appreciation of its meaning. And—mark what I say—that particular melody is love incarnate. Now how do you think she learnt that song?" She paused, looking at Victorine, who listened, an expression almost of fear on her face. Then she continued, and the deliberate delivery of her speech strained the other woman's nerves to breaking point. "I questioned her and found that, week after week, while you have been at work, she has heard it sung, as a serenade, to her from the courtyard. As I left I chanced to encounter the gallant who had discovered your niece. I recognized him as a famous singer. Does not this prove to you that others besides myself have discovered 'possibilities' in her? Would it not, therefore, be wiser that you should confide her to my care, and let her study where she will be under proper supervision, than that she should run the risk of some less scrupulous person bearing her away from you?"

"My God, my God," Victorine broke out, agonized, burying her face in her hands. Great tearing sobs rose in her throat and the pain of her throbbing temple became acute; she came blindly swaying across the room and sank into the corner of the sofa.

"The child knows nothing of him personally," Marguérite continued reassuringly, full of pity for Victorine's distress. "It would be much better that she should not know, since she is unlikely to see him again at present. I spoke to him concerning this matter, as I felt, even more strongly than you could, that his pursuit of her was unwise. For the moment the danger is past, as he has gone abroad for some months. But, sooner or later, some other man will discover your niece's unusual beauty. I counsel you, therefore, in her interests, to give her the opportunity for which she craves of a natural outlet for her talent. Remember that she has the blood of another class in her veins. Like turns to like. She will turn to the men of the class above her own. If she is a singer—a woman of position—it will be possible for her to marry someone who will satisfy her love of refinement. Do not deceive yourself in thinking that she would be content with anything else. Whereas, if you keep her in uncongenial surroundings, I cannot answer for

the result. You will have incurred a grave responsibility should evil come of it."

Victorine, beaten at last to her knees, raised her head. Tears ran down her cheeks. Her coarse mouth quivered as she put one thick hand on Madame Périntot's delicate sleeve, turning her bloodshot eyes piteously on the face that looked back at her gravely and kindly.

"What shall I do?" she sobbed brokenly. "God knows I love the girl as if she were my own. Child of my twin sister, is she not almost the fruit of my womb? If I let her come to you, will you swear to me by all you hold sacred that you will do your utmost to keep her from evil?"

Madame Périntot looked back at her, solemnity in her manner. Instinct told her that in this compact she touched something of vital significance to herself. She rose, enthusiasm filled her and a great exhilaration as she felt that, in her first battle for the young artist, gloriously she had attained victory.

"If you will be my friend and work with me, not against me," she cried, "I will swear to you to guard her as you would yourself. There is no reason why, before two years have passed, she should not be in a position of which you will be proud. By then"—she smiled, patting her visitor on the arm—"by then she will have learnt wisdom in many ways."

Victorine got up wearily, preparing to go—the fight was over and she had lost. Madame Périntot, seeing her movement, intercepted her, and laid a strong, well-shaped hand on the other woman's heavy shoulder.

"Then it is decided?" she coaxed, "and you will work with me?"

No answer came from her listener, but she felt the massive shoulder shudder beneath her touch, and saw the head with its high piled mass of greasy hair bent slightly in assent. She moved away.

"*Allons,*" she said, as she followed her silent visitor to the door, "do not be distressed. You will see that I shall be as good as my word. Let the child come to me to-morrow at five o'clock, and I will have a talk with her. In two years," she cried exultantly—"in two years she shall take Paris by the throat."

But Victorine, spent and weary with emotion, looked at

her with vague accusation. She had come here to do battle with an enemy ; and that enemy had not only vanquished her, but had managed, somehow, to tear down her defences, and prove to her that the battle was unworthy, fought in an unjust cause. More than this, with refinement of torture, she had compelled her to change her front and fight on the side of the enemy.

As she descended the stairway she heard the door above close. Pausing a moment she leant against the wall. The hammer that beat on her brain had begun again pitilessly to torment her, reiterating, now soft, now loud, but regularly as a tolling bell—"Lost, lost, lost, lost is the battle." In her tear-drowned eyes she saw not the dark stairway on which she stood, but in the livid light of the dawn, the figure of a woman, seated on the edge of the pavement—the figure of her twin sister weeping because she, Victorine, had failed. With heavy footsteps she continued her descent and passed out into the driving rain.

Marguérite re-entered the theatre. The excitement of victory was still on her. But alone, when Eugénie's aunt had departed, in the silence that fell on the house, the remembrance of that parting glance of accusation came back insistently, along with the recollection of the poignant terror which had taken her on the day of her visit to the house in the Place des Loups. Through the listening silence the sound of the wind arose like the sighing and wailing of some infinitely desolate and sorrowful creature, outcast, and utterly broken-hearted.

CHAPTER II

IN the chapel, behind the high altar of St. Philippe de Roule, the red lights glowed from out the dimness. Save for one or two penitents, absorbed in prayer, the great church was empty. From without, at intervals, when persons entered softly, the sound of traffic filtered in through the swing-doors. But neither these intermittent sounds, nor the quiet passing to and fro of penitents, disturbed Eugénie as she knelt on a *prie-dieu*, her face buried in her hands. She had come here, on her way home from the Avenue de la Garde—where she

had been to deliver some completed work—because the need of a place of absolute silence, in which to think over the great change impending in her life, seemed urgent to her.

At first, on kneeling down, she signed herself, pulling her rosary from her bosom—where she always carried it by day—and essayed to recite her prayers. But, try as she might, her brain refused to concentrate on the familiar words. They seemed to have no meaning. She became confused by the strong undercurrent of her thought. Again and again, with a little feeling of shame, she was compelled to recommence. At last she put the rosary back within her bodice and fixed her eyes on the stained glass window above the altar. It was useless to repeat a set formula of prayer when her whole heart was a living cry of gratitude. So it happened that, in the silence, she reviewed the history of the past weeks, beginning with the coming of the musician and passing on to the unknown future. It seemed to her that every event of her childhood and past life had led up to this change. Miraculously had she been guided by an unseen hand. Exaltation filled her, she felt strong and self-reliant, convinced utterly that in the development of her talent lay the vocation which had been marked out for her by the Divine Giver of that gift. Now at last she knew the meaning of those delicate beckonings from out the future, those whispered and alluring promises from behind the veil. They had not lied to her—those exquisite promises of her childhood—but had rather tried to prepare her for the future with its delicious gladness. To her, the presence of her voice—that voice which should ring through the world till the most indifferent were compelled to stop and listen—was as the presence of an unborn child. Fiercely she would guard the gift that was in her, so that nothing should stand between it and its ultimate development. Only yesterday morning she had been despairing, faint-hearted, believing that her Aunt Victorine would never permit her to go to Madame Périnot. She had remained outwardly quiescent; but inwardly she had pleaded, stormed, and cried, beating importunately on the Gates of Chance, lest they should close and cast her back again into the gloom of mediocrity. During those past three days of passionate doubt and agony Victorine had said no word on the subject. On the morning after her discussion with Eugénie she had looked ill and haggard at breakfast, while her right temple

and brow were discoloured by a terrible bruise. But, though she complained of headache, she resented with fierce anger any attempt on Eugénie's part to question her as to how she had sustained the injury. She went about her usual occupations morosely, with an expression of sullen determination which augured ill for the coming interview with Madame Périntot. Down at Les Halles the women jeered, asking if she had been fighting; whereat she had retorted savagely "that such was not the case, but that she was willing to show anyone who desired it what her powers in that direction might be." Yet, though she cowed her tormentors and turned the edge of their laughter, she was filled with bitterness, and her anger deepened till she could have screamed strings of filthy vituperation at anyone who spoke to her. Thus, for fear of letting loose her tongue, she remained speechless before Eugénie.

Despair seized the young girl, when, during the downpour of Tuesday, Victorine demanded, curtly, the full name and address of the "singing woman" and, without another word, set off grimly through the deluge. Now the reaction from her misery became almost exaggerated happiness, for the Almighty Power, which had hitherto led her on blindly step by step, had conquered for her and attained what had seemed impossible.

Victorine returned, soaked to the skin. She kicked her heavy boots off, and turned to Eugénie, who stood looking out of the window into the driving rain. Then, with harsh, guttural accent, she spoke words which came to her listener as the most beautiful sound imaginable.

"You are to go to Madame Périntot at five o'clock to-morrow. See that you are punctual."

Not one syllable more had she vouchsafed; but Eugénie, a flame of excitement passing through her, ran to her and, sobbing, murmured almost inarticulate words of thanks. She kissed the cheeks wet with rain and tears; while Victorine, groaning, clasped her convulsively in her arms, and looked long into her eyes—then, turning away, put up her hand to her bruised forehead, and slowly, her great feet leaving a wet imprint on the boarded floor, stumbled into her room and shut the door.

That evening she refused to eat anything, declaring that she was not well; but in the morning she set forth as usual

to Les Halles. Standing in the doorway, her face livid, she turned to Eugénie, saying in not unkindly tones :

"Now you have got your own way and are happy—see that you are worthy of the trust I repose in you. Keep your wits about you, and don't let flatterers turn your head."

And Eugénie, whose heart beat with glad anticipation, once again thanked her, gratefully promising to give heed to her counsel.

Left alone, she worked blithely at the little sordid details of housekeeping and cleaning. Throughout the day her exaltation grew till passion of triumphant gladness permeated her whole being. Now she knelt on the rush-bottomed *prie-dieu* in the shadowy church, and, as culmination of that passion of gladness, she dedicated the fervour of her uplifted soul and of her burning temperament to the service of her talent. Her mind, as yet barely conscious of desire, was purified of every thought save the great ideal of the artist to attain, to excel—if needs be, by suffering, by asceticism, by self-chastisement, and self-denial—till the body should become solely a temple sacred to the worship of Art. She had passed, for the first time, into that strange land of detachment which is the heritage of the artist from generation to generation. And, upon entry, she stood dazzled by the spiritual glory which dwells therein. Filled, too, with the overpowering knowledge that, in the land of art, neither ties of kindred, of duty, or affection, have any meaning. There the artist, in proportion as he "finds" himself, stands alone; yet can claim membership in a mighty and everlasting brotherhood, every unit of which, standing alone also, is master of his craft.

Therefore Eugénie, in the hour of her first entry into that land, was unconscious of Victorine's bitter tribulation; and, for the time being, the memory, both of her mother's shame and of those blue eyes that had stirred her so deeply, faded, leaving only, mingled with her worship of the Eternal Creator an adoration of the mystic God of Art—a new God, whimsical, ever changing, yet eternally the same, eternally young, eternally beautiful, part and parcel surely, as all things eternal and beautiful must be, of the great, the Almighty artist whose handiwork is nothing less than the whole scheme of creation.

And was she not part of His creation, a marvellously

fashioned and finely tempered instrument? Almost with reverence she raised her hands and clasped them round the warm column of her throat, feeling with delicate nervous fingers the great muscles at the sides and the central outstanding cartilage of the windpipe. An ecstasy of living filled her, an adoration of her own person. It would be as culpable in her to withstand the call of destiny to develop her unborn art, as it would be for a woman with child wantonly to destroy the mystery of life within her womb. Create!—Create!—Create!—is the law of Nature, whether it be fruit of the body or fruit of the brain—for in so doing you shall leave an inheritance unto eternity!

For a long while Eugénie knelt on, staring up at the dim altar and glowing lights. At last the chiming of a distant clock roused her. She rose from her knees, a new solemnity upon her, and made her way out of the quiet church. Her eyes were still wide with the imagery of lovely things, her thought buoyantly floating on a vague sea of romance and imagination. She stumbled, as she had done when a child, drunk with the crowded glories of her brain. Once more her ears were strained to catch the distant alluring call—piercing, infinitely sweet—that sounded from behind the enchanted veil of the future. But now the Gates of Chance stood open, and the cry of that voice was—clarion-like—close at hand.

On the pavement she stood for a moment, in the stream of pedestrians, unable to bring her mind back to the realities of concrete fact. Battered to and fro, jostled by the passers-by, she was hustled against the railing of the church. Leaning there, she waited a moment. Then, recollecting that she had barely time to reach Madame Périntot's house by five o'clock, she stepped quickly into the roadway and boarded a passing tram.

The sway and jolt of the open car gave her a delicious sensation. It was very seldom that she allowed herself the luxury of travelling thus. Usually her excursions, for the fetching and carrying of work, or for the making of simple purchases for her and her aunt's household needs, were made on foot. To-day she chose to ignore her custom and permit herself this little outbreak of extravagance.

The seats being all occupied, she took up her position on the centre platform, her hand resting on the iron rail supporting the canopy of the roof. The rush of air—cleansed

of dust by yesterday's rain—was still fresh and wet-laden. Looking down between the floor and the rattling chain which barred the exit, she could see the ground flying away beneath.

On reaching the Place Farnouchelles she got off the tram and threaded her way through the crowd of buyers and sellers on the pavement of the boulevard. Here the great stores do an immense trade at the stalls, set beneath canopies along their frontage; and, from morning till night, an eager throng, chattering, exclaiming, complaining, gossiping, obstructs the passage of the legitimate passer-by. The scent of hot cakes and *brioques* on their wire trays above tanks of steaming water; the effluvia of vegetables and fruit, of fish and meat, to say nothing of the great waste pans of offal—beneath the stalls—into which the servers cleaned and trimmed the fish and meat—all this mingled with a warm, not over-clean, odour of humanity produced a confusion of smells thick and indescribably disagreeable. Eugénie pushed her way through the throng, thankful to turn down into the quiet of the narrow rue des Masques. Behind her she could still hear the hum of voices, and the pulsing life of the great boulevard. In the archway of the *porte cochère* of No. 5 the *concierge*, leaning against the wall, stood looking down at a grey cat, which with graceful curved paws gambolled fiercely with the soft inert body of a dead mouse. The man looked at her interrogatively, and, in answer to his unspoken question, she demanded:

“Madame Périntot?”

“First floor on the right,” he answered, and returned to his contemplation of the pirouetting cat.

Eugénie was forced to step over that small, pitiful corpse, with its upturned paws and little sharp, exposed teeth. Superstitious, she regretted that on the crossing of that threshold she had met with the symbol of death. She shivered as, passing on, she heard the miaul of the cat flinging itself again fiercely upon its prey. The sound was displeasing to her and caused her to mount the stairs hastily.

Outside the door of Madame Périntot's flat—she paused. A sound of singing came from within. A woman's voice—high and piercing—mingled with a man's—rich and triumphant. The two seemed to strive together, fighting for the mastery, as in some great sex-battle. Alternately they pleaded, mounting, penetrating, then mingling with

tempestuous fury of desire or denial, in which first one and then the other seemed momentarily to triumph, till, when the contest of love and hatred became almost unbearable, they culminated in one great cry.

In the silence which followed Eugénie could hear someone directing, arguing, in rapid speech.

A nervous shudder shot through her. The veins in her throat began to throb. She felt powerless to enter. She was filled with fear that her voice would desert her, and oppressed with a sensation that being cowed by the presence of other human beings she might be unable to speak and formulate her thought—still more, unable to sing. She trembled, standing without on the dimness of the landing. A faintness came over her, and she leaned against the wall.

At that moment footsteps and conversation sounded in the vestibule. The door was flung open, and two men, talking, laughing, and gesticulating, came out on to the stairhead. One of them was about to close the door, when he perceived Eugénie, her great eyes sombre, her red mouth quivering.

"*Tiens!*" he ejaculated—"I really beg your pardon, mademoiselle, I did not see anyone was there."

"I have come to see Madame Périntot," she murmured, looking at him in confusion.

He, seeing that she was very young and for some reason nervous, smiled at her encouragingly.

"Doubtless," he said kindly, "mademoiselle has rung the bell, and Euphrasie, as is her custom, has neglected to answer it. She is affected with a convenient deafness sometimes—when we make a noise within."

He pressed his finger on the bell and looked inquiringly into the vestibule.

Fontenailles was one of Madame Périntot's stock working tenors in the opera class. Not of a fiery disposition, but with adequate voice and considerable knowledge of technique, he was extremely useful to her. An *habitué* of her theatre, he elected to act the part of son of the house and deputy host when, as was frequently the case, visitors or new pupils arrived while Madame Périntot was engaged on the stage. She always declared that he had an excellent hand on a *débutante*. Being good-natured he was always willing to assist a beginner in her first attempts at stage love-mak

Now he addressed Eugénie, shrugging his shoulders and smiling with kindly humour.

"Euphrasie does not appear," he said. "Tell me, mademoiselle, can I be of assistance to you?—I am a privileged person in this house—if it is not impertinent on my part to ask, will you tell me your business?"

"You are very kind," she answered. "Madame Périntot told me to come here at five o'clock to-day. If I do not go in now I am afraid she will think I am late."

Fontenailles looked at her with curiosity. He observed that she was beautiful, whereat his interest increased.

"You need not be afraid that you are late, mademoiselle," he said. "We are always behind time with our classes—especially if Madame Périntot is pleased with our work. She will not stop the playing of a good scene at the bidding of the clock. At this moment Miarka and Paniche are on the stage. It will be another quarter of an hour before they finish that scene of *Cavalleria*. But you had better go into the theatre. I will take you—wait for me, Batouche," he added, turning to the other man; "I shall not be a minute—follow me, mademoiselle."

At this moment the grey cat, lithe and fierce, came bounding up the stairs. In her mouth she still carried the little drooping corpse of the mouse. Seeing the three standing at the stair-head she growled and made a swift dart for the open doorway. But Fontenailles tried to stop her with his foot.

"*Misérable*," he said, as the grey streak fled past him; then, addressing Eugénie, "Twice this afternoon have we banished her; and again—a third time she returns to annoy us. No one in the house seems to own her, and we have never seen her before, therefore when she appeared, screaming, bearing a half-dead mouse in her mouth, Madame Périntot, who abominates cruelty, bid us turn her out."

He peered round the room into the vestibule.

"*Sacré!*" he exclaimed, "she has disappeared! But, *attention*, mademoiselle, she has dropped the corpse of her victim." And looking up at Eugénie he was struck by a singular effect of horror and panic in her eyes. "Ah!" he said with sympathy, "do not be concerned, mademoiselle, the little creature is quite dead now."

Eugénie smiled faintly.

"I am glad," she said, a tremor passing through her.

For the second time on her coming into this house death met her on the threshold.

"Let us go in," she begged him, and so, piloted by Fontenailles, Eugénie passed through the swing doors and made her first entry into the workshop of her art.

CHAPTER III

BLINDS masked the great windows, and the electric footlights were turned on in front of the proscenium. Eugénie received the impression of a vivid semicircle of faces below the stage—young men and young women—their expression rapt, intent, fixed on that which was taking place in front of them. Raised on the brightly lighted square of the *scène*, upon the right-hand side Madame Périntot was seated. Her fiery hair glowed, and her animated, expressive face was turned to her pupils in the centre of the stage, as, in clear incisive tones, she continued to address them alternately directing, explaining, scolding, cajoling.

Eugénie felt Fontenailles push her into a seat at the back of the semicircle of listeners. She did not observe his quiet exit through the swing doors, for her attention, too, had become riveted on that which was taking place on the stage.

In the centre of that illumined space knelt a young girl of about her own age dressed in a pale pink satin blouse, cut low at the neck, and a tightly fitting blue serge skirt. Beside her, clad in an ordinary tweed suit, stood a young man. Eugénie noticed that the pins which held the girl's fair hair in place were standing out, and that the faces of both were streaming with perspiration. The girl knelt on one knee, so that the tight skirt revealed the shape of her limbs faithfully. Her face was turned towards Madame Périntot—who slapped her hands together, crying :

"*Allons !* Let us recommence ! Miarka, you must put more life into that scene. Try to realize that Santuzza is a desperate woman. *Mon Dieu !*—of what use is it to scream with that great thick voice of yours, when the body remains apathetic ! The hands, too, my child ! The body—the

whole body, the head, the eyes, the mouth—all must suffer ! How often have I told you that you must give voice to your desperation not only with your song, but by the articulation of the limbs ? See here."

She got up and walked away to the centre of the stage—dominant, explanatory, voluble—and motioned the girl aside.

"Jean, you will sing the duet with me——"

She gave the sign to the accompanist.

"Now, watch me. *Mon Dieu!* why do you not feel more with your great beautiful body and your cow's eyes. I tell you that when people are desperate, they are ugly, they are all angles, their features are thickened by emotions of terror and of horror. What have they to do with beauty ! You are too sweet—too pretty, in your Santuzza. That will not move your public. There are plenty of rôles in which you may with advantage depict both those insipid qualities. But in *Santuzza* they will ask something more of you ! Cease to be a beauty and become an artist. Now—watch me."

The duet began, and Madame Périntot, large and no longer young was flung down on her knees, her hands clawing at the tenor's chest and shoulders with febrile movements, her voice—slightly thin and metallic—was vibrant with a desperation and poignant appeal almost unbearable to Eugénie, who sat listening in the darkness of the auditorium. Marguérite played *Santuzza* with all the artistry in her, until the scene became a living thing ; and *Santuzza*, wailing, sobbing, passionate, battered to the ground, struggles again to her knees, then grovelling in unendurable agony, lost to all sense of pride, falls at the feet of the man who has betrayed and deserted her.

To Eugénie the torture of the woman's soul became her own. With the true actor instinct, mentally she played the rôle—suffering as *Santuzza* suffered—till the hot tears sprang to her eyes and flowed over her burning cheeks. When, at last, with the great culminating cry of the duet, the struggle of voices and human bodies ceased, and Madame Périntot rose breathless to her feet, Eugénie struggled vainly to wipe away the fast flowing tears. She was glad that the darkness obscured her from notice.

"*Tiens !*" cried Marguérite, "I am hot. *Nom d'un*

chien ! but I am hot ! Open the window, Jean, *mon petit*—I stifle. Miarka," she continued, fanning herself with her handkerchief, "you will study that scene for next time. It grows late and I have not time to hear it again now. Now be off, all of you !" she added, raising her voice.

The semicircle of listeners got up. Someone turned on the lights, and immediately a buzz of conversation and laughter arose.

Marguérite descended from the stage and stood by the swing doors bidding her pupils good-bye. Her charming dimples showed as she kissed the young women and chaffed the men—talking, advising, scolding, encouraging.

Suddenly, as the little crowd dispersed, she caught sight of Eugénie standing looking at her from the back row of seats in the auditorium. There were traces of tears on her cheeks and her red mouth quivered. In her wide sombre eyes there was a point of flame. She looked forlorn standing there, apart from the hubbub, in her simple black skirt and striped cotton blouse. Yet, despite that effect of forlornness, she held her head proudly, and Marguérite knew that, amongst all her pupils, there was not one who could touch her for beauty or for breeding.

"*Allez !*" she cried, imperatively, to the crowd of students. "I have still work to do." And she drove them before her—able, urgent, laughing—closing the swing door on their chattering voices.

Then, turning, she came across the room to Eugénie.

"Come, my child," she said, holding out her hands, and drawing her over to the sofa. "Let us sit here for a moment and talk. But, *ma petite*, why have you been weeping ? Do you not want to sing ?"

"Yes, a thousand times yes," the young girl answered.

"Then why," inquired Madame Périntot, "do I find such a woebegone maiden ?"

Eugénie put up her hands and pushed her small neat black hat back a little from her forehead.

"I do not know," she said simply ; "perhaps it was foolish of me. But I have never before seen anyone act and sing as you did. Indeed, I have never been inside a theatre in my life. Therefore it seemed real to me, and—with the music—it was almost more than I could bear."

"*Mon Dieu!*" Margu rite exclaimed. "It is stupid of me, but, accustomed as I am to the stage, I confess it had not occurred to me that you would have no knowledge of the theatre. Tell me," she asked, smiling, "what was your impression of my acting?"

"Only," Eug nie answered in a low voice, "that I had never thought it possible for a person to be so terribly unhappy—so cruelly treated. I had a feeling that if I had been the woman there in the story, I should have killed myself—or him."

"Ah!" said Margu rite, drawing in her breath sharply, "you will do. You have the right instinct. But, let me tell you that it is not every person that sings who can make their audience see vividly what they wish to portray. Indeed I have known cases where the artist himself, though naturally endowed with the gift of fine visualization, has been utterly unable to convey his thought to others. But I speak in riddles to you who are as yet ignorant of psychology. When you yourself come to play a r le, remember that the heart must speak, but must be guided by the brain. For it is the brain—the inward thought—which makes the artist. Physical beauty, perfection of voice, of musicianship—yes—but above all, master of all—if the artist is to reach a high standard in the interpretation of his r le—is the intellect, the power of thinking and living the mind of the character he portrays. Do you follow me?"

Eug nie answered slowly.

"I think I understand. It is no good to stand in a position and sing, even to dress yourself as the character, unless you make a picture in your mind of what you are singing. Unless you see, they—the audience—will not see with you."

Margu rite looked at her with curiosity.

"She is intelligent, and this is fortunate," she reflected, "for in no profession does one need more of that rare gift than in mine, and in no profession is it so often lamentably conspicuous by its absence!—Ah, my child," she added aloud, laying her hand on Eug nie's shoulder, her countenance alight with enthusiasm as she looked keenly at her new pupil, "one day you shall sing that r le, and, with your voice and your face, you shall make thousands weep as you yourself wept. You shall tear the heart out of your public

till they cannot sit still. I say not what I hope—but what I know."

Eugénie rose to her feet. She held herself proudly. Her beautiful head, set on its noble column of throat, stood out against the light back-ground of the holland blinds.

"If you knew," she murmured, "how glad I am that I have found you—how happy I am—if I could only thank you——"

"Succeed, then," Marguérite commanded. "Become a great artist! That will reward me for my belief in you."

She moved across the room and shut the tall windows through which the life of Paris, vibrating, throbbing, palpitating, had echoed as accompaniment to their speech like the long-drawn note of some gigantic 'cello. On the shutting of the windows the sound continued, but softer now, as if the great instrument without was played on muted strings.

"Now," she murmured. Then, turning, "That is better—I want to hear you sing—not to give you a lesson to-night. I am tired and you are greatly excited; we should not do good work. But I want to get the impression of your voice here—in surroundings that are familiar to me. Do not be afraid of me—sing as if you were alone. Go up on to the stage—through that door to the left—I shall hear you better from there. *Allez!*"

Madame Périntot became once more the teacher—keen, commanding, imperious. In obedience to her order Eugénie, her heart thumping against her ribs, mounted the little stairway. Pausing for a moment in the wings, she pulled off her hat. Then stepping forward, into the centre of the open space of the sloping stage, she looked for the first time into the "house" from the artist's standpoint. Madame Périntot had turned off the lights in the auditorium. The brilliance of the line of electric bulbs at her feet dazzled the young girl. As she stood in the centre of that light, the upper portion of her body seemed to her abnormally heavy and bulky, while her lower limbs were unsteady—she was not sure that they existed even, or that she would be able to keep her footing on that boarded floor which appeared to sway beneath her. She looked out into the auditorium, and her eyes, piercing the dimness, met only the semicircle of empty seats and the vague outline of the visitors' gallery

above. The blood pulsed in her heart with violent beating. Her throat was dry and parched, so that her voice sounded strange when she spoke, throwing her question into the cavern of the dark house.

"What shall I sing, madame? Something that you have not heard?"

"No"—came the answer from somewhere in the gulf beneath the gallery, "I should prefer to hear again the song which I heard the other day."

Standing at the back of the last row of velvet seats, Marguérite watched the slender figure—elongated, *effilée*, upraised against the green background of the *scène*. From above, the festoons of tragic and comic masks stared down with pallid, distorted, non-seeing faces.

After a moment's silence, Eugénie took a deep breath and, with a cry that was rent from her, commenced the long sustained note which opens the serenade. Then she gave forth the air with full voice, "*A che la morte ognora*." When she reached the point where the soprano breaks in on the tenor's wailing she took the parabola of each rounded phrase with a clear upward swing and return of wordless melody, mounting, rising, till it rang full and clear on high C; and then dropped—with an impassioned tenderness—again into the refrain of the imprisoned lover. Throughout, the quality of the voice was even, consistent, rich and full, vibrant with that magnificent, almost metallic ring, which—as Marguérite told herself—could not only pierce the strings, but soar triumphantly from amid the mighty volume of sound given forth by the brass and wind instruments of a great orchestra. As she stood listening, she held her breath, and a glow of enthusiasm filled her, of mother-love towards the unborn art within this girl—the art for which she would fight that it might secure its birth-right.

And Eugénie, singing, looked into the distance. With the sound of her own voice, fear left her; but her imagination—since she only partly understood the meaning of the words she uttered—reached out into the vague, groping for a greater depth of comprehension. Then from out that vagueness came to her the remembrance of the musician. With her sensitive mind she visualized him as being the only tangible illustration of her song. Manrico and Leonora

were as yet unknown to her—and, therefore, it was but natural that the image of the man so intimately associated with the music should assail her mental vision. Once again she was moved by a bewildering sensation of liquid warmth permeating her whole person. It seemed to her that the face of the musician looked down on her from the gallery. Luminous at first—like the full moon seen through fog-blurred glass—gradually it became substantial, until the light blue eyes watched her, and the whole face showed clearly, delicately distorted by a little mocking smile. The vision faded, but immediately, from behind her, came a yet stronger sensation of his presence. So poignant was that sensation that she could no longer endure it. Terror choked her—fear of the unseen and unknown in which he, as some instinct told her, would play a part.

The last great note broke off, sobbing in her throat. She fled across the stage and staggered down the steps into Marguérite's arms.

"But what is it then?" asked the latter, as she soothed her. "It was well sung. Have no fear! The voice is great!"

But, though she comforted the child with kindly tones, and praised her in no measured terms, in her, also, arose fears, brought forth by that young creature's impassioned rendering of the song taught her all unwittingly by Gaston Hypolite. For Marguérite could not but perceive that her interpretation of the music was alive with his personality—a harmonic echo of his very soul. Along with the memory of him—as he stood in the little narrow courtyard of the Place des Loups—returned a sinister dread of calamity, of inevitable, irresistible woe. Sitting in the darkness she struggled with a distress of mind unformulated yet cogent. And from out the confusion of her thought—hideous with distortion of anger and something more terrible than anger as yet indefinable—Victorine's countenance, with its blood-shot eyes, cracked purple lips, and bruised temple, presented itself to her vision as if insisting that she too would hold her rightful place in the drama of the future. Vainly Madame Périnot strove to obliterate from her mind both Hypolite's mocking, wayward smile and the terrible brute rage of Victorine; but when Eugénie, touched by the eeriness of either her own emotion or that of her listener, fled into her

arms, Marguérite's unaccountable tension of mind was redoubled. She put out her hand and snapped on the electric switch—flooding the auditorium with light. With the return of normal illumination the impression which troubled them both took flight. Eugénie, looking around, perceived that there was no presence in the theatre save that of her kindly and comfortable teacher; while the latter's ready commonsense attributed their mutual agitation to her own natural fatigue after hard work, and to the inevitable excitement and nerves of a young artist. She looked attentively at the young girl. Eugénie was calm now. But her eyes were still dilated by panic and her breath came quickly.

"Come and sit down, my child," Marguérite said, leading her across to the sofa against the wall at the further side of the room in the little square space that she laughingly called her *boudoir*. "Now listen to me. I believe that you have a great future before you. Providence has given you a beautiful voice. And, besides temperament and intelligence, a more than common measure of good looks. All these things are yours by nature. It depends on yourself, however, to put them to the use that nature intended. As to the voice, there are faults of diction, and your knowledge of light and shade is defective. It is neither necessary, nor is it good art, to sing full voice all the time—that, however, is easily remedied. You will have, also, of course, to study a great deal of music, and to learn to interpret what you wish to convey not merely by thought and voice but by appropriate gesture. I do not disguise from you that you have a great deal to learn; but all your difficulties can be surmounted if you are diligent and throw your whole heart and mind into your work. Now are you prepared to do this?"

Eugénie clasped her hands on her bosom and looked up at the speaker with shining eyes.

"I ask nothing better," she exclaimed, "than to devote myself wholly to the development of my music. It is all that I live for. Long ago, when I was a baby child, I learnt to dream of it."

"Dreams," Madame Périnot commented, "must now be put away with other childish things. You must learn to dominate your imagination till you are its master. With your temperament you must be the God in the Machine—

till, holding the power in check with a strong hand, you can do what you will. Great art is domination—not a riot of hysteria. A great actress must feel, yes, with her whole being. But, nevertheless, she must keep her hand on her own pulse all the time, tempering her actions to the need of the moment. You must learn to exercise authority over yourself, keeping a reserve of power within you for the great moments of a big scene, otherwise you cannot reach the supreme climax of drama. It is the same with your voice—no one will believe in its greatness if you use your utmost strength the whole time. It is by that power of discrimination that the critics and the public judge an artist."

"Ah! yes, I know," cried Eugénie, "I am sure that it is so; but I know I can learn to do all this because Sister Marie-Terèse used to tell me the same thing. She used to teach me where to sing softly. Only, to-day, I could not help it—I had to sing with all the strength I possessed, because I felt that I must convince you that I had a power within me which as yet I have not been able to express."

"Ah, my child," Marguérite sighed. "That is what we all feel, we who have temperament. Our life is one continual struggle with the importunity of that inward knowledge. Be thankful that you have this very definite way of expressing yourself. For those who have no gift, and yet possess that inward longing for expression, who are touched sufficiently with the artistic sense to be aware of their own deprivation, the way is hard indeed. They run the danger of foolish and decadent living—tormented by the desire of brain which can find no outlet. Even so, for those who have a definite gift, life is not all roses and you must not expect so to find it. Many times you will feel discouraged, both by the inherent difficulties of your profession and the self-sacrifice which will be demanded of you."

"I am not afraid," exclaimed Eugénie. "I want no amusement but that of my art and the joy of giving pleasure to those who listen."

Marguérite smiled.

"There are some who will account your self-sacrifice selfishness. And there are many who will not understand, and who will neither respect your devotion to art, nor comprehend the purity of your motives—those to whom it is given to rejoice in ignorance, and who account themselves

superior, both in virtue and in intellect, because, forsooth, they abstain from doing that which they could not possibly do were they to try—these, I say, will form no inconsiderable portion of your audience. They are the enemies of art, for they hold a belief that the artist is merely bent on self-glorification and the pursuit of fame and money. These cannot fathom the truth that the art within you, if you be true to it, is like a child crying at the door of life to whom you only, as parent, can give the existence for which it pleads. And, whether you will or no, that pleading will come to you so piteously, so urgently, that you must take heed to its clamour. It rests with the artist," she went on, a solemnity in her tone, "whether the art be born a noble and beautiful thing which will do good and not harm in the world—by which I do not mean that you must cut out, mutilate, distort, and trim in order to conciliate immature, timid, anæmic, pallid souls who dread the truth. In life there is good and evil, and, so long as life is depicted with realism, with strength and sincerity, the balance will hold full measure of both. With that which is dirty, suggestive, or morbid, I never advise an artist to deal. But in drama you must have contrast. You cannot cauterize humanity of any vital principle of active existence."

Eugénie's eyes were fixed on her face, the pupils of them dilated, unnaturally large. She had clasped both hands round her knees. Her brain reached out to the other woman's thought. All that she listened to strengthened her purpose. She felt calmed and uplifted as by the discourse of some moving preacher.

"No," she murmured, "I cannot expect it all to be beautiful, but I am not sure that I wish it to be so. After all, men say that the faces of no two human beings are ever quite alike. Some are lovely and some terrible to look on. Why should the stories of their lives not be beautiful and terrible also?"

Suddenly Marguérite felt inexpressibly tired, she rose abruptly.

"Go and fetch your hat, my child," she said. "I am exhausted and I must rest. But come to me to-morrow morning and we will commence our labours. Let me see," she continued, turning over the leaves of her engagement book which lay on the piano. "Yes, I can give you an

hour at nine o'clock. Till to-morrow then," she added smiling, as Eugénie, having retrieved her hat, came up to bid her good-bye.

"Till to-morrow, dear madame," the young girl answered, putting up her face to be kissed.

Marguerite let her out on to the stairhead. Then, returning to the studio, she pulled open the great window again, and let in the freshness of the starlit night. She remained long in the empty theatre, meditating upon the entry of this neophyte into the enchanted regions of art.

Eugénie, hurrying home with dancing feet, beneath a canopy of purple spangled darkness, looked with happy eyes at the brilliance of the streets.

To her the roar of the traffic was as a great orchestra playing the eternal music of life. The long line of lights which glittered up the boulevard were the footlights of the world's great stage. The multitude of people passing, moving, hurrying, were the vast mass of an audience, swayed to and fro by the playing of that mighty music. But to her alone did these things reveal their meaning. Yet, in this enchanted world she was not quite alone, for the presence of the musician, delicate and insinuating, whimsical yet indescribably dear, followed her daintily through the mazes of the crowd.

BOOK IV

BINDWEED

CHAPTER I

THE nine-thirty *rapide* for Boulogne was drawn up at the departure platform of the Gare du Nord. Gaston Hypolite, clad in a well-cut loose travelling coat of grey frieze and a soft felt hat—set deliberately a little on one side—stood below the step of his carriage smoking a choice Egyptian cigarette.

Andrea, spare and melancholy, moved in and out of the *wagon*, firmly shadowing the porters as they arranged the small baggage in the place reserved for his master. After which, with much ceremony, he set out layers of magazines and newspapers in the adjoining seat, with the same careful neatness and precision he would have employed in adjusting them to a nicety on the polished side table in the smoking-room of his master's luxurious flat in the rue Pérugine.

The number of passengers by the early train was not large, and Gaston anticipated a fairly comfortable journey—at least until he should reach Boulogne. Beyond that arrival at the seaport he declined to speculate. If the sea should prove unquiet—then most decidedly he would remain in safe *asile* until she should demonstrate a serene and untroubled temper. A state of mind—he argued—indispensable to a really well-conducted sea. He greatly desired that he should not be compelled to wait on its convenience. Boulogne was not—as he ruefully reflected—amusing as compared with Paris! He sighed heavily. The uncertainty as to whether his journey was to be continued or not annoyed him. The immediate future was not exhilarating, yet it was his habit to indulge in speculation as to coming events—a process by which he could, with a little manipulation, a little glossing over inconvenient possibilities, arrange matters to

suit himself—rather than to dwell on the lamentable delinquencies of Providence in the past. Therefore he preferred, as subject for thought, that travelling on a journey of possible discomfort to a review of last night's excitement and the disturbing influence of what he mentally designated the *affaire de la Place des Loups*. For when exaltation—a state of mind inevitably recurrent in those of artistic temperament—has passed off, irritation is prone to take its place.

It was, perhaps, the aftermath of yesterday's adventure which depressed Hypolite to the point of making him almost childishly peevish and cross. He wished he had not decided to go by an early train. It was unlikely that there would have been a great crowd by the later one, and breakfast, as he angrily told himself, at an hour that should be exclusively devoted to the milkman, the sweep, returning cats, or awaking babies, put him out of conceit with things in general! The early morning was distinctly disheartening. It was all very well for Andrea. His pleasure lay in lugubrious thought, therefore he must necessarily expand under the influence of discomfort, as another man of normal sensibilities would when filled with good wine. Besides, Andrea had no objection to travelling by sea. No—he shrugged his shoulders, it was no good, the prospect was detestable. He mounted the steps of the *wagon* and inspected his seat. Here exasperation became acute, for the place opposite was also reserved. He was to have a companion in distress, who might add to his annoyance. He would have liked to change to another carriage, but it was too late to find a responsible person who would arrange it for him. He comforted himself with the reflection that, the train being a corridor one, and the number of passengers being few, he could—if the occupant of the opposite corner proved tiresome or loquacious—remove himself to more congenial quarters. He went out again on to the steps, and stood gazing distressfully down the vista of grey asphalt. Advancing towards him—heavily veiled, and dressed in a smart blue coat and skirt—the figure of a lady detached itself from the general medley and confusion. Gaston noted, with approval, her small black hat, fitting tightly to her head, her patent leather boots with neat grey *suede* tops, and the perfectly plain yet smartly tailored serge. She carried a gold chain purse in her hand, and moved with a long-limbed lithe grace that enchanted him.

His ill-humour began to vanish ; he wished greatly that the lady might enter the carriage in which he stood. Closer inspection might prove profitable ! He began to suspect the turning of one of those delicious bypaths which were so attractive to his whimsical nature. Instantly his imagination was on the alert. He threw away his half smoked cigarette, and watched the lady with interest. She was undoubtedly coming on ! No—she was stopping. Oh ! distress ! Had she merely come to see someone off ? She wore no overcoat. It would be an imprudence to cross the sea without one ! He would—Ah ! she was in conversation with another neatly clad female figure, who carried—oh rapture !—two travelling coats hung over her arm—obviously the lady's trusted maid. M. Hypolite craned his neck, almost losing his balance. What were they waiting for ? Ah !—they were coming towards him, and a porter—*Sacré !* it was the miserable porter who had detained them—carrying a neat dressing-case and bag, now joined them. They were certainly going to enter the *wagon* in which his place was situated. They had divined that it constituted the only habitable portion of the train !

Hypolite retreated gracefully and settled himself comfortably in his corner. He felt exceedingly glad he had taken the early train. He wondered whether it would be possible to change his carriage later on, in pursuit of that graceful blue-clad figure. *Tonnerre !* the porter, bearing the dressing-case, had entered his carriage. He was putting it down beside the seat reserved in the opposite corner ! Who could abuse Providence whose intention was so obviously friendly, and who had arranged this journey with such delicate consideration ! How delightful it was to find he would not be the sole occupant of the carriage ! Decidedly this early train was the only one to go by—since the lady was to be his travelling companion !

He assumed an air of exaggerated sang-froid, and hastily opened a paper, immersing himself in—apparently—the news, as seen bottom upwards. From behind the paper he regarded the lady. She stood in the corridor giving directions to her maid ; then, dismissing the woman, she entered and seated herself opposite to him. He had the impression of a lovely figure, and a graceful head enveloped in a veil vexatiously thick.

Mon Dieu!—he exploded mentally—what idiot had invented veils? Later, doubtless, he comforted himself, it would be necessary to remove the offending object, since it would be impossible either to eat or to read through that monstrosity concealing material—of an opacity almost criminal. It could only be designed to conceal excessive ugliness or protect unusual beauty—undoubtedly the latter, if the remainder of the lady's person might be taken as an indication of the truth. Assuredly, later, hunger or boredom must drive her to reveal what now was so effectively concealed. No one but a nun should take the veil! And this lady, very certainly, did not give one the impression that she hailed from the convent!

He meditated upon the possibilities of the journey in the way of opportunity. Would it be possible, without risk of impertinence, to draw the lady into conversation? He decided that, at least, it would be permissible to try.

At this point, with a banging of doors and shouts of departure, the train began to move out of the station. *Malédiction!* a third traveller was making his way, breathing heavily, into the carriage! *Nom d'un chien!* he was about to invade the sacred precincts of their private apartment! Fat, coarse, heavy-looking, he was forcing his infuriating carcass into the entrance of this enchanting hidden byeway! In his vexation Hypolite sat up, an expression of positive execration in his eyes. But, alas!—the monster had entered, and had seated himself, with a vulgar expiration of breath, in the corner next the corridor with his back to the engine. He had begun to arrange his small baggage on the seat opposite.

Hypolite, in his vexation and fury, gazed at the lady opposite. He fancied he could detect, through the meshes of that offending veil, a gleam of sympathy and amusement. He felt calmer. After all, might not this intolerable intrusion be a bond of sympathy between them? His anger began to subside. And he returned to contemplation of his paper, this time with real intent to study the news. But he discovered that it was impossible to carry out his intention! Inwardly he writhed. Had the lady been smiling at his futile pretence? Had she observed that ridiculously inverted sheet of news? Impossible!—the veil was too thick. Admirable invention! The talented creator of veils ought

certainly to receive some form of world wide congratulation ! Nevertheless, he must not betray himself by turning the paper about, even the friendly veil would not obscure that obvious movement.

Hypolite folded his paper neatly, and gazed out, with apparent absorption, at the flying landscape. But the tossing branches of the trees, as they lifted and swayed in the fresh spring wind, filled him with uneasiness, reminding him that the sea would, in all probability, prove unquiet. His spirits fell again. Even supposing he should succeed in making acquaintance with the unknown mysteriously-veiled lady, they would be separated by the unmannerliness of that barbarous ocean ; and, even did he elect to risk crossing in her company, he knew, from experience, he would be in no mood to follow it up, either by the way or on the other side ! He groaned despairingly.

With that descent of his spirits in the direction of his extremely well-cut boots, Hypolite sighed. He was conscious of a great home-sickness. As the train, leaving the outskirts of the city, uttered a long shrill scream, he gazed dolorously at the last tall houses slipping away in the glittering sunshine.

Parisian born and bred, though on one side—his mother's—Italian, Paris meant to him the home of his boyhood. Later it was the setting of the scene for the romance of his student days at the Conservatoire, which had culminated in his triumphant career at the Opéra Comique. Beneath his veneer of cynicism and lightmindedness, Hypolite possessed a strong fund of sentiment, together with a spasmodic power of feeling—if not profoundly at least for the moment violently and hysterically. He dreaded what he was pleased to call "those occasions on which I am betrayed by my temperament," though he had a deep admiration for his own sensibility ! His brain, always alert, turning quickly from one subject to another, kept his thoughts constantly employed, but was apt—when he was not at work on some particular new *rôle* which needed concentration of study—to wheel ingeniously in the vague, like a racing screw, to the detriment of his energy.

For Hypolite, though on the stage a most charming, ardent, and distinguished-looking lover, was, in reality, just a little disappointing to his friends when it came to a question of

his talents in that relation as regards "real life." Though he was pleased to consider himself a thorough-paced man of the world, and bold lover of women, this was not the character in which he appeared to most of his intimates. These were shrewd enough to see that—dilettante—his posing hid a certain weakness, even a certain effeminacy.

Thus it was that, in the great moments of drama—though, in the opinion of the critics he was an admirable actor—he failed to do more than give the effect of a counterpart of great emotion. Had it not been for the rich beauty of his voice this hint of effeminacy in his character would have been detected; but, where he failed in gesture and facial expression, he "made good" with his admirable vocal instrument. Most of his emotion was a purely personal matter, an almost voluptuous enjoyment of, and admiration for, his own skill, rather than any psychological "getting inside" the character he wished to portray. He made his successes mostly in rôles where subtlety and delicacy are needed; for, in these, his innate breeding and quick brain stood him in good stead. In the cruder tragedies he was not at his best. His innate sense of the ridiculous, it is true, saved him from the pitfall of exaggerated staginess, which is often the refuge of the tenor who wishes to give the impression of a thing he does not feel; but he could not give that indication of the primitive which is the keynote of great art when it comes to depicting the bare human soul. Hypolite lacked the necessary possibility of brutal force. Nevertheless, his charming appearance and the undoubted beauty of his voice, carried him triumphantly into the front rank of singers.

He was uneasily conscious, however, that—though his performances were above the common ruck, and not without distinction and points of individuality—there was a depth in his own nature which he had not fathomed, and which only needed awakening to make him a supreme master of his craft. He did not suspect that, the fact a man has wit enough to recognize a vacuum in his nature, is not a guarantee that he will have wit enough to fill it.

With his passion for art, from the moment he realized his own fundamental deficiency he sought high and low to find the touchstone which should open that hidden door in his nature. Vaguely he believed it to be connected with

women. Yet his habit of withdrawing from a sensation, directly he felt it beginning to touch that vital and hidden depth, defeated its own ends. Always he was possessed with nervous jealousy lest some outside influence should usurp that hidden chamber in his nature and, entering, take possession to the exclusion of his art.

Yesterday, standing in the courtyard of the Place des Loups, holding the hand of that unusually beautiful and attractive child, he had felt the stirring of that mysterious hidden power within him. Now, once again he pondered, drawn—despite his resolution to dismiss the subject—by that astenishing wave of passion which had attacked him in her presence. Why in the name of Heaven or Hell should he have been so moved? Was it possible that he had, at that moment, stood within touch of the locked entrance of that mysterious inner chamber of his nature? He remembered his desperate longing for her as he loitered on the balcony in the starlight—a longing which he was bound to confess had penetrated him mentally, as if the brain rather than the body were the seat of his emotion. Was it possible that he had been mistaken in his attitude to women? He was at a loss to analyse the sensation the young girl had aroused in him. Was it possible that there existed women, the love of whom, the passion for whom, could have a part in the finer, the intellectual side of life? Could the love for such a woman be the key for which he was searching? He scoffed at the idea—and yet—*Malédiction!*—why had he been obliged to leave Paris on the eve of what he now suspected to be a self-revelation of astonishing interest? Firmly he resolved that, on his return, he would pursue that promising byeway with no lagging footsteps. The form of Marguérite Périntot must be eliminated—brushed aside from its entrance—

Hypolite had, in the interest of his newly-found "idea," forgotten the presence of the lady opposite. It was not until the train began to sway, bumping over the points as it passed through Creil, that remembrance of her was recalled by the soft clink of her chain purse as it slipped from her knees on to the floor.

Hypolite's meandering career of speculation was sharply arrested. Again he became alive to the fact that, though the pursuit of Eugénie was for the time being impossible,

yet in front of him lay a very pleasant, equally mysterious, pathway, exploration of which promised profitably to distract him in this enforced hour of idleness. Here, in the dropping of her little bag, was an excellent opportunity afforded him for conversation. Stooping, he obtained possession of the lady's property. Fate had been kind. Once more she had arranged matters with delicacy and consideration by electing to break the ice for him! It was but common civility to restore the pretty toy to its owner! And what more natural than that he should accompany that restoration with a glance of self-depreciation for his temerity, and a few graceful words of pleasure at being able to do her a service. Hypolite was filled with a glow of appreciation for the intelligence of Fate in affording him an opportunity for self-introduction free from any shadow of offence.

"A thousand pardons, madame, but you have dropped your bag."

"All my thanks, monsieur," answered a clear, well-bred voice.

"For nothing, madame! I trust it is not hurt?" He dangled the little limp bag in the air, inspecting it critically with an expression of concerned anxiety.

"Oh! no, I thank you"—a graceful hand was extended to receive it, but, somehow, in the passing, the bag slipped and fell between them. They bent simultaneously to retrieve it, but the lady's floating veil swept Hypolite's cheek, causing them both to retire in embarrassment. Diving again desperately, the gallant young man, in his anxiety to acquire the fugitive, groping beneath the lady's petticoats, gripped the boot on her neat little foot. Again he retreated, this time blushing violently. What would the lady think? Would she believe, as was positively the case, that his raid upon her person was accidental? With real annoyance, and a touch of hauteur, he made apology: "Ten thousand pardons, madame!"

"But no, monsieur, it is I who should apologize for giving you so much trouble," she replied, ignoring the incident with admirable breeding. Yet there was a slight tremor in her voice as if she repressed a laugh. "Perhaps it would be better that I should get up." She went on, "I think it must have rolled under the seat."

Gaston was down on his hands and knees groping in the obscurity. "I have it," he cried triumphantly, as, looking up, and still at the lady's feet, he handed the refractory little bag to its owner, who thanked him as they settled back in their corners again.

"They fall so easily, those little bags," she murmured, slipping the chain over her wrist, on which he noticed she wore a diamond and ruby studded wrist-watch of unusual beauty.

"Ah, yes," he exclaimed eagerly, "they are most inconvenient."

"Truly?" murmured the lady—and again her voice shook with a spasm of dainty laughter—"it is your habit then, monsieur, to carry a chain purse?"

Gaston looked at her mischievously.

"Not now, madame, I find them so treacherous!"

The lady did not reply, so that, desperately hanging on to the slender thread of conversation, he asserted with almost abrupt insistence:

"You are travelling to England, madame."

"*Mon Dieu!* yes," she replied, shrugging her shoulders, "and it is not a journey I am fond of! I cannot look forward to a Channel crossing—even on a fine day—as a pleasure. At the best of times I am an atrocious sailor. But, whatever the weather, I must cross to-day or to-morrow—I have business in London which cannot be put off."

Hypolite reflected that, since the lady was a bad sailor, she certainly would not wish for his escort on the boat, therefore it would be quite unnecessary to betray his own weakness in that direction. He contented himself with graceful expression of his sorrow that she should ever be called upon to suffer inconvenience. At this particular juncture Hypolite suddenly became aware that the execrable intruder whom he had so vigorously cursed at an earlier stage of the journey had discreetly disappeared. Whereupon he again congratulated Providence for an admirable piece of stage management, for had not that minor character in the little play served to give them both a sense of security; and, now that the introduction had been so successfully achieved, the minor character had made a timely exit. He was about to assume conversational attack on the fair citadel, when the hasty entry of another minor character

made him look up furiously. But his alarm subsided when he found that it was only the conductor, who, smiling and bowing, stood in the doorway inquiring solicitously—"Will monsieur and madame take luncheon?—First luncheon at twelve—second at twelve-thirty."

The lady was about to reply when Hypolite, with a bold stroke, stormed the citadel and secured for himself undoubted possession of the coveted domain.

"Certainly," he said. "Luncheon for two at the second *déjeuner*—and see that you keep us a table to ourselves."

The conductor disappeared before the lady had made up her mind to offer any protest. Now, however, she looked at him, and again he thought he detected a gleam of amusement filtering through the veil.

"But, monsieur," she protested, pronouncing her words with precision. "I never said I would lunch with you!"

Hypolite replied with elaborate suavity. "Madame, I am aware of your omission, but I could not take you to task before a third person, so I was obliged to take it for granted, knowing that you would retrieve your lapse of memory later."

"*Mon Dieu!*" replied the lady, laughing. "You are very impertinent, sir."

Hypolite leaned forward persuasively.

"Not really, only—I ask you, dear madame, is it not absurd that two persons, sitting opposite one another in the train—for whom an accident—a blessed accident—has contrived an introduction—should be compelled to sit at different tables when chaperoned by an execrable luncheon. For have you ever known a luncheon on board a train be otherwise than execrable? And is evilly tasting food a thing to excite one to frenzy of excess—therefore is it not a perfect chaperone—warranted to subdue any exhilaration we might otherwise exhibit. I say we, madame, because I feel that I have to answer for your part of the bargain also!" He smiled coaxingly. "Then, too, my sense of humour was up in arms. I, seeing the absurdity of the position, and having an intense abhorrence of appearing ridiculous, or of letting others, in whom I take an interest, appear likewise in an ignominious position—was forced by every instinct of breeding and good nature to remedy the coming ill and, if possible, to avert it."

The lady's eyes twinkled beneath her veil, she looked down at her chain purse, snapping the clasp and undoing it while he spoke. When he had finished she looked up.

"You argue well, sir," she said. "If your conversation continues to be as amusing as it promises I shall have no objection to your remedy—drastic though it is."

Thus encouraged, Hypolite, still longing for an opportunity to penetrate the mystery of the lady's appearance, continued to converse with her until the call for twelve-thirty luncheon found them established in pleasant acquaintanceship. Despite delicate probings on either part, neither had as yet succeeded in discovering the name or occupation of the other, though both had resorted to every means possible of encouraging revelations which were determinately withheld. Therefore it was with alacrity that he sprang up when the conductor called :

"Twelve-thirty luncheon. Shall I lock the door, sir?"

"By all means," Hypolite answered.

"One moment," the lady put in; "I should like to take my small dressing-case with me."

She possessed herself of a little neat hand case, engraved—as he was able to observe—with a coronet and the initials W. P. Hypolite was much exercised in his mind as to what in Heaven's name could that initial stand for. He could not connect it with any feminine cognomen that he could remember.

The lady had stepped with a frank, swinging freedom of movement down the corridor; now she stood in the doorway of one of the carriages. Gaston, looking through the window, observed that her maid, caught apparently in lively conversation with Andrea, was trying to look unconscious of the fact. He observed, too, that Andrea, though engaged in the pursuit of a gay damsel, had retained his expression of abysmal melancholy.

"So," Hypolite murmured to himself, "like master, like man. Andrea also has profited by the occasion!"

Nevertheless he affected an indignation he did not feel—and to which Andrea was wisely obtuse. Calling aside the delinquent, he left the lady to give directions to her maid regarding the dressing-case. But she, perceiving that the dignified personage, whom she had lately found in company with the said maid, was now in close conversation with her

own cavalier, decided that she would keep the case with her, instead of carrying out her first intention, and leaving it to the tender mercies of the gay damsel and dignified personage. Memories of stories of great jewel thieves haunted her—and, as she reflected, that innocent little dressing-case contained her famous pearls.

"After all," she said, as she came out on to the corridor again, "I think I will keep it with me."

Gaston had perceived her embarrassment, and was greatly amused thereby. Mischievously he resolved to mystify her still further. He permitted a shade of disappointment to cross his face, while he demanded eagerly :

"But at least you will let me carry it for you ?"

"It is not heavy, thank you," she answered, hastily setting forth once more along the rocking corridor.

Gaston followed, ricocheting from wall to window, and window to wall, uttering the while suppressed *Parbleus* and *Sapristis* when he floundered more than usual in his pursuit. The lady moved so swiftly that she escaped the appearance of the minor character—in the shape of the late occupant of the further corner of the carriage—who, erupting suddenly from a doorway immediately in front of Gaston, intercepted his hurried progress.

Thus the cavalier was separated from the graceful, flying blue-clad figure by a vast, slow-moving, elephantine bulk, which breathed heavily, and bounded from side to side, obscuring his view.

"*Nom d'un chien !* that this india-rubber ball would fly out of the window, that this inflated gas-bag would depart from my path !" groaned Gaston, as he dodged from side to side in his efforts to see over the shoulder of the cannonading elephant.

When at last, red with fury, he reached the dining saloon, he found that the lady, tranquilly seated with her dressing-case by her side, was in the act of pulling off her long gloves. With a sigh of relief he slipped into the place opposite.

"At last !" he said. "If I had not arrived soon I should have been forced to commit murder to attain your side. A personage of vast proportions inserted his monstrous carcass between us, and I was forced to witness his indescribably idiotic gyrations, since, active though I am, he gave me no opportunity of leaping over him."

"Ah," the lady answered, with a little spasm of naughty laughter, "I regret exceedingly that you should have been outraged by the person of whom you speak, but I regret still more that he neither afforded you the opportunity of playing the rôle of antelope, or myself of witnessing what would most assuredly have been a unique and interesting performance."

She laid aside her gloves and opened the front of her trim coat, disclosing a neat frilled shirt. Then, with both pretty hands raised, she began to untwist that tiresome veil. Deftly she loosened it and threw it back from her face so that it hung in thin, semi-transparent folds as background to her head. Gaston looked at her enchanted. She was infinitely prettier than she had promised to be—more than that, she was distinctly younger. Her gold-coloured hair was bright with a natural gloss, her blue eyes were rimmed with an adequate fringe of fine eyelash, her dainty, rather high-bridged nose and fresh mouth were attractive, if not classical in outline. Her complexion was fine, and innocent of make-up. Looking at her, Hypolite was struck with a certainty that he had seen her face before. He was familiar with the curves of her mouth, and the way her hair was drawn back from her ears; he knew the shape of those ears, finely formed, lying flat against the head, but not small. Even the pattern of the diamond earrings that twinkled in the long lobes was not new to him. He racked his brains to remember where he had seen her. Who was she? And why, if he knew her, did she not recognize him?

The lady looked up, and, observing his intent gaze, laughed musically.

"You seem to be studying my features very closely," she hinted. Then, as he still continued to watch her in silence, she went on a little ironically:

"May I ask you whether you find the result satisfactory?"

"Infinitely so, in one respect, madame, but in another quite the opposite."

"Indeed! might I inquire what you mean by that left-handed compliment?" The lady's eyebrows were raised, and her tone was satirical.

Gaston helped himself to a piece of bread, crumbling it in his fingers.

"I find your features altogether charming," he asserted;

"but I am puzzled. I believe I have seen you before, and, for the life of me—forgive the seeming impertinence—I cannot remember where and how."

Again the lady laughed, throwing back her head.

"It is very possible," she asserted dryly, "very possible indeed, that you have seen me before. I am seen by many people whom I do not know."

"Would it be further impertinence to ask you where and how?" he inquired, looking at her closely with his light blue eyes.

"It would be an impertinence," she replied, looking steadily back into them. "But I have already found it useless to expect anything else from you."

"Nevertheless—you will gratify my curiosity?" he suggested urgently, beginning to lose his head beneath the spell of her quick wits and frank self-possession.

The lady began to drink her soup, she regarded him quizzically over the top of her spoon. Hypolite leant forward and looked at her pleadingly.

"I suppose I must," she said with resignation, "if I am to enjoy my luncheon in peace; and, like most people of my profession, I have always an excellent appetite. Well, then, possibly you have seen me on the operatic stage, or you have seen my picture in some illustrated paper."

"*Nom de Dieu*," he exclaimed, remembrance coming to him. "Imbecile that I am, you are Wanda Panowska! It was but last week I saw your picture in *Excelsior*, as coming fresh from your triumphs in St. Petersburg and Nice to make your début in London."

"Yes," she replied, "I am going to play *Tosca* in London."

"*Tosca!*" He gazed at her fervently. "Ah, then there is no need for us to be distant to one another. My instinct was right. My *Tosca*, in a week, or less than a week, you will be in my arms!"

"*Mon Dieu!* monsieur," she exclaimed, "there is no reason why you should insult me—even if I am a singer. I begin to regret that I satisfied your impertinent curiosity."

She helped herself to a cutlet, her face severely averted.

"No, no, a thousand times no," he answered, taken with irresistible laughter. "But you will see reason in my wicked speech when you know that I am Gaston Hypolite, and that I play Mario to your *Tosca*."

The lady looked at him astonished. Then the corners of her mouth began to give, and they both laughed immoderately.

"If I had known earlier," she murmured, "it would have been unnecessary to drop my bag!"

"Then it was deliberate?" he demanded with delight.

"I am afraid so, but you did not pick up the thread of conversation quickly, so that I was forced to kick it under the seat."

"Ah!" this from Gaston appreciatively. "But afterwards you regretted your imprudent action?"

"I was convinced you had designs on my 'famous pearls'; they have been advertised much lately."

"And that my valet was my accomplice?"

"I fear I suspected you both," she admitted. Gaston looked at her so reproachfully, that the lady stretched forth a hand—on the fingers of which two magnificent diamond rings sparkled—and put it into his. "Forgive me," she said winningly. "But your method of attack was somewhat brazen—when once you made up your mind what you wanted! Let this be the beginning of a delightful friendship. Acquaintance made thus should have more meaning than if we had met under ordinary conventional circumstances."

"We will drink a glass of wine to its long continuance," he cried, and, calling the attendant, he ordered some sparkling Moselle.

"To our friendship," he said, raising his glass when the waiter had poured out the clear wine.

"And to our mutual success," she added, clinking her glass against his.

When Gaston had paid the bill and the lady had buttoned her gloves, they rose from the table together, while he took possession of her little dressing-case.

"You see," he murmured in her ear, as they passed down the saloon, "I still have designs on your 'famous pearls.'"

As they came on a level with the compartment in which Andrea and her maid were installed they both observed that Andrea, still with an expression of abysmal melancholy, was in the act of imprinting a fervent kiss on the *chic* little face beneath the smart black hat. Wanda half turned to him. "In that rank of life they ignore *les convenances*," she said. "They advance very quickly!"

As they re-entered the carriage, Gaston was conscious that his pulse beat quicker. He wished with all his heart he might follow Andrea's example and ignore *les convenances* too. But the train was nearing Boulogne, and the lady had already twisted up her veil, and was gathering up her big coat. With a sigh he helped her into it. He was conscious that a sweet and subtle perfume, suggestive of musk or some eastern spice, emanated from her person.

The train ran into Boulogne, and she turned to him smiling.

"We shall meet again so soon," she said, "therefore I do not say good-bye. I will not ask you to be my companion on the voyage, for I go to my cabin. On the other side, too, I shall probably be infinitely unsociable."

"It would be more discreet, then, that I should leave you here," he inquired, watching her with appreciation as she gathered up the odds and ends of her baggage preparatory to leaving the train.

"Yes, more discreet."

"But you will let me come and see you in London?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes, come," she answered, as, leaving the carriage, on the threshold of the corridor she paused and looked back. "I shall be staying at the Hotel C——"

"*Au revoir*, then," he cried, as the slender, blue-clad figure disappeared into the crowd.

Then Gaston, stepping out of the train into the fresh wind, resigned himself, despite unromantic possibilities, to brave the immediate crossing of that unquiet sea. His ill-humour of the morning had completely vanished. He perceived that he stood in the entrance of one of those enchanting side roads to which this journey and that uneasy crossing were but the prelude.

CHAPTER II

TWO days later, when London was looking—despite the fact that it was the height of the season—its murkiest and most ill-tempered, Gaston, making his way through the welter of traffic in the Strand, was nevertheless in good conceit of himself.

The morning's rehearsal at Covent Garden had gone well. The authorities had been gracious and La Panowska's voice—though not of more than ordinary beauty—was exquisitely trained and quite sufficiently good to act as an excellent foil to his own; while her charming face and lovely figure—to say nothing of perfect stage deportment—were a guarantee that their performance of *Tosca* would 'go down' with the most critical public in the world.

Wanda Panowska, tall and svelte, daughter of a small Russian princeling—and consequently possessed of a considerable knowledge of the ways of persons of rank and position—was admirably suited to the rôle of *Tosca*, the beautiful singer whom she was to impersonate. Hypolite felt more than satisfied with the results of the rehearsal. He was in good voice, too, despite the miserably heavy and thick atmosphere. Yes, he felt quite contented, quite resigned for the moment to the fact that he was not in his beloved Paris. After all London, notwithstanding the fog that hung in the air, was not without her charm. The pale, ethereal green of trees and shrubs stood out against black stems and branches in fairy tracery. The muffled, thudding roar of the passing of hundreds of vehicles reverberated pleasantly in his ears. There was a suggestion of extreme tranquillity and deliberate solid purpose in those slow-moving streams of traffic. There was dignity in this great, black, sullen city, whose buildings, streets and houses seemed to have been jumbled together anyhow like piles of miscellaneous luggage, so that her most valued and beautiful monuments were often surrounded by sordid slum or business quarter. This habit of huddling ill-assorted buildings in odd corners is confusing to the foreigner. He is accustomed to have his monuments and *chefs d'œuvre* led up to by a formal and magnificent approach of avenue, the whole length of which cries out, "I lead you to something worth seeing!"

To Gaston Hypolite London was not unknown. He always declared that he detested going there, but, when once he arrived, he invariably became subjugated. Immediately after his return he would declare it was "the only city" save Paris; while a month later he would again declare it to be a place of indescribable boredom.

But to-day he was anything but bored. For the moment he was London's humble slave. In spirit he saluted the town;

and now, as he crossed the street and entered the vestibule of the Hotel C——, he proposed to enter the presence of another fair subjugator. This time, however, he would be content with a less tremendous goddess, he would pay homage to a lovely and fascinating woman.

That morning, at rehearsal, Wanda had asked him to come and see her, and drink a cup of real Russian tea with her in the afternoon, and he, delighted to obey her summons, had promised to do so.

On making inquiry of the hall-porter as to whether Madame Panowska were at home, he was shown up immediately into her private sitting-room, where he found her reclining, graceful and long-limbed, on a low divan. She was clothed from shoulder to foot in a clinging gown of some soft, silky black material, cut low so as to expose her throat—around which she had hung a long string of her famous pearls. The hanging sleeves of her dress had slipped back showing her bare arms, and their filmy blackness set off the dazzling fairness of her skin. Beneath the hem of her dress her scarlet-stockinged ankles and slender feet—the toes slipped into little *mule* slippers of scarlet leather—protruded over the edge of the divan, accentuating the fine lines of her heel and instep. Her fair head, crowned with its great plaited coil of gold-coloured hair, rested on a pile of green silk cushions. She had twisted her body sideways, her cheek on one arm, while the other arm was turned back over the curve of her hip.

Gaston, looking at her, could not but acknowledge that she was a very lovely and attractive woman. Attractive as much by art as by nature he knew; but yet—notwithstanding that outward lacquer of civilization—he detected in her a suggestion infinitely woodland and of the wild, as of a barbarian caged in luxury; yet, for all that caging, untamed, ready, should the fancy take her, to break the bars of that prison, and, scattering the silken softness of civilized surroundings—for Wanda, like most Russian women of breeding, within doors loved to encompass herself with a florid riot of luxury, and clothe herself in garments of almost Eastern extravagance—fare forth into the naked forest or steppe in search of strange adventure.

She did not rise as he entered the room, but looked up, smiling, then, turning over on her back, put both hands under her head.

The suppleness of her movements told him that her graceful body was not supported by stays. Again he was struck by an element of something exquisitely primitive in her. So much so that he averted his eyes from the posing figure and fixed them on the pure cut profile of her face, as being a less disturbing subject for contemplation.

"Ah, madame," he murmured, his heart thumping, "you are resting? That is well. After your exertions of the morning you must be tired."

"I am not tired," she answered, looking at him between half-closed lids. "But I make a practice of lying down when I have been at work all the morning. Tell me," she added, "do you feel satisfied? Did things, in your opinion, go well this morning?"

"More than satisfied," he returned, pulling forward a big armchair, and looking with appreciation at the details of the charming picture in front of him. "You are by far the most inspiring Tosca it has ever been my good fortune to play with."

"Is that a compliment? Or am I to believe that you mean it?"

"I do not compliment when it comes to a question of art, and in this case my admiration is most sincere."

"Well," she murmured, playing with her pearls and dangling one of the scarlet *mules* on the tip of her pretty foot, "I agree with you that compliments are an inpertinence to art. Nevertheless I am glad that you are pleased and that you are good enough to say so. Perhaps I, too, find you more inspiring than the Marios with whom it has hitherto pleased fortune to cast my lot. Your voice is a most moving one; you have breeding and personality—and"—she laughed, as if her thought and not her speech amused her—"and—yes, perhaps your personality moves me also. *Mon Dieu!*" she exclaimed, with a dainty gesture of disgust, "if you knew what atrocities in human form, calling themselves romantic lyric tenors, I have been compelled to embrace, you would give me your sincere sympathy."

"Then it is only as contrast to former detestable experience in the way of atrocities that I appear to please you?" This from Gaston, with the air of one politely seeking information. Wanda did not answer, but she laughed, and the scarlet *mule* flew on to the floor.

Gaston stooped to pick it up. Kneeling on one knee, he held the little shoe in his hand. It was warm from late contact with the owner's slender foot.

"You permit me, *Tosca Divina*?" he asked. His eyes regarded her steadily, but there was a tremor in his voice, and the hand holding the scarlet *mule* shook.

She stretched forth her foot, and, narrowing her eyes, looked up at him from under her eyelashes with a queer expression that reminded him of the half hostile, half *farouche* cunning he had seen in the eyes of a goat. That expression at once intrigued and repelled him. In her voluptuous femininity she attracted him. Intellectually she interested him, for he was aware that, if it came to a battle of wits, she was eminently a match for him. Yet, though he acknowledged her equality with himself in this direction, he could not get over the sensation that her mind was materialist and lacking in any spiritual sense of the unseen and ideal.

Wanda, seeing that he remained staring at the red *mule* poised on the open palm of his hand, held up the little scarlet-stockinged foot provokingly.

Hypolite, with infinite ceremony, replaced the *mule*, taking care, to her surprise, not to touch her foot with his hand. She had expected, in view of his evident appreciation of her charm, that he would have made better use of his opportunity. She reflected that any other man in his place would have succumbed to the temptation to caress it. She was provoked, and the more so when she perceived that he was slightly embarrassed.

With a cat-like movement she slipped from the sofa and ran to the inner door.

"Fanchette, Fanchette," she cried, "bring tea! I am perishing of thirst!"

"Immediately, madame," answered a crisp voice from within, and the maid—whom Gaston had last seen engaged in friendly and intimate intercourse with Andrea—entered the room. Trim, neat-waisted, dressed in black silk, with a frilled white muslin and lace apron, she advanced, carrying a tray on which was set out a pretty paraphernalia of porcelain and silver. She placed it on a table near the open window and retired.

"We will make the most of our time," said Wanda, "for alas!—at five-thirty my manager is coming to see me on

tiresome business, and then good-bye to our charming conversation *à deux*."

He watched her with appreciation as she scooped up the tea with a silver spoon from the depths of a bright-coloured wooden box engraved with curious Russian characters. The small, elaborately-manicured fingers, as they moved to and fro in this little feminine domestic occupation, charmed him extraordinarily. He was unusually conscious of her in her capacity of woman.

In the morning, rehearsing with her, he had greatly admired her exceeding grace on the stage. Her gestures, unlike those of most operatic actresses, were unhampered by any effect of overstudy in pose. He had played with many notable singers, but, almost invariably, he had been struck by their intense unspontaneity of action. One and all had been drilled into that pernicious idea that the climax of every action must culminate with the climax of the musical phrase and words—a rule excellent in itself, if taken as a mere indication for beginners, but, if carried too far, apt to be an intolerable obstacle to self-originated activity, and to give a studied air to what should appear voluntary impulse.

It was this effect of naturalness in Wanda, combined with that *farouche* playfulness—as of some woodland animal of primeval lands—which perplexed Hypolite when taken in conjunction with her extreme love of luxury and finish in personal adornment. Scented, powdered, exquisitely dressed, yet she gave him the impression of the most sprite-like, wayward creature he had ever known.

"See," she cried, as, her head on one side, she held up a piece of lemon in the silver tongs. "I will make you *thé à la russe*, and you must like it—to please me!"

"I shall like it, *Tosca Divina*," he answered, laughing, "as much as I am beginning to believe I like everything Russian."

"Ah," she ejaculated, handing him his cup, "everything Russian?—I do not know!—for you French are very conventional when it comes to the point."

"Conventional!" he repeated, stirring his tea and regarding her inquiringly—"In what way?"

"In every way," she asserted positively, "even in your love. That which is generally a great destroyer of conventions, is always regulated according to tradition. But it

is not so in Russia. We are not afraid of showing our feelings ; moreover, we are endowed with an overflowing measure of the quality which is called ' heart '.

Gaston looked into her blue eyes gravely.

" You forget," he murmured, setting down his cup in the saucer with a little rattle, " you forget that I am half Italian. I can truly say that the Italian side of me has too much heart."

" Too much heart or too much temperament ? " she inquired. " With the Italian it is generally the latter."

Gaston's manner stiffened. " Oh," he protested, with a little lift of his head, " when it comes to niceties of racial distinction, I confess I think it was to put the question alone."

Wanda smiled enigmatically. " And yet," she returned, twisting her pearls round her finger, " I should have said that the only basis of real understanding between persons of different race was an appreciation of the fundamental characteristics of their several nationalities."

Gaston began to feel uncomfortable, he was getting out of his depth. He wished this enchanting lady would not turn serious. He had no desire to bare the hidden places of his mind for her inspection. That was not in the bargain. Therefore he made no comment on her speech. But, as she leaned back in her chair, she looked so exasperatingly lovely that he began instinctively to look forward to to-morrow's performance, when, at least vicariously, he should hold her in his arms. He pulled himself up short. He had always taken a pride in relegating his relation to the singers with whom he played into the category of things impersonal. Believing that, did he permit that other individuality to intrude into his conception of the character which acted as counterfoil to his own rôle, it would upset the balance of his reading of the ethical value of situations which he had studied to the nth—and thus detract from his power of *sang-froid* and give uncertainty to his dramatic climaxes.

A certain fastidiousness also in him rebelled against the lowering of his art by submitting it to the degradation of mere personal excitement. In respect of these things, when it came to a question of art, he was an idealist. Nevertheless, he was conscious of a new and disquieting curiosity, a desire to probe his own sensations ; to test the emotional effect of Wanda's presence on him, when he should no longer be himself, but some tragic lover at the feet of his beloved. He

fought against his curiosity, but, notwithstanding his effort, the desire gained strength.

He put down his cup and looked out into the indefinite greyness of the evening twilight.

Outside the traffic roared, thundered, surged, in continuous unrest. The voice of this "city on an island" sounded to him less strident than the sharper, more urgent cry of Paris. For the roar of Paris is like the voice of many women; the intermingling of their laughter, their sighing, and their fierce, high-pitched screaming and shouting, incessantly, unmistakably, whether to be loved or feared. The woman's cry—it is feminine. But the dull, billen, sibilant, hissing, and muttering of sound—muted, veiled by noise—this is the more agitating. It is as if some great sea creature, with deep-throated in the dusk croak, palpitating, lunging, for long and relentless pursuit, to devour its prey.

The softness of form was not what began to feel uneasy—entirely, but the woman, stifled him morally. He liked her, and the intensely physical attraction emanated from her, so some highly perfumed and exquisite, in bindweed, which had power to intoxicate those who were near, until, stretching out delicate tendrils, it could enwine its victim with delicious softness that would harden to ropes of steel. He was conscious that, of the two, she was the stronger—consequently, he feared her.

Wanda rose to her feet, took a silver tube, trumpet-shaped, she extinguished the flame beneath the samovar.

"Come," she said, "come over to the divan. 'Come and sit by me, will you smoke?'"

He got to his feet. He watched Wanda as she took the cigarette case, wrought with her initials and a crown emblem, from the table beside her. In seating herself she drew two of the silken skirts round her slender hips, and, as she sat, the long line of her graceful limbs showed in the light of the lamp.

"I smoke," he said, "but surely, you, a singer, have more regard for your voice than to do so?"

Wanda chose a cigarette from the case and put the tip of it daintily in her mouth. Taking a silver lighter from the table she lit the cigarette, inhaling the smoke luxuriously.

He took out the cigarette and held it lightly in her left

hand, between the first and second fingers, while she handed him the case. Then, shutting the lid of the lighter, she set it down on the table. Again he noticed that effect of half cunning, half *farouche* hostility in her manner. It passed, however, and she looked at him, smiling.

"Before I was a singer, I was a Russian," she said. "Did you ever know a Russian man or woman who did not smoke?"

Gaston felt that he was beginning to succumb to the influence of her charm. As she leant forward holding out the gold case he thought her the most alluring being he had ever seen. By reputation he knew her to be complacent in matters of morality; and, obviously, it was her intention to encourage him to become more friendly with her. Yet he hesitated—fighting against her influence. Some instinct warned him that, beneath her lovely exterior, she was the predatory cruel type of woman who, vampire-like, will suck vitality from all with whom she comes in contact—who, taking all, will give but a mere pretence in return. With fingers that shook slightly he selected a cigarette. He was about to take up the lighter, when Wanda leaned towards him invitingly, cigarette in mouth. "Light," she murmured indistinctly through her closed teeth.

Hypolite, deeming it ungracious to refuse, bent forward likewise. The two faces, separated only by the length of the cigarettes, remained immobile for a moment. Looking up he met her eyes. Wanda was observing him beneath half-closed lids. The tendrils of that human bindweed were already tightening round him almost to the point of suffocation. He longed to escape, yet an irresistible impulse filled him to embrace her; to crush the laughing mouth with passionate kisses, and bear her away in his arms to some primæval forest, where, forcefully, as some fierce animal, he would tear the life from her until she cried for mercy. The blood mounted to his forehead and his hands made a movement towards her. Trembling, he had half risen in his seat, when there came a knocking, soft yet imperative, on the door. Wanda had thrown herself back on the divan, while Hypolite, the perspiration streaming down his forehead, struggled to his feet, and stumbled over to the window. Air—he must have air or he should throttle!

He heard the sound of Wanda's voice saying "*Entrez*"

and then the opening of the door sucked a cooling draught through the open window. Breathing deeply, he half turned, so that he was able to observe the newcomer who had entered the room—a tall, fair man, well over six foot and broad in proportion. He was immaculately dressed, and his clear, cold eyes were small and steel grey. An immense golden beard reached to his waist.

At the sight of him Wanda had sprung to her feet. She stood still for a moment, one hand pressed over her heart, the other clenched at her side, a singular expression of astonishment—almost of fear—on her face.

"Anton!" she exclaimed, then she ran swiftly across to him, and laid her little jewelled hands on his shoulders, looking up as if she would have kissed him.

The big man took her hands from his shoulders, and enclosing them in one huge palm, bent lightly over them; with the other hand he pointed to the ground.

"Look," he said, "your cigarette, you have dropped it."

Wanda set her heel upon it almost angrily, and began to speak rapidly in her native Russian. The words sounded softly caressing and sibilant to Hypolite. After a moment she again spoke in French. "I did not know you were in London. I thought it was only my stupid agent who was coming to talk business with me. How long are you here for? I believed you to be at K——."

She spoke hurriedly as though agitation held her.

The new-comer turned his cold, impassive gaze on the man in the window. Hypolite perceived that for the moment Wanda had been oblivious of his presence. He felt furiously piqued by her indifference and capriciousness.

The Russian turned reprovingly to Wanda, and answered her with a gesture indicating Hypolite. Then, in a tone of studied insolence, he addressed her in French. The construction of his sentences was perfect, but his accent was slightly blurred and hissing—as if he whispered.

"My Wanda," he said—laying stress on the possessive, and smiling, satirically, as his gaze met that of Hypolite. "My Wanda—I leave for St. Petersburg to-morrow morning. I am but passing through London on my way back from Paris for the express purpose of paying you a visit. I believe your friend will excuse me if I beg him to let me have uninterrupted possession of your attention."

Wanda looked at Gaston. The expression of fear was still in her eyes, but she looked indescribably lovely—no longer feline, but gentle, almost submissive. He saw that her eyes pleaded with him, but what she demanded he could not tell. The two men waited silent. The one for her obedience, the other for her command.

"M. Hypolite," she said at last, laying hold of the back of a carved chair so strongly that the white knuckles showed through the skin of her hand. "I am sure you will forgive me. My cousin, Prince Yerlatsky, has so short a time here.—" She looked back at him and then continued her speech of halting explanation. "He is kind enough to look after my estates in K——, since they lie next his own. We—we—have much to say to one another about business and—and other matters."

Hypolite came from the window and stood in front of her.

"I was just about to make my *adieux*, madame," he answered quietly, "when your cousin's entry delayed me."

He had regained his composure outwardly, but his temper was rising. Desire to escape from that fascinating human bindweed had left him—now that the said bindweed showed such evident signs of uncoiling itself and grappling on to another and—he could not but acknowledge—most attractive victim.

"*A demain*, then," he said, his eyes seeking hers.

"*A demain*," she answered mechanically, her eyes fixed on the Russian's face.

Gaston was filled with bitter hostility towards this superb barbarian who had entered the charming byeway in which he had elected to walk. As he left the room he glanced at him, with the intention of manifesting his displeasure in the coldest of bows, but, to his chagrin, so intently had the other two become absorbed in conversation, that he made his exit unnoticed. As he went down the stairs he had the ignominious sensation of a little boy sent away at the coming of a man. He stepped out of the hotel, his brain in a turmoil. Relief at the interruption which had released him from—to say the least of it—a situation which had threatened to involve him in intrigue, had given way to immense irritation at his own dismissal.

He took a sharp turn to the right, passing down a street which led, by steep incline, on to the Embankment. Crossing

the broad thoroughfare and the tram lines, he took his stand on the extreme edge of the opposite pavement against the wall. Looking out over the river, he wrathfully contemplated, first the passing traffic of barges, tugs and river steamers moving along the great waterway, then the uneven line of wharves and advertisement-covered buildings on the distant shore. Behind him, in the roadway, the trams groaned and rolled, while a continuous whir of passing motors echoed down the road.

Dusk was passing into night. Red and yellow lights shone, like strange watching eyes, in the gathering darkness. One by one they glittered, sparkled, twinkled, from out the sullen purple. An aching nostalgia for Paris surged up within him. Why was he not back there, breathing the keen air and acrid scents of his native city? He thought of the lure of Paris in May. How ardently he wished that those lights, shining along the river bank, were the bright jewels set in the bosom of Paris—beloved Paris—home of art and beauty—and not the cruel eyes of this enormous sluggish monster which watched him evilly, while, with its heavy breath, it stupefied him, and raised in him—through its enervating atmosphere—desire from which he longed to be free.

CHAPTER III

GASTON HYPOLITE stood in the wings of the Opera House. The curtain was about to rise on the first act of *La Tosca*. The Angelotti of the evening stood with him, and they conversed in low voices. Suddenly the light, dry rattle of the conductor's bâton and the last hurried exit of the scene shifters gave the signal for the commencement of the opera. An electric bell whirled, and the orchestra, galvanized into quick activity, gave forth the crashing chords which usher in the drama. Then, after a slight pause, the violins took up the hurried movement which tells of Angelotti's panic-stricken flight from the horror of prison and torture.

Angelotti leaving the wings, Gaston was alone. A certain excitement held him. Always highly strung, to-night he felt the tension of mind, habitual to him before a per-

formance, amount to a strained intensity which alarmed him. He had not seen Wanda since the evening before, yet, at this moment, he felt acutely conscious that in a very short time she would be on the stage. He was angry with her, because of that quick dismissal, yet, despite his pique, he could not dismiss her from his thoughts. His very annoyance whetted his appetite for further vision. Idly he watched Angelotti's agitated search for the key and his disappearance in the direction of the chapel, followed by the entry of the Sacristan. He wondered if Wanda would divine his annoyance. He looked again at the stage; the Sacristan was kneeling; he was repeating the Latin prayer. Someone advanced behind Gaston with the words, "Your entry." He roused himself and passed mechanically from the wings.

Once on the stage the familiar business of the picture steadied his nerves. Nevertheless, to his mind, the picture with its golden hair and blue eyes, seemed to him to represent, not the Magdalene, but Wanda, who watched him with evil intention from between half-closed lids, while the painted lips addressed him, saying: "Only I—Wanda—am real. To me you belong. Tosca does not exist for you to-night."

This impression so affected him, that he began to long for the moment when he should hold her in his arms—not Tosca, but Wanda—delicately perfumed, radiantly young and splendidly alive, leaning with warm weight on his breast. The inevitability of that holding of her calmed him again. He continued the scene, playing with deliberate care the minutest detail of "business." Wanda was coming. Even now he knew she was close at hand.

"*Il mio sol pensier sei tu!*" he sang as he visualized Wanda's face. He was glad when the Sacristan's departure marked the end of another stage in the waiting. Throughout the following scene with Angelotti his impatience grew. But, at the moment when Tosca's voice, audible in the wings, insistent and irritable, broke in on their whispered conversation, he became agitated—confused between the rôle of Tosca and the personality of Wanda who played it. He knew Wanda stood without, and that—though her fair hair was covered with a dark wig, and her semblance was that of Tosca—yet she, and not Tosca called him. He could have sworn that she would appear on the stage as he

had seen her last, a cigarette between her lips, slender, in her trailing black garments, with little scarlet clad feet.

So convinced was he that she would enter thus that he was almost startled when she made her impetuous entry, her body dressed in Tosca's fanciful and light-coloured street clothes.

The black wig set off the fairness of her skin, her black-rimmed eyes seemed to shine and glisten with extraordinary lustre, beneath the outstanding brim of her bonnet. She looked eminently graceful and lovely in her simulated irritation. Gaston found it difficult to keep his head, and, to his dismay, in the opening phrases of their conversation, his voice trembled somewhat. For Wanda, bright-eyed and mischievous, beneath her veneer of technique played with him. Anger left him. His enchantment and absorption grew, but he began to lose a little of his unrivalled sense of rhythm. Once or twice his entrances were slipshod, and he was compelled to glance at the bâton.

As the scene advanced he had much ado to keep his acting within the limits prescribed for Mario's abstraction in the presence of his beloved—so attractive did Wanda appear to him in her coaxing insinuation. Again it seemed to him that not Tosca, but Wanda herself, made love to him, with covert pleading, wooing him from any touch of pique that might remain as aftermath of yesterday. When she brought her first scene successfully to its climax with her clear singing of the phrase "*ma falle gli occhi neri!*" he was so much in love that it was with difficulty he restrained himself from following her off the stage.

When in the opera she had bid him come to her after the performance there had been an intimate personal appeal in her words that, divining, he now welcomed. His agitation had turned to excitement. He left the wings and made his way to his dressing-room, unable to analyse his own sensations. He knew that he was losing his power of sangfroid both on the stage and off it. Was this, then, the answer to his seeking of so many years? Did the sweeping away of every barrier of reserve, every carefully calculated protection of self-restraint, with which he had surrounded his artistic entity, presage the development of a higher element in his talent? Was passion then not a thing despicable, but a vital force to be chained to the wheels of Art? Hitherto

he had, in his effort to put himself "inside" a rôle, scrupulously eliminated the personal element. But to-night, as in rehearsal, when he had held her in his arms, he had felt Wanda consciously intrude her own personality.

He got up and walked to and fro; then, stopping in front of his looking-glass, he commenced to make certain deft little alterations in his make-up. But his hand shook. He put down the stick of grease paint and, calling Andrea, bid him get a glass of wine, hoping thus to steady his nerves. But, when once again he stood awaiting his entry, his excitement became acute. He began to long for sight of Wanda again, and for the moment when he should feel her bending over him.

From the wings came the sound of the opening of the cantata, and, in another minute, he was on the stage in conversation with Scarpia—to whose quick questions he gave answer with unusual decision and impatience, as though he wished to hurry his enemy. All the while he was listening to catch the sound of Tosca's entry; and when, with a swift rush, she threw herself into his arms, he returned her embrace with real tenderness. Her appearance was extraordinarily effective, regally beautiful, her dress—the foundation of which was some iridescent material of blue-green silken tissue—literally encrusted with scintillating gems. For a moment she clung to him, panting, as if she too had counted the moments till they should meet.

Returning to the wings again, he watched her. He fancied that he could observe in her manner again a slight nervousness. Her lips twitched slightly, and her eyes were strained in expression as if fear of something more intimate than Scarpia's brutality penetrated her mind. Was she, too, suffering from the intrusion of a new element? Was she, too, caught by that bindweed of passion? Was that appeal in her eyes and tremulousness of her lips a token that she, too, had touched something new and terribly disconcerting? A chivalry took him and a delicate tenderness, at the thought of causing her confusion or distress. Shame filled him when he contemplated the possibility of his having misjudged her. Had he been wrong in believing that she had deliberately played on his weaker nature? Yet he remembered the episode of yesterday's cigarette lighting, together with

certain trivial happenings at rehearsal. It was impossible for him to believe that he alone had been at fault.

Had he not always—he protested inwardly—kept his art clean, whatever might have been his weaknesses and shortcomings outside his profession. His art—the honourable and exquisite romance of his life—had remained inviolate and untouched.

His emotion rising, he battled with himself; and, all the while, the sound of the orchestra, like a restless undercurrent to his thought, came to him, together with the clear insistent notes of Wanda's voice intermingled with that of Scarpia in intermittent conversation. Listening, he became aware of, beyond that wall of lifting orchestral sound, the tense stillness of the "house." Evidently the Scarpia—an old-established favourite—was "making good" with the audience. Again Wanda's voice rose in excellently graduated tide of desperation—an appeal, vivid and poignant, revealing a depth of feeling he had not thought her capable of enacting. The sound of that desperate appeal moved him strangely—as no woman's voice had hitherto had power to do. He could not erase from his mind that the appeal was not to Scarpia—for the saving of the fictitious lover from torture—but the cry of Wanda to him, that he should understand her.

But again he rebelled inwardly, furious that this woman should thus force the personal note. Selfishness—inborn in the vocal artist—cried out in defence of his own supremacy. That integral self over which no other must dominate, and which is a necessary part of every great artist, began to arise in him again. He determined to rally his cynicism. Fiercely he repelled the assault of that pleading. So desperately did he brace himself that as Tosca's shriek, when she realizes her lover's terrible torment, came to him as the signal for his agonized groan, the mental strain under which he was labouring racked his nerves almost to snapping point. He turned resolutely to technique, and the minute execution and realization of detail, as refuge from the turmoil of his thought—striving, as he had striven while as yet a young student of his first rôles, to visualize the horror of that band of iron that encircled the unhappy brow of Mario—the romantic young lover, and faithful friend.

It was with steadier tone and more delicate phrasing he answered her questioning voice from the stage. But, a moment later, Tosca's desperation culminated—after mounting cadences of shrieks torn from her very soul—in that bitter wailing as, woman-like, she breaks down, exhausted by her own fierce anger. Then came back to him passion—overwhelming, bewildering. Hypolite knew that he was madly in love. Mario's cry of anguish became the expression of his own distress—the pain of an impassioned and imprisoned lover; the cry of a man, stifling, throttling, beneath the bindweed of passion, the fragile, the irresistible tendrils of which grow ever stronger and more powerful, clinging, encircling, until the victim is unable to fly, and becomes the prey of that other predatory human being who cries "mate!"

Like a man in a dream he was conscious that he had again moved on to the stage, and that, from out what seemed to him infinity of space and time, Wanda came to him. As she bent over him he could feel her breath on his cheek, her lips near to his face, and the warm roundness of her arm beneath his neck.

"*Quant'io hai penato anima mia!*" she sang; and, looking at her, he saw that again the lovely mouth twitched with a little nervous movement though her voice was steady. The delicate scent of her person was in his nostrils. At the touch of her fingers again he lost his head. He no longer battled with his desire. He loved—he loved—and she loved him. He was filled with infinite tenderness for her.

"*Tosca, ho parlato?*" he murmured, and the rich vibration of his own voice startled him. To his critical ear there lurked in it a depth and meaning that amazed him.

"*No amor no!*" she answered, and her voice was soft as the cooing of a dove.

Gaston's eyes met hers, and the last of his idealism fled, swept overboard by the tide that engulfed them both; so that, when Scarpia's order for the arrest of Angelotti reveals the fact that the sorely stricken Tosca has betrayed the wretched fugitive in order to save her lover, Hypolite played at repulsing her, but with strong light fingers, unseen by any, he caressed her quickly, before the exigencies of stage directions parted them again. Then, after the breathless narration by the messenger, a glory of abandon took him,

and, rising to his feet, he poured forth the great pæan of triumph, "*Vittoria!*" with a splendid abandon. His voice pitching itself with tremendous ring and vibration, his whole body tense, trembling, with the intensity of his feeling. It seemed to him that he cried out with the gladness of a conqueror, at whose feet lies powerless a beautiful slave. But though conqueror he, too, was enslaved—enslaved by mighty love. Tosca's voice pleading seemed to him as the epitome of womanhood, crying pitifully to be set free from the eternal bondage of sex; but within him, primitive man, egoist, triumphant, fundamentally cruel, would brook no denial. To her agonized appeal at parting he refused a hearing. Because of her the civilized man in him had awakened from the narcotic of traditional reserve; of that awakening which she was not wholly guiltless of provocative intention—therefore she must pay the price.

He longed for the opera to be ended. Of one thing he believed himself certain—this woman was the key that was destined to unlock the hidden door in his nature. Not passion alone, but brutal ruthlessness was needed. And Wanda, not himself, should be the victim sacrificed to the God of Art.

So it was, that during the entr'acte he waited breathless, his muscles taut, his whole person radiant with expectation. Wanda—he loved her! His thought reiterated this again and again. In the last act he evoked spontaneous applause by his impassioned singing of Mario's lovely "*E lucevan le stelle!*" Later the two gave forth the love duet with such superb tone that the audience, catching the flame of their enthusiasm, listened in growing excitement.

The beauty of the new Tosca was undoubted, and Hypolite surely had never sung better. Critics watched him with curiosity. There was a change in him, perceptible since his last appearance. His voice was magnificent, richer, fuller, but surely he was a little careless in his method of delivery! There was a suggestiveness, a materialism in his playing of Mario, which belonged to a less refined and poetic artist than the Gaston Hypolite who had conquered them on his first visit.

"He is playing to the gallery—for popularity," one well-known critic exclaimed discontentedly. "I should like to

see how he would play Pelléas now. In my opinion he should pull up. He is not made for melodrama."

"Bah!" answered another, "you are hypercritical. Listen to that last note—true and round as a bell! And look at the audience—it is nearly the end of the act and they have not even begun to unscrew their opera glasses."

"All the same," replied the other, "I preferred his earlier style."

"Not so the audience," said another critic significantly, as a tremendous storm of applause broke out in the house; and men, standing up, cried brava, as they drummed on the crowns of their hats.

The first speaker, however, had slipped away into the crowd with a shrug of his shoulders.

Later Hypolite and Wanda, hand in hand in front of the curtain, when bowing to that vociferous audience, were not listening to the applause. Both of them were conscious of the sound of a more vital tumult. Tempestuous and irresistible the God of Love had knocked at the Gates of Chance. But he came not in the garb of a mischievous laughing boy, but as some fierce elemental semblance of sex incarnate, who rudely battered down all barriers, crying to them with terrible voice.

After what seemed to them an interminable time they left the stage silently, and Wanda, tearing her hand from Hypolite's, fled. Hypolite stumbling, drunk with excitement, found his way to his dressing-room, conscious only that Wanda, when she had knelt by him on the stage, had bowed over him until her lips met his.

"Quick, Andrea," he cried, "change my clothes. *Sapristi!* hasten, I tell you." He tore off his wig and began to rub the grease paint from his face. In a few minutes he had left his dressing-room and found his way to Wanda's door.

He stood waiting irresolute, his pulses hammering, his breath coming quickly. Strange sounds came to him from the stage. The carpenters were taking the last scene to pieces—that scene where he and Wanda had played as puppets before a vast audience. He could have laughed aloud as he remembered that a hidden drama, great as that of Tosca and Mario, was played before their unseeing eyes!

There was a sound, a gentle movement within, the creaking of a bolt withdrawn. The door opened and Wanda came

forth. She had removed her wig and make-up, but was still clothed as she had been in the last act of the drama; only over her shoulders she had—instead of the dark cloak she had worn on the stage—thrown a flame-coloured wrap of some silky material. It was open in front, disclosing the beauty of her neck covered with sparkling diamonds. Her face was pale, but her parted lips were red, and her eyes, still rimmed with black, shone with fierce brilliancy. As her glance fell on the figure of Hypolite, she gathered the cloak up in great heavy folds, and held it together over her bosom. She did not speak, but looked at him as if she waited that he should ask her something.

Hypolite, watching her, spoke roughly:

"You are ready, then? I am going home with you."

Wanda swayed, her hands dropped away from her bosom. Her eyes met his, she seemed to grow taller and to fill out, glowing with an effervescence of youth and womanhood. Then, suddenly, she looked away, and, as her eyes left his, she seemed to shrink and droop. Hypolite knew that some outward remembrance had touched her in which he had no part. A sudden intuition came to him that in that instant Russia and things Russian claimed her. He remembered the coming of Prince Yerlatsky and his own dismissal. Fury took him.

"Come," he said brutally. "You keep me waiting. Do I return with you?"

Wanda shivered.

"Yes," she whispered. "You return with me."

CHAPTER IV

IN the weeks that followed it seemed to Gaston, later, that he had lived in an uneasy and hectic dream. Wanda became to him an obsession, a madness from which he could not escape. And, the more that obsession grew, the more he lost his power of visualization, so that he was dependent on her presence for the material inspiration necessary to his present, more brutal method, of interpretation of drama. No longer did he stand alone—an idealist whose art was the nobler part of himself—and this consciousness of his artistic

subjugation was galling to him, so that he tried to deaden his resentment by plunging deeper and deeper into debauch.

But, away from the woman who had enslaved him, he became weary, spiritless, conscious that his whole nature, let alone his artistic sense, was becoming brutally materialist. The immediate applause of the public still reached him, but it was not the applause of the connoisseur in praise of finished and spiritual interpretation of the intellectual conception of composer and dramatist, but the magnetic excitement produced by his own reckless expenditure of vitality.

Certain of the older and more subtle critics, discovering in him the beginning of deterioration as an artist, had, on occasions, called him to task in no measured terms. But, furiously, he had turned a deaf ear to their kindly meant strictures, refusing to acknowledge what, in his heart of hearts, he knew to be truth—and truth spoken, not from a desire to find fault, but from anxiety for the welfare of one whom they had believed capable of finer things.

It so happened that one morning, towards the end of the season, Gaston sat at the open window of his luxurious sitting-room in the Hotel R—, moodily stirring his coffee and reading one of those same criticisms which carped, more than usually, against his growing lack of distinction.

"It is a pity," wrote an eminent critic, "that Gaston Hypolite was not contented with his earlier interpretation of certain rôles. We confess to a distaste for his new methods, which savour rather of the exaggerations of the worst Italian school than of the subtle and reasoned finish of French romance. He, who was once a perfect master of Debussy, will find himself unable—if he continues in his present path—to grasp the delicate manner of thought and poetic feeling demanded by this master of modern exquisites."

The flimsy scrap of paper trembled in his fingers, and his eyes filled with tears. Crushing it into a little ball, he flung it into the paper-basket and, leaning his head on his hands, hunched his shoulders like a little unhappy boy who has been scolded. With haggard eyes he stared out into the sunshine.

"Was it true what they said of him? Was he indeed deteriorating?" He knew the writer of that article, a man who had been his most enthusiastic admirer in the early days of his career. He knew him to be a man of un-

impeachable honour, who cared for art and the artist too much to praise when he could not do so with a clear conscience.

He got up, pushing away his coffee with a shaking hand. He felt hurt because the man who had spoken those words was his friend—and one whose opinion he trusted.

He pulled his dressing-gown about him and walked over to the great mirror. Putting both hands on the polished surface of the table he leaned forward and surveyed his reflection. The impression he received was not exhilarating. His skin was sallow and great pockets showed beneath his eyes. There were heavy lines about his mouth. His unshaven chin and ruffled hair gave him an unpleasantly unkempt appearance. He turned from the contemplation of himself and retreated with slow footsteps to his arm-chair again. A pile of unopened letters still lay beside his plate. He picked one up, it was a boyish epistle from Edward Rainsdale, a young English pianist of some distinction, who pursued him with constant invitations to spend the week-end at his little country house on the river. This boy, being an all enthusiastic follower of the modern French school, had pertinaciously sought him out as the acknowledged foremost exponent of his beloved Debussy. And now, once more, he wrote imploring that Hypolite would honour him by becoming his guest—if only for one night.

Gaston smiled as he laid aside the letter. He was touched by the eagerness of the boy, and half inclined to take refuge in this atmosphere of honest admiration.

He turned again to the pile of letters, the next was a mere business communication in acknowledgment of a cheque paid into his bank. Idly he picked up a third letter, and observed, to his surprise, that it was addressed in Wanda's big flowing hand. What could she have to say to him? They had parted late last night, and she knew it was his intention to go and see her that evening. Hastily he tore open the envelope, and, extracting its contents, spread out the single sheet of sparsely covered paper on the table.

"*Mon ami,*"—she wrote: "I find that I need a day or two's complete rest. I am leaving London till Monday morning. WANDA."

Hypolite drew in his breath. What did she mean—he asked himself angrily—by going away without letting him

know of her whereabouts and with only this curt word of farewell? What was he to do with himself, kicking his heels in London for the intolerable length of the week-end?

He crossed the room and took up the receiver of the telephone on his writing-table. Irritably he rang up Wanda's hotel. Was Madame Panowska in?—Madame Panowska had just left the hotel, she was going out of town for the week-end.—Her destination?—The porter was sorry, but Madame Panowska had given special orders that her letters were to be kept till her return—she had left no address.

Gaston snapped the receiver back into its place, and came up to the table again. Looking down, among the litter of half torn envelopes and papers, his glance fell on Edward Ramsdale's letter. Here, at least, was something that offered him distraction. He picked up the letter and scanned its contents afresh. Then he rang the electric bell.

"Andrea," he said, as the valet answered his summons, "pack my small suit-case. I am leaving London for the week-end. Wait one moment." He sat down at the writing-table, and addressed a telegram to Edward Ramsdale at Maidenhead—"There—send this out immediately and then get my bath."

This decision taken, he recovered a little from his depression and, by the time he reached Ramsdale's pretty riverside villa, he had begun to feel a certain relief at the brief respite from strenuous living that had been his daily and nightly portion of late.

His host's conversation after dinner that evening interested him, as constituting an elaborate discussion of certain aspects of the music of Ravel, Charpentier, and Debussy. The boy's enthusiasm concerning Hypolite's own interpretation of modern French music acted as a balm to the double wounding of the morning's critique and Wanda's defection. Declaring himself to be tired, he went to bed at half-past eleven, but, once in his room, he felt unable to sleep. The night was sultry and thunderous—feverish it seemed to him. The rank smell of the river came up from across the stuffy, gnat-haunted garden. His head ached, and his hands and feet, despite the hot night, were icy cold. When at last he fell asleep the grey dawn had laid fingers of light across the horizon. He dreamed evilly, turning restlessly in his sleep.

The next morning he did not appear till nearly luncheon time, and young Ramsdale was distressed by his aspect. But Gaston replied shortly to his solicitous inquiries, and spent the day in restless wandering in the garden, or, seated in his friend's music-room, smoking innumerable cigarettes while Ramsdale played to him. At dinner he had talked brilliantly, feverishly, passing from one topic to another with extraordinary mental vigour. Ramsdale listened to his elaborate criticism of obscure harmonic progressions and niceties of tone colour with rapt attention. Hypolite was not only a fine singer but an accomplished musician, and poured forth a torrent of witty and judicious comment of things musical. But at night, when he lay awake, unable to quiet his brain, which raced interminably in fantastic thought—wearily he turned, burning and shivering alternately, and, alone in the sultry night, his craving for Wanda became acute. His head throbbed and his mouth was parched. He was indescribably tired but unable to rest. Therefore, when Monday evening came and he knew that within a few hours he should see Wanda, he could hardly control his impatience to be with her again. Pacing to and fro in the garden, before dinner, he asked himself anxiously what he should do at the end of the season when he and Wanda were forced apart by the march of circumstance. Wanda, he knew, was going back to Russia, while he himself had a series of engagements in the more important French provincial towns. The idea of a separation from her was intolerable—and yet he felt that, if he continued to live as he was now living, the strain would in time become too great.

Why had this woman taken such entire possession of him that he was wretched apart from her? Why could he not break away from her? Was she not stifling the better part of his nature, slowly poisoning his whole system with her sensuality, so that the very critics observed his moral deterioration? And yet he loved her. For was not this love—this surrender of his very soul—of the inner shrine of his personality—to her? No—he could not, he would not, part from her. It was impossible. She had become a necessity to him. It was unthinkable. To-night, after dinner, he would return. He would go and find her. They would talk of these things. Some plan for the future—their mutual

future—must be formulated. If necessary he would break his engagements in France and go with her to her own country.

He stood still in the airless dusk of the summer evening. On the heavy air the subtle scent of jasmine rose in his nostrils. From the river he could hear the plash of oars and distant voices. The minute and peevish ping of gnats studded the silence with thin points of sound. He stepped on to the dew-laden grass and walked to the end of the lawn, where he stood contemplating the vista of white mist rising rank and humid. Again his thought turned irresistibly to Wanda and the problem of their future.

What was it in her which attracted him? There was something abnormal, outside his experience, in her. He knew that she was to him as a vampire, feeding on his vitality, draining him of personality; and, the more he struggled to retain that integral self, of which he had once been the master, the more ruthlessly did she take possession, until he was as wax in her hands, defenceless, dependent on her slightest wish. Whither was this state of things leading him? he asked himself unhappily. Would it not be the part of a man to free himself? Could he do so? He doubted his own capacity. He dreaded the wrench which parting would inevitably cause him. No—he could not, it was useless—useless—mentally he paused—unless some sudden shock, some sudden awakening from this evil dream, should release him, and enable him to fight his way out of those evil entwining tendrils, back to the pure fresh air of Idealism once more.

Footsteps sounded in the garden. Edward Ramsdale had come out of the house. He advanced down the garden path and over the lawn in search of his guest.

"Hypolite, my dear fellow," he exclaimed, "I had no idea that you were out here. Come in—I cannot have my guest risking his precious voice in these damp river fogs. Just at sunset, and after a hot day, they are particularly pernicious. I do not want to have it on my conscience that you have caught cold, and to hear that you are unavoidably prevented from appearing by indisposition."

He put his arm within Gaston's and pulled him gently in the direction of the house.

"I have just received a new budget of music from Paris,"

he went on, " and I should like you to hear the latest Debussy, also that ' Pavane ' of Ravel's which we were discussing last night. For, if you really must go after dinner, we may not get another chance. I suppose it is not possible to persuade you to change your mind and stay till to-morrow morning ? "

" Impossible, *mon ami*," Gaston answered, as they entered the French window of the music-room together. Catching a glimpse of himself and Ramsdale, reflected in a long mirror at the end of the room, he bitterly contrasted his own faded appearance with the boy's freshness. For two months ago he had been quite as full of *joie de vivre* as Ramsdale, and now, because of this all absorbing devotion to a woman, he was wretched. Yet it was absurd that a *grande passion* should cause him unhappiness.

He turned bitterly from contemplation of himself in the mirror.

" I should like to stay," he said, " but I find it necessary to return to-night. I have a rehearsal at ten to-morrow, and, as you know, I am not fond of early rising ! I am afraid," he added, " that I have been a somewhat gloomy companion. But the truth is I have been working very hard lately, and your London climate does not agree with me."

" You are not looking well, Hypolite," Ramsdale commented, regarding him with anxiety. " You must take a good rest, my dear fellow, at the end of the season. I cannot tell you," he went on, his face glowing with enthusiasm, " what a pleasure it has been to me to have you here. I only hope I have not bored you with my madness for certain music."

" On the contrary," Gaston declared, as he flung himself into the depth of a big red leather arm chair, " your conversation and your ideas have greatly refreshed me. Now you will do me a favour which I shall greatly appreciate if you will play me the ' Pavane,' I am curious to see whether your reading of it is the same as my own."

" Smoke then, while I play," Ramsdale suggested, as he put a box of Egyptian cigarettes at his friend's elbow.

He seated himself at the piano, his slim figure silhouetted against the white-panelled wall. He began to play, and immediately his gay young face became transfigured. To the man who watched him its spiritual quality was singularly disturbing. Ramsdale required no material help outside

his own personality. Once occupied in the exercise of his art, he retired within himself and became an instrument, a sensitive receiver of the creative artist, and transmitter of delicate cerebral inspiration. This was Art, as Hypolite had first conceived it—as he had loved it before Wanda had come into his life. Again depression took him. He turned slightly so that he no longer watched Ramsdale, who—rapt in his playing—had forgotten him. That forgetfulness hurt him shrewdly. Wanda—he wanted Wanda. The "Pavane"—beautifully as the boy played it—jarred him. The sounds presented to his overstrained nervous perception a medley of angles and corners—suggestive of crude colouring and troubled thoughts. He was thankful when Ramsdale, at the end of the "Pavane," without more than a moment's pause, began to play some rippling, dainty music of Debussy. Glad because that continuation of music released him from the obligation of immediate conversation. And he was tired, horribly tired. He ached from head to foot. Debussy—yes—that was Debussy the boy was playing. A while ago those exquisite monotones would have greatly appealed to him—now they seemed to him grey, ethereal, indefinite. Was their intangible sweetness wanting in vitality or was he—Gaston—coarse—materialist—*terre à terre*?

He moved in his chair, and his eyes looked out mournfully through the open window into the sultry purple darkness. The sickly sweet perfume of jasmine came to him on the warm, humid night air. The heavy sweetness of white and mauve nicotina, set in a great vase in the corner of the room, mingled with the scent of his own cigarette. This confusion of odours nauseated him. He put down his cigarette and lay back in the long chair—restless and feverish—unable to quiet his jangled nerves or fix his attention.

Then, again, the longing for Wanda arose in him overpowering and poignant. He closed his eyes, and, photographed on his brain, came back a cloud of shadowy impressions, pictures of Wanda. Wanda as he had first seen her when she came down the platform of the Gare du Nord—mysteriously veiled. Wanda as she played Tosca, with lithe cat-like movements. Wanda as she appeared to him on the first night that she lay in his arms.—Unable to bear this last and most maddening vision he opened his eyes,

staring out again into the darkness. A light current of air stirred the creepers which hung from the verandah, so that patches of light took their polished dark green foliage. Hypolite's fevered brain turned those swaying festoons into trails of exquisite human bindweed, covered with evil, sweet-scented pale flowers. From out the heart of those waxen petals looked the face of the woman who had cast a spell on him. The scent of those exotic blossoms was the delicate human odour of her person, the faint breath that came from her parted lips.

He was thankful when the dinner-gong roused him from the drunken sweetness of those dreams. He pulled himself together and essayed to converse with his host, forcing himself, with difficulty, to eat the choice little dinner which had cost Ramsdale much anxious thought. His pulse galloped and his eyes were bright. He talked continuously, wildly, with quick gestures of his nervous, fevered hands; and Ramsdale, watching him, perceived that he was ill.

"I wish you could see your way to staying the night," he pleaded affectionately. "It is my opinion that you need a rest."

Gaston smiled.

"You fuss unnecessarily, *mon ami*," he said. "I assure you I am merely overworked. We operatic artists are not in the habit of taking it easy." He shrugged his shoulders.

Ramsdale looked at him with tears in his eyes.

"At the risk of seeming impertinent," he stammered, blushing, and leaning forward over the edge of the table, "I dare to beg that you will see a doctor. I am convinced you are suffering from some sort of fever. My father was many years in India, and he used to be greatly troubled by malaria—I suppose that you have never lived in a bad climate?"

Gaston was touched by his evident distress and real affection.

"I begin to believe that I have been living in a detestably unhealthy climate for the last two months," he answered; "but I think it is not a doctor I need, but a change of atmosphere."

"And yet London is generally considered healthy," Ramsdale murmured.

"So it is, probably. But, apparently, it does not suit

me. My dear fellow, don't worry," he went on, putting out a burning hand—"perhaps you are right, I am not well. I must get back to London. Once there," he added, half to himself, "all will be well."

Ramsdale's manservant appeared in the doorway.

"The car is here, sir."

Hypolite came out into the hall.

"Can I have the car open?" he inquired.

"Certainly," the other answered, giving the order; "and look here, my dear fellow, I am, in any case, coming with you to the station. Will you let me bear you company further? I had intended returning with you to London, if I thought I should not be a bother"—he broke off, stammering.

Gaston looked at him humorously.

"Non, *mon petit*," he said. "Leave me alone or I may become irritable, and I am not nice when I am irritable. It is understood now that we make no further mention of the subject." He turned and went out to the car.

"Ah, that is better," he added, as it started and bore them swiftly into the night. "It was just a little air I needed. I am not sure that the river mists are good for me. *Sapristi*, although I feel more alive."

Long afterwards young Ramsdale remembered that five minutes' drive with Gaston. He was haunted by the picture, framed in the window of the first-class carriage as the train slowly rolled out of the station—the face of his friend, which had appeared to him as some dolorous tragic mask, pallid and lined to emaciation, with nervous, twitching lips and burning eyes.

CHAPTER V

AS the train rolled away Gaston sank back in the corner of the empty first-class carriage. He was greatly relieved that his visit was over and that he was on his way back to Wanda. Wearily, now, as he sat huddled in his seat, his mind turned to her. He was conscious that Ramsdale's diagnosis had been right, and that he was suffering from some sort of fever. He leaned his head back, sinking into semi-coma; but the constant jerk of the train, as it drew up at wayside stations, roused

him to irritable consciousness. A terrible thirst consumed him and his hips and loins began to feel icy cold, while his head and hands were burning hot. Alternately he shivered and stifled. He became nervous about himself, fearing that he would be unable to sing at rehearsal to-morrow. Rubbing his coat sleeve against the window he looked out. The train was nearing London. Over head a sullen thickness of fog shut out the greater distance of the night. The glare of the great city was reflected on the lower banks of vapour, and, beneath that glowing canopy, a million lights glimmered, while the streets vibrated, palpitated, seethed—a vast amphitheatre of living humanity, the noise of which melted into one continuous roar like the flaming of some gigantic furnace, glowing with ardent life. Radiating away to right and left, from the height of the raised railway track, squalid mean alleys were visible as ribbons of crude light. At the near ends of them he saw lines of fruit and vegetable stalls, round which little dwarfed figures moved.

Gaston let down the window and leaned out; the sultry air, disturbed by the rush of the train, met him laden with the thick, nauseating odour of fried fish, over-ripe fruit and manifold humanity. From the dull roaring of the city sharper notes of sound occasionally detached themselves. He sank back again in his seat, for the deadened air brought no refreshment to his lungs.

He was stifling, he told himself, as he expelled panting breaths from his parched mouth—stifling for want of Wanda—for want of the scent of that evil human bindweed, the poison flower that was killing him.

The train rolled into Paddington. The door of the carriage opened, and Gaston stepped out on to the platform. From out the crowd the tall figure of Andrea approached.

Hypolite put his suit-case into the valet's hand.

"Take my luggage, Andrea," he ordered; "I have business to attend to and shall not return till later."

Hailing a taxi, he flung himself in, directing the chauffeur to take him to the Hotel X—. "Wanda," he whispered to himself. "I will go to her, I must see her to-night, I shall feel better in her presence."

With dazed eyes he regarded the kaleidoscopic effect of lighted streets and houses. The thunder of trains, shouting

of voices, and rattle of traffic bewildered him. At last the taxi drew up before the Hotel X——. With difficulty he roused himself from his semi-stupor and, paying off the cab, entered the vestibule.

From the hall porter he obtained the information that Madame Panowska had returned, and was entertaining a guest. She had given orders that dinner was to be served in her private suite, and that no one else was to be admitted that evening.

At that moment, Gaston saw that the door of the lift had opened, and a tall man, clad in evening dress, stepped from it. He came down the steps of the inner hall into the vestibule. The young man, watching him, saw he had a great golden beard which reached to his waist, and that on his fine wrists were thick gold curb bracelets.

The sight of those bracelets acted as the steadying influence that Gaston needed. He recognized the man as Prince Yerlatsky—Wanda's cousin. Drawing himself up he called impatiently to the hall porter.

"Take my card to Madame Panowska and tell her that I wish to see her on a matter of great urgency."

At the sound of his voice the Russian turned his head. He regarded Gaston steadily and insolently with his cold eyes, then, raising his shoulders, he passed out into the street smiling.

At last, after a wait that was intolerable, the porter returned, saying that Madame Panowska would see him, and he was borne up in the lift. At the top of the well he dismissed the man, saying that he would find his own way to her rooms.

In a few seconds, with beating heart, he stood in front of the doorway of her private apartment. It was slightly ajar. He pushed it open. Looking in, he perceived that the room was empty, and lighted only by a single shaded lamp set on the table beside the fireplace. On the divan the cushions were in disorder. The deep indentation of the pillows showed that someone had but lately lain there. Gaston, gazing at that divan, was taken with poignancy of remembrance. He thought of his first coming to this room, and his finding of Wanda—graceful in black trailing garments with little scarlet-clad feet. Clenching his hands, he looked away and his glance fell on the table that stood between

the divan and the mantelpiece. On the polished surface reposed two empty coffee-cups, and, amid a litter of cigarette boxes, lighters and papers inscribed in Russian character, a pair of man's gloves. He did not doubt that they belonged to Prince Yerlatsky. A growing conviction forced itself on him that he and Wanda had come to the parting of the ways, and that, somehow or other, this man had cast him out. An agony of distress filled him, and his eyes grew misty with tears. Unable to endure the thought, he turned to the window, and, wrenching open the long casement, leaned out into the airless summer night. With the opening of the window that roaring of the city, as of a mighty flame, came to him, surrounding him and hulling him down. His sight became blurred and his brain unsteady. In his disordered imagination he saw himself used by that human bindweed, until, stifled, strangled by the warm clinging tendrils—no longer of any value to her, bled of his vitality and talent, he was cast aside; while she—predatory, cruel, voracious—set forth in search of further prey.

He leaned against the jamb of the window, and his ears were deafened by the sound of the rolling wheels and whir of motors without, so that he did not hear Wanda's light footfall. Startled, and galvanized into sudden consciousness, he turned round abruptly when her clear speech roused him.

"*Allons, mon ami*," she said sarcastically, "then you are in no such great hurry after all to see me."

He perceived that she had come from the inner room and was standing a few paces behind him, clothed, from shoulder to foot, in shot flame colour and gold. The corsage of her gown and the points of her little gilded slippers were encrusted with opalescent and *diamanté* embroidery. The sleeveless garment, cut princess fashion, set off her beautiful figure and exposed a generous expanse of dazzling neck and bosom. Her yellow hair was plaited high in a crown on her head, and, round her neck, she wore a heavy gold necklace of chased and carven gold, set with diamonds and pink topaz, great opals, and pendant pearls. The whole effect of her was of another race and age—barbaric and regal.

To his seeing she looked—despite the splendour of her attire—less lovely and woodland, but more subtly refined.

An intangible change in her, which he could not define, puzzled him. It was as if she had been cleansed of her animality, and that the process had developed in her some faint awakening of the soul she lacked.

He saw, further, that there were dark circles round her blue eyes, and that the lovely mouth drooped at the corners. After her first speaking, she stood in front of him, immobile and silent, her eyes fastened on his.

Moved to tenderness by that indefinable change in her, he held out his arms; but, instead of throwing herself into them, as was her custom, she remained where she was—one slender hand clutching the folds of her shimmering gown.

A lump rose in his throat. He moved a step nearer.

"Wanda—Wanda," he cried hoarsely, as he made a movement to take her in his arms. But she eluded him and, crossing the room, stepped out on to the balcony. The light from within streamed out on to her where she stood, catching the points of sparkling light on her corsage. Her graceful head, above the white arms and neck, was outlined against the darkness beyond.

Hypolite, maddened by her elusiveness, rendered furious by her indifference, followed her out on to the balcony. In the darkness he put his arms round her waist, trying to draw her to him. But he felt her pull away with all her strength, stiffening every muscle.

"Wanda," he said at last, "what possesses you to-night? Why do you resist me? Don't you know I'm longing for you, mad for you, that I've counted the hours—minutes—till I should hold you in my arms again?"

"Let me go," she answered, struggling with him. "Let me wait, I want to think—I want time to think—something has happened."

She tried to escape, but he held her, and she, feeling her struggle ignominious, remained passive, her face turned from him; but, as he held her, he felt no response, the once amorous woman was cold as ice. He knew that his burning touch was horrible to her, and silently, they stood thus for a moment looking out into the night. At last Hypolite—unable to bear the strain of that silence—stepped from the balcony into the room. Deliberately and coolly he took a cigarette from the table beside the divan. Then, moving aside the pair of man's gloves, with elaborate

exhibition of care he picked up the igniter and lit the cigarette. Wanda, who had followed him, watched him as he touched the gloves. Her face grew paler and she drew in her breath with a small gasping sound. Hypolite did not look up, but his hand shook so that the little flame of the igniter quivered almost to extinction. He set it down on the table and turned to her.

"Wanda," he broke out, and the tone of his voice was curt and hard, "I came here to-night, as many times before, expecting the welcome that you have always extended to me. Your manner to me is that of a woman who, in some way, considers herself injured. Our intimacy emboldens me to ask for an explanation. If I am unwelcome to you—you have but to say so. If I have offended you—you owe it to me to tell me in what way I have incurred your anger."

She moved slowly across to the hearth. In her eyes there was weariness, and, with trembling fingers, she pushed back a loop of her heavy yellow hair from her forehead.

"~~Now~~ you an explanation," she said. "Perhaps it would be better that I should give it to you at once. You have never pretended to care for me deeply. I have known all the while that I had but attracted your passing fancy. Your attitude of mind towards me is the same as my attitude of mind has, hitherto, been towards men."

"Hitherto?" he asked.

"Hitherto," she answered calmly, inhaling the smoke from her cigarette, and gaining confidence as she continued, "with, perhaps, one exception."

"Ah!" he exclaimed. His voice strangled in his throat—looking at her as she stood there, lovely, desirable, ten thousand times more provoking in her wayward indifference than she had been in her amatory abandon.

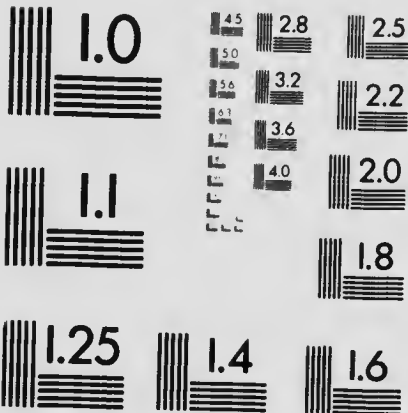
Wanda leaned her elbows on the mantelpiece, daintily turning one hand, she flicked the cigarette ash into a silver tray. Posing the point of one foot on the rail of the grate, she twisted her body sideways and looked him full in the face. Her glance was innocent of coquetry or invitation.

Gaston was furious and humiliated. He recognized that she was seeking to get rid of him, and it wounded his self-esteem shrewdly that it should be Wanda, and not himself, who desired severance. Despite the fact that he had so



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often meditated breaking from this entanglement, the moment she seemed anxious he should go, he clung to her with the jealous anger of a man who suspects that he has been supplanted.

"Hypolite," she demanded, deliberately, looking down at her cigarette as she spoke, "can you honestly declare that there was anything idealistic in your love for me? Was not your attitude that of a man who merely wished to gratify his passion? Shall I tell you that never once in our relation have I felt you think of me. It was always yourself, your art, your gratification—never my happiness, that you considered. Therefore"—she paused again—"I considered myself justified in using you as you used me."

Gaston was silent for a moment. He began to be profoundly interested in this new Wanda, though she humiliated him by her words. Inwardly, he knew that she spoke the truth concerning him. His attitude towards her had been wholly selfish, wholly materialist.

"Wanda," he answered, a little humbly, "many times I have wanted to find in you something besides passion; but as yet I have not succeeded in doing so. The fault therefore was not wholly mine."

"I find no fault," she answered, moving restlessly, as if the conversation irritated her, and she, too, was nervous and unstrung. "I merely repeat that, in recognizing the character of your interest in me, I considered myself justified in adopting a like attitude to you."

"You speak with cold-blooded cynicism," he returned bitterly. "What if I had offered you a more ideal love?"

"I should have told you that, in that direction, I had nothing to give."

"That is what I have always believed," he exclaimed brutally.

"There is the reason I could never have given it to you," she said, quick anger filling her. "Out of your own mouth you are condemned. Your outlook towards women is grossly material. I have met men of your kind before. You care nothing for our heart or intellect so long as you can satisfy your desire. All the idealism you possess, you lock up, keeping it religiously for that part of your life in which women have no entrance. It is evil, I tell you, you are utterly heartless; full well do you deserve to be paid back

in your own coin. I have no pity for you. You suffer only in your self-adoration, caring not one jot what may become of your cast-off loves. This time you, yourself, are caught. The hunter is trapped in his own snare! He tastes, for once, the joys of sport from the point of view of the hunted. And prettily he takes it," she added, taunting him. "It is charming, is it not, to be used for the purpose of another?—And, when you are no longer needed, to be cast off—to be told as I tell you—the play is ended."

"Be silent," Hypolite cried angrily. "You cannot cast me off, for I never belonged to you. But I tell you that I do not leave this room until you either give me reasonable explanation of your conduct, or, whether you will or not, you satisfy the passion at which you scoff."

Taking both her wrists in one of his hands, he held her round the shoulders with the other arm, pressing her to him with his whole force. She could feel his burning breath on her cheek, and fever in the clasp of his hand.

"Let me go," she panted. "Coward, you may gain what you want by brute strength, but not till I have resisted you to the uttermost of my power."

"Answer," he cried again in fury. "For whom are you deserting me—for it comes to that—what new lover has taken your fancy?"

The fierce grip was beginning to tell on her, and, fainting almost, she drooped against his shoulder, her head hanging back.

"Let me go," she whispered weakly, "let me go, lest I give way."

Hypolite, his paroxysm of rage passing, flung her from him. She fell, half lying, half sitting, on to the divan. As she crouched there, her breath coming in great gasps, and tears running down her cheeks, she appeared to him an object for contempt rather than fury.

"Listen then, Hypolite," she said, "you shall have your explanation. As to whether it will be palatable to you I am indifferent." She paused a moment. "You remember my cousin, Prince Yerlatsky—you saw him here one day?"

Gaston nodded. He stood, his two hands clasping the carved back of a chair. His face was deathly pale, and there were blue shadows about his mouth. He did not look

at her, but fixed his eyes on the mirror, over the mantel-piece, from which his own ravaged face stared back at him. It seemed to him that his soul had awakened from some creeping horror of madness and disease. At first he listened to Wanda's voice—low-pitched and thick with tears—as if he hardly understood her meaning, then as her story continued, anger spurred him to consciousness and his vitality flared up.

Wanda continued hurriedly: "He had come here to ask me to marry him—to give up the stage and to go and live with him at K——,—where he is governor. I love him—I have always loved him—but I loved my gay life, my art, better. He is proud, arrogant, a great man in Russia, but he wished—despite the fact that I have forsworn the ways of my noble forefathers and lived in the world of art, as it seemed good to me—Anton Yerlatsky wished to give me his name, and the splendid position that would be his wife's. All this, if I would consent to absolute exile from my old life and associations. But I could not give up the stage and my wandering existence—the amusement of my many lovers. You see I do not spare my reputation. I own that many men have loved me, and I have not been indifferent to them. But for none of them have I cared as I cared for him—for Yerlatsky. These others have never been master to me. Rather have they been my slaves—my favourites for a while. But Yerlatsky," she paused, "we—we were cousins, and, as boy and girl together, we roamed the flower-starred steppe. In winter we would go sleighing through the snowy woods. Yerlatsky was a beautiful boy. Many times, in the forest, he has kissed me, telling me that when we grew older we would marry. But then came the discovery of my voice. My father died—leaving me all his property—and I went to Paris to study. Yerlatsky remained at K——, where he looked after my affairs for me. I would have none of his love, but cared for nothing but my freedom. Only—he has waited, waited, and persistently he has asked me, persistently he has held out to me the allure-ment of his tremendous love. He is not like you—selfish—but loves as only the strong man loves——"

"You will kindly leave me out of the story," Gaston broke out harshly.

"Not entirely," she answered, "you play a small, though

a very small, part in my history, therefore I must make transitory mention of you."

"Go on," he commanded. "If you have any feeling in you, get forward, for you torture me."

"Then do not delay me with interruptions," she said coldly, "nor confuse me with hysterical comment. I repeat, Yerlatsky is strong, so strong that I fear him. When I sent him away I knew that, though I banished him, his influence remained. It disconcerted me to realize how much I cared for him. I knew that if I did not send him away he would, with his terrible quiet strength, break down all barriers. I began to think of him, to dream of that strength, to love him, to long for him, yet I knew that he would never satisfy my love for him unless I became his wife—and that meant exile, and Yerlatsky—only and eternally. In my desperation, to escape from my love for him, I turned to you as an outlet—as a makeshift to occupy my mind!"

A sharp exclamation escaped Hypolite's lips, but she continued pitilessly.

"When you kissed me, I tried to think it was Yerlatsky. When you held me in your arms I shut my eyes and dreamed that it was he who embraced me. You unwittingly acted proxy for him. It was never you to whom I gave myself, but Yerlatsky. In dreaming of him, my longing for him became intolerable and I could not endure the position. I began to awaken to the fact that I hated you, because you stood in his place. Last week I telegraphed to him to come to me, and he came straightway, without question. I told him everything. He loves me and I am going to marry him." Her head sank back on the cushions.

Hypolite took his hands from the chair; he came up to her raging.

"By God, Wanda," he burst out, almost inarticulate with anger, "you mean to tell me that every time I lay in your arms you were thinking of another man? By hell, if you are telling me the truth, I have a mind to kill you."

"Kill me," she answered, sitting up and staring at him, "I freely own that I never loved you—it was just that, vicariously, you satisfied my passion for him."

A word of coarse import escaped Gaston. His panting breath strangled in his throat; seizing her by the shoulders

he forced her back on to the couch, holding her down. She stared up at him, her blue eyes wide and unflinching. They could hear the labour of each other's breath.

"I hate you," she cried. "Brute that you are. Animal—what do you care so long as the beast in you is satisfied. Bah! do you think you are the man to awake a *grande passion* in a woman of my calibre. No—you can go—leave me, a slave whom I have grown tired of, a toy that I have broken—go to make room for the coming of a man, a man, do you hear, who could take you in his two hands and break you."

Hypolite did not answer; only he stared at her with bloodshot eyes, stared at the great snake of plaited yellow hair that had broken loose and hung in limp disorder over the green cushions; stared at the red lips drawn back over her teeth, as some wild creature that desires to bite.

The panting of her breath caused her chest to rise and fall. The beautiful bosom, with its little valley in the centre, showed exquisitely beneath the shimmering gown. He felt madness seize him. No longer did he desire her. She had wounded him to the quick, tearing at his live heart till his agony became unendurable. The humiliation of her having used him in the manner she admitted, outraged his sense of decency and angered him to the point of delirium. His brain seemed to give almost with a snap, and to become a thing apart from him, a blank space in which whirled and reiterated one idea. The primitive brutality of man awakened in him—the brutality that kills, lest another should take possession. To kill, to kill this creature who outraged him, and who challenged his supremacy as man.

He would crush the beautiful thing that lay there, till the panting breath choked in the gullet, and the tongue was forced between those white teeth—till the blue eyes should be first bloodshot, then glazed in death. For a moment he saw red, and Wanda, looking up at him, knew what was passing through his mind. To her the terror and horror of murder looked back at her from his ravaged face. The sweat broke out on her forehead, still she did not take her eyes from his, she knew that he was very near to madness; it was as if she gazed into the eyes of some wild animal in whom blood-lust dominated. She feared that if she took away her glance the last link with humanity in him would

be gone and he be left beast-like—soulless—she utterly at his mercy, that he would tear the life from her quivering flesh, sending her out into the darkness to face eternity.

Hypolite—mad at that moment—was brought to sanity by the sight of the sweat pouring down her face. Her agony of mind communicated itself to him. Vaguely his brain sought again the thread of human living, recalled by those drops of moisture streaming over her face. He noticed that her mouth was quivering, and that patches of scarlet stained and mottled her clear skin. With a great sigh, shuddering from head to foot, he drew himself up, releasing her. His hands dropped to his sides, he was conscious that his head throbbed violently. Alternately he shivered and burned with fever. His limbs ached, and he had much ado to stagger to the door, holding on to the furniture, and groping like one hideously drunk. For a moment he could not find the handle. This disappointed and distressed him inordinately, so that he began to sob like a child. At last his fumbling fingers touched the handle and he turned it. Pulling open the door he looked back at Wanda. She was lying where he had left her—her face bloodless, her eyes half closed, in a dead faint.

Staggering down the passage to the lift he pressed his finger against the bell and leant against the iron netting which masked the well. He heard dimly the sound of the lift as it started. When the gate opened he stumbled in. He demanded a taxi, and swaying, lurching, half carried to the door by the lift-man, he gave the name of his hotel, leaving the *personnel* of the staff under the impression that the famous tenor had, for once, exceeded a normal allowance of strong drink.

When the cab reached the Hotel R—, it was found that Gaston had lost consciousness. The faithful Andrea, summoned to his assistance, cried out instantly for a doctor.

Through the night, watched by an eminent physician and his faithful servant, the poor, fevered body of the young man tossed restlessly. At intervals his cracked and blackened lips poured forth a stream of hurried, disconnected, muttered speech. Again and again, with febrile movement of his hands, he wrestled with that human bindweed. But the entwining tendrils, hideous, choking, stifling, held him like the tentacles of some monster octopus. In his fevered imagination he

wrenched at them, and the torn fragments bled, dripping red over him. But faster and more fast, new tendrils clung to him, till, exhausted with the struggle, he sank away into the vague, floating out into a mist of terror, while the waxen flowers—human-petaled—bent over him, nodding derisively, swaying voluptuously, evil-scented, with the foul stench of blood—the blood of Wanda, whom he had desired to kill, and whose laughing face looked out, mocking—ever living—triumphant—from the heart of those evil blossoms.

BOOK V

IDEALISM

CHAPTER I

IN the late September days Paris once more awoke after her summer sleep. The great shops filled their windows with new and costly autumn and winter fashions. The dusty trees, in the Champs Elysées, began to shed their dry leaves with a little harsh whispering rattle. A thin cold wind drew from the east—exciting, yet full of strange promise of some infinitely sad, yet infinitely beautiful, intellectual enjoyment. For autumn, with her lovely yearning solicitation, holds no brief for the materialist, rather does she call to the Eternal Soul, waking the intellect from its sluggish sweetness of spring longing and summer indolence, with delicate insinuation of forgotten idealism and promise; bracing for the fierce virility of winter, when man walks alone and cleanly in the storm winds that scour the bleak earth.

At the end of the summer term Marguérite Périnot carried Eugénie off to Acquarelle, so that she might continue her lessons during the vacation. Eugénie had demurred at first, but Victorine, on being consulted, consented apathetically. So Marguérite, determined to try whether a long spell of her native air would not benefit Madame Rouston's failing health, had taken her favourite pupil with her as hostage of Art. At Acquarelle Eugénie, running wild in the woodland and fresh country air, basked in the parching heat of the August sun. The Forest of Crépuscule from its lack of water is, to the ordinary visitor, a thing to be avoided during the hot months. To Marguérite and Eugénie, in whose veins the warm blood of the Midi flowed, that fierce sun had no terror. The three women had established themselves as guests at La Maison Grise, and Marguérite, having hired a

piano, spent long hours in giving her young pupil the full benefit of her knowledge.

All day long, when she was not learning, Eugénie roamed the forest, over the soft sand, beneath the singing fir trees, which, as they swayed in the hot wind sent forth their aromatic odours like incense to the blazing sunlight. She would lie on the ground, looking up at their waving, grey-green branches against the cloudless sky, and listen to the call of their mysterious voices, faintly, delicately, elusively, holding out to her once more—as in the shadowed church—those alluring promises of coming happiness. That wind in the tree-tops, sighing and hushing its song of eternal joy and eternal sorrow, presented pictures to her imagination. Sometimes she saw them as the waves of some sparkling, smiling, summer ocean, breaking azure blue and foaming upon the golden sands of tropic island. Sometimes gloomy, sobbing, moaning, like the grey, sad waves of winter—foam-flecked and angry, washing against cruel black rocks, and tossing on their crested heads sea-wrack of dead mariners, whose pale, battered faces stared up, with unseeing eyes, at the stormy sky.

Visions she saw of exquisite happiness and heart-broken sorrow. The drama of living touched her with firm, intrusive fingers. Little clinging childish hands; wistful age-knotted hands, trembling, and holding on to life by memories; passionate hands with caress that stirred her deeply, plucked at her till, alone in the forest, she would cover her face, unable to understand the dawning of emotion and awakening of the glamour of life.

With the first days of September a thin mist began to hang in the heads of the fir trees. To Eugénie's seeing this pale, delicate veil which shrouded them in the early morning, and clung to them when night fell on the forest, held, in delicious enchantment, the woods and plain. That mist became to her a symbol of the future. Penetrated by half-formulated longing, she would climb the rock-crowned hills and take her stand on the summit staring out into the distance. Beyond the mist-curtained horizon lay Paris—Paris which held for her the heart of coming life. Listening, she heard at intervals, intermingling with those spirit callings, the sharp clear sound of church bells or the scream of the road train. And then, northward again, the long shrill whistle

marking the thundering of the great express along the highway from the south. Save for these distant echoes of civilization, the peaceful beauty of the woods was undisturbed.

But, with the coming of autumn, Eugénie had begun to feel the spiritual restlessness that—ghost-like—treads with whispering footsteps on the skirts of summer. She was possessed by an exquisite fear; and, daily, the plucking of those spirit hands grew more insistent, so that at times when alone in the woodland she would run home, terror-stricken.

When the day for her own and Madame Périntot's departure arrived she was infinitely glad, since no longer would she stand in this borderland of clamouring thought, but step forward, once more, along the pathway of her fate. For, on the return to Paris it was Marguérite's intention that she should make her first venture into stage experience, and play the two operas—*Faust* and *Cavalleria*—of which she had so assiduously studied the technique.

Thus was Eugénie, returning with Madame Périntot to Paris, held silent by high excitement as the taxi traversed the quays by the river from the Gare de Lyons. It seemed to her, as she breathed the still sharp air, that she journeyed into the mysterious country behind the veil. Silently her thought fled abroad over immensities of space peopled with the creatures of her imagination. Troupes of ghostly singers, who had gone before her, held out their hands to her, smiling, inviting her to sing her way into the brotherhood of Art. Mighty musicians and composers watched her with kindly eyes, bidding her interpret their works and make the children of their genius live again for the teaching and uplifting of new generations.

All these, urgent, persistent, floating far away into the vista of things ancient and traditional, called her, till the echo of their voices rose like a vast chorus from Eternity, to which the roar of living Paris gave answer, as some strident and magnificent brass orchestra which acts accompanist to the voice of a singer. As Eugénie entered the more crowded quarters of Paris, the fierceness of the mighty brass rose and rose till the spirit voices of that immortal choir were drowned, floating into ether, back to the eternity from which they had immersed to greet the young creature who belonged to their brotherhood.

Madame Périntot, too, was touched with the mystic influences of autumn. But, since the drama of living for her lay not in the future, the wistfulness of the past looked over her shoulder, filling her with tender memories and thoughts of her dead husband and vanishing youth. Still young enough to feel the sorrow of diminished vitality, she strove valiantly to banish those pale ghosts of bereavement and deprivation by fixing her mind, with determination, on the career of the young girl who was becoming daily more dear to her.

For Eugénie, after three months' daily association with Madame Périntot, had developed astonishingly. Her voice had grown in quality and suppleness. During the vacation she commenced studying the rôle of Marguérite in *Faust*; and, with her admirable ear and extreme diligence, succeeded in mastering the greater part of it with remarkable facility. Madame Périntot was enchanted by her pupil's quickness. She began to build castles in the air of which the brilliant gifts of the young singer formed always the foundation.

All through the summer term Eugénie, in addition to her daily singing lesson, had been a silent student in the opera class; watching, with rapt attention, detailed analysis of character—as set forth by Madame Périntot and her pupils.

Daily the young girl grew dearer and more interesting to the older woman, till her position in the little household of the Rue des Masques became more that of daughter than pupil. Victorine, out all day at Les Halles, acquiesced sullenly in all that Madame Périntot desired. The latter had never seen her since the day of their first interview; and Eugénie, occupied with her work, absorbed in the daily learning of new things, and the development of her artistic ability, was unaware of the old woman's brooding melancholy; unaware, too, of the fierce jealousy of her art which was deepening in Victorine's brain.

Life seemed very beautiful to the young artist; and, at this time, for her, the only rift within the lute lay in a certain regret that, from the day of Madame Périntot's coming, she had never seen the musician of the blue eyes again. Those few moments of intimate conversation had profoundly affected her. So strange and fantastic had been his speech that, in her imagination, she endowed him with a spiritual personality. She was not at all sure that he was a real person; but believed him rather a being from the land of Art, come as

an emissary to her, who, having delivered his message, dissolved into thin air. And yet—he had told her that they would meet again.

Thus, with dreams ideal, and visions fantastic, her imagination ran riot in the long hours of summer glory; while, with the widening of her mind, the human loveliness of her healthy, well-formed young body increased. It followed that, on the return to Paris, a very beautiful and attractive maid sat beside Madame Périntot in the jolting taxi, and with sombre eyes, at the passing pageant of the streets.

On arriving at the Rue des Masques Eugénie slipped from the car, and, pulling out the bag containing all her small possessions, and the little trousseau which Marguérite had given her, put it down on the pavement beside her, while the *concierge* hurried out and took charge of Madame Périntot's baggage.

"I will say good-bye now, dear madame," said the young girl, as she embraced Marguérite. "I had better go straight home."

"Will you not come in, dear child?" Marguérite inquired. Eugénie shook her head.

"No, I shall be with you by nine to-morrow morning."

So saying, she picked up the bag and moved away down the street. Crossing the road, she turned to the boulevard and mingled with the crowd. She hurried past the stalls outside the big stores, and made her way to the tramway station. On the way her eyes dwelt affectionately on familiar details of traffic—great motor-carts, hurrying taxis, little horse carriages, hand carts, pedestrians, lines of workmen, flashed past in the dying sunset.

The sun was low on the horizon and the street lamps had not yet been lit. As she descended at the corner of the Boulevard des Choses Perdues and entered the Place des Loups the last flare of the sunset was extinguished. A dimness hung over the Place, and when she passed in under the *porte cochère* a sense of loneliness invaded her. The courtyard seemed darker and the cracked doorway more dilapidated than before. Pausing, she could hear the drip, drip of the leaking tap in the corner.

She felt a great distaste for this return to the rough surroundings of her old life, after six weeks of comparative luxury.

Slowly she mounted the creaking wooden stairs. Passing the doorways to her and her aunt's tenement, she could hear the wailing of their neighbour, Madame Raiste's sickly children, and the woman's peevish, bickering tones as she scolded them fretfully. She turned the handle of her own door—it was locked. Victorine had not returned. Doubtless she had left the key with Madame Raiste. Eugénie retraced her steps and knocked at the latter's door. It was opened by Madame Raiste, slatternly and ill-tempered, with dirty face and loose-lipped mouth, displaying uneven, decayed teeth, holding in her arms a wailing, pallid baby of two months old. The front of her black bodice was unfastened, displaying a full, sagging breast. The baby nuzzled to her, at intervals, searching fretfully for nourishment. The interior of the room looked hideous to the young girl as she surveyed its disorder of dirty children, half-dried washing, and unscoured pots and pans.

"Pardon," she said, "but I have just returned from the country. Aunt Victorine has not come back yet—may I leave my bag with you? I have to go out again."

The woman hushed the wailing infant, pressing its open mouth against her bosom and rocking it to and fro.

"Leave it—and welcome," she said. "Only, step inside and put it on the dresser, out of the way of the children. They will get messing it up if you leave it on the ground. Mind there"—she added, as, with her foot, she pushed away a baby that crawled on the dirty floor.

Eugénie did as she was requested. Then she retreated down the staircase. As she entered the gloomy courtyard she heard the wail of the infant, gradually dying away. The small human creature's cry troubled her. Unsavoury though it looked, she would have liked to take it in her arms and soothe the poor little thing. She passed out into the Place, and, walking with quick steps, began to mount the hill to Montmartre. Parisian born, child of the people, she took her way fearlessly through the roughest quarters, climbing steep narrow streets until she reached the plateau on which stands the church of the Sacré Cœur.

The sun had sunk now below the horizon. Only a rosy afterglow showed in the western sky, and, where the glory faded, streaks of pale green and amber. Below—as in a cup—lay the city, and, from out the greyness beneath her, a

thousand lights began to twinkle, while, as the distance deepened to purple, and from purple to velvet black, above, in the vault of the heaven, hung a great golden moon. A myriad stars, like holes piercing the opacity, let through the glitter of some infinite brightness beyond.

Eugénie stood silent, a slender figure on the empty plateau. Flanking her, upon the hill summit, the great white ghost-like building of the *Sacré Cœur* glimmered in the moonlight. From below, in the blackness, came the murmur of voices, passing footsteps, the roll of wheels, and the far off confusion of sound rising from the great thoroughfares. Then, beating through the dull murmur, came the crashing brazen voice of a military band, followed by a roll of drums—throbbing and dying away in the distance.

How long she stood there gazing into space, listening to the beating heart of Paris, dreaming with the fantastic idealism of her half-awakened genius, Eugénie did not know; but her hands, resting on the stone wall in front of her, grew cold and she shivered in her thin summer gown.

Swiftly she turned, and, looking up at the great white ghost church behind her, crossed herself, silently paying homage to the Presence which for ever dwells within for the adoration and comfort of the faithful. Then, kneeling down, she bowed her head and, clasping her hands over her bosom, whispered:

"Thanks to Thee, oh God of Art, for the gift that Thou hast given me."

Rising, she plunged into the blackness of the precipitous path, which leads, by a short cut, from the plateau to the streets.

CHAPTER II

EUGÉNIE reached the *Place des Loups*, warm now and bright-eyed from her walk. She tried the door—it yielded to her touch.

Victorine Dupont was standing by the window. Her coarse hands rested on her hips. She faced round towards the door at the sound of footsteps. Expectantly she stared, with haggard eyes—black-ringed, bloodshot, and troubled—at the young girl's pretty simple muslin dress and smart

little hat, with its bunch of cherries dangling from the brim. Her face hardened as she saw that Eugénie had been fitted out with new clothes since she left Paris, and that even her shoes were of better quality than the ones she had worn when she last saw her. This last detail angered her, so that she made no attempt to greet her niece when the latter advanced towards her, though, passively, she permitted Eugénie to kiss her cheek.

"You are back then, Aunt Victorine?" Eugénie said.

Physical contact with her aunt, as she kissed her, filled her with distaste. For, at close quarters with the gross person of Victorine, she became aware of the disagreeable odour of unwashed flesh. She remembered Marguérite's kiss and the sweet scent of her skin.

"Well, my girl?" Victorine said at last, with her harsh, guttural accent. "You have come back dressed in fine feathers. How have you earned them?"

Again Eugénie was conscious of an overwhelming distaste for Victorine's coarse speech and person. The narrow confines of the little room seemed to her more than ever displeasing. Then she whipped herself mentally. For had not this poor little room been her home from babyhood? And was not Victorine the one person who had cared for her when her mother died? Shame filled her that she should permit herself to criticize the woman who had done so much for her and who was her mother's sister. She answered gently:

"Madame Périnot bought me a few clothes. It was natural she should wish me to look nice when I was staying with her relations."

Victorine grunted.

"Your clothes were good enough for me. For my part I have more pride than to wear what I cannot pay for."

Eugénie flushed crimson. She was hurt by her aunt's roughness, but again she tried a policy of conciliation.

"You do not look well, Aunt Victorine," she said. "It is time I came home to help you."

"Time indeed," the other grumbled, sitting down heavily on the wooden chair. Setting her broad feet apart, she stooped, unlaced her boots, kicking them off on to the floor. Then she thrust her feet into an old pair of list slippers, frayed and torn at the toes. She got up, stretching

herself and heaving a sigh, and, rolling her sleeves back, walked over to the sink, from whence she brought a bowl of water. Taking some garlic from her basket she threw it into the water, then plunged her hands into the bowl, and began to strip off the outer leaves of the cloves.

Eugénie, looking at those powerful arms and hands, saw they were by no means clean. Distaste again overcame her—she could not eat what had been touched by those hands. She got up and rolled back her own light sleeves.

"Let me do it, Aunt Victorine," she said hastily.

"Well," the other answered ungraciously, "there is no reason why you should not. Get your check apron from behind the door—I washed it myself yesterday—I thought you had grown too fine a lady to do your own work now."

She shook the drops of moisture from her fingers, and rubbed her palms on her skirt, while Eugénie, her muslin finery hidden beneath the check apron, took a knife and cut the garlic.

Victorine sat down again heavily, hunching her shoulders and sinking her body together. Eugénie glanced at her anxiously. She saw that the older woman's aspect was changed. Her eyes had a queer, half cunning look, while, beneath them, the fat sagged in purple pouches. Her flesh hung loosely on her face, as if the sleepless nights, spoken of by Madame Raiste, had told on her vigorous health. Above the collar of her gown, her thick neck rose coarse and red. As she sat with her hands planted on her knees she continued to open and shut her mouth with the action of a dog snapping at a fly, while at intervals she clasped and unclasped her hands convulsively. These purposeless and unpleasant movements began to beat upon the girl's nerves, so that she attempted conversation again, in the hope of arresting that intermittent action of the jaw.

"Have you anything for supper, Aunt Victorine?" she demanded, as she hung up the salad to drain in a wire basket over the sink, and turned to the table to mix the oil and vinegar.

Victorine looked at her vaguely. She put up her hand to her forehead.

"Supper?" she asked—"Supper?—Yes—oh, yes—you will find a piece of ray-fish at the bottom of the basket."

She got up slowly, still with her hand to her forehead, and

crossing to her bedroom, went in and shut the door. Eugénie heard her shoot the bolt. This fact astonished her, as she had never known her aunt to lock the door of her bedroom. She absorbed herself, however, in the work in hand, though the little squalid realities of her old life chafed her. She wanted to float away again into that dream of alluring sweetness, and touch the eternities once more.

But the very unsavoury necessity of cleansing and washing the fish recalled her from visions. She sighed as she lit the gas-ring and put the fish in the pan with some fresh oil. She cleansed the litter of salad from the table, and, covering the bare surface with a check cloth, set on it one or two knives and forks, thick plates and glasses, a long roll of bread, some butter, and the salad. Having finished these preparations she took a bottle of *vin ordinaire* from a cupboard in the wall and filled a jug with fresh water. Putting them on the table she waited for a moment, then crossed the room and tapped lightly on Victorine's door.

"Supper is ready, Aunt Victorine," she called.

Returnin' to the gas-ring, she took the well-browned fish from the pan, and placed it in a dish on the table.

The door of the inner room opened and Victorine came for her. She had loosened her collar and the flesh of her red neck protruded from the front of it. Sitting down, she divided the fish into two portions and handed one plate to her niece.

Eugénie watched her furtively. Her uneasiness increased, for she received a painful impression. During her absence all Victorine's latent brutality—which, hitherto, she had kept as her armour for Les Halles—had developed. Her mind—befogged by brooding and want of sleep—refused to concentrate; therefore, all the restraint she formerly put upon herself in the presence of her niece had been swept away. For the first time the young girl saw her, undisguised, in her habit as she lived—the coarse, undisciplined child of the people. And this utter absence of refinement shocked Eugénie the more because she came straight from Madame Périntot, whose civilization was very complete. She felt angry with herself, even while she criticized her aunt, but the contrast with her late companion was crude to the point of grotesqueness. The sight of Victorine as she sat opposite, tearing at her food with almost animal avidity, nauseated

her. Victorine ate the fish with her knife, shovelling it into her wide mouth with the point, and filling her cheeks with great pieces of bread. Vainly Eugénie strove to eat, but she was unable to do so.

The elder woman, looking up, caught the girl's expression of disgust. She stuck her knife and fork up on end and stared brutishly at her.

"What is the matter?" she demanded fiercely. "What are you gaping at me for? I don't eat to your fancy, I suppose—after the mincing ways of your fine friends. You had better have stayed where you were than come back to despise your aunt, without whose care you'd have been brought up by the State."

Eugénie pushed away her plate and her eyes filled with tears.

"I don't despise you, Aunt Victorine," she answered slowly. "But you do not seem glad to see me. You ask me nothing of my work. Do you not care that I am supposed to have one of the most beautiful voices that my teacher has ever heard? Why do you not believe—as I believe—that God has given it to me so that I may cry forth to the world, in His honour, the glory and beauty of Art. Why do you make out that there is evil in my beautiful gift? I tell you that, as an artist, I can be as clean of mind and body—and cleaner—than any woman in Les Halles." As she spoke her sombre eyes lit up and her red mouth, set in the pale ivory of her face, trembled. She looked across at the older woman with a fire of enthusiasm which cowed her. Victorine turned away her head and rose from the table.

"See to it," she said harshly, as she began to clear away the plates and dishes. "See to it that you keep your word true. As I told you before—you're young, and you don't know where temptation lies."

Sullenly she prepared to wash the dishes and plates. Then, as Eugénie, taking a cloth, wiped them for her, she turned with a furtive, cunning glance to her and asked almost coaxingly.

"And what part of you contains this wonderful voice?"

Eugénie, enchanted that her aunt should show any interest in her singing, replied by explaining, as well as she could, the mechanism of the vocal chords and larynx.

"Then all your singing comes from little bits of chords fixed inside!" Victorine commented. "What would happen if you were to snap them?"

"Don't!" cried the young girl, shuddering. "If they were to break I should sing no more. I should be dumb."

She put down the cloth and clasped her hands protectingly round the column of her throat.

Victorine laughed, and again she put up her hand to her forehead.

"If you could sing no more, you would have to work like other people," she said grimly. "And no more fine friends and fine clothes."

She turned her back and slowly wiped her hands upon the roller towel.

At her words Eugénie was filled with fear. The possibility of losing her voice had never occurred to her. She felt bitter resentment at this new proof of lack of sympathy. The momentary pleasure caused her by Victorine's interest was lost, and the gulf between the two widened. That her aunt should laugh at such a terrible thing horrified her. It showed a degree of callous indifference which wounded her deeply. With trembling hands she began to tidy the room and set the table for their early breakfast. At last, her nerves on edge, she said that she was tired and would go to bed.

Victorine nodded assent and bade her good-night curtly. By tacit consent they did not offer to kiss each other: and Eugénie, with a sigh of relief, retired to her room. A growing sense of uneasiness prompted her to lock the door. She began to take down her hair; but remembered that she had not yet retrieved her luggage from Madame Raiste. Rolling up her hair again and turning the key she passed into the outer room; as she did so she saw that her aunt was standing inside her bedroom in front of the door. She stared at Eugénie without speaking. In her hand she held a carving knife, which was half hidden in her apron. Her lips were drawn back from her teeth. With quick impulse the girl spoke:

"Aunt Victorine, can I do anything for you? I am going to get my bag, which I left with Madame Raiste. I came home early and, not finding you, went out again for a walk."

"Where did you go?" This from Victorine in guttural tones.

"Where? To Montmartre. To the Sacré Cœur."

Victorine grunted, and the carving knife fell out of her hand with a clatter on to the floor. With her foot she pushed it beneath the bed.

"I knew you'd been out," she said. "I saw Madame Raiste, when I came in, and she told me."

She laughed harshly and mirthlessly. Then she drew the door to and shot the bolt.

Eugénie went out on to the passage. Fear filled her again. She knocked at her neighbour's door hastily and demanded her bag. Taking possession of it she went back into her room. Victorine had disappeared, her door was shut. Slowly Eugénie undressed and got into bed.

Sleep came to her soon, but, in the night, she awoke. A strange and unaccustomed terror gripped her by the throat. She sat up in the darkness listening, her eyes strained—watching for some movement. She thought she could hear someone passing to and fro in the kitchen—pausing at regular intervals outside her door.

Horror penetrated her brain. She became convinced that some fierce nocturnal beast crouched there in the darkness, with intent to spring upon her and tear her limb from limb. Thankfully she remembered that she had locked the door. She lay trembling. Once it seemed to her that she heard the sharpening of a knife against steel.

Towards morning she fell into troubled slumber; but in her dreams terror still haunted her along with the sound of that sharpening knife.

CHAPTER III

ONE fine October afternoon, towards the end of the month, Gaston Hypolite and Camille Drouot sat smoking after luncheon in the former's well-appointed dining room. The remains of an excellent *déjeuner* were still on the table, though the hour was drawing on to late afternoon; but, so absorbed were the two men in conversation, that, despite tentative efforts on the part of Andrea to dislodge them, they remained seated—shrouded in smoke.

Drouot, a big cigar in his mouth, leaned back. Turning sideways, he regarded his friend with kindly and affectionate gaze. Gaston, both arms on the table and cigarette in mouth, rested his chin on his hands. His expression was that of a penitent child.

"You see, *mon vieux*," he was saying, "it is like this. I have lost heart. I no longer desire to excel. My late performance in London"—he made a little gesture of displeasure—"my unhappy experience, has depressed me. I have no faith in myself."

Heruffled up his hair and looked mournfully at Drouot; then, with a quick movement of his wrist, dropped his cigarette into his finger-bowl, where, fizzing slightly, it was extinguished. With two fingers he extracted it, and, holding up the squashy little object, dangled it in front of Drouot, smiling deprecatingly.

"I am like that," he said; "limp—played out—all my fire gone—the reason of my existence put out."

"If that is so," Drouot murmured grimly, "then it is a pity that I took a long and uncomfortable journey in the hopes of prolonging your life."

Gaston shook himself.

"You regret it?" he inquired, letting his cigarette fall back into the finger-bowl.

"No," Drouot answered shortly, "because I believe that you will come to your senses in time."

Hypocrite's expression was one of offence.

"Look here, my dear fellow," Drouot said quietly. "For the last month I have neglected my work, and shoved the whole of my business aside to dance attendance on you—and, my work, you know, is a pretty big thing in my life. I've not touched a tube of paint this six weeks; and there are three of the finest pictures I've ever conceived shouting to be painted—yet I've let them lie fallow. They'll have to wait now till the spring salon—the autumn shows will be drawn blank as far as I'm concerned. My name will be conspicuous by its absence—and why?—Because I cared enough to run across the Continent and act sick nurse to my old playfellow—because, having a pretty considerable admiration for him as an artist, and knowing he was in trouble, I wanted to help him if I could."

Gaston covered his eyes. He laid his head down on his hands and his shoulders shook.

Drouot swallowed, but he continued without moving :

" And all the thanks I get, when I have sweated away at bringing him back to health, is to find I have wasted six good weeks on an hysterical weakling who hasn't the strength of mind to turn over a new leaf."

Gaston looked up. There were tears on his face and his lips shook.

" By God, Drouot," he said, " I did not know you could be such a brute." A great sob shook him. " You don't understand," he went on. " It wasn't overwork. It wasn't that I'd been living hard. It was just that my ideals had gone overboard. Everything, *everything*—had gone wrong—and I can't get back again."

He stopped and again Drouot swallowed.

" Well," he said, " why haven't you the strength of mind to start afresh. If I spoil a canvas, do you suppose I believe the world come to an end ? No—I burn it and try another. Why in the name of Heaven don't you burn that very untidy canvas, that lurid page in your own life ? Tear it out, *mon petit*. There's a blank space ahead—yours to make or spoil."

Gaston looked at him desperately.

" You don't understand, *mon vieux*. There—there was a woman."

Drouot looked away.

" Precisely," he said ; " that was why I came."

Gaston turned white.

" How did you know ? " he muttered.

Drouot took out an ancient pocketbook, and, searching among its contents, extracted some slips of printed paper. He handed them to Gaston. The latter's eyes were blurred again as he read.

" ILLNESS OF A FAMOUS TENOR.

" M. Gaston Hypolite, the famous Parisian tenor, who has been making such a success in London this season, was unable to fulfil the last night of his engagement at the Opera. It is understood, from information received from his business manager, that the gifted artist is suffering from a severe nervous breakdown and fever. Much sympathy will be felt for him by his numerous friends and admirers.

"Another item of interest in the musical world—though of happier import—is the news of the engagement of Mademoiselle Wanda Panowska, the famous Russian singer who has so often sung at the 'Comique.' Rumour has lately linked her name with that of the famous tenor—whose illness we deplore—so that her engagement to Prince Yerlatsky is a surprise to many. It is understood that she will leave the stage and settle at K——, where her future husband is governor, and where Mademoiselle Panowska owns landed property. Her departure from the world of art will be a considerable loss to the public."

Gaston's hand shook as he turned over the second slip attached to the first by a pin. He saw that he was reading the very critique of his singing that had pained him so on the morning of his visit to Edward Ramsdale.

Deliberately he set the two slips of paper down on the table, and, taking out his cigarette-lighter, picked up the papers again. Holding the corner of them in the flame he let it ignite, then slowly the two notices curled up, till the creeping flame reached his fingers, scorching them. With a little thin clatter the pin fell out on to his plate, and he let the last burning fragment go. Then he looked up steadily at Drouot. He was pale, but his expression was no longer abjectly childish.

"The page is burnt," he said. "The artist will turn over a new leaf."

Then he observed that two great tears forced themselves from Drouot's eyes.

"*Mon vieux, mon vieux*," Gaston cried, "why do you care so much?" He came round behind Drouot and put one hand on his shoulder. "I begin to think it is I who am the brute."

Drouot got up and moved away.

"You will not go back on your word now?" he said roughly.

Gaston watched him as he pulled open the casement.

"No," he said; "but I feel as if I ought to go to school again. I would like to go back to student days."

Drouot smiled.

"That is better," he said. "There is always hope for the artist who acknowledges he still has something to learn."

"I am not sure," Gaston murmured, "that I really know anything. But who will take so backward a pupil?"

Then Drouot had an inspiration. He remembered Madame Périntot. Surely this wholesome-minded, kindly woman was just the person to put new power of work into his friend.

"*Voyons*," he said. "Last summer I promised to take you to visit a very charming woman I know who is a teacher of your art. It is a fine afternoon, let us go for a walk, and pay our visit on the way home—possibly we may find my friend at home, and even at work. In any case," he added, smiling, "if you have a mind to learn, she, if my instinct is right, will have a mind to teach."

"Come then," cried Gaston, his spirits rising. "Decidedly you are the best fellow in the world, Camille!"

Drouot laughed and the two men set forth.

Thus, by apparent accident, did the unconscious Marguérite again become a pawn—and that possibly of sinister purpose—in the hand of Destiny.

CHAPTER IV

IT so happened that the same late October afternoon which had been so full of momentous decision for Gaston Hypolite was also a red-letter day in the life of Eugénie Massini.

A chill promise of frost caused Madame Périntot to command the lighting of the *calorifère* in the theatre, where a motley crowd of eager young enthusiasts had gathered. Things were going well with the class this afternoon. Poincé and Valérie Delorme had just played a scene of *Carmen* to Marguérite's extreme satisfaction; and, before them, Claudine Dupuys—a pupil from the Conservatoire—had sung the church scene from *Manon*, with a young Czech tenor, both of these giving a lovely quality of tone. And so—what with the *calorifère* and her excitement, Marguérite was heated. Nevertheless she was happy.

In a seat, near the door, Eugénie awaited her turn. She had been at work now in the opera class for nearly a month, and was growing accustomed to the ordeal of singing on the stage to that little crowd of critical observers. But, to-day,

an attack of "beginner's" nerves again seized her, since, for the first time, she was to sing with a tenor. Up till now she had merely sung with Madame Périntot—who knew every rôle in the operas she taught.

Since her entry into the class as a pupil, Eugénie had become very popular with her fellow students. Her beauty and simplicity, combined with her lovely voice and marked ability as an actress, inspired them with admiration; while other girl-students declared that it was impossible to be jealous of her as she was too good-tempered.

Though Parisian born, she was wholly without the little coquetties of dress and manner affected by most young French girls of her age. The men in the class liked her; but this very absence of coquetry, and something *farouche* in her manner towards them, kept them from being more than mere acquaintances. They hesitated to pay her the light-hearted compliments usually bestowed on other young women. And when, the class over, heady with youth and excitement, the whole lot of them poured out into the street, separating gaily into little knots of two and three in search of passing tram, bus or metro, Eugénie would start off quietly by herself, finding her way home alone by unfrequented streets.

She did not want to go with those gaily-dressed, laughing companions; but preferred the pageant of her thought, in which Faust, the ardent lover, stepped beside her, and she, Marguerite—dreamed at his side.—And besides these, countless others, tragic, romantic, pitiful or magnificent, were her friends. They jostled her as she moved along through the glittering night, crying, "Give me life! Tell my story to the world! Cry forth my love!—Portray my agony! Avenge my wrongs, and cruel death! Recount my struggles—my idealism—and give the reason of my fall! Hold out your arms to me—for I am great and noble love! Dance with me—I am grace incarnate! Laugh with me—for I am youth and gladness! Weep with me—for I am old and wayworn! Pray for me—for I lie slain!"

But now, to-day, had come a new element, for, not the romantic lover of imagination would stand beside her on the little stage, but one of those kindly, commonplace young singers who seemed to her quaintly far away from her conception of Faust.

Madame Périntot, who had just given Valérie Delorme final instructions concerning her castanets, turned round and called from the stage.

"Now, Eugénie, *vite, mon enfant!* Come with your first act of *Faust*. We will take the duet. Pourtet or Chamieau, I want you to sing with her—*Faust—Vite, vite*, my children—What? They are neither of them here? Where is Fontenailles?—He had to go? Then Cornaille? You—surely you sing *Faust*? *Sapristi!* No?—Where are they all—my *Fausts*? Last week there were half a dozen of them offering to sing; and to-day, when I most particularly need one, none is forthcoming."

She turned up the lights in the auditorium, and stepped to the front of the stage, searching the room with her eyes.

"*Nom d'un chien,*" she went on, "the room is full of Romeos, Marios, Manricos, Don Josés, but not one *Faust*! *Parbleu*—you, Zanito, surely you sing *Faust*?"

"No, madame," the young tenor protested, laughing. "It would give me great pleasure to sing with Mademoiselle Massini; but, unfortunately, I have never studied the rôle."

"*Tiens!*" Madame Périntot ejaculated. "It is a rôle that should be in your *répertoire*. Well, Eugénie," she added, turning to the young girl, who stood waiting in the wings, "you will have to be content once more with the embraces of Marguérite Périntot—*primo tenore, basso profondo, and soprano dramatique.*"

She snapped off the lights and Eugénie crossed the stage to take up her position for entry.

Two men, meanwhile, who had entered the visitors' gallery were quietly listening to the conversation. One of them, whispering to the other, leant over the balcony as Madame Périntot ceased speaking. His face was perceptible, as a little pale blot in the darkness, when the glow of the footlights touched it.

"Unless," he said, in a charming voice, well-bred and humorous, "Mademoiselle Massini, whoever she may be, will permit me to sing the duet with her."

"Who speaks?" demanded Madame Périntot.

Startled by the suddenness with which the voice had addressed her, she was attacked by a sense of tenseness. She was annoyed, too, as it was not her custom to converse with visitors in the gallery. It was an understood thing

that they should expect no greeting from her when she was at work. Resting her hand on her hip, with a certain hauteur in her expression, she awaited the answer.

"Gaston Hypolite, at your service, madame," he returned.

"*Mon Dieu*," she murmured, under her breath. She would have given much that, at that particular juncture, Hypolite, of all men, should not have made this offer. She was aware that it would be both unreasonable and ungracious to refuse him; but the coincidence of his coming was agitating to her.

A murmur of excitement ran through the little theatre. Eugénie's luck, in having the opportunity of singing with the famous tenor, turned some young heads with jealousy. Gaston, in the balcony above, was aware that the semicircle of young listeners were whispering and craning their necks upward, through the darkness, to catch sight of him.

"Silence!" Madame Périnot commanded, as the murmur of conversation arose. "M. Hypolite," she added, addressing him, "I am sure Mademoiselle Massini will be honoured by your kindness in offering to sing with her; but you ought perhaps to know she is only a beginner, and this her first experience of singing with another artist."

"So much the better," he answered. "An old hand like myself may be of some assistance to her; and a Marguérite ought to be—at any rate in the first act—inexperienced."

"Come down then," Madame Périnot said, smiling in spite of herself. "We will, if you please, take the first meeting of Marguérite with Faust, and then the duet."

Gaston disappeared from the balcony. In another minute he passed through the swing doors into the auditorium, and made his way up the steps of the stage.

Eugénie, standing awaiting her entry in the wings on the opposite side, could see his back only, as he divested himself of his overcoat. Something in his appearance was familiar to her. As he stepped on to the stage she glanced up at him for a moment. She caught an impression of a man, clean shaven, fair, and irreproachably dressed in a blue serge suit and patent-leather grey-topped boots. She wished that she had not been obliged to sing with an absolute stranger, and dropped her eyes on the ground, determined not to be put off by watching him.

Gaston, occupied with his own freak of fancy, had, as yet, hardly taken the young singer into account. The spirit of fantastic amusement was on him. He looked at Madame Périntot with dancing eyes. The gravity of the glance she gave him in return piqued him somewhat. He was intensely diverted at himself for offering to sing on this little stage before a crowd of students.

The music commenced and, with the first notes, a little tremor of nervousness took him. He remembered that it was the first time he had sung in public since his illness. Last time he had stood on a stage it had been with Wanda. He wondered what sort of a voice this young student would have, and if she would be nervous at singing with an artist of his standing. He resolved to be kind to her. Looking across to the wings on the opposite side he observed her graceful figure and averted head. He could not see her clearly, but he perceived that she was poorly dressed, and that the big knot of smooth black hair rested on the neck of, evidently, a very youthful maiden.

Eugénie, taking up her cue, began to advance towards him, her eyes on the ground; and he, with a sweeping gesture and bow, intercepted her, while his rich voice rang out in the Faust's greeting.

At the sound of his voice she started and raised her eyes. A great throb of emotion shot through her, for, before her, clad in the smart clothes of a *mondain*—beardless, it is true,—stood the itinerant musician of the blue eyes. Her confusion and astonishment appeared to the audience so natural that a murmur of applause broke from them. Gaston, petrified with amazement, recognized her also, while a flood of remembrance came over him. So utterly taken aback was he that with great difficulty he controlled an exclamation. He wondered if his companion would show any further signs of recognition, for that she knew him again he was certain. But, after the first movement of surprise, Eugénie regained her self-possession. Her natural dignity and reserve made her mentally recover her footing. She gave Marguérite's lovely innocent reply with perfect purity of tone.

Hypolite followed her with his eyes as she crossed the stage. He was profoundly moved by the sound of her voice. The richness of its quality delighted him.

Madame Périntot clapped her hands as signal that the music should cease.

"Well acted, Eugénie," she cried.

"And well sung," Hypolite murmured quietly. "That phrase is one which before now has ploughed many a more experienced artist. I have never heard it given with greater charm. Mademoiselle has a beautiful voice," he added, turning to Madame Périntot.

She nodded, a certain challenge in her eyes.

"Enough of compliments," she said roughly. "She has yet a great deal to learn—voice is not everything. Pass on to the duet. We will begin at '*il fait si tard!*'—for you, Marguérite."

She gave the signal to the pianist, who took up the opening bars.

Eugénie and Hypolite began the scene. Their voices were evenly matched in quality, both being vibrant and with sufficient *sond* to make the brilliant "ring" rich yet not hard.

It seemed to her that, out of her dreams, had come a real and not an imaginary Faust, one who was no stranger. The musician of the blue eyes had come back, just at the moment when she most needed him. She sang from her very soul, her belief in her vocation more than ever justified.

And Hypolite, catching the fervour of her gladness—the idealist in him awakened by the chaste purity of her acting—was aware that she played, as he had himself played before his lapse into gross passion and materialism, with the spiritual visualization of the eternal characters created by composer and dramatist. He acknowledged to himself that, with Eugénie, the personal element was entirely swamped by her living of Marguérite's rôle; that she was, after the first moment of recognition, unconscious of him, Gaston Hypolite, so deeply did she, visionary and uplifted, feel the presence of the master's creation, Faust.

Then the artist, the ascetic, awakened in him once more, so that, touching her, breathing her, he was conscious of no physical passion; but rather of a tremendous spiritual revival, drawing from him the best and most perfect art that was in him. He sang the exquisite phrases with his utmost skill, and the rich voice of the young girl answered him in lingering tenderness, but throughout with that exquisite passionless spiritual quality.

Each time he addressed her, it seemed to him that the imprisoned soul within him beat, with importunate hands, upon the hidden doorway, crying for liberation. That soul which had been so nearly stifled by the hideous bindweed of passion, now craved to spread its wings flying into glorious infinity of splendid and noble effort. His voice seemed to him no longer the voice of his body, but the voice of his soul. With a sudden madness of happiness he knew that he had found the key to the hidden door of his nature—realized that, behind the hidden door, lay the eternal soul that alone can live by faith in the idea. He vowed to himself that never again would he defile his art by the hateful material side of life.

This young girl, who had been sent to him by fate, should help him to defy his animal nature. Its foul breath should not touch his relationship to her.

When at last the scene ended, Eugénie descended from the stage and mingled with a crowd of students. Gaston had been about to speak to her, but Madame Périntot, turning on the lights, summoned him to her side.

"So you are better, *mon ami*," she said, regarding him critically, "I was sorry to hear you had been so ill."

"You are kind, madame," he answered, flushing slightly.

"Yes, I am quite restored to health."

"Your voice has not suffered," she observed, smiling.

"I have never heard you sing better."

Gaston bowed.

"It is not often I have so inspiring a person to sing with as your little pupil."

"Ah! then you think well of my fledgling?" she inquired.

"There can be no two opinions as to her ability—she is magnificent," he returned. "At least she will be, when time and experience have developed her full powers. It is a voice and temperament in a thousand."

"So I think, and I am not a little proud of my discovery."

"My discovery too," he asserted, a satirical smile in his eyes.

"No," she replied, "Eugénie is my property. But, if you promise to treat her with all respect, I will permit you to assist in the matter of her *début*."

"*Bien*, and I should be greatly in your debt if you would let me come here sometimes and sing with her."

Madame Périntot frowned. She remained silent for a moment.

"Hypolite," she said at last—following the professional habit of calling people by their surname—"mon ami, if I permit you to come and sing with her, you must promise me that you will act with discretion and not try to turn her head. I am not sure that it would be at all wise—she is so utterly ignorant of men of your type. I do not want to complicate her life by encouraging her to lose her heart to you."

"*Mon Dieu*, madame, neither have I the slightest desire that she should do so," he protested. "You seem to look on me as an irresponsible *viveur*. I assert that it is purely for the development of her art that I wish to sing with her. Nothing is better for a neophyte's style, than to work with a thoroughly experienced singer like myself. It raises them above the student ruck."

Madame Périntot pondered. She knew he spoke the truth—yet, also knowing his reputation for selfishness, she could not believe that he would come from purely altruistic motives. She hesitated, looking at him keenly. After a moment she demanded:

"Is her artistic development your only motive in coming here?"

Gaston returned her gaze frankly.

"No—I own it is not, I come here also for my own instruction."

Madame Périntot raised her eyebrows.

"Is that necessary? From all I hear your progress last season was remarkable."

Gaston grew pink. He shuffled from one foot to the other like a naughty small boy who is accused of transgression.

"You are mistaken, madame," he assured her. "My so-called progress last season was, in my opinion, a retrograde movement."

"*Alors?*" demanded Marguérite, a keen look in her eyes.

"I come here," he murmured, "to wash and be clean. To rid myself of the materialist, and to steep myself to the soul in the idealism of clear-eyed youth—youth that believes—youth that has not touched pitch."

His voice trembled, and he looked at her piteously as if

demanding pardon. Margu rite, touched by the appeal in his eyes, smiled at him tenderly.

"*Viens donc, mon petiot,*" she said. "You will find cleanness and nobility of mind in Eug nie Massini. But," she added, her face touched with severity, and a certain grandeur of command, "if you come here, you come on the same terms as my other pupils—that is, that you conform to my rules—the first of which is absolute obedience, the second—exemplary conduct in relation to your fellow students. I will have no playing at love in my theatre—see to it that you do not soil the innocent mind of Eug nie, or lower the artistic ideal that is in her."

She held out her hand and he bowed over it.

"I can trust you?" she asked.

Hypolite regarded her solemnly.

"Yes," he murmured. "Absolutely you may trust me."

His expression changed to that of a coaxing child. "Do not be so distressingly suspicious, dear madame," he pleaded.

Margu rite's face relaxed into an answering smile.

"You must own," she answered, "that I had reason to be somewhat anxious. And, in the present case, I am responsible for the welfare of this young girl in a more than ordinary degree, since I have promised her very disagreeable aunt and only relative to look after her as my own daughter."

"*Bien*, then I will follow your example and act in a parental manner. Since she is an orphan, we shall not find our claim disputed."

"I am not so sure that she is wholly an orphan," Madame P rintot asserted, "for I believe that a very solid personage, who is still alive, could lay claim to parental authority, if he knows—which I very much doubt—of her existence."

Hypolite's expression was a frantic note of interrogation.

"On one side," Madame P rintot went on, "she has the blood of a princely Italian family in her veins; but, needless to say, she acquired it through an irregularity on the part of her other parent."

"That accounts," Hypolite exclaimed, "for her good breeding, and her exceeding good looks."

Margu rite shrugged her shoulders.

"You are too inflammable," she said. "Remember you have promised me discretion."

"I look upon her as a mere baby," he asserted eagerly. "I beg you to calm your anxiety. *Sapristi!* I swear I am really a person to be trusted." And he gazed at her so reproachfully that she laughed.

"*C'est entendu,*" she murmured. Whereupon Gaston, picking up his coat and hat, made his way out of the theatre.

Marguerite, after the swing doors had closed on his retreating form, permitted herself a deep exhalation of breath.

"*Mon Dieu! mon Dieu!*" she said to herself, "I most distinctly hope I am not in process of committing a folly."

Outside Hypolite found Drouot in conversation with a large and friendly *basso*, who, delighted to have an opportunity for talk, was expounding rather heavy theories concerning his own breathing capacity. He was in the act of demonstrating his power of blowing out his diaphragm, when Hypolite, impatient to be off, slipped his arm inside his friend's and drew the latter away from the still expanding *basso*.

"Well," he said gaily, "*mon vieux*, your prescription was a good one. You see I am myself again. How did I sing?"

"Magnificently. I should have come round to congratulate you and have a word with Madame Périntot, but you seemed so absorbed in conversation that I thought it a pity to disturb you; therefore, with admirable unselfishness, I decided to defer the pleasure of speaking with her again until another day. But tell me—who is the beautiful *débutante*? I have seldom seen a young creature who attracted me more. I should like very much to make a study of her. Curiously enough, she reminds me of the famous portrait of Donna Lucrezia Paleria, which hangs in the Paleria Palace at Genoa."

Hypolite opened his mouth to speak, but for a moment he remained staring at his friend. He stood still, pulling Drouot to a halt in the middle of the pavement, much to the annoyance of the passers-by, who jostled the pair angrily.

"*Sapristi!*" he exclaimed. "Camille, you are right. I have seen the portrait. *Mon Dieu!* and, unless I am much mistaken, the likeness is no freak of circumstance. I have just been hearing certain details of the young lady's history from our good friend, who went so far as to hint that the maiden's father is a very fine gentleman indeed—an Italian.—*Voilà*, there we have the whole history! Madame Périntot's young *protégée* is a bastard of the famous Paleria family—famous

through generations for their brains, beauty, and gift of song."

He let go of his friend's arm and observed that the latter was watching him intently.

"You say that mademoiselle is a special *protégée* of Madame Périntot?" he asked, speaking slowly.

"Yes," the other answered. "And I may add that I, too, at the request of that lady, have promised to interest myself in her career."

"Ah!" Drouot ejaculated, suddenly enlightened. He looked keenly at Gaston in the half light. "We had better be getting home," he said, moving forward.

"Yes," Gaston continued, unconscious of the other's full realization of his former acquaintance with Eugénie. "I shall make a point of doing all I can for the child." He turned and slipped his arm into that of his friend again. "You understand, *mon vieux*, it will do me immense good to be associated with a perfectly innocent and unsophisticated creature. At your suggestion I go to school, and I find a charming and delightful playmate. A little comrade who will teach me to believe in things—who will bring back my ideals."

His expression was sincere and charming, and there was a new note in his voice which Drouot could only partially understand; nevertheless he recognized that Gaston was profoundly impressed by some new conception.

"You are restored to health," he said. "I think, since you no longer need me, I shall pack my trunks and be off for a spell of work at Acquarelle."

Contrary to his expectation Gaston made no protest.

"I know I cannot expect to keep you for ever," was all he answered.

CHAPTER V

THUS it came about, in the next week or two, that Eugénie and Hypolite met from time to time in the opera class. Hypolite had not begun to sing in public again, though he had accepted a series of engagements for the following spring and summer. Meanwhile, he insisted in helping to coach Eugénie for her coming *début*. Finally one afternoon he had prevailed on Madame Périntot to permit her to sing the

second act of *Faust* with him at one of the performances to be given by her pupils in December.

Marguérite had protested that it was unworthy of his position and likely to do him harm in the eyes of the professional world, but Hypolite had shrugged his shoulders and pleaded his cause so ably that she had reluctantly given way.

Nevertheless Marguérite again felt a twinge of uneasiness at the young man's persistence ; but she comforted herself with the reflection that, when his engagements began again, he would, as he had hinted, have very little time to spend at her theatre, and that, capricious as she knew him to be, his interest would gradually cease. Meantime, she could not but acknowledge, his conduct towards the young girl was irreproachable. Narrowly as she watched them both, she could detect no sign that either was conscious of any interest apart from the professional one.

On the afternoon in question Gaston, well satisfied to have gained his point concerning the performance, refrained from allusion to the subject during work, but it occurred to him that he would like to have further opportunity for conversation with Eugénie. It seemed to him that, though he constantly saw her and talked to her, he never really succeeded in penetrating her reserve. Conceivably—he argued—this was owing to the fact that, when they met, practically it was always in public. He remembered her outburst of confidence to the itinerant musician, and he craved for closer knowledge of her mind. At the close of the afternoon's work, he timed his departure so as to follow her when she made her way out among the crowd of students.

Eugénie, as she crossed the Place Farnouchelles, became aware that he was behind her. Suddenly *farouche*, she walked rapidly, hoping to escape in the confusion of traffic. But, on the far side of the Place, a number of people gathered round the little tables of a *café* impeded her progress, and he gained her side.

"Mademoiselle," he said, smiling ingenuously, and raising his hat, "I am going your way. May I walk home with you?"

"I would rather not," she answered, looking at him with troubled eyes.

Gaston's expression became grave.

"Do you, too, distrust me?" he demanded mournfully.

"No, no, of course not. Who should distrust you?" she asked innocently.

"Then why may I not come?"

Eugénie hesitated—she flushed. Then she answered frankly:

"Indeed I should like it very much, but——"

"But what?" he repeated, smiling.

"But," she murmured, "no one ever walks with me, I am not accustomed to it, and I cannot imagine why you should put yourself out to come with me."

Gaston waited a moment. Had any other woman spoken to him in that way he would have been sure that the speech demanded a compliment. In Eugénie's case he dismissed the idea immediately. Not for one moment did he question her sincerity.

"Mademoiselle," he said, almost humbly, "if I were to confess to you that my desire to walk with you—to know you better—came from a selfish motive, would you forgive me?"

She looked at him doubtfully.

"My reason," he went on, "is simply this—I come to you to learn."

"To learn!" she exclaimed, utter astonishment and disbelief in her expression.

"Ah!" he said, "you do not trust me. Is it because of my foolish pranks of last year when I played the wandering singer?"

"No," she answered gravely. "It had not occurred to me to think about that matter at all. But—since you speak of it—why did you do it? Do you know, I believed you to be so poor that I really thought you in need of the *son* that I spared you every week?—and all the time you were laughing at me."

"I was not laughing," he interrupted eagerly. "I assure you I shall never cease to be grateful for your kindness."

"You have no need of my pity—or my help, now," she said, smiling.

"Ah! there you are wrong; I have infinite need of your help—of your pity."

"You are not unhappy—in trouble?" she asked, with ready sympathy.

"I have been," he answered; "that is why I ask you to give me your friendship."

"What good can I do you?" she asked, wondering. "It

is I who am happy in having the good teaching. I know how much I owe to you as well as to Madame Périntot."

"Thank you," he answered, in a low voice. "Some day I may explain to you more fully, but will you be content if I say that I find your friendship most necessary to me?"

"Quite content," she answered simply, looking into his eyes with innocent affection.

Thus it happened that Victorine, returning by tram from the Étoile, where she had been on business, caught sight of the two standing together at the corner of the Place Farnouchelles.

A flame of jealous anger arose in her again. More than ever was she suspicious of the life Eugénie had chosen. The tram stopped almost opposite to where they stood. Victorine regarded the pair with profound hostility. Something of her fierce anger, as she watched them, penetrated to Hypolite's mind. He looked across at the tram and observed her gazing at them. She was bareheaded and the expression on her coarse red face was unmistakably malignant. He received an impression which disgusted him; yet he could not take his eyes off her, as she stood with her market basket on her arm, her red hand clasping the iron support of the roof. A sudden shiver ran through him as if a spectre had passed him; still he could not take his eyes from the face of the woman who stood there. Eugénie, seeing that he looked beyond her at something which had arrested his attention, turned, and, following the line of his vision, caught sight of her aunt.

She gave a sharp little exclamation; and Hypolite, as if the sound released him from some spell, shook himself and addressed her.

"Who is that?" he asked, puzzled. "Someone you know?"

"It is my Aunt Victorine," she answered simply; "with whom I live. I must say good-bye. She will be expecting me home."

She held out her hand to him, and Hypolite took it. As he did so the tram moved away, and Eugénie, looking up, saw that Victorine's face was still visible amongst the crowd of people. She was watching them. Her expression was one of furious anger.

Hastily Eugénie took her hand from Hypolite's. "I must hurry," she said.

"Let me walk with you?" he pleaded, following her.

He was still under the objectionable impression produced by Victorine's appearance. Shocked though he was to think that repulsive-looking woman was Eugénie's near relation, yet, with tenacity, he clung to his purpose.

"May I not walk with you?" he repeated, close to her.

"I beg you not to," she said hurriedly, stopping for a moment. "My aunt would not like it. She is very strict with me. She would not understand."

"Let me come and see her," he pleaded, determined to gain her confidence. "I will explain."

"No, no," she said, almost tearfully, "she would never understand. She is not a person who would let you explain. Please do not keep me. Already she is angry."

"Poor child," he murmured. "Well, I will not come. But will you promise me that one day soon you will give me the opportunity of talking with you—and let me take you for a real walk?"

"Yes, yes," she said, willing to promise anything in order to make him go.

"*Au revoir*, then," he cried, raising his hat.

Eugénie walked away quickly. She knew that Victorine would not pass the incident over in silence, and she greatly dreaded causing her irritation. For lately her aunt's temper had been quick to rise, and her vehement, hectoring anger was hard to allay.

When she reached the tenement Victorine met her in the doorway.

"Ah," she said, "so you have at last torn yourself away from your lover."

Her expression was ferocious, and her hands clasped and unclasped themselves convulsively at her sides. Despite her utmost effort, the young girl was filled almost with loathing. Angry with herself for what she considered callous and ungrateful thoughts, she answered gently:

"It was M. Hypolite, the famous tenor from the Opera. I am quite certain that nothing would be further from his thought than making love. He is a very serious person."

"Very serious," Victorine said loudly and angrily; "so I should think—to keep a young girl standing about at street corners so that he might make eyes at her!"

Eugénie winced.

"He meant no harm," she protested.

"They never do," the other said bitterly. "If I had thought his intentions were evil I would have come down from where I stood and torn the guts out of him."

Her face was terrible, her mouth worked. She regarded Eugénie so threateningly that the latter moved back.

Victorine came close to her again.

"If I catch you about with any of these men," she said coarsely, "I will put a stop to your singing altogether."

Eugénie stood her ground.

"Do not threaten me, Aunt Victorine," she replied coldly. "I shall sing as long as I have a voice within me."

The blood mounted to Victorine's face and she raised her closed fists as if she would have struck the young girl, but Eugénie's unflinching gaze confused her. She let her hand drop to her side and moved into the room muttering to herself. Several times she put her hand up to her forehead.

She said no more, however, to Eugénie's relief, on the subject of Hypolite, but her manner was strange. She moved about restlessly, without seeming to have any particular object. The habit of opening and shutting her jaw had become more frequent of late and it bore upon her niece's nerves. A nameless fear began to assail Eugénie in the presence of her aunt. For the latter would, at times, sit in silence for hours, resting her coarse hands on her knees, seeming not to hear if she was spoken to, but staring at every movement of the girl.

That evening Eugénie, unable to endure the strain of her sullen silence, went early to bed. Once in her own room she knelt down and buried her face in the bed. Why was it—she asked herself—that she and the aunt, who had cared for her from a little child, were slowly but surely drifting apart? She blamed herself severely for having left her alone for so long in the summer. Claspings her hands, she looked up at the ivory crucifix, and, taking comfort in the contemplation of that beloved symbol, repeated her evening prayers.

Then, undressing, she got into bed, and, lying with her opera score open before her, she began to go through every detail of her acting and singing; but, to-night, her thoughts refused to concentrate wholly. On into the small hours she heard Victorine in the other room, her heavy footsteps passing to and fro over the boarded floor. When they

ceased she again had the impression of some wild beast crouching there ready to spring.

It was her custom now to lock her door. To-night she went a second time to make sure that the bolt was fast. Standing still in the darkness she listened. She thought she heard someone breathing outside, and, in another moment, soft feet padded away with a thick thudding as of the paws of some animal. A moment later terror seized her, and she cowered down shivering, for she heard the sound of the knife being sharpened.

Eugénie knew that soft-footed beast must be Victorine, because Victorine, for some strange whim, now took the carving knife to bed with her. In making the bed the young girl had several times found it under her aunt's pillow.

But with that sound once more the footsteps ceased. Eugénie went back to bed. Yet all night her dreams were haunted, not—as so often of late—by phantoms of terror, but by the vision of Hypolite as he had bidden her good-bye at the corner of the Boulevard Farnouchelles.

CHAPTER VI

ON the week before her operatic *début* Madame Périnot decided that Eugénie should stay with her for the period of rehearsal and performance, consequently Victorine was again alone.

That going of Eugénie was a mutual relief to the aunt and niece. For the young girl felt it would be impossible to give her whole mind to her work with the perpetual distress of Victorine's lack of sympathy to disturb her. And Victorine, released from the necessity of self-restraint, brooded ceaselessly, making no effort to live in a well-ordered manner. Sometimes she did not even undress at night, but flung herself fully dressed on her bed.

She spent long hours, when she was not busy at Les Halles, tramping on pilgrimages to the Sacré Cœur—trying to relieve her anxiety about Eugénie's future by constant demands upon the Almighty that, by some means, He would take away the gift of song which He had bestowed upon her. Her prayers were less a pleading than a violent reproach, conse-

quently she derived no comfort from them. But, rather than decreasing, it was evident to her that her niece's talents became more conspicuous. And, finding her prayers unanswered, she lapsed into a state of mind bordering on despair.

On the day that she had observed Eugénie and Hypolite standing at the corner of the Place Farnouchelles, there flashed across her mind Madame Périntot's warning—and how the latter, at their first interview, had told her of the famous tenor who had serenaded her niece. Even her narrow, confused brain connected the two facts until she became morally certain that Hypolite and the tenor in question were one and the same person. She suspected that, having found out Eugénie in the opera class, he was now again in pursuit of her, aided and abetted—she thought with increasing hatred—by the “singing woman.”

Hypolite's pursuit of Eugénie became a perfect nightmare to her, so that she could not rest at night. If she slept malevolent dreams took possession of her, so that her dormant brain became a mere shell, from which perpetual warring of discordant thought evolved panoramas of prodigious horror and atrocity. To escape from the menace of these nightmares she would start up from her bed with brusque sobs, to walk up and down till she got rid of the inclination for the very sleep of which she stood so in need.

At other times—overcome by exhaustion—she would stretch herself at full length on the floor, and, beating her head on the ground, would pour forth streams of filthy vituperation, in low muttered speech, until, exhausted by the *vacarme* of her dolorous thought, she fell into half sleep, half stupor, in which to dream again, without ceasing, that Gaston had seduced Eugénie and that—deserted by her lover—the young girl was forced to go on to the streets; while she herself—caged behind iron bars—was unable to save her from the horror of that passion market, though she tore at the bars of her prison till her hands bled, and cried out till the muscles of her throat were wrenched and her screams subsided like those of some slaughtered pig.

Again and again, too, she dreamed of the unfortunate whose face she had marked with the five franc piece. Sometimes the face would resemble that of Eugénie, sometimes that of Marthe, until the three persons became one tragic entity in

her bewildered mind. And, before her agonized gaze, the being whom she watched would glide in and out, swiftly threading its way among the people, on the crowded pavements of the boulevards, with a mechanical smile, supplicating the passers-by with a plaintive "*Tu viens ?*" But, as each refused her, she would turn to Victorine with that terrible smile, and point silently to her mouth—from which issued a thin stream of blood.

Victorine became so appalled by this dream, that many times she meditated cutting her throat in the still hours of the night. But, though she took the sharp knife to bed with her, she had not, as yet, sufficient courage to carry out her project. Also it seemed to her that she would not escape from the horror by suicide, since she felt profoundly convinced that, amid the torment of another world, she would know that Eugénie—unprotected by her—had fallen a victim to Hypolite's pursuit. In the presence of the niece whom she loved she still managed to keep a semblance of normality, but the tension imposed upon her by her self-restraint was frightful; and she was tortured by the resemblance that she fancied the young girl bore to the phantom of the night.

Down in Les Halles she experienced a certain relief, in the necessity of occupying her mind with the business of the moment. But the strain was beginning to tell on her. She was careless over her accounts, indifferent in the choice of her stock, inattentive and overbearing with customers, so that, one by one, she began to lose her clients. A cheerful coming and going of buyers no longer surrounded her stall; but Victorine sat silent, her rolling red-brown eyes staring into space, a lonely and deserted figure amid the toiling vociferation of the market.

It became her habit to walk home from Les Halles, hoping, through physical weariness, to arrest the racing of her brain. But those walks, at first partially successful, had of late become an added horror to her. She fancied that, everywhere, she saw the phantom of her midnight visitor, walking ahead of her through the crowds, stopping every now and then to solicit passers-by with her eternal plaintive "*Tu viens ?*" With heavy footsteps and labouring breath Victorine followed, but the terrible object of her pursuit always eluded her, vanishing into the crowd.

At last the terror began to overwhelm her. She decided that torture had reached a point that was no longer bearable, and determined to seek out the living *cocotte*—to whom she had first thrown the money—in the vague hope that, by material assistance, she might lay the ghost which haunted her diseased imagination. "Perhaps," he told herself, "the woman, disfigured by that scar, is unable to carry on her terrible trade, if so she wants money, and I—not her lovers—must keep her."

If she could but prove the creature who haunted her was a real living being she might, she felt, regain her former acquiescence in Eugénie's present occupation; but if, as she feared, her strange visitor was some earthbound spirit, then it would be necessary to take other measures to satisfy its demand.

A little calmed by her resolution, she began her search by making persistent inquiries in the side street where she had seen the creature disappear; but her questions were greeted with ribald laughter and coarse jest, and even blank refusal to listen to her story. So, dispirited, she turned her steps to the great boulevards, where every evening, through the throng, she searched feverishly among the nightbirds for the girl whom she could never find.

Thus it became her habitual custom to stand—a grotesque though tragic figure—on the edge of the pavement of certain notorious thoroughfares, her fierce eyes raking the tide of humanity which swept past her. With painful eagerness her gaze would fasten on the painted, hectic faces of the women, searching avidly for some sign that might reveal to her, among the flotsam and jetsam of lost happiness, the person whom she sought. But no success crowned her efforts, until, one evening, at nearly eleven o'clock, she saw, on the other side of the street, amongst a crowd of people gathered on the wide pavement at the little tables outside a *café*, the back of a young woman which arrested her attention. Something in her appearance was familiar to Victorine. She was struck by the long black curls streaming to the young woman's waist. She felt convinced that, at last, this was the object of her search.

Trembling, she essayed to make her way across the street. But she was compelled to wait until a gap in the passing traffic should give her passage. As she stood there waiting,

the girl turned and saw her. Victorine observed that she was recognized. She saw, too, in a flash, that the painted mouth was distorted by a newly healed scar—the face was the same as that which had looked up at her from the gutter of the Place des Loups.

She uttered a cry and, careless of the traffic, stepped from the curb into the roadway with intent to reach the woman. But a gendarme, standing behind her, caught her forcibly by the arm and hauled her back on to the pavement from under the bonnet of a great motor.

"*Sacré ! Imbécile !*" he said, with a good-humoured smile.

Victorine, mad with rage at his interference, furiously shook herself free, and, letting fly a series of words of a coarseness and abuse that surprised even the *gardien* of the Boulevard des Voyageurs, she ran across the road.

In her passage of arms with the gendarme she lost sight of the girl; and when at length she reached the other side of the street, seated at the little table where she had seen her, was a gigantic negro. She remembered that the young girl, whose back had been towards her, had appeared to be in intimate conversation with some man. She shuddered, but with desperation she intercepted the negro as he was rising. He regarded her jocosely. His white glistening teeth were set off by the blackness of his lips, so that his smile appeared to her grotesquely exaggerated.

"Monsieur," she said entreatingly, "the young girl who was here but a moment since? In which direction did she go? I want to speak to her."

"What young girl?" he returned, lighting a huge cigar. "I do not understand."

"You must understand me," she said. "She was sitting here at the table with you but a moment since—a young girl with dark curls, and a scar on her mouth."

"Be off, my good woman," he said. "You are dreaming, or you must have seen a ghost. Do you not perceive that I am alone."

She turned away despairingly, a sob in her throat. As she did so the corner of her shawl swept the table, and drew, from among the litter of fruit and dirty napkins, a large black-handled knife which fell into the basket she carried on her arm. She hurried away, not daring to

remove the knife, but tore through the streets panic-stricken—obsessed with gross vision—suffocated by charnal fear. For she believed the phantom was indeed a being of another world which had led her on, in order to give her the message of sacrifice and violence, to command her to save the helpless Eugénie.

The negro's words confirmed her suspicions. She waited no more, but rushed homewards, her eyes on the ground lest she should again see the spectre. She was penetrated with fear and a foul desire of massacre—of carnage. Her teeth chattered and she sweated. That which had haunted her dreams was veritably the spirit of Marthe, doing penance in this garb of sin, seeking to communicate with her, urging her relentlessly to sacrifice herself in order to save Eugénie from a kindred fate.

But what was the sacrifice demanded? With agony she strove to penetrate the veil of the future.

From that day she sought again to see the phantom in order to wring from it further revelation of her duty. She walked the boulevards till the livid dawn banished the hectic city night, creeping later to Les Halles, with bent body and scarred soul, to fall into a stupor over her work. In the afternoon she would return to the Place des Loups, where she would feed beast-like, and lie like a log on her bed till the shouting terror of darkness called her forth to walk afresh.

She began to lose flesh and her bloodshot eyes became terrible in appearance. Eugénie she hardly ever saw; for the *début* that was drawing near absorbed the young artist, who told herself that, once the eventful week was over, she would give more thought and attention to her aunt. Nevertheless Eugénie dreaded the few hours when she was alone with Victorine. Fear took her by the throat and a shrinking amounting to disgust.

Victorine experienced a horrible passion in looking at the black-handled knife that had been given her by the spectre. It seemed to her a symbol of deliverance. She exalted it into a fetish. In former days she had fingered her rosary with constant repetition of prayer, but now she neglected her rosary and fingered the sharp steel.

At Les Halles she wandered restlessly, neglecting her work. Again and again she visited the fish market, drawn

thither by the sight of the women cleaning the fish and trimming them with sharp, black-handled knives. Once or twice she asked to be permitted to assist them.

Then, drawing out her own knife, which never left her, appalled, yet fascinated, she would plunge it into the cold body of a cod—ripping it up with strong cuts. It seemed to her that she was no longer master of herself, but merely an instrument in the hands of the dead mother who haunted her day and night, riveting into her whirling brain the frightful purpose that, until its accomplishment, would hold her enchained. For with the execution of that purpose, Victorine believed that she would be relieved from the phantom, which, freed from earth, would trouble her no more.

As yet, in the presence of Eugénie she still held herself, controlling with a certain cunning the madness which grew upon her. Still, as the days wore on towards Christmas, the obsession grew stronger. She no longer went to Mass, no longer to confession, but, moody and silent, tramped on endless pilgrimages, hiding herself in the outmost corners of the church, like one guilty of an unpardonable sin.

Later—later—she told herself—when it should be accomplished—later she would go to confession; and cleansed of bloody nightmare—of unspeakable monstrosity—she would return to the peace of her earlier years.

She longed for the day of consummation, longed for the revelation of what was demanded of her. She trusted that understanding and opportunity would come, and passionately she believed that for the sake of the child she loved she would not flinch.

CHAPTER VII

EUGÉNIE'S alienation from her aunt distressed her increasingly. Hence she was genuinely thankful when the second week in December arrived, and Madame Périntot insisted that she should stay with her for the period of rehearsal and performance.

To Marguérite this week of opera was always a great delight, though in many ways an anxiety, since she was her own stage manager. The scenery, as a rule, she did not trouble much about, being content with a background

not out of keeping with the scene, selected from the stock of the répertoire company who owned the small theatre in the Boulevard d'Espagne.

In addition to the responsibility of stage management, she was always a little nervous as to how her young pupils would sing with an orchestra. For Marguérite was not, as is the custom at most student performances, content with a mere accompaniment on the piano. In this respect she believed—and rightly—that no operatic voice should be judged apart from orchestral effect; for the singer, who may be perfectly at home with a piano, has not always the gift of following the more complicated musical action demanded in taking his cue from a variety of different instruments.

These student performances of Madame Périntot's school, therefore, were looked on as a somewhat unique event; and the fact that a young singer was allowed to appear at them hall-marked him or her as one whose career gave promise of being successful. For Madame Périntot's judgment was shrewd. She had a genuine *flair* for talent.

This year considerable interest had been excited in the musical world by an announcement, in the preliminary notices, that Gaston Hypolite kindly consented to sing the second act of *Faust* with a young *débutante*. Gaston being a well-known exponent of the part, it was conjectured that, either this *débutante* was something very much out of the common, or that the famous tenor had taken leave of his senses. In either case the matter would prove food for piquant gossip. Therefore all and sundry hastened to secure places for this performance at which they might behold a phenomenon or phenomena. Rumours concerning Hypolite's illness—reported mental rather than physical—had aroused interest and speculation, the more so that none of his old associates had seen him since his return from London. Meantime Hypolite himself, unconscious of the churnings of gossip which surrounded his name, continued daily to coach Eugénie and to rehearse the scene they were to play together.

Madame Périntot made careful choice of the Mephistopheles, Marthe and Siebel, who should complete the caste. Hence she judged that, if Eugénie's nerve held good, the young singer would have a brilliant *début*.

To Eugénie, her first singing with the orchestra at

rehearsal was an enchantment. With Hypolite's aid she began to pick out the various leads of the instruments. This new instinct of orchestration absorbed her, so that she did not feel so nervous as she might otherwise have done. She would sit for hours, during the rehearsal of other scenes listening breathlessly to the interchange of harmony. She began to liken the different instrumental qualities of sound to the living and human sounds of life—to see vivid pictures, blending colours, varying emotions, embodied in those *nuances* of quality. The violins spoke with strange, fantastic pleading; the wood wind embodied a tenderness and wistful yearning that she could not define—vaguely she connected it with the sound of the fir-trees, and with the wistful yearning which the plucking of those passionate spirit hands had stirred in her in the early autumn at Acquarelle. The brass, with its splendid flaming audacity, spoke to her of virility, tremendous strength and the strife of fierce life; while the 'cellos cried softly of the sorrow of age and the mournful tragedy of dissolution. The flutes sounded to her like the twittering of birds, the fluttering of their wings, and the bubbling of tiny woodland streams. While altogether these voices were as the manifold cry of creation.

On the day of the dress rehearsal Eugénie carried her clothes, and the new box of make-up Madame Périnot had given her, into the dressing-room reserved for her as a Principal.

One of the professional dressers from the theatre came to help her, and to see that she put on her wig safely and did not overdo her make-up. After the woman had left she stood contemplating her own changed and elaborated image in the glass. Certainly the make-up altered her astonishingly. She thought that her eyes looked abnormally large, and the colour of her cheeks and lips garish. Reluctantly she left the shelter of the dressing-room and followed the stone passage to the wings.

But there Gaston, as much altered as herself, met her, and Eugénie forgot her own appearance in the interest of examining his clothes.

"Well, Marguérite," he said, smiling, "how do you like your Faust '*en costume*'?"

"Truly I find he looks very well," she answered, laughing. "But until this moment I had been so exercised in my mind

concerning my own appearance that I had hardly realized you, too, would be differently dressed."

Hypolite answered teasingly.

"That is a little unkind of you! Would you then wish me to walk on to the stage in a fur coat and top hat?"

"No," she murmured, "no—I greatly prefer this wine-coloured velvet suit and jewelled belt."

"Let me tell you that you, yourself, look charming," Hypolite said, giving her a critical glance.

"You really think so?—without compliment, I mean——" she demanded anxiously—"Personally I do not think I look at all nice."

"Then you make a mistake," he returned gravely. "You look more than charming, and, from the other side of the footlights, you will look beautiful. It is only that you are unaccustomed to the 'make-up.' You see we are not meant to be looked at too closely."

"I am glad. Then I need not trouble," she said. "For if you are pleased I am quite sure others will be. I wanted to thank you," she went on, looking at him with frank gratitude, "for all your kindness to me, and for singing with me at the performance. Madame Périnot says it will give me the special consideration of the critics from the first."

Hypolite's eyes grew moist and he answered her in a low voice:

"You have nothing to thank me for, it is I who should thank you."

Something in his tone troubled her. She looked up quickly and met his eyes. Then a warm pang shot through her whole body, and remembrance flooded her brain of the first occasion of their meeting—when the touch of his hand and the sense of his nearness had caused her a like emotion.

She trembled, and, with a sudden shyness, moved away from him slightly, proximity to him seeming, at that moment, alarming.

Hypolite was about to speak again when Madame Périnot called to them from the stage and the orchestra commenced to play.

Eugénie went through the rehearsal with extreme care, and Madame Périnot was certain that she was sure of every detail of *mise-en-scène*.

From the moment of those first chords on the orchestra, Eugénie was absorbed in the music, following every beat with minute appreciation. Gaston Hypolite disappeared from her horizon and only Faust, the lover, existed for her.

The extreme inexperience of her nature made her play Marguérite solely from a visionary point of view, so that her reading of the character was exquisite in its childlike purity, while her love, being the outcome of mental subjugation, transfigured her. As yet the physical side of things was practically unawakened in her. Nevertheless, when Faust made love to her, she began to dream of the beauty and wonder of man's love for woman as something exquisite and supremely delicious—as the realization of a perfect ideal. In the second act of the opera, shame has not yet touched Marguérite; so that, in the ecstasy of her awakening womanhood and her love, she is like a child that has found a beautiful flower. Thus did Eugénie embody the *rôle*, giving a fine quality of youth and gladness wholly free of the voluptuous element.

Again Hypolite was touched by the extreme cleanness of mind and nobility of purpose that he saw in her. In his acting he was scrupulously careful that his conduct should never intrude upon her mental detachment.

After they had finished Eugénie, divesting herself of her stage clothes, went back to the Rue des Masques. She was tired, but tranquil, for the rehearsal had gone well. That night she did not dream, but slept deeply, waking in the morning with a freshness that spoke well for her nerve.

Throughout the day of the performance she dreamed of Faust—living Marguérite—thinking Marguérite—waiting impatiently until the moment when she should step on to the stage and meet him again. For with the costume—still more with the orchestra—that which had been but a story in her mind became a reality.

The opera ceased to be a play, into which artists threw the weight of their personality and technique in order to represent certain characters. Yesterday it had become a living thing, an hour or two of life. The world in which she moved, her own personality, Victorine, Madame Périnot, all seemed to her phantasmal beside the drama of Faust and Marguérite. Her own part in that reality would be once

more complete when the moment arrived for her to enter the great love drama again.

As the day drew in Madame Rouston came to her room and called her.

"Mimi left strict orders that you were to take a taxi," she said, extracting a five-franc piece from the pocket of her black silk apron and handing it to the girl.

"How kind of her," Eugénie exclaimed.

Madame Rouston smiled, an expression of pride on her face.

"Yes she has a good heart—my Mimi—it was only last night that, with thoughtfulness, she bade me send a ticket to your aunt, in case she should like to go and hear you."

Eugénie started. Compunction took her. She grew crimson and her eyes filled. She had completely forgotten Victorine—it certainly had not occurred to her to wonder whether Victorine would care to come and hear her. She hoped that her aunt would not come. She did not want her to-night—Victorine—with her coarseness, total lack of imagination and sympathy, her crude narrowness of judgment! To-night she had wanted to be free. To-night belonged to her art. She bitterly regretted that Madame Périn had sent Victorine a ticket—for her aunt, and all that she stood for, seemed utterly out of keeping with her exaltation as an artist—Victorine, who cared not for art. She belonged to the majority, to whom that world is a closed book—who see only the outward veneer and trappings of the thing presented to them—while of the ideal and spirit behind those trappings, they have no realization. The sense which reaches the soul, and sees into the beyond, has been left out of the nature of these.

It followed that Eugénie set forth in the taxi feeling slightly discouraged; but with her arrival at the theatre, and the business of dressing for the performance, the matter of Victorine's possible presence fell into the background of her thought.

On entering the stage-door she went to her dressing-room, where the first thing that greeted her was—in place of the bouquet of artificial flowers she had prepared for the casket scene—a beautiful bunch of roses, lilies, and carnations. It lay on her dressing-table, and, on examining it, she

found fastened to the stalks by a ribbon, a white card bearing the words "A bouquet for Marguérite." A burning blush overspread her cheeks as on examining the card she was convinced that the flowers were from Hypolite. She bent down to examine the writing more closely and became aware that a slight odour of tobacco clung to the card.

Slowly—with infinite caution, so as not to tear it—she detached the card, and furtively pressed it to her lips ; then she slipped it quickly inside the bosom of her dress, where it lay against her warm skin.

"How kind a friend he is ! " she said to herself.

Three quarters of an hour later she made her way into the wings. In her hand she carried the bouquet and the box of stage jewels for the casket scene.

Arrived there, she could hear the applause of the house greeting the artists who had just finished a scene of *Manon*. They came off, heated and triumphant, passing her as she stood waiting.

Madame Périntot—who had come from the stage box through the little door into the wings—met them with quick gestures and animated flood of conversation. She congratulated, criticized, and encouraged them. Her appearance was handsome and effective. She wore black, with much scintillation of sparkling jet ornament. Her flaming hair was dressed high, and she had on a necklace of sapphires and diamonds—a relic of her married life. Her hands were covered with rings, her eyes sparkled and she was carefully made up. In her corsage she had fastened three purple orchids, while a swinging pearl and diamond chain hung to her waist.

"It was excellent, *mes enfants*," she cried. "Zanito, your tone was perfect—and your pose admirable. And you, Claudine, were exquisitely tender and feminine. I am pleased, *mes petits*—but, *voyons*, Claudine, *mon enfant*, you re-arranged your gown when you knelt ! Never—I have told you before—must you re-arrange either your clothes or your position. You weaken your dramatic effect—*quand même* all was well, barring that. *Maintenant*—be off !—Where is my Eugénie ?—ah !—there she is," she added, coming across to the young girl. "Let me see you, my child. Yes, you are all right ? How is the courage ?—High ?—That is well. Where is Hypolite ? "

"Here, madame," he answered, coming from the passage to the dressing-rooms.

He bent over her hands, and then turned to Eugénie.

"Marguérite has found her flowers," he said, holding out a kind hand to her.

Madame Périntot raised her eyebrows; however, she said nothing, but hurried on to the stage to give directions. Eugénie looked at Hypolite. There was real affection in her eyes as she whispered:

"They were from you, then?"

"Yes," he answered, smiling; "do they please you?"

"I love them," she answered quietly, burying her face in them; "I have never had so many flowers before."

"You will have any quantity in the future," he asserted—a little lump in his throat.

"None will give me so much pleasure as these," she answered with tranquil assurance.

"Thank you," he murmured softly.

Madame Périntot returned.

"The scene is set," she said, in crisp tones, "you had better take your places. Eugénie, give those flowers to Siebel, and do not rub the powder off your nose—the flowers may be wet. Take your places, please—Marthe! Siebel! Mephistopheles!—you are there?—that is right. Then—we are ready."

She retreated through the door into the stage box.

The orchestra began the introduction to the act—pizzicato, followed by a running movement of smooth, stringed melody. Later the clarionets gave the signal for the rising of the curtain. Hypolite, who had moved away from Eugénie, stood listening to the familiar music. He glanced at her as he joined Mephistopheles. She was standing erect, lost in thought, her eyes wide, her lips parted. Her appearance was singularly noble, and at that moment, despite her fair wig, the "keness she bore to the portrait of Donna Lucrezia Paleria was remarkably apparent.

Eugénie listened to Siebel's opening phrase.

"He sings of my flowers," she told herself. "They are mine—not those that now fall withered from his fingers, but the lovely bouquet which has been given me."

Siebel left the stage. Faust and Mephistopheles were in the little garden—"My garden," Eugénie told herself. "And the house which is my home."

Once more she was Marguérite and all personal consciousness had ceased. Once again the orchestra called to her, with strange medley of voices, and from among the shadows, from out that welter of harmonic sound, the souls of ghostly singers—now passed into the beyond—seemed to troop like living echoes across the stage. The voices of former Fausts and Marguérites hailed her. The faces of great masters of music, great composers, dramatists, executants of masterpieces and immortal works, looked down on her from the shadows that hung in the flies. She was carried away—uplifted—by a magnificent spiritual enthusiasm. Nervousness left her. She longed for the moment when she should step on to the boards, and, in answer to that spiritual invitation, make the rôle of Marguérite live once more.

Gaston Hypolite was forgotten; only Faust—the eternal lover—called her from that gallery. The audience in the front of the house was blotted out by the great, protecting wall of sound rising from the orchestra. It did not exist—crowded out by that great company of immortal artists who cried to her to uphold the most sacred traditions of art.

Mephistopheles left the stage and the violins took up the slow, soft phrase which accompanies Faust's soliloquy. Then other instruments answered, and their voices, with gradual crescendo and diminuendo, ushered in the commencement of Faust's beautiful salutation to the house of his beloved. "*Salut, demeure chaste et pure,*" came humbly and tenderly, almost reverently, in Hypolite's rich notes—Eugénie, listening, clasped her hands over her bosom. Her exaltation increased. A silence, penetrating and intense, held the audience until the last phrase of the aria had died away. Then, breaking forth into vociferous applause, the house acclaimed the famous tenor with enthusiasm. Never had he sung with more perfect art. Distinctly his delicate finish and fine quality of tone had improved during his long rest! Gaston himself, bowing in response to repeated bravas, was conscious that he had reached a higher level than ever before. It was with satisfaction that he finished the conversation with Mephistopheles and the two retired from the stage, leaving the casket and the bouquet.

Silence again fell. Then the bassoons, with soft, hollow reiteration, took up the low note that ushers in the air of the *Roi de Thule*, followed by clarionets, violins and oboes.

Eugénie, listening to each phrase, knew the exact beat on which she should enter. No longer trembling, but now living Marguérite, she opened the door. As she did so she was aware that Hypolite stood behind her and that, though he did not speak, he supported her with silent friendship at this crucial point in her career. In another moment she appeared on the scene, and, stopping, hesitating, began with thread-like softness—tuning her great voice to its gentlest quality :

"Je voudrais bien savoir——"

One by one she finished the phrases simply and naturally ; and then, crossing to the spinning-wheel, and calculating her steps justly so that she seated herself at the traditional chord, she began the beautiful old song. The audience held their breath. Surely never Marguérite looked more lovely or told, in so rich and sweet a voice, the simple old story.

In the third verse she stood up, and, putting aside her wheel, made her way picking the flowers, across the garden. But, as the thought of Faust came to her, she let them fall forgotten from her fingers.

At the finding of the bouquet, the scent of the real flowers gave her pleasure, and she passed the difficult phrases before the aria admirably. Then, clear and true, her voice trilled delicately Marguérite's laugh, and she swung into the gaiety of the Jewel Song with a brilliant smile.

She threw into her singing all her gladness and exaltation, pouring out her glorious voice till the air seemed to sparkle with flying notes.

Madame Périntot watched her from the stage box, and Hypolite from the wings—they were both astonished at her *sang froid*.

"She will make a great singer," the former murmured to herself. "She has the *aplomb*, the natural self-confidence, the nerve, which are essential. Nothing," she told herself, "nothing is lacking save a little experience."

Gaston watched Eugénie with enchantment. If his success had been great, hers was greater, for when, with the pearls entwining her throat and the sparkling earrings and bracelets on, she rose, culminating the end of the song—after a long, sustained trill with a B natural of magnificent purity and power—the audience accorded her a reception that left no doubt of their opinion of her as an artist.

Eugénie, after that triumphant climax, looked round,

slightly dazed by the applause. She did not bow, but continued the business of the scene. On to the end of the act she sang with the same exaltation.

In the love duet Madame Périnot acknowledged to herself that she had never seen a better matched pair of lovers.

Eugénie sang the last song faultlessly, throwing herself with a cry of gladness into Faust's arms; and, though the young man's heart beat quickly, it should be recorded to his credit that he recognized that her cry voiced rather relief than the ordeal was over, than the passionate surrender of Marguérite's love.

The curtain descended. Flushed now and panting, she was let through to the front of the stage to bow to the clamouring audience. Eugénie, hardly mistress of herself, was thankful that Hypolite held her by the hand and guided her.

At last the two came off, and Madame Périnot, triumphant and excited, greeted them. She took the young girl in her arms and kissed her.

"Bravo, my child!" she cried. "It was magnificent; you will be great, I, Marguérite Périnot, prophesy that you will be great."

The conductor—a spare Frenchman with a long beard—was patting her and saying kind things.

"She never missed a beat," he declared exultantly. "And there is M. Franz Madore, the eminent composer, saying he must know her, for no one but she shall sing the *title rôle* of his new opera; and M. Michel Dugarde, the most *difficile* of critics, declaring that she is the 'one and only Marguérite' he has ever heard!"

Eugénie, bewildered, happy, clasping her flowers, which she had recovered as she left the stage, replied to their compliments very simply.

At last Madame Périnot returned to the stage box and the others to the front of the house. The conductor, still talking and waving his hands, disappeared down the steps to the orchestra.

The third scene—an excerpt from *Werther*—was about to commence. Gaston stood alone by Eugénie in the wings. He took her hand and held it closely in both his.

"You were magnificent," he said, a choke in his voice. "You will be great, there is not a doubt of it. Already you are a great artist."

She looked at him with shining eyes.

"M. Hypolite," she answered, "if I am ever great—as you say that I shall be—I shall owe it all to you and Madame Périntot."

Hypolite did not speak, but he continued to hold her hand tightly. Then suddenly he let it go and, with a great effort, answered calmly :

"No—you will owe it to your own superb gift, your diligence and your fine ideals."

Eugénie looked at him tenderly.

"I do not forget kindness," she said, "and, from you both I have received more than I can ever repay. There is one thing more I want you to do for me, that is"—she hesitated—"I want to go back now—while I am so happy. I am going to collect my things. Will you tell them to call me a taxi? I shall go back as I am to the Rue des Masques—and will you let Madame Périntot know that I have gone?"

"Yes, of course I will—but"—he hesitated—"I wanted to talk to you very much—need you go back at once?"

"Yes, I must," she whispered, "I am afraid that my aunt may be here. I don't want to be unkind, but I could not bear seeing her now. I am so happy and she has no sympathy for my work. I think she would be shocked, horrified, to see me as I am—painted and wearing these clothes. Do you understand?"

"Yes," he answered gravely, "I understand. But if I am to see you no more to-night, will you fulfil an old promise and come for a walk with me to-morrow morning?—I will take you in the Bois."

"May I? You do not think it would matter, my walking with you?" she demanded wistfully. "It would be such a pleasure."

"What possible harm could there be?" he returned impatiently.

"Very well—then I will come."

Hypolite's face expressed extreme satisfaction.

"At eleven, then, I will fetch you and bring all the newspapers."

"Newspapers?"

"Yes," he replied, laughing. "To-morrow there will be a critique of our acting in all the daily papers. Don't you want to see them?"

"If they are kind to me," she answered.

"No fear but that they will be so," he answered.

"Good-bye," she said, as she turned away.

"I am going to call you a taxi," he answered, hurrying towards the stage door.

Five minutes later, when Gaston returned from giving her message to Madame Périntot, he found the door of Eugénie's dressing-room wide open and the dressing-room itself empty. Hastily, with many suppressed *sapristis* and *parbleus*, he made his way to the stage door dressed as he was. But Eugénie had departed. In her place he found the door-keeper engaged in a violent altercation with a virago who, hatless and loud-voiced, demanded entrance, declaring that she was Mademoiselle Massini's aunt.

Gaston pushed forward and stood in front of the furious woman. He recognized her instantly as the unpleasant person he had seen on the tram in the Place Farnouchelles.

"Can I do anything for you?" he asked quietly.

Victorine's stream of abuse died on her lips. She stood still, staring at him with bloodshot eyes. Her lips were drawn back from her teeth, her expression was strange, her jaw snapped. She thrust her hand within the bodice of her dress.

"The knife"—she whispered to herself.

But with terrible disappointment, she remembered that she had taken it out to sharpen, before setting forth, and in her confusion had left it lying on the kitchen table.

To-night, when she had sat in the gallery watching this man, as he held the transfigured Eugénie in his arms, she had seen red. She knew at last that the vengeance demanded of her dealt with him. She understood he was the victim demanded by the phantom. Now, miraculously, he had been delivered into her hands, and she, foolish and bungling, had missed her chance. As she looked at him, a madness seized on her, she longed passionately to plunge the knife into his body, till the red blood should soil his costly garments, and stain the ground on which he stood.

Gaston, watching her, was overcome by disgust. He stepped back a little.

"You are looking for Mademoiselle Massini," he said.

"I, too, was looking for her. She has left the theatre, for she was very tired."

Victorine did not answer, but spat on the ground at his feet, and, giving a hoarse laugh, turned and tramped away into the night.

Gaston shivered. Then remembering his thin clothes, he turned and re-entered the theatre.

"What a loathsome creature," he said to himself, and again he shivered.

CHAPTER VIII

ON the morning after Eugénie's *début*, at half-past ten, Gaston Hypolite stood at the corner of the rue des Ambassadeurs, at the little kiosk, busily buying all the morning papers he could lay hands on.

Armed with these he made his way to the rue des Masques, stepping briskly in the sharpness of the fresh December morning. The sun shone brilliantly and he was happy, for his personal success last night had been considerable. He knew, too, that the finest of his artistic capacity had come back to him. Association with Eugénie, he told himself, was obviously helpful; therefore he had every intention of developing his friendship with her. He reached the rue des Masques in high spirits.

"*Bon jour, mon ami,*" Madame Périntot said as he entered, but Gaston, quick to feel any lack of cordiality, was conscious of a certain stiffness in her manner. He told himself that the good Madame Périntot regarded him with a fishy eye—of a coldness!—of a distinct coldness! Unwilling to probe her on the subject, he turned to Eugénie with assumption of the perfect ease and gaiety of a clear conscience.

"*Voyez,*" he said, pressing the papers into her hand, "I have read some of them as I came along—they are magnificent, and seem to be unanimous in your favour. They have even given you headlines. '*Début* of a new star!'—'Madame Périntot's discovery!'—'Gaston Hypolite assists at the *début* of a new singer.'—We are all in it—we share your glory, do we not, madame?" he added, addressing Madame Périntot, and holding out one of the papers for her to see.

"Yes," she answered, "it is an unprecedented success, I have every reason to be proud of my pupil."

She turned to Eugénie, laying her hand on the young girl's arm.

"You are pleased, my child," she said gently, "and you deserve your success. Now, after this, you must be content with a year's drudgery. No more 'brilliant appearances' for the present. Remember, you have still a great deal to learn."

"I know it," she answered simply. "Nevertheless I thank you both for your extreme kindness to me."

Marguérite patted her cheek.

"I must be off now," she said, glancing at the clock. "*Tiens!* what have I done with my purse? Go, my child, and look in my room. It should be in my right hand dressing-table drawer, or possibly on the dressing-table—unless I dropped it in the theatre just now."

"I will find it," Eugénie cried, hastening out of the room.

As the door closed behind her, Madame Périntot turned on Hypolite.

"We have a few minutes to ourselves," she said grimly, taking the lost purse from her bag and holding it up in front of him. "Now, *mon ami*, I have a question to ask you. Have you forgotten your promise to me that you would be discreet in your relations with that child?"

"Decidedly," Hypolite told himself, "Madame Périntot is affected with a terribly suspicious nature!" Then aloud: "But certainly not, madame; when do you accuse me of having broken it? Have I not been discretion itself?"

Marguérite emitted a little sound which Hypolite privately labelled a snort.

"I do not think your definition of the word and my own quite agree then," she asserted.

Hypolite shrugged his shoulders.

"I call it indiscreet, and inconsiderate," she went on, "to present bouquets to a young girl. They mean little to you, but much to her."

"How do you know that the bouquet means much to her?" he argued.

"Last night," she said sternly, "I went to bid my little *débutante* good-night, and I found her, long after she should have been in bed, still dressed as Marguérite, and holding your bouquet in her hands."

Hypolite was touched. He grew pink. He was more

than pleased that Eugénie should have cared so much for his flowers. Mentally he preened himself. Perceiving that he was impenitent, Madame Périntot hardened her heart.

"You have been here a great deal," she said. "I am not sure that I have been wise in allowing it. But you came to me making great profession of reformation—and I believed you."

"It was no profession only," he exclaimed angrily. He wondered if she knew that he had asked Eugénie to go out walking with him.

"That is well," she answered calmly. "But I must remind you again that discreet young men do not invite very pretty and totally inexperienced maidens to walk with them."

"Ah," he exclaimed, "you will not give me credit for perfectly disinterested motives."

"I should prefer you to have no motives at all," she interrupted. "No, Hypolite. I have allowed you a free hand, and I most sincerely thank you for all you have done for the child—but you encroach, *mon ami*, and I should not be doing my duty by her, to say nothing of keeping my promise to her aunt, unless I put a veto on further advances on your part."

"Yes," he said, furiously irritated, "her aunt—her most disagreeable, ferocious old aunt."

"Ah," inquired Madame Périntot, staring, "where have you encountered her?"

"She came to the door of the theatre last night in search of her niece, and I happened to be there."

Madame Périntot drew in her breath.

"Then you can understand," she said gravely, "that she is not a person to be ignored?"

And Gaston, remembering the terrible face of the woman and her action before leaving him, shivered.

"No," he answered, "no, you are right. Forgive me, dear madame, I will wrap myself in a veil of discretion; I will eat the bread of discretion—I will become discretion itself! Only—do not cut me off altogether from my delightful and innocent friendship, or I greatly fear you will reduce me to tears—or, still worse, to resort to my evil ways."

Marguerite looked at him steadily.

"I am not responsible for you," she said, "except in as

far as you touch my responsibility towards Eugénie. I consider you have reached those years of indiscretion when a man should have sufficient knowledge of life to choose his own path with safety."

"Yes, he should," Gaston murmured regretfully, "but the danger occurs when he has sufficient temperament to want to walk in more than one path at the same time. He is rather in the position, then, of the circus rider, who stands with one foot on each horse. If the horses or the ways take different routes, ignominiously he may find that he falls to the ground."

"Then," Marguérite asserted dryly, "it is better he should profit by his experience and be wiser next time."

At this juncture Eugénie entered the room.

"I cannot find it, dear madame," she said anxiously. "Madame Rouston, Euphrasie, and I myself have searched high and low."

"Are you certain it is not in your muff?" Hypolite asked sweetly of Madame Périntot.

"Certain," she answered, with admirable composure. "But, *voyons*, no—why, how ashamed I am, dear child, to have given you so much trouble! Here it is, after all. I seldom make such foolish mistakes."

"Mademoiselle," Gaston put in hastily, fearful lest Madame Périntot should demand his escort, and thus wrest from him the tattered fragments of enjoyment; he had no intention of being wholly bereft of conversation with the young girl—"Madame Périntot thinks you must—though you will probably not admit it—be tired after the experiences of last night; therefore she discourages my proposal we should walk. You will not, however, I am sure, be so exhausted as to need instant sleep, therefore, though she is unfortunately obliged to go out, I would like to stay a little while and go through our press notices if you have leisure. Madame Périntot will, I am sure, be delighted."

He looked at Marguérite with civilly raised eyebrows.

"Certainly," she answered. "And I am sure my mother will assist you, she is longing to see them."

Madame Rouston, who had entered the room, looked mystified, but she answered gently:

"I should like to see them when Euphrasie and I have finished the *bouillon*. I will not trouble M. Hypolite and

Eugénie now. I came to know if the purse had been found." She retreated hastily.

The defeated Marguérite, as she left the room, vouchsafed Hypolite only a curt nod.

"I am not really tired, dear madame," Eugénie said, as she went on to the vestibule with Madame Périntot. "Would you not like me to come with you, perhaps I could help you."

"No, my dear," Marguérite whispered; "stay—but send him off soon and gather your things together. It is my intention to take you to Acquarelle after Christmas, therefore you must make the most of the short time with your aunt. We do not want her to feel hurt."

Eugénie embraced Madame Périntot's scented and comfortable person.

"Oh, how I shall love that," she said; "I had been feeling rather sad that the performance was over. And how glad I shall be to see Jacques and Marie again."

Marguérite, seeing that Hypolite was, as she called it, "going to be tiresome," had determined suddenly to wrest Eugénie from him by carrying her away into the country. "In the spring," she reflected, "he will be busy with engagements, and will soon forget her." And therewith she departed, well pleased with the thought she had conceived an effective method of baffling the refractory tenor.

Eugénie returned to the drawing-room glad at heart, but, on reaching the doorway, she was astonished to perceive Gaston leaning dejectedly against the mantelpiece with his head in his hands. His back was to the door, and at his feet lay the scattered sheets of "*Commedia*." Surprised—she hesitated, then she made a movement towards him, but he remained in the same position.

"M. Hypolite," she said at last, "is anything the matter?"

Gaston turned and slowly came across the room to her.

"Nothing is the matter," he said, "if I keep your friendship—if you remain true to me." His voice was hoarse.

Eugénie laid her hand on his shoulder, and answered with grave kindness and tender sympathy such as she would have used to an unhappy child in the days when she was a *garde* in the *crèche*.

"Tell me what is the matter? You are in trouble—something has made you sad. What can I do? You know that you have my friendship, and that nothing can take it from you."

Hypolite, moved by her words, put up his quick, delicate hand and took hers from his shoulder. He brushed it lightly against his lips, and then, as once before, held it against the breast of his coat. To them both came the remembrance of their first meeting and they were silent for a moment.

"Eugénie," he said haltingly, "Eugénie. You remember that I was ill in the autumn, when—when I was in London?"

She nodded, watching him with grave concern.

"Yes," she said, and her voice trembled. "You are not ill again?" she asked with quick anxiety.

Hypolite shook his head.

"No," he said—"no—but I have just received a shock. It is connected with the person—the woman—whose cruelty caused my illness."

He released her hand, and, stooping, picked up the sheets of "*Commedia*." With blurred eyes and unsteady hands he searched the paper till he found a full-page illustration which he set before Eugénie, and she, looking, saw that it was an enlarged snapshot of a lady, driving a carriage drawn—Russian fashion—by three horses abreast. The animals were finely matched and spirited, while the lady, seated on the front seat, handled the reins with evident ease. Eugénie saw that she was fair and delicately lovely, and that the whole equipage was excessively smart. She saw, too, that the lady was exquisitely dressed. She wore a round Russian cap of sealskin, with a stiff aigrette in the front, at the base of which silver chains connected two medallions. The cap was pulled, Cossack fashion, jauntily over one ear. She was wrapped in a superb sealskin coat with collar and cuffs of finest black fox.

Looking at the picture, Eugénie's heart beat quickly and she was filled with a sudden anguish. The lady was very lovely, and Gaston very unhappy; but her agony of mind concerned herself. She knew that she was filled with jealousy—knew that she cared deeply for Hypolite and that the sight of this other woman, whom she believed he loved, was unendurably painful to her. Striving to master her rising emotion, she read the letterpress beneath the picture.

"Princess Yerlatsky is a famous whip. She was snap-shotter yesterday taking her favourite strawberry roans for their constitutional in the Bois. Lovers of opera will be interested to hear that this most accomplished lady intends to return to the stage."

Eugénie handed him the paper, but she could not trust herself to make any comment. She looked up at him steadily, bravely determined that he should not know how terribly near she was to tears.

"Yes?" she murmured.

Gaston, occupied with his own feelings, was unconscious of the pain he was inflicting. He crushed the picture into a ball and threw it on the ground.

"She is evil," he said, "and heartless. She dragged me down and then despised her own handiwork. And I loved her," he cried with a sob, "God—I loved her."

His face was seamed with heavy lines, and his distress so poignant that Eugénie, forgetful of the sudden jealousy which had assailed her, was filled with pity. That same quality of mother-love which Hypolite had discerned in her before asserted itself.

"Gaston, poor Gaston, do not be unhappy. Do not, I beg of you," she said.

Hypolite had moved to the window, which looked out on to the backs of a row of dreary houses. At the use of his Christian name he turned and, coming to her, took both her hands in his.

"Eugénie," he stammered, "I had no right to bother you with this. Especially now—this morning—when you should be so happy."

"You do not bother me," she answered gravely.

"I want to ask you something," he said. "I want you to promise me that nothing shall spoil our friendship. I want you to help me—you are the only woman I have ever known who has had any power over me for good." He pulled her hands closer against him. "You will not let me go even if people insinuate I am not to be trusted; you will believe in me?"

"I will believe in you, and nothing, nothing shall end our friendship," she answered. "If my friendship is a help to you, rest assured that no one can set it aside."

"I shall hold you to your promise," he answered. "When can I see you again? I shall be out of Paris for Christmas, but back immediately after."

"Then we may not meet for a little while."

"Why?" he asked sharply, "why not?"

"Because Madame Périntot is going to take me to Acquarelle immediately after Christmas."

"*Sacré*," he exclaimed—inwardly furious, since divining that Madame Périntot had devised this scheme of carrying Eugénie off to the country as further obstacle to their intercourse.

"Tell me," he demanded, "when was this plan proposed? Why did you not tell me before?"

"How could I," she answered, smiling, "when Madame Périntot only spoke of it as she went out?"

"Ah!" he exclaimed, his suspicions confirmed. Obstinately he determined to outwit what he designated her machiavellian plotting and planning. He himself would go to Acquarelle. Did he not owe it to the faithful Drouot to pay him a visit. He turned to Eugénie and bent down, kissing her hand.

"Well," he said, "perhaps we shall meet sooner than you suppose," and he smiled into her eyes. "I prophesied, once before, that we should meet again. This time I prophesy that we shall meet not only again—but continually. Until then *au revoir*."

The pressure of his hand on hers had caused the young girl poignant emotion. As he looked at her he perceived that her red mouth trembled and that her eyes were luminous. For a moment he hesitated, then the sound of Madame Rouston's voice in the doorway caused him to drop her hand.

"Eugénie, *ma petite*," the little old woman said gently, "I have finished the *bouillon*. Will you not show me the papers? I should like to hear the good things they say of you."

"I must go," ejaculated Gaston hastily. "Already I have kept mademoiselle unscrupulously long. *Au revoir*, madame. *Au revoir*, mademoiselle, *à bientôt*."

He picked up his hat and, over the top of Madame Rouston's unconscious head, he kissed his hand to Eugénie.

A sharp pang shot through her. She made no answering

gesture, but slowly stooped and gathered up the scattered pages of "*Commedia*." Then, turning to Madame Rouston, she commenced patiently to read the notices to the old woman, who, seated on the edge of her chair, her hands folded in her lap, listened as a child receiving instruction.

CHAPTER IX

GASTON left the house in a state of considerable excitement. Mentally he shut his eyes. Madame Perintot had become abominably officious—outrageously suspicious! Therefore she did not deserve that he should keep his promise. Had she kept hers, he argued, and allowed him complete freedom, he would not have been tempted to circumvent her absurd restrictions. He refused to be subjected to surveillance. Besides, since the giving of his promise, events had decided themselves, had marched in a new direction. It was impossible—quite impossible—for her to expect him to maintain a fishlike attitude towards a young and lovely girl who was so deeply moved by his presence. And was it likely that the young girl in question would appreciate so icy an atmosphere? Did not her whole person and nature give promise of very different quality?

Passion arose in him as he visualized her. He had deeply stirred. Acquarelle—yes, it was an exquisite place—the setting of the scene for a romance. Had not the garden so before him? He would walk with her in the wood. Madame Périntot should be circumvented, and Genie—the blood mounted to his forehead—Genie—he would teach her the meaning of many things of which she was ignorant!

He stood still for a moment, conscious only of the strength of his passion for her. He had said nothing; should come between them; and nothing should—of that he was determined. Their strange friendship was their own concern—a purely personal matter.

And—meanwhile—what should he do? He had only he reflected that this morning he should see her. He was glad of the opportunity of walking with her. He would be with her in a

sense walk in her company. He would go to the Bois as he had proposed, and he would think of her there, he would involve schemes for their mutual pleasure.

Heaving a passing taxi, he directed the chauffeur to drive to the Avenue des Acacias; jumping in, he settled himself back in the car. In the brilliant sunshine he looked up the long Avenue du Bois de Boulogne, the automobile raced ahead. The frost curled on the branches of the trees, and the air was filled with a faint cold freshness suggestive of the cold of the winter. Dogs barked and children gambolled, but he was not moved. Gaston contemplated the scene with a certain indifference, for he still believed Eugénie as she stood in the room of the rue des Masques.

For he had not been able to understand himself. He was a lover, not a conqueror—not as he had been with Wanda. As he had loved her beautiful body so he now loved Eugénie's beautiful soul. And Eugénie was going to be something tremendous in his life! It was at last the *passion*—the finding of his ideal mate. She was made for him, for his happiness, even the first woman had been made for the first man—therefore he would brook no interference, no scruples, no part of jealous persons—unatural guardians who dared to deprive him of the pleasure of her presence. He would thrust aside those who opposed him.

"He must walk," he told himself. "Here, in the fairy-land beauty of the woods, in the cold clean air, he would pass along the road that he meant to walk with her."

He looked along the avenue to where the December mist showed blue through the trees, and decided to cross to the right-hand side path. At the edge of it he paused, his attention arrested by a quick trot of horse hoofs. He glanced over his shoulder and felt a queer turn in the blood, as to his astonishment he recognized the living embodiment of the snapshot he had looked at little more than an hour before in the pages of "*Commedia*." He cursed himself for having thus blundered into a meeting with the very person he most wished to avoid; but in his subsequent absorption in Eugénie the matter of the Princess Yeriatsky was forgotten. What an imbecile he had been, and now it was too late to escape—for Wanda, recognizing him, pulled up, and, shifting the reins and whip to her left hand, leaned forward and held

out her right, while she looked at him mockingly, her dainty mouth curving with laughter.

"So," she exclaimed, "it is M. Hypolite. You are then recovered?"

Mechanically he raised his hat. Unwilling though he was to speak to her he knew the chance of ignoring her presence was lost.

"I have recovered, Princess," he said frigidly. "But you have not so far shown much sign of being anxious concerning my health."

"You have recovered your health, but apparently not your manners," she remarked, smiling, though with a dangerous light in her eyes.

"I am not aware that we were either of us particularly civil when last we met," he said roughly, looking down at the ground.

Wanda shook the reins slightly, setting the horses dancing, and then, turning her head, spoke to the groom in Russian—whereat he jumped down and ran to their heads.

She turned again to the young man.

"You were most particularly and detestably rude," she asserted, "but I have forgiven you. Since I heard that you have been very ill, I am charitable enough to suppose your conduct was the result of a disordered brain."

"Perhaps it was," he answered, still looking at the ground.

He wanted desperately to get away—to leave her and go back to contemplation of the noble young figure in the plain black gown, with the pure face and luminous eyes. The sight and sound of Wanda stirred hateful memories.

"Listen," she murmured, bending down, "to show you that I have forgiven, I invite you to come and see me."

He stared up at her dumbly.

"My husband is in K——," she went on; "and I—as you perceive—am not." She laughed a little hardly. "The city in question is intolerably dull at this time of year. I needed a change of scene and new clothes—therefore I came to the only place where a self-respecting woman buys them. Also—I came to see my agent. There is no harm in my telling you an open secret—I am returning to the stage."

Gaston pulled himself together, determined to close the interview. "A thousand pardons, Princess, but I have

already detained you too long," and, bowing, he raised his hat.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "you are then no longer interested in my affairs?"

"They no longer concern me, Princess," he replied steadily.

"No?" she answered. "You are engaged elsewhere." She shrugged her shoulders—"But this time I learn you have descended to a less ambitious level."

"What do you mean?" he demanded, losing the completeness of his self-control.

Wanda's laugh rang out.

"Why," she said, between little spasms of mirth, "is there not a certain little *midinette* about whom you are in process of making yourself the laughing-stock of Paris?"

"Mademoiselle Massini is no *midinette*," he interrupted hotly. "I am by no means alone in my admiration of her. It is admitted that she will undoubtedly be a great singer."

Jealousy piqued Wanda. She grew dangerous.

"Ah," she exclaimed, with assumption of solicitude, "it is serious then? My poor friend, I thought this latest escapade was merely one of a series. I had no intention of wounding your feelings. But surely, however well-founded the admiration, you are foolish to mix yourself up with student performances and thus to expose yourself to ridicule?"

She raised her eyebrows.

"I am not aware that anyone beside yourself has ventured to regard my interest in this *débutante* as ridiculous," he answered.

"It amounts to no more than interest, then, does it?" she asked wickedly.

Gaston shrugged his shoulders slightly and backed away.

"You must excuse me," he said, "I have an appointment to keep."

"In the middle of the Bois de Boulogne?" she inquired, looking up at the sky with a naughty laugh.

"Yes," he answered, losing all his temper and his sense of humour, "and it is an imperative one."

"*Bien*, go and keep it."

Then with a refinement of malice she changed her tactics and became pathetic.

"You are very unkind, Hypolite," she said softly. "Here

have I been offering you a series of olive boughs—you have rejected at least half a dozen—and you refuse me forgiveness. Indeed I have never ceased to regret that we parted on such unhappy terms. I felt deeply concerned when I heard of your illness—reproached myself for certain things I had said to you."

Hypolite, quick to appreciate any woman's kindness, was momentarily touched; moreover, after all, this woman had been very dear to him.

"I thank you, Princess," he said, with ceremony, but his eyes sought hers, asking pardon for his lack of response.

Wanda's colour rose.

"*Au revoir*," she murmured. "I am staying at the Hôtel R—Will you remember that?—Should you come and see me you will find me seated in a veritable bower of the rejected boughs. But remember also, if you come," she looked him in the eyes again, "to bring chocolates to fill *L'Enfer*"—she pointed to the black poodle upon the driving seat beside her—"with sweetness. He has an unpleasant habit, otherwise, of presenting my guests with an unwelcome souvenir in the shape of the marks of his teeth. I call him *L'Enfer* because he contains so many devils. Besides he was a gift from Yerlatsky"—her eyes hardened—"that is why I suppose he dislikes other men so much."

She laughed, and, touching her horses with the whip, caused them to start forward, while the groom, leaving their heads, sprang into the troika.

Gaston was left standing in the road. For some seconds he watched the disappearing carriage. But his decision was taken. He would not remain in Paris. Wanda's efforts to regain possession of him decided the matter. He would go to Acquarelle, to Eugénie—Eugénie, the woman he loved.

CHAPTER X

ON Christmas Eve a black frost of peculiar severity held Paris. The sharp air was full of a stillness and promise of snow which did not fail. Against a lowering sky, banked high with massed clouds, the houses showed pale and stark.

In the courtyard of the Place des Loups an icicle hung from

the tap, while the water that meandered over the cobblestones froze solid during the sunless day.

Victorine had been busy in Les Halles ; but, late in the afternoon, she returned. Even she, accustomed though she was to changes of temperature and to exposure, felt the bitter cold, therefore she had hooded her head in a thick woollen shawl. Her appearance was eminently unprepossessing as she entered the tenement ; for her face was a dull crimson, her lips chapped, and the whites of her eyes more than ever bloodshot.

Eugénie, on her return two days previously, had been shocked at Victorine's appearance, but, to every question put her by the young girl, she replied so violently that the latter had not dared to make further inquiry.

Nevertheless, with the return of her niece, the older woman again succeeded in exercising some measure of self-restraint. With the cunning of the deranged she watched her unconscious companion eagerly for any sign that Eugénie observed a change in her. This very necessity for deception employed her mind and enabled her to pass the two days before Christmas in tolerable calm.

But now, standing in the familiar room, she was assailed by new misery. For the first time in her life, she knew that she would be unable to go to Communion on Christmas Day. That deprivation enraged her. She reproached herself bitterly that she had missed her chance of completing the task that had been given her. For she believed, now, firmly, that the life of Gaston Hypolite was the price set upon the freedom of Eugénie and her own peace of mind. In her confused brain she felt convinced that, with the removal of this tormentor, and the departure of the phantom, Eugénie's power of song would cease. And now the punishment of her stupidity—her negligence in leaving the knife given her by the phantom behind on the night of Eugénie's *début*—was that she had delayed the accomplishment of her duty.—Until that duty was fulfilled, she imagined that the gates of confession and peace were shut to her—therefore the agony of her deprivation weighed heavy on her soul. She sat down wearily in a wooden chair, resting her head on her hands and staring in front of her. She was utterly weary, spent, racked with burning fear and infinite sadness.

At the sound of movement Eugénie came forth from the

inner room. She looked at Victorine anxiously, but the older woman did not speak.

"Aunt Victorine," she said at last, "I have made you some *bouillon*. I thought you would be cold when you came in."

Victorine nodded apathetically, and Eugénie took a pot from the stove and poured the steaming soup into a cup.

"Drink it," she murmured, placing the cup at the old woman's elbow.

Victorine took it up and began to swallow the warm soup. Watching her, Eugénie saw that her hands shook, and she spilled it over her chin so that it ran down to her bosom. She held the cup to her lips, sucking in the liquid with the drinking action of a bullock.

The young girl looked away. The sight of her aunt was painful to her. Her voice was unsteady as she said timidly:

"I have been waiting for your return to go to confession. Are you—are you coming too?"

Victorine set down the cup. She looked terrified, then, recovering herself, she burst out fiercely:

"What right have you to question me in my doings? Do I interfere with you?—Go your own way—and leave me to mine."

She got up from her chair, wiping her mouth on her sleeve, and went into her bedroom.

Eugénie's eyes filled with tears. She passed into her own little room, and, with trembling fingers, fastened on her hat and coat. Taking her rosary and prayer-book, she came back into the kitchen. Victorine stood by the table.

"Let us go," she commanded harshly, and, turning, she went out into the passage.

Eugénie followed her down the long flights of steps, and out, through the crowded streets, to the great church near by.

The young girl shut herself up in her inward thoughts. Confession was a habit from childhood with her, and she regarded it as a necessary ablution. Her confession to-day was but a recital of trivial misdoings; but she also greatly desired to ask counsel concerning the matter that troubled her so deeply—namely, the alienation that was daily growing more marked between herself and Victorine.

The Abbé Goujon, her regular confessor, had been ill for some months, and his place had been taken by a younger man. She had waited patiently for his return, feeling that he alone, who had known her from childhood, would comprehend the whole circumstances. Therefore it was with extreme gladness that she perceived, on entering the crowded church, the Abbé Goujon's venerable white head and clean-cut, ascetic face in the illumined square of his own confessional. The Abbé was a man of considerable intellect, with a fine, wide-minded generosity of outlook. Greatly beloved in the district, he was a wise confessor, and an untiring worker amongst the poor. He belonged rather to the *ancien régime* by birth, though his sympathies lay with the people and not with the *noblesse*. He had known Victorine in the days before Eugénie's birth, and his influence over her was strong. Now his keen eyes observed the two women as they entered, and dwelt with peculiar interest on the young girl whose sudden appearance in the world of art had, but a few days before, astonished him. That this child, with whose history he was familiar, should become a great opera singer troubled him a little.—He told himself it was almost a pity that her talent had been discovered—but here he checked himself, for lack of faith in the merciful overruling of his Creator.

When her turn came Eugénie stepped into the confessional, and, crossing herself, commenced the recital of her sins. After she had received absolution she poured forth the story of her new life, and the Abbé, listening, was convinced that his reasoning had been just. Very certainly the hand of the Eternal Father had directed the child. That she was right to follow the dictates of His will he had no doubt; and that, as long as she kept before her the clean and noble ideal which she had set forth, no harm could touch her—of that she might be convinced. He promised to come and see both her and her aunt, as soon as the accumulation of parish business, resultant on his prolonged illness, should have been disposed of. Then he would place before Victorine the matter of Eugénie's duty to her gift, as he understood it.

Greatly comforted, Eugénie left the confessional with the Abbé's—"Go in peace, my child, pray for me," ringing in her ears. She had done right, and the confessor, whom she trusted, upheld her action. She knelt down again, at a little distance, and absorbed herself in prayer.

Victorine, at the moment of Eugénie's entry into the confessional, had left the company of waiting penitents, and retreated further from the Abbé. She knelt on the hard stone pavement by a pillar, her face buried in her hands. Once or twice she looked towards the confessional and made a movement to get up; and once, she thought, as Eugénie left the *prie-dieu*, she saw the Abbé search the waiting penitents with his eyes—and she cowered down lest he should see her. She longed infinitely for the peace of his absolution, but she knew that the hatred in her heart for Gaston Hypolite was growing daily—together with that fixed purpose of slaughter. To enter the confessional meant to confess that hatred—to renounce the just punishment of an evil-doer and to deliver the helpless Eugénie over to the enemy. And had not the mother of the girl come to her from purgatory demanding this sacrifice from her? That sacrifice must be made—or Marthe's spirit would not rest, and she—Victorine—would be for ever haunted by the horror which now pursued her day and night. Thus, crouching in the shadow, she struggled with abominable agony of mind. Pressing her hands to her bosom, she felt the hard substance of the knife. Its presence sustained her.—“Oh! God, give me my opportunity soon!” she pleaded.

Resolutely she got up, and, crossing over to her niece, touched her on the arm.

Eugénie, though reluctant to rise from her knees, got up. She had not seen Victorine enter the confessional, but she concluded that she must have done so. Still absorbed in spiritual communion, she left the church in company with her aunt, the exaltation following her recent exercises of piety filling her with gladness.

Victorine, walking by her, pressed the knife against her bosom. She was exultant, fierce, dominating. She had resisted the weak desire to pander to her own immediate comfort by relinquishing her purpose. She determined to accompany Eugénie to midnight Mass at the *Sacré Cœur*—but, along with her, she would take the talisman that should harden her heart against backsliding.

Eugénie, as was always her custom on Christmas Eve, passed the hours between confession and setting forth to the *Sacré Cœur* kneeling in her bedroom, her eyes contemplating the ivory crucifix; while Victorine, left to her-

self, had taken off her boots. In her stockinged feet she padded to and fro—from corner to corner. She held the knife in one hand and, from time to time, she muttered to herself broken phrases, while she tried the point of it on different objects. Her eyes were strange and the corner of her mouth wet with saliva. Every now and then she stopped still, listening, lest Eugénie, hearing her, should come forth. At eleven o'clock she replaced the knife inside the bodice of her dress and put on her boots. Eugénie came into the kitchen—she carried a rosary in her hands, her expression was noble, her eyes visionary.

"Shall we go, Aunt Victorine?" she asked—and Victorine, hooding her head in her shawl, grunted assent.

Up through the silent streets—up—up—to Montmartre—the two women made their way, mounting the steep hill to the great white church.

As they drew near they mingled with a crowd of people, coming from every quarter of the city to the Sacré Cœur. Swept in by the great crowd, they entered the church.

The seats had long since been filled and so the two kneeled on the ground in a corner—Eugénie took out her rosary—from where she was she could see the High Altar, which was covered with white flowers and ablaze with candles.

Silence—through which fluttered the little sound of hushed movement from the gathering crowd. Victorine kneeling behind her niece, clasped her hands over her bosom in which lay the talisman which was to protect the immortal soul of Eugénie from sin. But, with her entry into the church, exultation left her, and she was assailed by an unendurable agony of deprivation. A craving for spiritual peace tormented her—she did not know if she would be able to endure. The sound of the clock striking faintly, and, mingled with those fluttering movements, the tap, tap of crutches—as the cripples of Paris gathered in the shadows of the arches.

Eugénie counted the strokes of that faintly striking clock until they numbered twelve, then a procession entered from the side door, and passed up to the Sanctuary. The Midnight Mass of the Nativity commenced, announcing the glad tidings of the birth of Christ.

"In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti. Amen."

The congregation crossed themselves.

"Introibo ad altare Dei."

Eugénie was looking up, and beyond the great crowd—beyond, to the High Altar, where, amidst that blaze of light and flowers, the figure of the priest, clad in gorgeous medieval garments, moved silently, with angular traditional gesture, in the ritual of the great ceremony. An ecstasy of worship filled her. The glory and beauty of her religion, the purity of the birth of the Christ-Child stirred her imagination.

At the *Confiteor* she bowed her head, praying to the Innocent that she might be kept free from sin.

At the *Indulgentium* she looked up again, crossing herself, with the conviction that her soul was purged of stain.

When the priest read the collect Eugénie, who knew it by heart, repeated the words with silent lips.

"Oh God Who hast made this most holy night to shine forth——"

With her whole soul she visualized the shining forth of that first most Holy Night, and the drama of the Immaculate Birth filled her with spiritual gladness. Truly was the Virgin Mother blessed among women.

After the reading of the Epistle, the priest's clear, sonorous voice gave out the wonderful story of the shepherds as set forth in the Gospel of St. Luke.

The great congregation, standing, faced the uplifted altar, and the incense of the aspirations of the faithful rose beyond the vault of the heaven till it reached the Throne of Light.

Victorine, listening, could no longer endure. She swayed, as she rose to her feet, a bleak despair hulling her down. Out of all these souls she alone dared not listen to the message of peace and good-will. She turned and fled. Forcing her way through the crowd, out of the door, down the steps like one possessed, she stumbled, her hands over her ears.

She knew that flight alone could help her; for, if she remained one moment more in that Holy Presence, her courage would desert her and she would relinquish her task.

Out into the darkness she hurled herself, beating forward blindly—away from the Divine influence of the Christ-Child.

At last her knees and stomach came violently into collision with the parapet of a wall. She stood arrested at the edge of the terrace, overlooking Paris, to which Eugénie had come on the day of her return from Acquarelle. Her knees—smarting from the shock of their contact with the rough wall—

gave under her, so that she almost fell. Supporting herself by her hands, she lowered the bulk of her body to a kneeling posture. Sobs rose in her throat and she beat her head against the wall. Then, feeling in her bodice, she took from it the black-handled knife which had been given her by the phantom. As she held it up the cold light of the stars caught the surface of the blade so that it glittered. She clasped both her hands on the haft, and, bowing her head, kissed the blade. Then from the church came the pealing sound of the organ in the Christmas Hymn, *Adeste Fideles*. Victorine—outcast—knelt with her lips fastened on the cold steel of the knife.

"I, too, am faithful," she sobbed, and the tears streamed over her face.

Suddenly she became aware of another sound which at first she took for an echo of her own weeping. But, after a moment, she understood that someone near her in the darkness wept brokenly, punctuating her wailing with hollow, tearing coughs.

To right and left of her blank space was discernible in the moonlight. Rising, she hid the knife and leaned over the parapet, to where the alley, turning below the wall, followed the precipitous slope. On the ground beneath was the black blot of a human form. She could see the outline of a woman's head bent down over her knees. Victorine was assailed by terror. She believed that the spectre which pursued her was again striving to communicate with her.

The figure in the alley below clasped itself together moaning—racked again by terrible coughing.

Victorine leant over the wall paralysed with agony. She sweated, she turned sick, her teeth chattered, and foam fell from her lips. She tried to speak, to move away, but could not.

The racking cough ceased and was followed again by pitiful sobbing.

As once before she took out her purse and, selecting a five-franc piece, dropped it over the wall, where it rang on the hard ground.

"Below there," she stammered, and her harsh voice quavered. "Look! there is money for you! Go home! Let me rest! Let me rest!" Her voice cracked, and she swayed, hanging over the parapet.

The figure moved slightly. Dimly she saw a white face

turned upwards. From the gaping mouth a thin stream of blood issued. At the sight of it she drew back and let forth a terrible cry—harsh and discordant. With her hands tearing at her own throat she hurried along until she reached the steps leading to the alley way. The phantom—the phantom called her! She must obey the summons! Racked with horror, blundering, she ran violently, like some wild animal, letting forth sharp cries and inarticulate sounds, until she reached the place where she had seen the figure. But the passage way was empty.

Then Victorine flung herself on the ground groaning, and, as her outstretched hands scrabbled on the earth, her fingers came in contact with the five-franc piece that she had thrown. Raising herself to a sitting posture she examined it—the surface was reddened with fresh blood.

Groaning, she flung it far out into the night, and, pressing her hands to her bosom, clasped the knife.

"It was not money she wanted," the wretched woman sobbed, "but blood—the blood of the victim that shall save the immortal soul of Eugénie from torment."

She rose and, dragging herself with leaden footsteps up the slope, reached the door of the church. The gateway and the steps were alive with cripples—maimed—halt—blind—hideous with disease. Predatory misery had gathered to receive alms from the Faithful.

A stream of people began to descend the steps—Mass was over.

The suppliant band stretched forth their hands in wailing chorus. She could see Eugénie now, passing unconsciously through the welter of decayed and broken humanity. The young girl's face was pale. Her eyes were luminous with vision. An ascetic purity emanated from her very person. She looked as Joan of Arc might have looked when she went forth to conquer and to die. She had passed this night of the birth of Christ in communion with the Saints, and the soul within her shone forth from her eyes.

On the way home the tortuous streets and alleys were alive with beggars—for, on Christmas night, in the byeways around the Sacré Cœur, all the diseased and disabled of Paris crawl forth to range at liberty. They vie with each other in exhibiting to the pious passer-by the foulness of their physical mutilations, plying these exhibits as wares for profit.

To Victorine the pleading of these miserable creatures was torture. They seemed to mock her, asking, not for money, but for blood; while, in the lurking shadows, before her, amongst the crowd, she saw, ever and again, the form of the phantom flitting with flying curls and flapping black skirts—turning to look at her with a terrible smile on its scarred and bleeding mouth.

BOOK VI

"LOVE LONGING"

CHAPTER I

THE young couple at Acquarelle had spent the summer in quiet happiness. Marie-Anne, being a thrifty and conscientious housekeeper, had settled down to her duties of wifehood with ease and content.

But when the honeymoon was over, and Jacques resumed his work, he was out nearly all day driving and riding, therefore he insisted that Marie-Anne should take a *bonne à-tout-faire*. She had given way to please him; but the management of the dairy and the milking of the brown cow she refused to delegate to anyone. That, she declared, was a matter which concerned her only. The spotless dairy was a source of great pride to her, and the brown cow became—as so often among French country people—the companion of their walks. Marie-Anne—her cosy little figure clad in tight-fitting bodice and full short skirts, her dark hair tucked under a muslin cap, and her feet shod in stout shoes—would lead the sleek creature by a head-rope in the rich grass by the roadside. And when Jacques protested that, with three good fields of grass, it was not necessary to seek pasture elsewhere, Marie-Anne put her firm arm about him coaxingly.

"*Voyons, Jacques,*" she said, "anyone might imagine that you were jealous of Clémentine! Do you not understand she is a particularly intelligent cow—she needs amusement—she must be encouraged by change of scene to give us the best milk and the best butter in the village! Why, only yesterday, when little Josine Giougite passed with her father's cow, Clémentine, who was at the gate, turned towards me—as I stood in the garden. She lowed loudly, asking as plainly as if she spoke that I would take her out walking too."

"Ah, my little Marie," Jacques answered, "all that you do is good in my sight."

"Oh, my husband," the young wife whispered, "I love you so."

Thus it was with the two. They lived and loved simply and wholesomely; each going about his own business.

Marie Anne was very happy and in the exuberance of her youth and health; she played with her husband and property as a serious child plays with well-loved toys. From her earliest babyhood she had cared for animals and flowers, rather than dolls and the ordinary playthings that are beloved by little humans. For Marie-Anne was a child of the outdoor world; and to her, the wind, the sun, and the scented flowers were playmates. Her love of flowers amounted almost to a passion as she grew up. When out walking she would bind great trails of convolvulus or clematis in the cow's horns and along the head-rope; she would fill her hands with the wild flowers that grew on the edge of the plain—sweet-scented clover, buttercups, and ragged-robin, daisies and speckwell.

Then, too, the garden of La Maison Grise was full of blossoming shrubs and plants. When the place had been inhabited by a man he had planted lavishly for his own enjoyment. Marie Anne revelled in the riot of perfume and colour. She would spend the long summer days in the garden among a wilderness of roses, lilies, jasmine, clematis, nicotina, evening primrose, stock and sweet sultan. Each month the changing flowers gave her new gladness.

But when the heat of summer died and the flowers faded, Marie-Anne grew timid of going out alone. A new presence was within La Maison Grise—a presence as yet unborn, but vitally taking its part in the day's interests.

Jacques, because of that presence, loved his wife yet more tenderly. Hand in hand, when twilight dropped her grey mantle over the forest, the two would wander out to the edge of the plain; where, together, they would dream of the new wonder of creation which had come to them out of the heart of life and of love.

Jacques was very gentle with her in these days; while Marie-Anne, living now for the one thought of her husband and unborn babe, worshipped the man who had given her the crown of her womanhood.

"The child will love these," she would say, returning with her hands full of wild flowers. "Think, *mon Jacquot*, how the baby will pick them with tiny hands like the petals of a rose-leaf."

Then they would kiss one another with the lingering kiss of lovers to whom time has no limit.

"I shall make a swing here—under the red may tree," he would say, "so that when the baby swings the red petals will fall on it. Also I will build a little cart, for the collection of fir cones—our child will want to be useful."

M. Drouot, at work in his studio, was a silent witness of the comings and goings of the young pair.

"They are very much in love, these two," he said to himself. Then turning to his palette and canvas, he would paint furiously, weaving flaming reds, crimsons, orange and gold into the pageant of Eastern sunset, or dull browns and sullen yellow into naked Arab or infinity of sand.

Beyond an occasional word over the fence, and one visit of ceremony, Drouot did not go near them. It pleased him to watch the little idyll himself unseen. The mystery of Marie-Anne's coming motherhood was very beautiful to him. The reverent, brooding look in her dark eyes and the new seriousness of her piquant little face touched him deeply. Sometimes he would see her sit for hours, on a low, wooden chair in the garden, busy with neat sewing of tiny garments—at intervals she would hold them up and kiss them.

Later, Madame Rouston came to visit her; and, staying on week after week, the frail old woman and the young wife would pace the garden together. Madame Rouston regarded Marie-Anne with great devotion. She saw in her the recrudescence of her own early wifehood—the same ideals—the same whole-hearted and cleanly passion for her husband, the same hardy peasant standard of taste and living. Hence she came back, again and again, into the atmosphere which she loved.

As Marie-Anne grew unable to perform any but light duties about the home, Madame Rouston took over her work. The old woman was never so happy as when she was making butter in the little dairy. Marie-Anne would visit her there, and, taking a chair, sit in the doorway, while the tiny bent figure stepped to and fro briskly.

Every now and then Madame Rouston would break out into little fragments of song.

"Listen, Marie-Anne," she said, "it was thus that my mother sang." And the thin cracked voice sounded shrilly sweet amid the tap of her quick footsteps and the soft patting of the wooden butter-workers.

Then, when the gleaming yellow butter was safely stored on a top shelf beneath white muslin, Madame Rouston delighted to sally forth and lead the cow by the wayside, as she had done when a young girl.

This taking the animal to pasture became a kind of gentle passion with her. She chose always the same route through the orchard to the edge of the plain, and on, through the great clover-field, to where the main road passed the outskirts of the village. From thence she wandered up the straight road to the little lonely rock which marks the boundary of the two villages of Acquarelle and Croix-St.-Jean. Every step of this daily pilgrimage became a heart-beat of remembrance—remembrance of the long ago wedding journey and her unforgotten youth.

The old woman had taken up the broken threads of intimacy with the home of her childhood. Therefore it was that Marguérite, who after a six weeks' stay in the summer had returned to Paris, was tranquil concerning her mother's well-being whenever the latter announced her intention to visit *les jeunes mariés*. She recognized that, for Madame Rouston, the wheels of life had run on till they had reached the point where age, for lack of vitality, lives not in the present, but clings to remembrance for support. For to the aged, the contemplation of the past period of warm-blooded youth is less comfortless than a weary straining of waning powers after new sensation. To the middle-aged, in whom vitality is still strong, that gradual process of relinquishment holds bitter and poignant grief. For them the panorama of youth is still too vitally near.

Marie-Anne was devoted to her new relations. In her quiet way she took them all inside as her own particular friends—that "all" included Eugénie. For the two—Eugénie and Marie-Anne—had taken a great fancy to one another. Eugénie admired Marie-Anne's clever house-keeping, and her married dignity; while Marie-Anne was captivated by Eugénie's beautiful face and voice.

When, after her conversation with Hypolite, Marguérite had written proposing they should all come down during January, Marie-Anne had at first been doubtful, as the time for the baby's birth was not now far distant. But Jacques, thinking such pleasant company would be good for her, now that she was forced to lead a less active and outdoor life, had begged her to say yes.

So it was settled that, during their visit, Marie-Anne should have an extra *bonne* to help her in the house; and, on the second of January, the party duly arrived by the *petit train*.

Snow had fallen in the week after Christmas, and the progress of the *petit train* through the white-clad country had been slow, therefore all three were glad when they entered the shelter of La Maison Grise.

Marie—great-eyed and blushing—wrapped in a big shawl, had met them on the threshold and led them into the warm kitchen, where a kettle was singing on the hob and a substantial meal was in active process of preparation.

"How pretty you look," Marie-Anne exclaimed, as Eugénie, dressed in a black and white check suit and a smart little black hat, stood warming her feet at the great fire. She put up her hand and stroked the soft fox fur that the girl wore round her neck.

Eugénie smiled at her.

"Not more so than you, my dear," she whispered.

"That reminds me," said Marie-Anne, "two visitors came this morning, asking for you both. They wanted to know when you would arrive."

"Two visitors," Marguérite inquired; "that must have been your father and mother."

"No," Marie-Anne replied, her eyes twinkling, "they knew when you were coming. Guess!" she cried.

"Who can it have been?" Eugénie murmured.

"It was M. Drouot, the artist," cried Marie-Anne triumphantly, "and he brought with him M. Hypolite, his friend—what a strange thing that he should be the singer with whom you made your *début*, Eugénie. I did not see him," she added with dignity, "but Jacques tells me that M. Hypolite was very eager to meet you both."

Madame Périnot with difficulty repressed an exclamation, while Eugénie blushed deeply. The older woman looked keenly at Eugénie, noting her confusion. Had there been

any understanding between them as to this meeting? But her momentary distrust of the young girl was dispelled when Jacques, who had caught the latter part of Marie-Anne's sentence, came up to them.

"Yes," he said, "M. Hypolite was very amusing. He talked long and his friend listened quietly. M. Hypolite declared that you would be very much surprised to find him here, as neither of you knew of his intention to visit Acquarelle."

Marguérite was relieved that Eugénie was innocent in the matter; meanwhile she inquired:

"How did they know we were coming?"

"I can explain that," Eugénie answered simply; "after you left, the morning after my *début*, M. Hypolite told me he was going out of Paris for Christmas. He asked when we should meet on his return, and I told him I did not know, since you had promised to take me to Acquarelle."

"Ah!" said Marguérite, with pretended gaiety—"then the mystery is solved."

Inwardly she itched with the desire to shake Hypolite, even to do great violence to that exasperating young man. "*Nom d'un chien!* I bring the child here for the express purpose of keeping her out of his way," she reflected, "only to find him installed next door. Very certainly he shall know what I think of him! It is to be war, is it?—very well—I will enlist Drouot on my side. He, at least, has a conscience. *Sacré!*" she exploded mentally, "why cannot the imbecile perceive that already the child is beginning to lose her heart—*Nom de Dieu*, I could flay him, irresponsible *coquin!*"

She turned to look for Eugénie, but the latter had disappeared into her room with Marie.

Eugénie and Madame Périntot occupied the two rooms, on the ground floor, which looked out on to the lane and faced the western wall of Drouot's house and property.

That night, Eugénie, before undressing, opened her window and looked out into the frozen stillness. Over in the big studio of the next house she could hear Gaston singing, and the rich notes of his voice seemed penetrated with meaning new to her. She listened trembling, her lips parted. She knew that he had come here to see her—that now he sang to her, greeting her, and telling her that on the morrow they would meet.

CHAPTER II

THE following morning, when Eugénie awoke, the wind, driving great curtains of fleecy snowflakes before it, beat against the casements and howled in the chimneys. The cold was piercing, and the white world was blotted out by whirling, dazzling fragments of starry fluff.

Warm-blooded and finely healthy, Eugénie was conscious of charming gaiety, for she relished extremes of weather with the enjoyment that belongs to childhood.

Accordingly, about eleven o'clock, despite Madame Périntot's protestations, she borrowed a big shawl, short skirt, goloshes and umbrella from Marie-Anne, and set forth up the street against the driving snow. Under the wall of the church she cannoned into a man who was wrestling with the cape of his ulster, which had broken loose on one side. He strove to button it with one hand while he held his open umbrella in the crook of his elbow and a big basket in the other hand. Eugénie, looking up at the sound of a volley of *Sapristis* and apologies, saw that the afflicted wayfarer was Gaston Hypolite himself.

"M. Hypolite," she exclaimed, laughing shyly, "it is you—I am glad to see you. *Attention!*" she cried, as his umbrella fell to the ground and the cape of his ulster flew open again.

"If you would but help me," he murmured plaintively—"it is the basket that defeats me! I can manage the cloak and the umbrella if I put the basket down, but, meanwhile, taking advantage of my occupation, it flies from me—excited by the evil whispering of the wind—as if I were the devil. In vain do I retrieve it—it tries always to return home. Unless you come to my aid I am vanquished."

"Then most assuredly I must help you," she said; "you see the button that fixes the cloak has given. *Tenez!* I will put in this big pin. There—now all is well!"

"All is well when I am with you," he asserted, "and now that I have found you, I shall not permit you to desert me. How do I know that the pin will hold?" he added, looking

into her eyes, whereat she was moved by a tenderness that astonished her.

"Where were you going?" he inquired—"on such a cold morning, and all alone?"

"I don't know."

"I do. You were coming to help me! And now we are both going to the same place."

"And where is that?"

"To the Ferme au Forêt—wherever it may be—as yet I only know it is at the end of the street on the edge of the forest."

"I can tell you all about it," she exclaimed, "for I have been there."

"*Bien*!—an additional reason why you should not desert me."

"I never said I was going to desert you."

"No, but I was afraid you would."

"I am coming," she murmured, after a moment's hesitation, "but let us set forth."

"You had better come under my umbrella," Gaston declared persuasively.

Eugénie shook her head.

"Just now you declared that three things at a time were too much to manage, then, recklessly, you propose to saddle yourself with a fourth—no—I will cling to the shelter of Marie's umbrella. But, meantime, may I know why we are going to the Ferme au Forêt?"

"It is necessary," he said, as they moved forward. "Drouot wished to ask you and Madame Périntot to dine to-night."

He chuckled inwardly as he remembered Drouot's herculean efforts to get out of sending that invitation, and his own determined battering down of the unfortunate artist's protests.

"Annette—the *bonne*—declared that it was impossible—'she had not ordered anything extra—she refused to go marketing in this weather. Chickens!' she declared—'chickens she must have—and fresh eggs, monsieur!'" (he mimicked Annette's fussy manner)—"'a dozen of them—very fresh—for the making of an omelette'—and so I volunteered to go and bring her home a whole farm yard, eggs, chickens, sheep and oxen—should she require them! She was extraordinarily contemptuous of my offer, and rejected my proffered oxen and fatlings. Nevertheless

she ended by saying that I might go to the Ferme au Forêt and bring her home a couple of fowls and a dozen eggs. She intimated that, if I showed sufficient intelligence to reach the place, I could not possibly make a mistake in the goods, as, at the mention of her name, Madame Panette would produce the tenderest and fattest chickens and the freshest of eggs—or was it the newest laid chickens and the tenderest and fattest of eggs? I am not sure. Though, in any case, she assured me '*le bon Dieu* alone could persuade hens to lay in this weather'—at that point she produced the offending basket and I fled, feeling her speech concerning the origin of eggs becoming indelicate."

Eugénie, who had listened to his recital with amusement, now laughed outright.

"Poor M. Hypolite," she said. "Indeed I feel very grateful to you for taking so much trouble about our dinner."

"You will have to come," he said coaxingly, "after all my efforts you would not leave those chickens on my hands? Besides, the fear of Annette is before my eyes. What will she say if she finds I lied to her?" he dangled the beehive basket in his hand and looked at her, from under the umbrella, with mock piteousness, "for I swore that you would come."

"That rests with Madame Périntot," she answered as they entered the square courtyard of the farm.

From the great barns, on either hand, came the bleating of sheep and their strong odour.

Following a narrow swept pathway they went up to the front door and knocked. After a moment Madame Panette appeared. The wind and snow drifted into her face.

"Come in," she said. "whoever you may be, come in out of the cold—for the snow blows into the house on this side. Also I cannot leave my baby for long, he is sure to crawl into mischief."

"Then we will come inside," Gaston answered.

Madame Panette regarded Eugénie admiringly.

"It is a bitter day," she said, "but you evidently are not the worse for it, mademoiselle."

"No," Hypolite echoed, "madame is right, mademoiselle's appearance is perfect."

"*Voyons*," Eugénie protested, "we did not come here to discuss my health."

"No," he assented—"there was a matter of two chickens and a dozen eggs."

"You shall have them," Madame Panette observed, "I have two fine fowls, but they are only partly plucked—they were killed last night. I will set to work and finish them at once with my farm boy. Will you wait for them, or shall I send him up with them later?"

Hypolite consulted Eugénie with a glance.

"We will wait," she decided.

"Then come into the parlour," Madame Panette said.

Leading them into a room at the back of the passage, she drew up the blind and went out, closing the door.

The moment that she left the room, Hypolite laid his hand on Eugénie's shoulder.

"You are glad to see me?" he demanded.

She did not answer for a moment—but looked at him steadily, and, as her eyes met his, these two knew that their mutual gladness in each other's presence had passed the bounds of friendship and blossomed into love.

Hypolite stooped and set his lips on hers, and Eugénie, moved by an irresistible impulse, returned his kiss with a gentle fluttering movement of her lips.

Hypolite put his arm about her.

"My beloved, my Eugénie," he murmured, "my God, how I love you."

And Eugénie, with his arms about her, felt his presence as a burning flame, so that she turned sick with the wonder and glory of the knowledge that he loved her. Her heart beat till the pulsing blood sounded like a hammer, while she was thrilled by a sensation that was almost pain. She remained passive for a moment, then, with a quick movement, she freed herself and moved away from him panting.

"What is it?" he said, following her, "have I offended you?"

"No, no—it is only—that I love you—and that no man has ever kissed me before."

She hid her face in her hands.

Hypolite put his arm about her gently. With the other hand he strove to remove her fingers from her face.

"My Eugénie," he whispered, "if you love me, kiss me again, for your kisses are heaven to me."

Trembling she put up her lips and once more he kissed her, until she hid her face, while her hands clung to his.

"Is it not sweet?" he whispered, "the first kiss of the man who loves you."

"It is the most beautiful thing in life," she answered.

Footsteps sounded in the passage, and Hypolite moved quickly to the other side of the room.

Madame Panette entered hurriedly.

"I have been as quick as I could," she said briskly; "you will be careful not to swing the basket, monsieur, because of the eggs."

"A thousand thanks. I will be careful."

They set forth again into the storm.

Outside the gate Hypolite held out his arm, and silently Eugénie slipped her hand into it.

All the way they walked silently, each feeling the contentment of the other's presence. Eugénie did not question whether Hypolite had done right or wrong—she believed that he loved her. Vaguely—as she understood love—she realized that it meant marriage such as that which was the lot of Marie-Anne. Hypolite's love for her, she did not doubt, was such love as that of Jacques for Marie—only something altogether more beautiful—something irrevocable even as her own.

Hypolite, occupied with triumph over obstacles, was not in a mood to trouble himself about the future, enough that the present was enchanting. That at this moment he was madly in love with Eugénie he knew, and that he intended to profit to the nth by every opportunity that fate should afford him he also knew. Marriage did not enter his thoughts—he had no sense of religious obligation, and, accustomed to the free living of artist life, he took for granted that—loving him and not being bound by social obligation—she would be willing to disregard convention at a little pressure on his part. In such a devotion as he offered her there would be no question of obligation. Love, he considered, was sufficient. And, in this case, he offered her an ideal devotion. "She shall look into the secret places of my soul. Nothing that I have—that I think—that I do—shall be withheld," he told himself.

At the door of La Maison Grise she loosed her arm.

"You will ask Madame Périntot to come to-night?" he said, his eyes on her.

"Yes," she murmured.

"We will sing. I have some new songs—new, at least, I believe to you—that I want you to hear. When I am singing, listen to the words—they are spoken to you. They will be sung to you only."

"I heard you last night," she whispered.

"I was singing to you then."

"I knew," she said, her lips trembling.

"My God," he said, "how I want to kiss you."

"Not here—not now"—she backed away—"give me time."

"Then to-night," he said, in a low voice—"I cannot wait longer."

Eugénie looked at him steadily.

"I love you, Gaston," she said—as if she made a declaration of faith—then she went into the house and shut the door.

CHAPTER III

THAT night Marguérite and Eugénie went round to the Villa des Fées.

Marguérite—not a little disturbed in her mind by the fact that Eugénie had already seen Hypolite—set forth with firm intention of coercing Drouot into reasoning with his friend. If coercion should prove unfruitful Madame Périntot would cajole—she was prepared to go to any reasonable length. Hypolite must be brought to see her point of view. Therefore she rang and knocked on the outer door of the Villa des Fées in a somewhat martial mood. But, since the door was opened by her host, looking particularly charming in conventional evening attire of civilization, she was compelled to defer her attack. Despite herself her beguiling dimples made their appearance, and she put out her hand, saying:

"It is very nice to find you here, M. Drouot. Ah! but what weather!" She slipped and clung to his arm. "Tiens! a thousand thanks—that is right."

"Keep to the pathway, madame," he admonished, swing-

ing a lantern to guide her footsteps. "It is exceedingly good of you to come out on such a night——"

Marguérite's bottled-up wrath was fast evaporating. "At least Drouot could not be blamed!" she told herself.

"But it is a pleasure," she asserted graciously. "In this desolate country there are so few persons with whom one can talk one's own talk."

They entered the big studio.

"It is very rough—my *ménage*," he apologized. "You and Mademoiselle Massini must forgive me if I cannot offer you anything but a model's dressing-room——"

Eugénie smiled.

"I have never been accustomed to luxury, M. Drouot," she said.

"Then you will be content with this?" he inquired, leading the way to a small curtained recess.

Marguérite took off her cloak and looked at herself in the long glass. She saw to her vexation that the damp had uncurled her fringe.

"*C'est idiot*," she said to herself, "who would have thought it in just a moment like that."

She thought longingly of the little lamp in her room, and looked around disconsolately for curling tongs.

Eugénie, meantime, waited, and, without contemplating her own image save for a cursory glance at her dark smooth hair, stood, lost in thought, while Madame Périntot dealt with her traitorous fringe. She had not told the latter anything concerning Hypolite, save the bare fact that she had walked to the farm with him. In a sense her breath was taken away. She could not think, for the time being, she could only feel. All day her mind had been concentrated on the remembrance of those kisses that he had given her, and the first awakening of passion—as yet unrealized as such—confounded her. With him, love had seemed so simple—so natural. Away from him the more she thought of it the more confused she became. She longed to see him again; and yet, at the prospect of it, she grew hot with apprehension. Lost in the tumult of her thought she started when Madame Périntot called to her.

"Come, my child, I am ready."

Obediently she followed the older woman into the studio.

She was conscious of a great, bare, lofty room, with easels and pictures on either hand; of silken arabesque of Moorish rugs on the polished floor; and, at the further end, backed by the fan of light thrown up from the fire of blazing logs, the face and figure of the man she loved.

She stood still, her heart thumping, her face pale, and Gaston, divining her emotion, came across the room. After greeting Madame Périntot he turned to her. At the touch of his hand she recovered her self-control. For the softness of his palm pressed against hers with a caress.

"Come and sit over here," he said, moving into a corner of the room where a heavy cushioned settee, covered with silk of dull Chinese purple and blue, was half hidden in shadow.

Eugénie seated herself and, looking at him, saw that he, too, was moved by their meeting. The fact that he shared her embarrassment gave her confidence.

"We have come," she said, her voice shaking, "as you see—your chickens will not be wasted."

"I had forgotten that—for the remembrance of other things was so poignant."

Eugénie did not answer; but the quick fluttering movement of the blood pulsing at the base of the column of her throat was perceptible, and the sight stirred the young man deeply.

"My beloved," he said, "you are not troubled? You are not angry with me?"

"How can I be angry?" she murmured; "why should I be angry—when I love you?"

"Have you said anything to Madame Périntot?" he asked, with a little gesture in the direction of Marguérite and Drouot.

Eugénie started.

"No," she said.

Gaston inwardly heaved a sigh of relief.

"Then let things be," he returned, "it will be time enough later—when you leave here. At present let it lie between us two—for it concerns us only. No one," he asserted, "has the right to interfere between those who love."

"It shall be as you wish," she said gently.

She looked across the room to where Madame Périntot and Drouot stood talking. At that moment the former, glancing

at the couple on the settee, turned to her host with a little shrug of her shoulders.

"M. Drouot," she said, "I am a little exercised in my mind at Hypolite's growing intimacy with my protégée. Do you think you could give him a hint to be careful? She is impressionable—I do not want her to lose her heart to him, neither, do I imagine, does he. He is thoughtless and does not see that she is daily growing more interested in him."

Drouot regarded her inscrutably.

"I will try," he answered. "But, though we are extremely intimate, he does not confide in me concerning his women friends."

Marguerite nodded.

"No, but in this case, both she and I are also your friends."

Drouot looked across at Eugénie's noble face and figure, outlined against the brilliant arabesque—purple, blue and gold—of the high-backed settee.

"I suppose," he said, "that they became friends at the opera class?"

"I am afraid I ought to have put down my foot and forbidden his coming at all," she murmured regretfully. "But he made great profession of reformation, and I own that—with his coaxing ways—he beguiled me."

Drouot smiled.

"There is one thing you have not taken into account," he asserted.

"What is that?"

"The character of Mademoiselle Massini. I know something of her origin—the people of the Paleria family are no weaklings, whatever her father's conduct may have been. She comes of a race of strong men, proud, gifted with talent and intellect. You judge her to be a person who may be led astray by the first comer. I judge her to be a strong-willed creature who will be master—not mistress. I may be wrong—but, if it should come to a battle of wills between those two, I feel convinced the one who is worsted will not be Mademoiselle Massini."

"I am glad to think that," Marguerite said. "Nevertheless, you will do what you can to prevent the necessity of battle?"

"I will do what I can," Drouot replied. "Mademoiselle," he added, raising his voice, "come and look at my pictures.

This light is not good, it is true, nevertheless, though the colour suffers, the form is sufficiently distinct. That is where sculptors have the advantage of us painters. When night falls our pinks and crimsons turn to yellow and orange, our brilliant orange fades, our delicate flesh tints become crude or spectral—all is confusion. But for the sculptor—surrounding darkness only throws up the beauty of his line, and endows the lifeless marble with pulsating vitality."

Eugénie rose and crossed the room. She stood looking at the medley of pictures, finished and unfinished, set upon easels or hung up on the walls. They were almost entirely scenes of Moorish or Algerian origin—sand and desert, strings of camels in the blazing sun, Arabs riding, Arabs round camp fires, Arab women with brown babies, slender boys, fierce old men—all in rich or sombre oriental colouring, strong, realistic, tremendously vivid—fragments hewn alive from the pageant of the East.

As she looked the young girl's eyes grew bright.

"Ah!" she cried. "M. Drouot, is it like that at Algiers? What would I not give to stand in that sunshine. And those babies—look at those babies!" she went on, "I could take them in my arms." She turned with glowing face to Drouot. "Why do you make me discontented? Now I have seen these pictures I long to go there——"

"You pay my work high tribute," he answered, "and you understand—for my pictures are but broken verses, halting melodies, stolen from the age-old song of the calling East; and if but a single of these cries has reached you in articulate phrase, I have not painted in vain."

He turned away abruptly, moved by her exceeding quickness of perception.

"There spoke the blood of the Palerias," he told himself. "See, mademoiselle," he added, turning on an electric lamp in the corner and pushing a big easel forward, so that the clear white light shone on it, "here is my latest attempt."

The two moved forward, and, simultaneously, uttered an exclamation, for the newly-painted picture was a sketch of Gaston Mergolite.

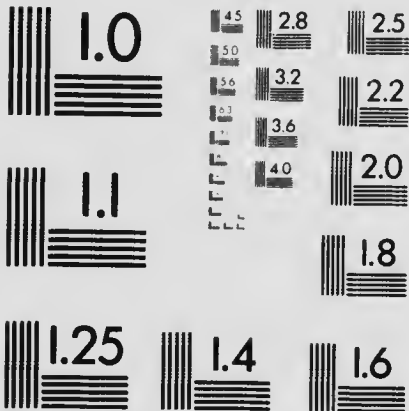
"It is marvellously like," Marguérite exclaimed.

Drouot, watching Eugénie, saw that she could hardly look at the picture, so great was her emotion. He deliberately



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placed himself between her and Madame Périntot so that she should have a moment in which to recover.

"Yes, I think it is like," he said, inspecting the picture critically. "But Gaston is a difficult subject. He changes from day to day according to his mood."

Hypolite too was watching Eugénie.

"Do not give me a bad character, *mon vieux*," he pleaded.

"Then live up to your good opinion of yourself," Madame Périntot put in with malice.

Gaston registered a vow of future vengeance; but, at this moment, Annette entered bearing the roasted chickens, a double dish of vegetables, and plates, on a tray.

"*À table*," she commanded and, laughing, the little company hastened to obey her. Eugénie and Marguérite seated themselves at the two sides, and the two men at either end.

The table had been placed in the centre of the studio beneath hanging rose-shaded lamps. The glass and silver were of the choicest, for Drouot was fastidious in his household arrangements. Madame Périntot looked with satisfaction at the dainty appointments on the table; while Eugénie's eyes, straying round the room, were attracted by a grand piano half hidden behind a forest of easels.

"So you have a piano, Monsieur Drouot," she observed. "I thought I heard it last night."

"Yes," he answered, "I do not play myself, but I delight in listening to music, therefore I keep a piano to tempt my guests."

Hypolite, watching Eugénie, was struck afresh by her beauty. She was simply dressed in a white silk blouse open at the throat, and her new check skirt. Guiltless of any ornament, her noble head and rather massive shoulders appeared to him the more beautiful for the extreme simplicity of her clothes.

"M. Hypolite says he will sing to us afterwards," she asserted.

Gaston nodded.

"That is if you both care for it?"

"There is nothing I should enjoy more," Eugénie answered, turning to him.

Under cover of Drouot's conversation with Marguérite, Hypolite inquired of Eugénie:

"You were not very wet, I hope—after our excursion of this morning?"

"No, I think I must be impervious to weather. I never feel the heat or cold."

"We must walk again to-morrow then," he murmured. "The pity is that it is not possible to go into the forest until the snow melts. I had been looking forward to walking there with you, but, with this depth of snow, it might be dangerous."

"Perhaps the snow will not last," she answered. "I, too, long for the forest. Last summer, when I was here, I used to spend whole days there—I loved it—it was my first experience of real country."

"If only it would thaw," the young man cried, "there are a thousand places I would like to show you. I want to see you in the forest," he lowered his voice, "I want to talk with you out there—where we should be alone."

Eugénie bent her head, and the pallor of her skin became thickened. Her mouth trembled.

"I am very young," she answered softly, "but it seems to me that wild nature understands the things one cannot speak; therefore I long for the woods—perhaps they would tell you the things which I cannot."

This time it was Gaston whose emotion was almost greater than he could support with equanimity, while the young girl had regained her calm.

"*Mon ami*," Marguérite began, after a little pause. "I had no idea that you painted portraits—I fancied your pictures were always imaginative compositions. But that portrait of Hypolite is a masterpiece. Shall you exhibit it?"

"Only to my friends. I do not paint portraits, but it is my habit to make a study of any head that takes my fancy. Later, if necessary, I steal certain characteristics—not always the most attractive—and utilize them in my pictures. After dinner I should like you to look at my two pictures for the next exhibitions—'The Nomad Camp' and 'Algerian Fishermen.' The latter has given me a great deal of trouble, as I have been obliged to study the painting of fish for it—so much so, that I have for months been unable to eat any!"

"*Tiens!*" exclaimed Marguérite. "You painter people are very conscientious in detail."

"We have to be so. Imagine to yourself the ridicule that would be heaped on me if my fisherman caught fish in Algiers which can only be found in the Seine!"

"The Seine," Marguerite asserted, laughing, "contains many things that possibly did not originally belong there."

"For which you must blame '*tout Paris*,' he murmured. "But not so the nets of Algiers—civilization produces more anachronisms than barbarism."

"I wanted to ask you," he added presently, "if I may make a study of Mademoiselle Massini!"

"With the greatest pleasure in the world—as far as I am concerned. But you must gain her consent also."

"I will use all my powers of persuasion. Mademoiselle," he turned to Eugénie, with his charming smile, "will you permit me to make a sketch of you?"

Eugénie looked surprised.

"Assuredly," she answered, "I should be delighted—if you think it would interest you?"

"I know it would. I have wanted to do so since the first hour I saw you. But, since you are so kind, perhaps you will extend your generosity further and permit me to make use of your features in a picture I am meditating—have you any objection?"

"None"—she answered, smiling. "Indeed, it would give me great pleasure to be of use to you."

"Then it is understood," he cried, joyfully, "you will come to-morrow morning for an hour, will you not?"

Eugénie glanced swiftly at Gaston.

"What is the picture?" he asked, turning to Drouot.

"*Fichtre!*—that I tell no one. It is a new departure—but mademoiselle need not be afraid that her face shall be put to any unworthy use. You will really come to-morrow, mademoiselle?" he asked.

She hesitated. Gaston regarded her with an enigmatic expression. For the moment he was horribly jealous of his friend.

"I will come. Of course I will come. What time would you like me to do so?"

"At eleven," he answered promptly.

A few minutes later they rose from the table, while Annette, having handed them coffee, quickly whisked away the remains of the dinner.

"Come over to the fire," Drouot commanded, and, taking a pair of bronze tongs, he threw some logs into the glowing heart of the flame, whence they sent forth sparks and an acrid scented odour as the resin ignited.

Madame Périntot seated herself in a low arm chair. She was contented, for she trusted Drouot implicitly.

"Do you smoke, madame?" he inquired, holding out his cigarette-case to her.

"*Mais non*," she answered, "we singer women do not dare. But smoke yourself, I beg of you."

Remembrance came to Gaston of Wanda's almost incessant smoking. He saw a vision of the table by the divan with its innumerable cigarette ends, ash, and—amongst the débris—a man's gloves. He moved nearer to Eugénie, trying to banish that impression. She was kneeling with her hands spread out to the blaze.

"How pretty it is," she exclaimed, looking into the fire, her eyes fixed on the dancing green and gold flames.

"Yes," Drouot said, his eyes on her, "ever since I spent my first year in Algiers I have loved firelight. Sometimes, here, I turn off the light and, illumined only by these burning limbs of the forest, the studio walls retreat. My fire becomes the camp fire of Arabs, sheltered in a hollow of the limitless sand, from which a trail of smoke, lifted by the free wind of heaven, floats upward like a pennon; while all around palpitates the black purple night crowded with haunting thought. I lie here on my elbow, as I have lain in the door of my tent—listening to memory—watching my thought."

He stood up, spreading out his hands.

"Look!" he said, and he pointed to a great canvas in the corner of the room. "There is my nomad camp-fire. Ah!—for the smell of that fire, and the pitching of tents in the dusk. For the warm sand beneath one's bare feet, and the splendid challenge of free space."

Eugénie stood beside him. She had risen, excited by his eloquence and the poetry of his thought.

"It is all there—all that you speak of," she said, moved by mother tenderness—"I see it in your picture—I understand." She laid her hand on his arm—an irresistible impulse to comfort him for some sorrow she was sensible of, but was unable to locate, impelled her—she looked up at him, utterly unconscious of the unconventionality of her action.

"I thank you," he said, touched by her instinctive sympathy.

Then swiftly he turned the picture round, so that it was hidden.

"I will look no more at it to-night," he declared—"I am restless."

Eugénie went back to the fire. Gaston, who had been aware of her every movement, though apparently absorbed in conversation with Madame Périntot, now, moved by a jealous impulse, determined to detach her from Drouot. Therefore, in order to place himself once more in the foreground, he stepped across to the piano.

"Mademoiselle," he called, "I want you to listen to these songs of Hahn's. Do you know them?—They are called 'Chansons Grises'?"

"No," she answered—"I know so few songs."

"Listen then," he cried, "*tout Paris* loves them. They are little masterpieces."

He took the cigarette from his mouth and began to play, softly, the plaintive monotones of the first song. Eugénie listened—the music affected her deeply:

*"Les sanglots longs
Des violons
De l'automne
Blessent mon cœur
D'une langueur
Monotone.
Tout suffocant
Et blême, quand
Sonne l'heure,
Je me souviens
Des jours anciens,
Et je pleure . . .*

*Et je m'en vais
Au vent mauvais
Qui m'emporte
De çà, de là,
Pareil à la
Feuille morte."*

The delicate softness and profound melancholy he put into his voice moved the young girl to the point of tears. She half turned round as she was kneeling, watching his face in the twilight of the candles on the piano. She detected, beneath the emotion of his singing, an undercurrent of passionate appeal to her ; so that she trembled, penetrated with the longing to communicate her understanding to him.

As he ceased singing the sound of the wind and drifting snow made itself heard, with a peculiar sliding movement over the glass roof of the studio, as if some pale ghost of former days wept in the storm, and, with wet garments and fingers, strove to find its way back to the warm life within, rattling at the window catches with plaintive, powerless hands.

Marguérite, who had listened with wide, sorrowful eyes gazing into distance, shook herself, setting down her coffee cup——

"Brrrr," she said, "you make me weep, Hypolite."

Eugénie swayed on her knees. Her eyes were fixed upon the singer's face, but she did not speak. She was profoundly moved.

"They are beautiful," Gaston asserted, "listen to this one."

He began again :

*" Calmes dans le demi jour
Que les branches hautes font,
Pénétrons bien notre amour
De ce silence profond.
Fondons nos âmes, nos cœurs
Et nos sens extasiés
Parmi les vagues langueurs
Des pins et des arbousiers.*

*Ferme tes yeux à demi,
Croise tes bras sur ton sein,
Et de ton cœur endormi
Chasse à jamais tout dessein.
Laissons-nous persuader
Au souffle berceur et doux
Qui vient à tes pieds rider
Les ondes de gazon roux.*

*Et quand, solennel, le soir
Des chênes noirs tombera,
Voix de notre désespoir,
Le rossignol chantera ! "*

As he sang Eugénie was borne far away into the summer-heated forest, in the heart of the scented pine wood, while the wind wafted over her the aromatic odours of the sun-warmed resin. But, in her imagination, she was no longer alone—Gaston, her beloved, was with her ; and, because of his presence, all that which formerly had been vague yearning became now defined and exquisite fact. She loved him, she yearned to go away with him into the heart of the forest, where, alone, she would tell him the things which he alone would understand.

She got up from the ground, and Drouot, seeing her emotion, spoke :

" Will you not sing to us, mademoiselle ? "

" Not to-night," she answered. Her face was pale and her lips inordinately red, her eyes bright with tears ; she went over to the piano like one blind.

" Let me look at the music, M. Hypolite," she said, her speech a little incoherent.

As he put the thin grey-covered book into her hands his fingers touched hers.

" Those songs have an extraordinary quality," he said, striving to aid her to recover her composure. " But to have them perfectly sung you should hear Hahn himself. He sings them softly, hardly opening his mouth, at the corner of which, all the time, he keeps a cigarette. But it is not only the music which is moving. Verlaine was a master of words and these poems are some of his best."

" I do not want to hear any more to-night," she faltered, " I could not bear it. I want to sleep with the remembrance of this singing of yours—of this and of your kisses."

Hypolite looked round. Madame Périntot's and Drouot's backs were turned. They were absorbed in conversation. Quickly he bent down and his lips brushed hers.

" Love," he murmured, " I sang to you. When you are gone I shall look out of the window into the storm and I shall send my thoughts to you. Last night, when I lay awake, I longed for you to be near me—you are the only

woman I have ever known who has given me a sense of peace."

Tears stood in her eyes.

"I love you," she whispered.

Marguérite came across the room.

"It is eleven o'clock, Eugénie," she said, "Quite time we went home. Come and put on your cloak."

When they were ready, Drouot went ahead with Marguérite and the lantern.

As the two turned out of the gate, Eugénie, who was behind with Gaston, felt his hand suddenly clasp hers.

"I love you, I love you," he cried—"more than any woman on earth——"

He held her for a moment, then, as she made a movement to withdraw her hand, he let her go, and they were about to follow the others when Drouot came back with the lantern.

"Be quick," he said. "It is cold for mademoiselle, and Madame Périntot is waiting to shut the door."

They walked quickly—Marguérite was awaiting in the porch.

After saying good-night the two men returned to the studio. Drouot opened the lantern to extinguish it. He stood by the table and did not look at his friend, but said gravely:

"Gaston—at the risk of offending a friend who is dearer to me than any other—I am going to say something."

Gaston did not answer. He lit a cigarette and, strolling over to the fire, kicked a burning log with the toe of his boot.

"I wish to tell you," continued Drouot, "that I believe you to be playing with Mademoiselle Massini in a way that is unworthy of you."

"*Sapristi!*" Gaston exclaimed irritably. "My friendship with her was fully approved by Madame Périntot so long as I was useful. I do not see why she should fuss now."

"Nevertheless she is troubled, she sees reason for anxiety," Drouot asserted. "She asked me, to-night, to warn you that she thinks Eugénie is growing more interested than is wise. She asked me to beg you to be cautious—for your own sake as well as the girl's."

"*Mon Dieu!*" he exclaimed angrily, "does she think me capable of rape in broad daylight?"

"No," Drouot answered, smiling, "neither do I. But there

are degrees of indiscretion before you reach that extreme. Come," he added, laying his hand on Gaston's shoulder, "I watched Mademoiselle Massini to-night, when you were singing. She is in a highly emotional state, which I believe to be not unconnected with you. I presume you do not intend to marry her?"

"*Mon Dieu*, no!" the other declared emphatically. "You know my opinion—that domesticity should be strictly prohibited for the artist. I never intend to marry."

He exhaled the smoke of his cigarette luxuriously.

"Then," said Drouot, "be advised, and adopt an attitude of colder reserve towards her. I counsel your going to Paris for a day or two, so as to allow her to think of other things."

Gaston humped up his shoulders mulishly; but, at this moment, Annette entered with a tray of letters.

"They are late, monsieur," she said; "the postman says they should have reached here this morning, but he has had great difficulty in going his rounds owing to the snow."

Hypolite possessed himself of his correspondence. He tore the envelopes open one by one, glancing at their contents. At the last letter he uttered an exclamation.

"*Malédiction!* *Mon ami*, your wish is granted. There is some difficulty about an important clause in one of my contracts. Owing to the delay in my receiving this I shall be forced to go to Paris by the early train to-morrow—and my business may keep me there for a day or two. You will be rid of me."

"*Allons!*" Drouot cried, clapping him on the shoulder. "Fate decides that you shall be cautious—she is on my side—against your inclination you must obey."

"You are ridiculous, my dear fellow. But pray let Madame Périntot know that I have gone. She will be enchanted at the good news—but will you tell Mademoiselle Massini also the reason of my going, and say that I shall hope to meet her again soon?"

Privately Drouot reserved for himself the right to deliver the latter message in such form as he judged wise.

"*Très bien*," he said, "you know, *mon vieux*, that I shall miss you—that your going is a deprivation to me."

Hypolite shrugged his shoulders. He was distinctly cross. With a grumpy good-night he made his way up the stone staircase to his bedroom. On the landing he paused a

moment, and looked through the ivy-covered window into the street. It was dark, and the drifting snow stung his face and clung to his eyelashes. He wondered if Eugénie remembered his promise to look out into the storm and think of her.

CHAPTER IV

AT eleven o'clock next morning Eugénie made her way across the snow-covered garden to the studio.

She found Drouot—his strong, spare figure hidden by a blue blouse which reached to his knees, his big head surmounted by a velvet cap—arranging easel, canvas and charcoal. As he busied himself amongst the accessories of his trade, with his adroit and graceful movements, the young girl thought that he made no commonplace picture himself. For his face was keen and thoughtful, and the rich brown of his complexion was set off by the blue collar of his blouse and the fly-away black bow at his neck.

"How charming of you to be punctual," he said, in greeting. "The light is perfect this morning—I long to begin. Now I am going to ask you a favour. I want you to let me paint your hair—if it is long—because I need that for my picture. You shall not, if you don't wish it, but——"

The young girl laughed, and began to take out the four or five big tortoise-shell pins that held the mass of her hair in place.

"It is not such a very long time," she said, "since I have put it up. Indeed, why should I not let it down?"

"Why not?" he agreed, delighted with her simplicity. "Ah!—that is perfect!" he exclaimed, as the black stream slid over her right shoulder to below her waist. "Now, don't touch it"—this imperatively—"I want it just as it is, not fluffed out, except where it is untidy by nature."

"Shall I stand here?" she asked, looking with curiosity at his little preparations of charcoal, bread, and so on.

"No, on the model's platform."

He posed her, stepping back to criticize her position from a little distance.

"There—that is right. Yes," he murmured. "I want it full face. If you do not mind," he added, speaking to her again. "I should like to paint a full-length figure. But you

must promise to tell me when you are tired, as I fear I am apt to be horribly selfish when a model pleases me."

"I will tell you," she answered.

From where she stood Eugénie could see the piano in the corner of the room. Where was Gaston? she wondered—but did not like to ask.

Drouot, noticing her glance, divined the unspoken question. He looked down at the charcoal and began to select a stick, testing it fastidiously on a sheet of rough paper.

"By the way," he said, "Hypolite received important business letters last night, which obliged him to return to Paris by the early train. He may be detained there for a day or two; but I hope, before the snow melts, he will be back again."

"Oh!" Eugénie ejaculated. A singular change took place in her expression; Drouot felt as though he had inflicted a wound on some defenceless creature. He was concerned, for he perceived that she was almost ready to faint, and that only the necessity of maintaining her dignity prevented her from bursting into tears. Privately he registered a vote of censure on his dearest friend. It was intolerable that this child should be made unhappy to suit the whim of such a very experienced lover.

Eugénie, supported by pride, forced back the gathering tears. Why had he gone?—she asked herself. Why—without a word to her?—Last night they had been so happy. If he cared so much could he not have sent her some message? But she put aside the thought of reproach. M. Drouot had said that Gaston would return in a few days. It was not Gaston's fault that business had obliged him to leave her. She must be patient, she must trust him; yet, despite her self-admonitions, she could hardly bear her disappointment. Her longing for his presence became almost unendurable.

Meanwhile Drouot roughly sketched in the contours of her troubled face. After a while he paused.

"You must rest," he said gently.

Eugénie descended thankfully from the platform and came to look at the picture. Drouot's sketch was remarkably alive. He had caught her nobility of aspect, caught the visionary look that was characteristic of her; he brought out, too, with extraordinary faithfulness, the expression of suppressed emotion now perceptible in her sombre eyes. The

face was that of Joan of Arc, as she might have fronted her accusers, with the agony of her martyrdom ahead—Joan of Arc, hurt by disbelief—pained by the shadow of doubt that lay within her.

Eugénie, seeing the drawing, was struck by that same expression.

"It is well done," she said, considering it carefully, "but I look unhappy——"

Drouot gave her an amused smile.

"I was afraid," he murmured, "that you disliked standing——"

"Please don't think that," she protested hastily. "I—it was—nothing."

"Then you will think no more of so slight a trouble?" he begged, picking up his paint-box, and still observing her intently.

Eugénie did not reply, but bent over the collection of paint-tubes.

"How strange they smell," she murmured.

"*Ce maudit peti' Gaston*," Drouot ejaculated inwardly. Then aloud: "Ah, probably you think it disagreeable. To me it is the most inspiring of scents. Well do I remember the day on which I began my first picture—execrably bad it was in all probability—but, to the youth who painted it, a masterpiece. One blazing day in June long ago I, on the borderland of boyhood and manhood, strode back and forth—made restless by the dawning of knowledge and by the push of latent talent—along the great quays and harbour of Marseilles. At last, weary with my own ungainly longings, I came to a standstill just at the point where, against a background of brilliant azure sea and sky, the stark lines of a sailing-vessel towered above me. Swarms of half-naked men toiled and sweated in the blazing light. Bare-footed they moved, to and fro, loading the ship with coal. Looking up I caught, against the sky, the outline of a gigantic negro, who stood for a moment, with a great crimson bundle poised on his shoulder. His magnificent torso was naked to the waist, and, as he moved, I saw the ripple of his muscles under the skin. I watched him till he disappeared from view; then I went homeward, transfixed by the desire to record the impression which had so excited me. I locked myself in my room and spent hours trying to draw that picture—every detail of which was photo-

graphed in my brain. To my astonishment, I succeeded in setting down a very fair sketch of the negro—crude and incorrect in detail, I have no doubt, but none the less—as I could not but perceive—alive. I carried the sketch to my father, and he, to encourage me, bought me my first box of oil paints—and with the smell of them came the beginning of my life's work."

He ceased speaking and looked at Eugénie. To his satisfaction he perceived that the interest of his narrative had absorbed her, and enabled her to regain her self-possession.

"I understand," she said. "All those intimate details of art are infinitely dear to the artist. We care for little, strange things which other people would think commonplace. But now, let me stand again, for indeed I am not tired!"

"Good," he answered, once more eager to commence his work.

Eugénie mounted the platform and Drouot began to paint again; but, after a moment, he stopped.

"Your expression has changed," he said.

"What shall I do?" she asked, perturbed and a little self-conscious.

"Sing," he cried, "then you will think out into space."

So Eugénie began to sing. At first a little uncertainly, but, gaining confidence, after a minute or two she poured forth a volume of rich sound as naturally as a thrush might. And, forgetting the presence of Drouot, she stared into the distance, until her sight, blurred with the intensity of her thought, called up the image of the man whom she loved. As she visualized him, her song became a passionate pleading for his return, a tremendous confession of faith in love, until Drouot, deeply affected, conscious of the meaning of her singing, could paint no more. When she paused he laid aside palette and brushes, his own vision being blurred by unshed tears.

"I have finished," he said gently, "finished for to-day, so I will release you."

Eugénie slipped down from the platform.

"It is a beautiful room for sound," she declared. "Thank you for letting me sing. It has done me good. At La Maison Grise I cannot get away from my own voice—here there is space, the furniture and people do not crowd in on me."

Drouot, busy with his paint-brushes and palette, had turned

his back to her. He was greatly moved—greatly perplexed—but he did not want her to know.

"Come and sing whenever you like," he said kindly. "I shall be delighted if you care to practise here. If I am at work you will not disturb me; and, if I am not at home, you have but to walk in and take possession. I will give you a key to the garden gate, so that you may come through from the lane without disturbing Annette."

"You are very kind," Eugénie exclaimed. "If it will not be a bother to you I should greatly like to sing here sometimes."

"You are very fortunate, mademoiselle, in having such a beautiful voice. It should be an immense pleasure—sufficient to exclude all else."

"Not all else," she said seriously.

"Well, let it at least always be the greatest thing in your life," he urged. "Let it be greater than any human interest. Mind is superior to matter. So is the great gift of God, the noble love of Art, the creature of your brain, worth more than the gift of a friend, the love of man."

His voice grew harsh. He set down the paint-box and spread out his hands.

Eugénie took the length of her hair in both hands and twisted it up skilfully at the back of her head into a great knot, setting the pins deftly in place. When she had finished she picked up her hat.

"M. Drouot," she said—and Drouot saw that her lips shook, and her eyes were bright with unshed tears—"M. Drouot, one thing is greater than all these—that is motherhood."

She turned to the door, and opened it.

"Good-bye," she said quickly—"I will come to-morrow at eleven."

Drouot followed her to the door. He held out his hand and clasped hers. "That is right," he said, but his eyes, fixed on hers, told her that it was not to the appointment but to her last speech that he referred.

He watched the dark silhouette of her figure as she made her way up the snowy garden. Then he went back into the studio and shut the door. With trembling fingers he pulled open his blue painter's blouse, and from an inside pocket of his coat took out the picture of a young girl. Then.

he bowed his head over his hands. "Motherhood," he whispered.

Eugénie re-entered La Maison Grise once more contented and composed. In the kitchen she found Marie-Anne with a big work-basket in her arms.

"Let me help you, Marie-Anne," she cried.

"Assuredly I shall be very glad.—The *déjeuner* is all prepared and Aunt Angèle is busy in the dairy. Let us sit in the parlour window where we can see out towards the plain. I have lighted the fire there, so we shall not be cold."

The two girls seated themselves in the deep window seat.

Searching in the big basket, Marie-Anne brought out a tiny garment which she gave to Eugénie.

"You do not mind," she murmured. "You see, I am making all the clothes for the baby myself.—But I shall be very glad to have you to help me—for there is a great deal to do."

"I love to help," the other answered. "Are you happy now that you are married, Marie-Anne," she went on wistfully—"as happy, I mean, as you thought you would be before your wedding?"

"I am happier than I ever dreamed of being," Marie-Anne answered, smiling, "Jacques is a good husband—kind and considerate—and—and—we love one another.—Besides this—in a little while, there will come the baby, who will be such a joy to us both."

"You do not fear the pains of childbirth, then?"

"No—I rejoice in the thought that I shall suffer. I believe that the more I suffer the greater will be the bond between myself and the baby. For Jacques I can do so little, and I love him so greatly—therefore when I give him this pledge of my love, and see him with our baby in his arms—I shall feel the pain no more, but remember only that our child is born."

She folded her work.

"Come with me," she added, "I want to show you all I have prepared."

She led the way upstairs to her room. On the farther side of the bed stood a low wooden cradle—of the peasant type—on rockers. It was made of oak, with a wooden hood elaborately carved and varnished.

"Jacques made it," she said proudly. "We wanted the

baby to have nothing which was not our own work, and in the long evenings he has made this. Such trouble he has taken ! ”

She turned up the little blankets and eider-down.

“ See, my mother gave me these and the mattress.”

She replaced them, softly smoothing them with her hand, and turned to the chest of drawers. Pulling open a long drawer, she disclosed piles of small garments, dainty and beribboned, folded neatly, with bags of lavender between.

Again Eugénie was strangely moved at the sight of those tiny clothes.

“ They are lovely,” she murmured, leaning over them.

Marie-Anne took out a silver and coral rattle from the corner of the drawer.

“ It belonged to Jacques,” she said gently, as she shook the silver bells—“ his mother sent it. Jacques was always fond of coral,” she went on, blushing. “ He says it was the coral necklace I wore, which he noticed one day in church, as he knelt behind me, that made him first fall in love with me. He made me wear it at our wedding, so I believe that coral will bring our baby good fortune. See,”—she took out a white cardboard box, “ see what the foolish fellow has done ! ” She lifted the lid. Inside lay a little coral rosary with a silver cross. “ He wished the baby to wear it at the christening. I tell him the baby will surely eat it and choke, but he will have it that the first time our child goes to church it shall wear a coral necklace.”

Eugénie’s eyes were swimming with tears. She was glad when Marie-Anne put away the corals and shut the drawer.

CHAPTER V

GASTON, on reaching Paris, threw himself with energy into the intricacies of business arrangements for the coming season. He was irritated with Drouot and Madame Périntot for what he termed their “ interference ; ” and proceeded to work off his annoyance in quite heated arguments with agents and impresarios, exhibiting a combativeness over unimportant clauses—which he had formerly left them to settle as they pleased—that astonished these business

men. He was rough and captious, domineering and exorbitant; while, all the time he smarted beneath the irksome knowledge that those two whom he had considered his friends stood between him and the one woman whose companionship and affection had, as he believed, brought out all the best in his art.

Why—he asked himself—why should they be so ridiculously particular? Was not Eugénie going on the stage? Was it not more than probable that her career would, like that of most other artists, be an extremely chequered one in matters of the affections? Therefore why, in the name of Heaven, object to the tremendous devotion he proposed to expend on her? What greater compliment could any man pay a woman than to adore her, to desire her, to be willing to make her his constant companion? What difference could that archaic little matter of a religious ceremony make?—Was not this free giving and receiving of love a far nobler, a far more generous, method? Marriage was the invention of law by priests for the benefit of their own love of power! But Nature—the great elemental force which existed before human beings peopled the earth—had created her own laws, before which all living should bow. Love—not merely passion, but love of the mind also, companionship of the spirit—this was the great, the only, law that he intended to acknowledge. Marriage—so often a mere bartering of wares, such as position, respectability in the eyes of the world, or titles—a mere hedging for the best bargain—why should this be considered nobler than that free giving? Granted—the mere gratification of the flesh was contemptible; but if there lay behind it the companionship of the intellect—did not this raise it from the common ruck?

Then, too, it was not a matter to be decided either by Drouot or Madame Périntot. It concerned Eugénie and himself alone. She had not shown the smallest objection to his advances. She had acknowledged that she loved him, and by no means discouraged his caresses. It was absurd to suppose, in face of his position and her own, that she expected him to tie himself up in bonds of matrimony!—he reflected with satisfaction that he had never so much as mentioned the word marriage to her. She could not, therefore, be under any false impression. No, he felt convinced that she would feel with him in the matter—that

marriage was out of the question for artists. Domesticity was the enemy of inspiration! Let domesticity be the prerogative of bovine temperaments; but let the artist be preserved for higher things! And so on and so forth—the devil reasoning ably in his agile brain.

He would, however, remain in Paris for a day or two, so as to allay the suspicions of those two well-meaning blunderers, Drouot and Madame Périntot; then he would return to Acquarelle and pick up the thread of events at the exact point where their exasperating interference had broken it off. Meanwhile, his business being satisfactorily concluded, there was no reason why he should not fill up the intervening time with the visiting of some of his musical friends. He would enjoy being back again in an atmosphere of art. Painter-people were all very well—but there were some things they did not understand. For instance, they were irretrievably wedded to the “out-of-doors”! He bethought himself of an invitation he had received to dine at the *Cercle Musical*. Rummaging amongst his papers, he unearthed the invitation in question. Yes—it was for that very evening. Decidedly he would go! He knew that he should meet the cream of the cosmopolitan musical world. It would be good for him to spend an evening amongst distinguished people, who fully appreciated, moreover, his value as an artist, and whose standards, he told himself, were of the world. They, at any rate, were not always intent on the waving of morality scarecrows.

So, telephoning to the secretary, he expressed his intention of being present; and the same evening—he had spent a little more than a week in Paris—faultlessly dressed, and feeling very gallant and full of *joie de vivre*, he stepped out of a taxi, and made his way into the club.

As he went into the reception room, a little hint of the ruffling gallant in his bearing, he felt well pleased with himself. His blue eyes were bright, and he looked extremely healthy and well set up.

Around him, on every hand, rose a *brouhaha* of conversation. The artistic world of the Opera and Concert Hall was well represented—famous critics, conductors, musicians, singers; violinists, with long hair and Beethoven expressions; pianists, who aped the Paderewski style; solid opera singers, male and female—the latter covered with jewels, false or real according

to their standing in the money market, much powdered and clad in exquisite creations, the *dernier cri* from Doucet, Paquin and Worth. On every hand animation, gesticulation, laughter—forced or genuine—and conversation—explosive, quick and varied, touched with the expansive *bonhomie* which marks the artist world.

"Here you are at last, *mon garçon*," cried Guériot, the famous basso from the Opera, clapping Gaston on the shoulder. "Where in the name of Mozart have you been all this time?"

"Why Mozart?" he returned, laughing.

"Why Mozart?—But because it is so long since we have seen you, that you belong to the order of musicians defunct."

"The musician may be defunct, but his works are any thing but dead," Gaston asserted.

"Then you, *mon vieux*," the basso intimated, an inimitable chuckle rumbling in his deep throat, "though lost to the world, have been perhaps occupied profitably?"

He raised his fierce eyebrows, inviting disclosure of merry things.

"*Enfin!*" cried Madame Vlees, a contralto, also from the Opera, shouldering Guériot aside with her massive body.

"It is *le petit* Gaston. And you are then restored to us? I was deeply grieved when I heard of your illness, *mon chou*."

"You are kind, madame," he answered, bending over her fat hand. "It is good to be back and find one is not forgotten by one's friends."

A pale, sad young man, in seedy clothes, and with a distracted expression, wandered up and shook him languidly by the hand. It was Grévaux, the composer, who wrote the words and music of exquisite erotic little love songs sung and palpitated over in every *salon* in Paris.

"*Te voilà! mon ami*," he whispered, looking at Gaston mournfully, and stroking back his hair with an habitual nervous movement peculiar to him. "I have an exquisite little song to be dedicated to you—I need but your permission. I have called it "*L'amour fugitif*."

"Ah!—that at all events sounds as if it would be true to life!" snorted the fat contralto, whose bulk, both of voice and figure, did not permit her to sing Grévaux's ethereal compositions—hence a certain contempt on her part for his works.

"Hypolite, come here!" cried Slanini, an eminent conductor, with hair *en brosse* and beard impressively virile. Bouncing up and down, in his eagerness to get through the crowd, he arrived—forcing his way with determination to the young man's side—and, disentangling himself from Madame Vlees' train, took possession of the younger man, propelling him by the elbow in the direction he wished him to go.

"*Voyons.*" he said, "I want to present you to Wlenowski—the Polish pianist and composer. He is mad about your singing of Julian in *Louise*. He seems to have heard you at the 'Comique' last year."

"Yes, *mon ami*," cried the Pole, embracing him vigorously, rolling his small green eyes and shooting out his lips as he spoke. "In you I have the honour to salute an artist! When I heard you I was enchanted—entranced with your singing. I told myself—here is a veritable phoenix of the true school! A singer of refinement and taste, who seeks not lurid effect, but rather to emphasize the spiritual."

Gaston's face flushed slightly. Remembrance torched him. He wondered what this enthusiastic *maestro* would have said had he been witness of last year's performances at Covent Garden. He was relieved when, at that moment, the master of the ceremonies entering, cried:

"Ladies and gentlemen, dinner is served."

The company made its way into the great dining-room, where a brilliant dinner was set out at a series of round tables.

According to the custom of the *cercle* each guest was given a numbered ticket at the door—the women odd, the men even—together with a letter designating the table at which he or she was to sit, thus no difficulty of precedence—a delicate matter in the artistic world—could arise. As the numbers were previously well shuffled it was quite impossible to tell by whom you would be seated until you actually arrived at your place.

Gaston, having succeeded in locating his chair, found that his left-hand neighbour was the fat contralto, Madame Vlees, who gave an outcry of pleasure on beholding him. As yet the place on his right hand was unoccupied.

Under cover of the emphatic explosions of the contralto, he managed to dispose of his excellent turtle soup. He wondered who fate would send him as a neighbour—something

younger and less massive than Madame Vlees, he hoped. His eyes wandered down the length of the table. At the further end he could see M. Grévaux mournfully fencing the too exuberant gestures of a Spanish cellist, who insisted on beating time with his spoon while humming the air of a new composition of which he wished to convey an impression to the lady pianist seated between them. Gaston looked away, taken with a spasm of laughter. Then a silk whisper of skirts behind him made him turn his head. A lady, who had come in late, placed herself in the chair on his right. To his astonishment, when he turned to assist her, he perceived that it was Wanda—Wanda exquisite, dressed in pale blue brocade, her yellow hair braided high in Russian fashion—in a coronet round her head; her famous ropes of pearls twisted about her throat. With perfect self-possession and a brightness of laughter in her eyes, she held out her hand.

"Ah! Hypolite! you have not been to see me yet. You still reject the proffered olive branch?"

He forced himself to take her hand.

"I have been away," he answered; "down in the country—with my friend Drouot."

"The country?" she exclaimed, raising her eyebrows and making a naughty mouth at him, as she unfolded her napkin and took off her gloves. "I thought that was just what one tried to avoid at this time of the year."

"Sometimes," he asserted, "we go there to avoid the town."

"Or people whom it is disagreeable to us to meet?" she inquired, shrugging her shoulders.

Gaston helped himself to fish. Mentally he gripped himself. If he and Wanda were forced—through no fault of their own—to sit side by side for an hour, it was but common courtesy and good breeding to show her every decent consideration. He tried to calm himself and ate his fish with elaborate assumption of *sang-froid*. The neighbourhood of this woman, whose presence had once meant so much to him, disturbed his equanimity; but resolutely he essayed to second her efforts at normal conversation.

He took a deep drink of wine, and, wiping his mouth on his napkin, turned to her civilly.

"You told me, I think, Princess Yerlatsky, that you propose to return to the stage?"

Wanda started at this ceremonious use of her married name. Her slender, highly manicured fingers, weighted with rings, played daintily with her long rope of pearls.

"Yes," she said. "At least that is my present intention. I came here for a little holiday, and found old associations too strong for me. K—— is impossible—*ennuyant* in winter."

"And Prince Yerlatsky?" Gaston inquired as he drained his glass without looking at her.

"The Prince remains at K——," she asserted a little defiantly, a hard look in her eyes. She pushed away her plate slightly, and her graceful head was raised higher.

Hypolite remained silent for a moment, then he said—not without a touch of malice:

"You find the adoring husband less amusing than you anticipated—is he too devoted?"

"*Fichu*," she murmured, looking at him wickedly, while the jewels on her beautiful bosom rose and fell with her spasm of uncontrollable laughter. "Oh! *mon ami*, I was not made for married life.

"It is not amusing, I can tell you. Society at K—— what there is of it—consists entirely of Jews, save for one or two officials and their wives, and a few officers of the garrison. Nothing—nothing—no one to amuse me save eternally and inevitably Prince Yerlatsky. La! la! think of it—long sleighing over the snow-clad country with my husband! My husband's conversation at every meal! My husband to be embraced whenever he or I please!—alas! and just the fact that you may embrace whenever you please takes away all inclination to do so. The same thing always—without what the old fashioned composer would have called variations. Oh very certainly I was born with a positive necessity for variations. Hypolite—many times I repented my quarrel with you."

She looked up at him. He could smell the subtle perfume she affected, suggestive of musk or some Eastern spice.

"Come," she whispered coaxingly. "You cannot be disagreeable any more. I have said such nice things to you. Tell me you forgive me—*c'est entendu, n'est-ce pas?*"

Gaston regarded her intently and gravely.

What did she want, this curious creature? Had she

any soul or heart? He doubted it, yet who could be angry with her when she pleaded with such captivating persistence? "*C'est entendu*," he said hoarsely at last.

At this moment—after repeated efforts—the contralto seized on him, casting an indignant glance at the lady who had occupied him to her own exclusion. It was not till just as the dinner ended that he succeeded in freeing himself from her attentions, and turned again to Wanda. He was astonished at his own eagerness to return to conversation with her.

"I have been watching your efforts to extricate yourself," she murmured softly, her eyes mischievous. "I would have assisted you had it not afforded me such infinite amusement to contemplate your struggles."

"*Mon Dieu*," he returned softly, "I can tell you it was not easy."

"Nevertheless you succeeded in the end. Therefore I know that you wished it. But, directly, they will begin to make speeches. I, unfortunately, must leave the instant after dinner, for I have promised to join some friends at the Opera—but—you will come and see me?"

He looked at her gravely, and he was aware that her eyes entreated. Disgust took him that this woman, who had married less than two months ago, should thus willingly fling in the gutter the honour of the man who had given her his name. The marriage ceremony might be a negligible quantity in the eyes of man; but in the eyes of woman—when she was so honoured—it should constitute something of greater dignity and value than that which Wanda set upon it! He knew that he was filled with contempt for her *lâcheté* to her husband. Yet he knew, also, that she was a woman and a beautiful one, and—he being a Latin—she affected him as such. Hot blood pulsed in his veins; but steadfastly he visualized the face of Eugénie, the young girl whom—he declared to himself with vigour—had now entirely usurped this woman's place.

"Princess," he said, and his lips shook, "I thank you for your invitation. At present I am very busy—later I will come—when—when your husband joins you"—he hesitated—"if he cares to meet me."

"Then you will never come," she cried in fierce anger. She leaned forward clenching her hands. Gastor was

struck by something of the primitive savage in her aspect and in the strong hissing Russian accent of her speech. She reminded him of a cat from whom a half dead mouse has been snatched.

"You need not trouble yourself about Yerlatsky," she asserted, contemptuously. "He has already instituted proceedings for divorce. He did me the honour to suspect me of an intrigue with a young officer at K—. Utterly unfounded—but why should I take the trouble to deny what constitutes my order of release?"

"What do you want of me?" Hypolite asked hoarsely. "What friendship is possible between us after all which has taken place?"

"Come back to me on the old terms. Come to me to-night at twelve-thirty—Hôtel R—," she said.

As she spoke, she got up. The master of the ceremonies was rising to call for speeches. The moment for her escape had come if she did not wish to be involved.

Gaston, clutching at the edge of the table, hearing the silken whisper of her skirts, was again filled with madness. Like a drunkard who has been deprived of liquor, at the first taste the fierceness of his old passion returned. He knew that, once alone with her, he would not be able to resist. He rose from the table, and, making an excuse of urgent business, left the *cercle*.

He went out into the night—it was raining heavily. Two days' thaw had melted the snow, and now the dirty islands of slush, that remained at the roadside, were fast disappearing.

Till past one o'clock he walked in the pouring rain, striving to master that overpowering desire to enter the Hôtel R—, where he knew Wanda awaited him, voluptuous and expectant.

Twice he reached the portico, but turned away again. At last, when the clocks were striking the half hour after one—worn out with emotion and very sad—he went home and flung himself on his bed.

To-morrow he would go to Acquarelle. With Eugénie—who loved him and whom he loved—he would forget.

CHAPTER VI

ABOUT a week after Gaston's departure, Madame Périntot received a letter from her son which caused her considerable anxiety. The boy had fallen in love with the daughter of a small shopkeeper at Versailles, and wished to ask her parents to permit him to marry her. He wrote to his mother full of boyish enthusiasm about the young woman, who, it appeared, was some years older than himself and *dotless*; but, according to the ardent young lover, a prodigy of beauty and cleverness. Marguérite had no intention of letting her offspring be caught by some unscrupulous baggage. Therefore, all her maternal feathers fluffed out like an infuriated hen, she set forth by the twelve o'clock train, the morning of the day on which she received the letter, with the intention of staying some days in Paris, of visiting Versailles daily, and, if necessary, wresting Pierre from the arms of the fair siren herself.

At Acquarelle, as in Paris, two days' thaw, followed by pouring rain, had caused the snow to disappear, leaving the humid atmosphere curiously warm and oppressive.

Eugénie went to see Marguérite off by the *petit train*. At the corner of the street they met Drouot, who was going to Vauclou. Madame Périntot instantly took possession of him as escort, promising herself a comfortable journey and an amusing one—at any rate until she changed into the Paris express.

"Be discreet. And," she said, when she had kissed Eugénie on either cheek, "practise your exercises well, *mon enfant*, while I am away."

"I shall be out until six this evening," Drouot put in, looking kindly at her. "If you care to use my studio, you will find it entirely at your disposal."

"Thank you," the young girl answered, "I will go round there after luncheon and sing for a time."

Accordingly, when *déjeuner* was over, she took her music and went round to the Villa des Fées. She could not play,

but knowing her notes could pick out sufficient on the piano to teach herself a new piece of music. Once having acquired the pitch and key she could sing anything at sight.

The great empty room was warm, though the fire had died down on the hearth. Roller blinds obscured the skylights, giving a diffused and tempered dimness to it. Outside the pouring rain had ceased, but heavy clouds hung in the sky, as if their sullen cessation of drenching the earth was but the gathering of further force. The studio was very quiet—very silent. Eugénie opened the piano and began singing scales and exercises; but the sound of her own voice in the stillness increased her sense of loneliness. She moved to the fire-place and, raking the charred embers together, took a log from the basket in the corner. She wanted something living, something moving in the room besides herself, for the gloomy day and Marguerite's departure had depressed her. The log would not light up and clouds of feathery dust rose from the embers powdering its surface. Looking round she observed a small pair of bellows. Taking them up she blew till a little crackling told her that a flame had awakened among the charred fragments, and in a moment green and orange flame broke out. She rose to her feet and began to walk round the studio, looking at the pictures. The spitting and hissing of the log gave her pleasure. On an easel in the corner was Drouot's portrait of herself. It was extraordinarily like her—but in her most tragic and thoughtful mood—the eyes stared into the distance sombre and wistful, the mouth drooped.

She turned to the picture of the nomads' camp-fire. How she longed to travel out into the unknown world—southward through the land of vine and olive and south again into the clamorous Orient. What infinite caprice of Nature lay in those unknown lands! Save for these brief visits to Acquarelle Eugénie had never been away from Paris. Now the voice of travel, of discovery invited her, and limitations of race and environment became distressing. She longed to hear the shattering of palm leaves stirred by hot winds from the equator; to traverse the blond deserts of Africa; above all to go down into the passionate classic sunshine of Italy—the radiant cradle of her race. All these were but names to her, names upon which her starved imagination,

fed by such morsels of comfort as she could obtain from the public picture galleries of Paris, built fantastically.

She looked at the dusky faces of the Arabs as they sat round the camp fire, and remembrance came to her of Drouot's words on the night that she and Madame Périntot had dined here. "The Song of the Calling East" ached within her. Last summer, in the forest, she had begun to understand that calling when she had spent long hours listening to the mysterious chant of the pine trees. If, last summer, Hypolite had been there, how happy she would have been wandering with him amongst the sun-blistered rocks. He had said he would love to be alone out there with her in the forest; and she knew that, untrammelled by convention, amidst the green of the trees, and the scent of clean earth and pure air, she could tell him of the longings that filled her—and the overwhelming love which she felt for him.

She moved on and her eyes fell on the portrait of Gaston. Half hidden in the shadow behind her own picture, it had escaped her notice. As yet only the head and shoulders were finished and the fine muscles of the throat. Drouot had painted him in some soft collarless shirt, unbuttoned at the top, displaying his neck and chest.

Eugénie looked into the blue eyes. They seemed to gaze back at her tenderly. Then she looked at the mouth; and a trembling took her—she dared not look long at the mouth, for she remembered the kisses given and received. Gaston seemed near to her. She could almost feel his arms about her, and smell the faint odour of his cigarette.

She left the picture and went back to the piano. On the top of a pile of music lay Halévy's "Chansons Grises." Remembering that Gaston had sung them on that same evening, which came back so persistently to her mind, she opened the book and began softly, in a delicate monotone, to sing:

*" Les sanglots longs
Des violons
De l'automne
Blessent mon cœur
D'une langueur
Monotone."*

She stopped. The presence of Gaston seemed actually to envelop her. Almost in fear she continued the song.

*" Tout suffocant
Et blême, quand
Sonne l'heure,
Je me souviens
Des jours anciens,
Et je pleure . . . "*

Tears choked her. She ceased singing.

Then she stiffened, listening. Someone was ringing at the outer gate. Eugénie knew that Annette had gone out, and would possibly only be back in time to prepare Drouot's dinner. Half an hour ago she had seen her pass—her market basket on her arm. She knew that she was alone. An unaccountable alarm seized her. Who could be ringing at the door? Again a sense of Gaston's nearness overpowered her. She tried to shake it off, looking round her fearfully. Yet it remained with her—poignant and vivid—so that she shook, holding on to the piano for support. Again the bell pealed impatiently. The person, whoever it was, who stood without there was determined to enter. Eugénie opened the studio door and stepped across the intervening space to the high outer gate, her feet making a soft grating rustle on the little pebbles.

She raised the latch and pulled back the heavy door. Hypolite, pale and weary, was before her, wearing his heavy fur coat and carrying a suit case in his hand.

For a moment they stared at one another astonished. Eugénie had not really expected to see him, and certainly it had never entered his head that she would open the door for him. At last Eugénie spoke. Her voice was uneven and she breathed quickly.

" M. Drouot and Annette are out," she said ; " M. Drouot very kindly told me I might practise here in the studio. I heard someone at the gate, so I came."

She stopped—her voice breaking, and the veins pulsing in her throat.

Gaston entered and closed the gate. Jealousy of Drouot arose in him. He wondered if this was the secret of his friend's anxiety for his departure—a desire to " make good " on his own account.

" Ah ! " he said, a little resentfully, " he is out, is he ?—

And Madame Périntot ? " he demanded, as they moved side by side.

" Madame Périntot was called away to Paris on business this morning," she answered, acutely conscious of his nearness.

In the studio Gaston set down his suit case and threw his coat over the back of the chair.

" Eugénie," he said, holding out his arms and looking at her, his lips slightly swollen with emotion—" Eugénie, do you love me ? "

She hesitated for a moment, then, as he advanced and put his arms round her, unresisting she offered her lips. The young man kissed her. She felt suffocated beneath his kisses—ready to die for the joy of his presence. At last she pushed him away dumbly, her hands on his breast, and, with a sigh, he released her.

Walking over to the piano, and, seeing the music lying open, he picked it up.

" You have been singing Hahn's songs," he said.

" Trying to," she answered. Her voice trembled and her heart throbbed painfully. " I wish you would sing them to me again."

Gaston sat down at the piano.

" Stand near me then," he said, his blue eyes pleading, " I want to feel your presence."

She came up to him and stood behind him, her arm on his shoulder, so that when he threw his head back it rested on her breast. As he sang he could feel the beating of her heart.

*" Calmes dans le demi jour
Que les branches hautes font,
Pénétrons bien notre amour
De ce silence profond.
Fondons nos âmes, nos cœurs
Et nos sens extasiés
Parmi les vagues langueurs
Des pins et des arbousiers."*

He ceased and leaned against her and she, stooping, kissed his mouth.

*" Ferme tes yeux à demi,
Croise tes bras sur ton sein,
Et de ton cœur endormi
Chasse à jamais tout dessein."*

He got up from the piano and put his arms round her again.

"Oh, my beloved, I love you, I love you," she murmured.

But, at that moment, the sound of the opening gate alarmed her, and she slipped away, going across to the great window. Annette, with heavily-laden basket on her arm, crossed the foreground on her way to the kitchen.

Gaston came up behind Eugénie. Together they looked out. Twilight was beginning to fall. In the lane Madame Rouston passed. The old woman's fragile bent form recalled to the girl Madame Périntot's words at parting.

"I must go home," she said confusedly. "They will wonder what has become of me."

"Not yet—oh! my beloved, not yet—I have much to say to you."

"To-morrow then," she said firmly, and, stooping, she pressed her lips to his hands.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he cried, the blood mounting to his forehead, "you make me mad. I love you."

"You cannot love me more than I you," she answered tenderly, turning resolutely to the door. "Do not come with me," she added, as he made a movement to follow. "I want to be alone for a while."

She left him in the door of the studio—irresolute—undecided—his passion for her at fever heat.

But instead of going directly to La Maison Grise she turned her steps towards the Poet's Rock. The wet grass swished against her skirts and clung, moist and cold, to her ankles. In the sweet freshness of the evening lowering clouds scudded across the stormy sunset, which gleamed yellow and green behind their greyness.

On the edge of the plain she could see dimly, through the dusk, a line of cows meandering down the road to the farm to be milked. Behind them, like some moving statue of bronze, walked the figure of a young man, who whistled a gay, thin little tune. And, from out that vagueness of humid dusk, came the passionate, buoyant, rejoicing note of the thrush. The glow sank away into infinity of greyness. The line of cattle passed within the farm buildings on the right. The whistle of the cowherd ceased. But still, with penetrating reiteration, the note of the thrush gave forth the pæan of love and youth.

Somewhere in the village, from the northward, came a sound of boys' voices—high-pitched in argument—and the barking of a dog. A silence—and then the regular tolling of a church bell, in the distance, calling to prayer. The bell stopped and again the note of the thrush became audible.

The farm buildings, the hill and plain, sank away into darkness. Then Eugénie turned and made her way home.

As she passed the Villa des Fées, she saw that a shaft of light streamed from the studio window. Through the darkness came to her the sound of her beloved's voice singing. She listened, and the words, floating out, vibrated through her very soul.

*" Oh ! dolci baci, o languide carezze,
Mentr' io fremente le belle forme disciogliea dai veli !
Svanì per sèmpre il sogno mio d' amore
L' ora è fuggita e muoio disperato !
E non ho amato mai tanto la vita—tanto la vita ! "*

At the last repetition of the sobbing cry *tanto la vita*, Eugénie leant against the wall, burying her face in her hands. Though she did not know it, Gaston's singing of the great air from *Tosca* declared her own triumph over Wanda. For the passion of his singing was a defiance of the invitation of the old love, a triumphant excluding of that old love for the sake of a greater love which was new.

But Eugénie waited to hear no more. Her hands dropped at her sides and she fled through the doorway of La Maison Grise.

CHAPTER VII

THAT night Eugénie went early to bed. A great joy—born of the consciousness of her love—was within her. Not long afterwards she heard Jacques and Marie mount the stairs and Madame Rouston's light tread follow them.

She moved across to her window, which gave on to the lane. Madame Périntot's room being unoccupied, she knew that she was alone—absolutely alone with her thought. Outside it was pitch dark and light rain fell. She undid her hair and dropped it in a curtain around her. Then,

leaning her head on her hands, she shut her eyes, letting that softness of rain and wind envelop her.

At Marie and her husband she had looked to-night with new, strange eyes. She too was beloved. She, too, would call the man she loved husband. She, too—she too, might bear a child.

In the studio, where she had heard the music, was silence. But as she listened the door opened and footsteps sounded on the pebbles. The two men had come out—she could hear Gaston bid his friend good-night. She heard Drouot return to the lower room and close the door; and, a moment later, Gaston mounted the outside stone staircase that led to his bedroom.

At the top he paused; then, after a moment's hesitation, he descended again—his heels grating on the uneven stones—and cross the pebbled ground to the garden. His footsteps retreated down the path and, after a moment, he opened the gate. She held her breath. He was coming along the lane.

On a level with her he paused. She could hear him fumbling with something and uttering little suppressed exclamations. Then he struck a match. It spluttered and went out—extinguished by the rain and wind. He came close to the wall, and, in the shelter of it, he lit another match, trying to shelter his cigarette as he applied the flame.

As the match flared up it illumined the whiteness of Eugénie's face at the window. He was within two feet of her and seemed to be looking straight in her direction as he threw away that flaring match. Had he seen her?—She waited motionless, hardly breathing. In the darkness she heard him take two steps forward, groping his way to the window. Something was touching her. She put out her hands and felt them clasped in his. She knew that Gaston had buried his face in her long, soft hair.

"Eugénie," he whispered, "kiss me, beloved. Come to me, or let me come to you, for I cannot exist without you."

She put her arms about him, and bent her head till her lips met his.

"My dear—oh, my dear," she whispered. "You know that I love you—you and you only—that I belong to you—that every thought I think is a longing for you. That every word in my mouth is a confession of my love."

He caressed her, touching her face with his fingers, kissing her forehead, her eyes, and throat.

"You love me?" he said hoarsely. "Then let me come to you now. You need not be afraid—you will be safe with me—no one will ever know."

She did not understand him.

"Why should not anyone know?" she asked, kissing his forehead.

"I would not persuade you against your will," he pleaded. "But if you love me, and——"

"Oh, my heart," she interrupted. "Shall I tell you what I was thinking—alone in the dark? What my sole desire—my overpowering longing—has been—ever since I came to love you—though at first I did not understand—only I longed without knowing the meaning of that longing."

"Tell me," he whispered, his lips on her neck.

"I long," she said—and he felt her tremble in his arms—"I long to bear you a son."

Gaston started. In the darkness he flushed. The thought crossed his mind that she was trying to make him marry her. He desired her infinitely—loved her passionately. He would have been ready to kill anyone else who attempted to seduce her. In his eyes, she belonged to him. But marriage—childbirth—those things spelt domesticity—concrete facts warranted to dispel the most exquisite romance, to extinguish the fire of the most ardent love.

"No, no," he answered roughly, "I don't care about children. I should not ask that of you."

He assumed an indignation which, for the moment, he believed to be unselfish consideration for her. But Eugénie was wounded to the quick.

"What do you want, then?" she asked, her lips trembling.

"This, my sweet," he murmured, his voice urgent, his breath coming hot. "Give yourself to me. By all the laws of Nature you are mine. You love me, and I love you. You shall be soul of my soul, body of my body. You shall hold me in the hollow of your hand, so that there is not a fibre of me that is not yours. Can any banal human-made marriage ceremony be more beautiful than the call of your spirit to mine, and the mating as birds mate?"

"The birds?" she answered, her tears falling. "True, the birds mate without marriage; but, for what purpose?"

they mate?—In order that they may build nests and give birth to their young. To me love without a child is not love. It is contrary to the law of God. Does not the whole of Nature testify to this? It is contrary also to every thought and ideal in which I have been brought up. What you ask of me is not possible. I, who would help you—who thought to help you—that I should tempt you to sin?—No, it is unthinkable."

"Ah!" he exclaimed roughly, "you have been brought up by priests and women. Both of these—for their own purpose—teach the young to ask for material return for man's love. Barter and exchange! You give yourself in exchange for money—a home—respectability—but the free giving, according to Nature, the giving for love alone, is debarred. If you loved me you would give freely, asking nothing but love in exchange."

"Ah, you hurt me!" she cried, weeping. "If you could know—if you could look into my heart and understand the depth of my affection, the greatness of my reverence for you—you would believe in the reality of my love. There is not a day, not an hour, that I do not think of you, that I shall not think of you until I die. Nevertheless, if I sinned, if I caused you to do evil, I should never be happy any more."

"Can you not trust me, then?" He put his arms about her, kissing her wet cheeks. "I swear that I would be faithful to you, as I should never be if I were bound; and, in your unselfish love, I should honour you more than any wife. Sweet, do you not know that I love you?"

"Gaston—Gaston, do not ask me, do not make it so hard for me!" she beseeched, putting him from her. "I love you so that it is agony to me to refuse."

"I will not press you to do what you do not wish," he said. There was a certain hardness in his tone, and he moved away a step.

"Forgive me, oh, my darling!" she cried, stretching out her hands imploringly. "Forgive me, I ask nothing of you," she added weeping. "Perhaps I was stupid. I had not understood what you meant."

Hypolite shrugged his shoulders and answered impatiently: "There is nothing to forgive. You do not care enough to discard convention, I suppose. The same old story—you want to feel safe—and I—I cannot marry."

Eugénie was about to speak when there was the sound of someone knocking on the door of her room.

Hypolite took her hand in his.

"Hush," he whispered. "What is that?—I must go to bed. Good-night. Think over what I have said. If you really care for me you will not hesitate—and I swear to you that I will love you beyond everything, that no woman ever has, and never shall, be loved more than yourself."

Again a knocking. Gaston hastily pressed his lips to her forehead, and, in a moment, she heard him cross the lane.

She shut the window and stood still, the tears streaming down her face. What should she do? She must see what was there. It was possible that, in the darkness, her agitation might escape observation. She went across to the door and opened it. Marie-Anne stood there in her nightgown, her bare feet showing, her hair hanging in plaits on either side her face. In her hand she held a candle which illuminated her face. Her eyes were round and startled, and the outline of her body, under her fine white nightgown, was slightly distorted.

"Eugénie," she said, "I thought I heard you crying. You had come down to fetch some milk—I was thirsty."

Eugénie looked at the little figure. She felt in a moment that it would be impossible to agitate that gentle friend with her trouble. And just now, too, she was aware that Marie-Anne ought to be preserved from all excitement. Yet—since the traces of recent tears were still on her cheeks—she could not very well deny that she suffered.

"It is nothing, Marie," she asserted, though her quivering lips belied her words. "At least—nothing of importance. But to-morrow I must go to Paris, I think, to see Madame Périntot."

"Is the matter so very urgent?" the other asked wonderingly. "We heard from her to-night, saying she would be back at the end of the week."

"I dare not wait," Eugénie answered hurriedly. "I cannot explain to you, dear Marie-Anne, but I am certain Madame Périntot herself would counsel me to go."

Marie-Anne advanced into the room. She put down her candle on the chest of drawers.

"Eugénie," she said hesitatingly, "I can see that something has made you unhappy. I do not ask out of curiosity

—but—could you not tell me? I have never had a sister and I have come to love you as one—and, now that I am a married woman,” she added, with simple dignity, “I know and understand many things. You need not be afraid to speak freely to me. I have a fancy, I may be wrong—I beg you to forgive me if I am in error—but I cannot help thinking that it has to do with M. Hypolite. Am I right?”

She looked up at Eugénie, and, seeing that the other girl wept, came to her and held out her arms.

“What is it, dear?” she whispered. “Are you in love with him?”

“Oh, Marie-Anne!” the other cried, sobbing bitterly.

“Don’t cry, dear Eugénie,” she entreated. “It has always seemed to me that he was very devoted to you. What has gone wrong? If you stay here perhaps you may find that he cares for you.”

Eugénie hid her face on Marie-Anne’s shoulder.

“He says that he does not love me,” she murmured.

“Then why are you unhappy?”

Eugénie moved away and sat down on the edge of the bed. She dropped her face in her hands and her voice was stifled by sobs as she answered:

“He does not want to marry me.”

Marie-Anne came to her swiftly and knelt down with both arms clasping the weeping girl.

“*Ma pauvre chérie*,” she cried, “you are right to go away—you shall go by the first train to-morrow. Jacques will take your bag round to the train. Now,” she added, “try not to cry any more. Go to sleep. Cousin Marguérite is such a wise person. She will know better than I how to advise you. I feel sure that she will set things right. Tell her everything. If it is true love on his part, I feel sure all will be well in the end. If not—Ah! it is better you should not see him any more. It will only make you more unhappy. Think, my dear,” she coaxed, “think of your lovely voice!”

But Eugénie refused to be comforted. The wound she had received cut her to the quick.

“Marie-Anne,” she said, looking at her with sombre eyes, “would you believe a man loved you if he asked you to do wrong?”

Marie-Anne was silent for a moment, then she said gently:

“Not if he was free to marry me.”

"If he was free to marry?" Eugénie repeated slowly. "I have no reason to suppose Gaston is not free; but he does not believe in marriage."

"Perhaps there is some obstacle he cannot tell you of." Fear clutched at Eugénie's heart. She remembered the picture of the lady driving in the Russian troika.

"In any case," Marie-Anne went on, "you will do well to return to Paris, till Marguérite comes back. You know you are always welcome here; but I am afraid for you, if this marriage is not good and Marguérite is away. Believe me, dear, if you gave way to him you would regret it all your life. Men are made differently to us. We sometimes mistake what is only passion in them for love. It seems to me that, if he does not put your happiness before his own, he does not care for you truly. I am certain that my Jacques, who does love me truly, would never have wished me to do wrong."

"But Hypolite does not think it is wrong. That is just what makes it so terrible to me. I even fear he considers it selfish on my part to wish to bind him."

"Then it is he who is selfish," exclaimed Marie-Anne indignantly. "Where true love is, the closer the bond the greater the gladness. This man is unworthy of you."

Eugénie got up.

"Ah, no—no—don't!" she cried—"that hurts me. Marie-Anne, you must go to bed. It is very thoughtless of me to keep you here. Now promise me you will not trouble about me. I will go to dear Madame Périnot to-morrow."

Marie-Anne kissed her tenderly.

"You will not grieve any more?" she whispered. "You shall go to-morrow, but you will come back quite soon."

She picked up her candle and went out of the door. Eugénie watched her shadow thrown upon the wall as she mounted upward. At the stair-head Jacques met her.

"Where have you been, my little Marie?" he said. "I missed you."

Eugénie, standing in the darkness below, saw him come down the first steps, then his shadow mingled with that of his wife, as he gathered her up in his arms.

"*Mon Dieu*, Jacques, let me go," she heard Marie-Anne's voice say, "we shall catch our deaths standing here in the cold."

Eugénie turned and re-entered her room. She could not

endure the sight of Marie's happiness to-night, and again she gave way to bitter weeping. Locking the door, she flung herself down on the floor beside her bed, burying her face in the clothes in order to stifle her convulsive sobbing. She was filled with anguish. Gaston—how she loved him! But now all that which had seemed so beautiful became to her a matter for shame. Her shoulders heaved with the passion of her weeping. After a long while, spent with agony of mind, she roused herself, and, getting up, bathed her face in cold water. Then, taking a candle, she went through the communicating door into Marguérite's room, and, sitting down at the writing-table, commenced to write to Gaston.

Her resolution was taken. Gaston wished her to sin. She would not consent. She would fight him in this matter. By the greatness of her love she would conquer. If that love demanded self-sacrifice of her, she was ready to accept it. If Gaston wanted her clean and honest friendship, he should have it. She had promised to help him when he was unhappy; and, even though the loss of his love was agony to her, she would not fail him. Only he must understand. It must be marriage and the greatest, highest terms of love and motherhood—or friendship only. She could admit of no possible compromise. She must be strong, if he was weak; tender with him—even as she had been with the wilful babies in the *crèche*. She could not blame him. It seemed to her possible that he was in some way bound to Wanda.

Her heart yearned over him with a great mother-love. She must think of him, care for him. What, after all, did her own happiness matter? Perhaps he loved Wanda—and because things had gone wrong between them he had turned to her—Eugénie—for comfort. She would not cast him off because he had been blinded by passion. She loved him, and—yes—the greatness of her love must show itself in self-sacrifice. She would help him.

For nearly two hours she wrote and re-wrote her letter. It was past one o'clock before she closed it and, wearily, undressed. She put the letter beneath her pillow and lay in the darkness—again weeping.

BOOK VII

THE ETERNAL SOUL

CHAPTER I

WHEN Eugénie left Acquarelle next morning by the *petit train* she was in a condition of tragic enthusiasm. She said good-bye to kindly Jacques, and putting down her baggage on the seat inside the car, went out on to the platform at the back to watch the last grey houses disappear in the distance.

A lowering sky, gloomy and wind-swept, hung a pall-like canopy over the plain. As the train moved swiftly forward, the wind, sweeping round the corner of the car, reached her, lashing and stinging her face. It tore at the tossing branches of the bare trees by the wayside, shrieking and screaming like hysteric laughter of elemental beings, who, flail-like, beat down the spare grass and stunted bushes, only to leave them and leap away whistling into space.

In the swaying of the car and buffeting of that malicious, rain-laden wind, Eugénie bade farewell to Acquarelle and the romance of her love. And, as the last grey houses became smaller and smaller in perspective, something gripped her terribly. An unexplained and unfathomable nostalgia took her by the throat, as if, in saying good-bye to that exquisite dream of romance, she bade farewell also to the hope of child-bearing—to the profound and fundamental beauty of woman's love for man.

For Eugénie—though in the first bloom of her youth—did not mince matters with herself. She believed that, through all eternity, the one man whom she could love—for whom she could feel "love longing's piercing passionate need"—was the man who had first awakened in her that longing. It seemed to her that the great romance which lay at her feet, like an idol shattered—broken—abortive—

could never more be brought to wholeness. In the greatness of her yearning that Gaston should see as she saw, she could not bring herself to believe that his egoism was the result of his inability to love one woman truly. Glorifying the man she loved, she believed rather that his attitude towards her was dictated by his inability to give her all, because that "all" rightly belonged to some other woman. Out over the rain-drenched plain, where tinkling sheep-bells clashed faintly, she looked back at Acquarelle, where she knew the man she loved was still dwelling—the man whose importunity had broken her as on the wheel, and scorched her to the very soul. Somewhere, out in the great world, there lived another woman who had taken possession of him to the exclusion of all others, a woman whom he loved—more than he loved her—whom he yearned for even as she, Eugénie, yearned for him.

In remembrance, and in the consciousness of her own agony, she clung to the thought he had so suffered—had been so unhappy—that she ought to think of him rather than of herself.

Yet, despite this striving after unselfishness and generosity, the tears dimmed her eyes. Racked with the torture of her own sorrow, she found relief in a passion of tenderness over his unhappiness. Then she began to question herself. If he suffered because of a woman, could that be the woman whose picture he had shown her in "Commedia" at Madame Périnot's apartment in the Rue des Masques, the morning after her *début*?—The beautiful woman driving three horses abreast?—She remembered the whole scene. Remembered Gaston's pleading. That had been surely the beginning of their friendship—of their love. It was then the first note of intimacy was struck. She searched her memory for the woman's name. At last it came to her—Wanda—Wanda Panowska, whose cruelty, so he said, had been the cause of his illness. This, she cried to herself with a sudden sense of illumination, was what stood between Gaston and herself—this woman, who did not want him as a husband, still ruled his heart.

Something of age-old jealousy—woman of woman—primitive and naked—pierced her, giving her rack of sorrow a new turn. But, bravely, she fought jealousy, setting it aside.

If love was the great and noble thing which she believed it to be, surely the root and heart of it was not self-pity, but self-sacrifice and devotion, regardless of self-interest, to the cause of the object of love. She lifted her head and looked out over the plain. The train was passing from the open space into the woodland that lies before Vauclou.

On either side the bare branches of the trees clashed and shuddered in the wild wind. Behind them the tear-stained landscape had the aspect of some creature pale from long weeping, which waits but to gather fresh tears to weep again. As the grey-green fields sank into distance, again she was taken with a longing, painful and acute, for the quiet village and the arms of her beloved. It seemed to her, as she strained her eyes into space, that she looked on the fair country for the last time. A feeling of portent, immense and overwhelming, was upon her, a sense of renunciation.—Renunciation of what? Of love?—It seemed to her rather, that, in taking that journey, she renounced life itself—living and the joys of life.

A curious detachment now possessed her, as if, unconscious of time or locality, she fled onward through the void. Again that tragic enthusiasm welled up in her. Strangely she felt that the parting of the ways had come. The veil of the future was rent and her eyes were opened.—She had gone to Acquarelle as a girl on the verge of womanhood, with the first sense of awakening sex glowing in her. Now—after less than two weeks, she returned, leaving her girlhood behind her—a woman, yet a maiden, sad, and infinitely wise.

For cut of her sorrow had come knowledge; and the love—that magnificent and undying love—which was within her. She was going home. Was it to escape from that love?—Vehemently she repudiated the thought. No—she was going back to help Gaston.—She had promised to help him. How could she prove her love—how best serve him? For she would cry shame on herself if in her own sorrow she could forget that he needed help.—And she must help him, would help him, even though it broke her heart.

But how?—What did fate ask of her? Not the sacrifice of her honour? She knew, she understood that her instinct of flight gave the answer to that question. She wondered if Gaston had read her letter—if he would understand. Then again agony flayed her soul.

What had she done that fate should hurt her so? Her thought, searching back, turned to her art. Wistfully, almost humbly, she clung to that idea. Had she, in pursuit of love and the ecstasy of loving, looked back from the road on which she had elected to travel? Was love, and the romance that came with it, denied her by fate because she ought to devote to the service of her great gifts the whole of her heart and brain? Had she betrayed her art and turned a deaf ear to the promise of those mystical voices which had hitherto directed her? Was the betraying of her art and the casting aside for a brief space of all thought of it a sin which had brought upon her the punishment of abortive love? Did the fulfilment of the ideal of art require of her a devotion amounting to asceticism?

She clasped her hands together, in the very human passion of her grief. To-day—the last day of her love—she would give to suffering and to remembrance.—Afterwards she would strive to put aside that suffering, till time should heal the rawness of the wound. Then she would be able to give Gaston a pure and perfect friendship that should sustain him in trouble. Only—and a shudder again passed through her as of the first pangs of labour—never more must he hold her in his arms. If she could not have the greatest love that man can give to woman, she would, for the sake of honour and clean living, have nothing less.

At the thought that never again would she feel his lips on hers, there came to her full remembrance of every detail of his love-making, till she bowed herself together in her anguish of a woman who has lost her eternal mate.

She was roused, at last, by the stopping of the train as it reached the Vauclou terminus. Mechanically she picked up the little suit case which Marguérite had given her. Taking out her return ticket, she crossed to the centre platform and stood, awaiting the express, looking down the long perspective of track that led south-eastward to the *midi*.

There were few passengers, and the nearly empty station looked desolate. The wind cried and whistled in the telegraph wires and along the hoardings. It carried little spare shreds of torn rubbish along the platform.

At last the Paris *rapide* thundered in, and Eugénie climbed into an empty carriage. Settling herself in a corner with her back to the engine, she shut her eyes.

As the train rushed on through the sombre winter country thick rain blurred the windows. But, with that leaving behind of the country, numbness left Eugénie. She cast away the last regret for her decision; and exultant, full of high and pure resolve, went back to her former dream of Art.

For Gaston she would do what was possible. This last day of her love she belonged to him. After—after—she would devote herself wholly to her art.

Once again to her, out of the dim future, came those enchanting voices calling, holding out hands of friendship, surrounding her, filling her, until, purified of all earthly desire, she lived again in the communion of things Eternal.

As they entered the city, she looked at the tall houses no longer with tear-dimmed eyes, but with the shining vision of the artist, who sees beyond the veil. Art, mighty and beautiful, took back her child. Paris, mother of artists, the beating heart of the body of art, the integral soul of noble inspiration, received her home once more.

CHAPTER II

GASTON passed a restless night. His conversation with Eugénie, and the balking of his desire, made him irritable.—Without intending it, he had precipitated matters to such an extent that he had caused her to arrive at a definite decision, before he had sufficiently prepared her mind. If he had only been content to drift! But his accursed temperament had betrayed him into indiscretion, just at the moment when he ought to have approached the question with diplomacy. He was bound to acknowledge that he had landed himself in an *impasse*. If she would not allow him to go forward, and he refused to go back, what in heaven's name was to be the outcome of it?—The question presented a riddle of which it was exasperatingly difficult to discover the solution.

He was aggravated with Eugénie because he could not but love her—for, whether she refused his advances or no, ruefully he admitted that he was very deeply attached to her. Towards her, too, a new quality entered into his attitude, a new feeling that he could not as yet define. Never

before, in his whole life, had a woman told him that she would like to bear him a child. That fact stood out in his mind. Over and over again he returned to the thought, till the impression it had made sank in deeper and deeper. Somewhere in him a sense of paternity stirred; and he began to wonder, vaguely, if it would give him happiness to possess a little creature to whom he himself had given life. But, though he played with the thought furtively, he became a little alarmed at this sudden awakening of sentiment, and sought to stifle it by conjuring up visions of various of his friends who had elected to sail the troubled waters of matrimony. Did he not remember how, after a while, the fond lovers had become bored—the women losing both their figures and their looks! In such cases, he reflected, the conjugal tie and the obligations it entailed were an outrage on temperament. After the birth of children, the glamour of infatuation having lost its pristine freshness, they remained riveted to one another—indissolubly bound—helpless victims of convention, forced to keep up a semblance of affection, while to each the society of the other had become stale.

He shuddered. How could he continue to see the romance of life if such a thing happened to him? Eugénie was young now—but she too would grow old. He thought of Victorine, and her gross person. If the niece in old age should grow like that, should lose her beauty and her grace, he knew that he should not remain faithful to her. No—love was a thing sacred to youth, of which the only ideal law was that of perfect freedom.

He was convinced that, were he free, he could make her happy—provided only that she could be persuaded to relinquish the fetish of religion. Whereas, if he were bound—what possible happiness could there be for her if he grew tired of her?

By the time he had reached the last stages of his toilet, Hypolite had persuaded himself that, in Eugénie's own interests, it would be extremely inconsiderate to allow her to marry. "She has her profession to think of," he told himself. "She is young, beautiful, and has the prospect of a great career. Many men will make love to her—I cannot expect her to be any more faithful to me than I should be to her.—Obviously, to saddle her with a family at the outset would be little short of criminal on my part!"

He went down into the garden. The rain had ceased, but the wind was rising and great black clouds hurried across the sky. He crossed to the studio. Turbulent gusts buffeted him, increasing his irritation. Entering, he found Drouot had finished his breakfast and was preparing for work.

"Anything wrong, *mon ami*?" he asked, as Gaston threw himself into a chair, and, sighing heavily, began moodily to pour out a cup of coffee.

The young man nodded in reply. Drouot waited patiently for revelations, while the other seated at the table continued to stir his coffee mournfully.

"Camille," he said at last, "I want your advice."

He pushed his cup away, and leant his head on his hands.

Drouot, who was washing paint brushes, began examining them carefully one by one.

"I don't know that it will be of much use to you," he said, concealing a smile. "You always go your own way in the end, you know."

Gaston ignored the speech. He twisted a little spoon on his fingers.

"I'm in the devil's own hole," he murmured. "The truth is, I am very much in love with Eugénie Massini and she—she loves me too——"

Drouot looked at him anxiously.

"But, *mon ami*," he cried, "if the love is mutual—what stands in your way?"

"In my way," Gaston said, apparently absorbed in the gyrations of the teaspoon. "I thought you yourself counselled flight?"

"Not if you care for her thus seriously."

"Ah! but it is just that—I believe I do, but I am afraid of committing myself and then finding I do not want what I ask for."

Drouot was silent for a moment.

"With a girl of Mademoiselle Massini's character," he asserted gravely, "you would in all probability do well to reflect before committing yourself."

Gaston looked up quickly.

"You mean—that after a while she would be unfaithful to me?"

"On the contrary," Drouot returned quietly, "I mean

that she would expect a high standard of conduct from you."

"Ah," the other returned—"provided I married her."

He got up and walked to the window, looking out at the flying clouds and tossing branches of the trees and shrubs in the garden.

Drouot, who had followed him, addressed him somewhat explosively.

"You could not propose that she should become your mistress?"

Gaston shrugged his shoulders.

"Why not?—Not a few women have, after all, been most anxious for that position. In this case, I am sure I could make her extremely happy—we have many tastes in common."

"And Mademoiselle Massini?" he demanded a little stiffly, stopping in front of Gaston. "Have you discussed the question with her?"

"You stand for her then as against me?" Gaston inquired, a little bitterly. "Is it possible that you yourself have fallen in love? Do I find in you a rival and not a friend?"

Drouot's face contracted. For a moment his expression was dangerous; then he went over to Gaston and, laying his hand on his shoulder, said:

"Gaston, you are the dearest friend I have in the world. I should have thought, by this time of day, my affection for you had stood sufficient test for you to believe that, in this matter, I am incapable of thinking of myself."

"Forgive me," the other cried, immediately repentant, remembering Drouot's devotion to him during his illness of last year. "I know that I can depend on you. Yet, in the present case, are you not a little narrow-minded? Think of the hundreds of women with whom you are acquainted. Are there not many—whom you respect and admire—whose morals would not bear close inspection? It is not the view of modern civilization that a man must exist without certain distractions unless he marry."

"In that modern civilization is all wrong," Drouot interrupted roughly. "The love of man and woman should mean the selection of the one being whom you consider worthy to bear your children—not the passing satisfaction of lust."

"Ah, *mon vieux*, I do not agree with you! Personally I

believe nature never intended it to be so. It seems to me much simpler that we should accept the emotional instigation of the moment, without mortgaging the future of whose exigencies we are ignorant. Personally I have never believed that a woman was bound in these matters any more than a man."

Drouot made a quick exclamation. He turned sharply on Gaston.

"That is a creed invented by yourself to suit your own convenience," he asserted emphatically.

"No," the other returned; "you will find it commanded by pretty numerous adherents. As you know, I am not *croyant*. Art is my religion, is sacred to me. For the preserving of my art—for the development of it—I would sacrifice anything or anyone, and hold myself more than justified in so doing. I believe that domesticity would stifle the best in me, and that its continual claims on my time and sympathy would be intolerable—would, in fact, paralyse all inspiration."

Drouot groaned.

"You don't see, that it is not yourself that you sacrifice, but Eugénie—the child whom you assert that you love."

"I do love her," the other answered hotly. "She appeals to me in a way that no other woman has ever done. She stirs my imagination, sharpens my intelligence. I cannot give her up, for she is necessary to me. Intercourse with her brings out the spiritual quality in my art—therefore it is proof positive that she is good for me, and——"

Drouot interrupted him.

"You argue well, but wholly from your own standpoint. To begin with, you do not consider her intellect—and she possesses a considerable amount of it. It is not women of intellect who demand too much of the husband, for these have interests in life apart from the domestic relation. No—the woman who demands too much, who wishes to constantly occupy the foreground of her husband's mind, to the exclusion of all other interests, is the creature to whom body rather than mind is the god of her idolatry——"

"I detest your intellectual cold-blooded women," Gaston interrupted vehemently. "One does not want to marry a schoolmistress. *Sapristi!*——"

"The intellectual type is not necessarily cold-blooded—witness Mademoiselle Massini herself. There is plenty of

fire in her, I am convinced.—But to return to my argument, I repeat that, given intellect and passion well balanced, the intellect will, as age advances, become the dominant force of a woman's life. But, choose the unintellectual, exclusively feminine and very often childish-minded creature—the type most attractive, as a rule, to men—and the result will be, when passion cools, infinity of boredom. She will make increasing inroads on your time and sympathy which you will be increasingly unwilling to pardon her.”

“*Parbleu!* that is exactly what I have always told myself,” Gaston murmured.

But Drouot continued to hold forth, while he paced the room restlessly.

“I presume,” he asked, stopping in front of his friend, “you would not be so selfish as to ask Eugénie to give up her profession; therefore, what could be more suitable, more attractive, than your common interest in things musical? For marriage to be happy, I believe from my heart, it should be based on friendship and similarity of tastes; in order that, when the first ardours are passed, there may be something to fall back on.”

“Yes, yes, *mon vieux*,” Gaston exclaimed, “all this is admirable—but, how is she to continue her profession if she is wholly occupied with a nursery?”

“Wholly occupied?” Drouot put in, smiling—“a large family is not inevitable.”

Gaston looked round nervously, as if he expected to see a little crowd of children already surrounding him.

“I was not born to be a *bon papa*,” he groaned—“I much prefer my own arrangements. No, Drouot, you are a good fellow but you do not understand these things. You have not studied them as I have.”

Drouot stood still, looking at his friend. His strong hands were clasped convulsively, his face flushed to a dull red.

“*Mon petit*,” he said, “Eugénie has a splendid nature. Passionate she may be—but what man worthy the name would not have a woman love him to the *nth*?” He swallowed, and his voice became thick with tears, while he went on unsteadily: “It is true that no love—since we curious complex creatures are half animal, half divine—is perfect without the element of passion. But that passion should be the sole link between human beings is unthinkable

to those who believe in the eternity of the soul. Passion dies—and what is left ? ”

Gaston looked up—his blue eyes alight with interest.

“ Then you believe in the theory that there is a genuine and real passion which men call love, which is superior to and distinct from, the mere desire of the flesh ? ”

Drouot's face became pale. He turned to the window and, looking out into the distance, he spoke with sincerity and conviction.

“ With my whole heart—with every fibre of my being, I believe it—and why ? Because I have the greatest of proofs of its existence—because I have experienced it myself.”

He looked round at his friend, and Gaston was struck by the nobility and spirituality of his aspect.

“ You, Camille ? ” he exclaimed, startled. “ I have always believed you somewhat of a hermit—indifferent to the things of the world. Sometimes in my heart I have condemned you to be a cold-blooded ascetic.”

“ You wronged me, then,” Drouot answered quietly. “ You are somewhat of an egoist, my Gaston. I should not have bare the secret places of my heart and speak of the most sacred chapter of my life, unless your welfare were very dear to me and my consequent desire that you, too, should understand these things.”

He went over to the window, leaned his elbow on the broad sill, and stared out, his chin on his hands. Hypolite, watching him, perceived that he could hardly restrain his emotion and that he bowed himself together as though in pain.

“ It is necessary to convince you,” Drouot went on. “ therefore I tell you what I have told no other man. I loved a woman—who shall be nameless—it is sufficient to say that she is the only woman I ever have loved, or ever shall love.” His voice broke, but he steadied himself with a little gasp, and went on. “ If I could have married her, it would have been to me a heaven on earth. God—how I wanted her, how I still want her ! She was the most beautiful creature in mind and body that ever breathed.”

Gaston was profoundly moved. He sat very still.

“ Was she not free then ? ” he asked. “ Why did you not marry ? Did she not care for you ? ”

“ She cared—she will care through all eternity,” Drouot

asserted proudly. "But we—we did not think it right to marry. She—her father became insane, and his father before him. We knew that, loving as we did, there would—there must be a child—a son. And we could not dare to bring into the world a creature foredoomed to madness by all the laws of heredity."

"*Mon vieux*," cried Gaston, wrung to the heart. "Was there no other solution?"

"None," said Drouot harshly. "To both of us, with our obedience in the Catholic Faith—there was none. I would not stoop to sully her pure mind by suggestion of anything else. To me she should remain, and she has always remained, the one perfect and desirable woman."

He was silent for a moment, then he continued:

"After our decision we parted, she to enter the Convent of the Ursulines—and I—I went to Algiers, where, from out the ashes of the tragedy which consumed me, arose the phoenix of my artistic career." He paused for a moment, his face grey and lined. "Fame has come—much has come—but not the satisfaction of my unending love for her. Yet I know that, hid in the Convent of St. Ursula, she lives and daily prays we may be united in Eternity."

Again he was silent, and again after a pause he took up his narrative.

"Yes, Gaston, you talk of the impossibility of submitting to the bonds of matrimony, of the *ennui* of domesticity." He spread out his hands, and a laugh that was half a sob was torn from him. "I only know that to obtain her as my wife, to make her the mother of my son, seemed to me, seems still, God help me—the most glorious thing possible in life. And, because I could not make her my wife, I broke my heart—and the agony of that heartbreak remains in me still. But I am accustomed to its presence—I could not do without it. It consoles me, for, if I can do nothing for her, at least I can remember, and"—he leant forward bowing his head down on the window sill—"at least that which she may not have shall belong to no other woman. My art—myself—my life—all are dedicated to her. It pleases me to think that I suffer for her as I believe she suffers for me."

He ceased speaking. Hypolite came to his friend and put his arm round his shoulders. His expression was that of an awed and contrite child.

"You make me ashamed," he said, in a low voice. "I had not believed such self-sacrifice possible."

"It is not self-sacrifice," the other asserted, raising his head, "it is true love—the love which lasts for all eternity—the love which springs from the soul. It is not given to every man to feel it, but I have a conviction you are capable of finer things than you yet know. There is a nobility slumbering in you of whose existence you are unaware."

Gaston looked at him, surprised and touched.

"I did not know that you studied my psychology—that you cared enough to do so. I, too, have a hope that there are possibilities in me of finer things than I have yet attained. It is because of this that I have been afraid of marriage. I feared that the obligation of constant association with the commonplace and material would retard the development of the nobler and spiritual element——"

"Do you think, then," Drouot asked sternly, "that by breaking down the moral sense of a perfectly innocent girl such as Mademoiselle Masson you will materially assist your spiritual development. No—if you love her, have the courage to make her your wife. I have watched her, talked with her, and I know her to have a noble and unselfish nature. I am confident that any man who married her would be the better for it. As to her position—I cannot do you the injustice to believe that any question of class would influence you."

"No," the other asserted, "the fetish of class does not affect me, I have lived too long in Bohemia to be tarred by that vile brush."

"Then why in heaven's name are you not gallant enough to try the experiment?"

"You think it lack of courage on my part?" Gaston asked, smiling.

"Distinctly—since you acknowledge yourself to be in love with her!—In my opinion but two courses are open to you.—Marry Eugénie: or if you do not love enough for that, let her absolutely alone. It is cruel to gain her affection by dangling round, and then offer her the poor compliments of seduction as a salve to your conscience. If you care to the point of being unwilling to contemplate with equanimity the question of resigning her to some other man."

"*Sapristi!*" Gaston interrupted, "I have not the slightest wish she should marry anyone else."

"*Le voilà!*—It is obvious, then, that the only honourable course is to marry her yourself." He stopped. Someone was coming along the garden path.

"It is probably Mademoiselle Massini," he continued hastily. "She promised to come for a final sitting this morning."

The two men went to the door and Drouot opened it. Marie-Anne, her face pale and grave, crossed the gravelled space and stood in front of them.

"M. Drouot," she said, "Eugénie went back to Paris by the early train. She asked me to tell you, and to beg you to excuse her for not being able to come to you."

She took a letter from the pocket of her apron, and held it out, addressing Gaston.

"She asked me to give this into your own hand, M. Hypolite."

As he took the letter, Marie-Anne regarded him fixedly for a moment; then, turning, without another word, she went back up the garden. Drouot, after a moment's hesitation, followed her.

Gaston stood silently by the door, a lump in his throat. Slowly he opened the letter and read the closely written pages covered with Eugénie's generous handwriting.

"My beloved," she wrote,

"When you read this I shall be on my way back to Paris. It is better that I should go away for a little while—Oh, my beloved, forgive me if I do so; but, where you are concerned, I am not sure of my own strength, so deeply, so tenderly, do I love you. In a little while—when I have had time to think, to range my thought with new ideas—I shall be strong enough to take up our friendship. You asked me if I would help to keep idealism alive in you.—How can I do that, beloved, if my presence tempts you to sin? Oh, my dear, my dear, if you could only realize how I love you—love you so well that I cannot wish you to do wrong; love you so much that it would break my heart were I weak enough to give way to your passing passion—and thus sully the great love that has taken possession of my soul.

"And now understand one thing, which I in this night of

bitter weeping have learned, that where true love abides there must be unselfishness. That, perhaps, is the meaning of 'Greater love hath no man than this—than that a man lay down his life for his friend.' For his friend?—How much more is required as a proof of devotion to his beloved! Marriage, as I understand it, means mutual unselfishness—the giving up of freedom for you, and the pains of childbirth for me. And it is just this need of mutual unselfishness that is so beautiful to me—I want it as a means of proving my love for you.

"But oh, my darling, do not think I wish for anything that you cannot freely give without any sense of restraint. Once and for all I tell you—if you want to be free I should never wish you to be bound to me. I beg of you, in mercy, do not think that. I, who am so proud, am humiliated by the thought.

"Last night I was utterly confounded when you suggested there should be anything between us but marriage.

"Cannot you understand, beloved, that if I should ever marry I should wish to have a child. I should like that child to be born of a perfectly innocent and pure body.—For I believe that, as a baby should be born of a perfectly healthy body, so the little soul, which is to live eternally, should be born of a perfectly pure mind. It is thus that I see the obligation of women to live purely. Of the duty of men I know not—I do not profess to understand their ways—but for women—I believe this is absolute. I never thought of these things until my love for you taught me. Beloved, if I sinned, never again should I feel worthy to have a child.

"Oh, my darling, I have cared for you so much and thought of you as the father of a son to me, that I do not think it possible I could marry anyone else. But don't think I am blaming you. I know now that, from the first moment I saw you, I loved you. It was just my fate to care.—I believe that the greatest thing in my life is my love of you, my longing for you—I do not want to be without it. Whether you care for me thus or not can make no difference to my own love, for it is like a burning flame in my soul, and cannot be extinguished by death itself.

"If you have never felt such love, you will not perhaps believe in its existence. Believe me—I who speak to you know it—there is a great and noble love possible which

comes from the soul itself, a love which it may not be given to all to feel; but, to those who have once tasted it, no other is possible. Do not think that this love is without the longing of the body—for no greater longing can exist than mine for you—I believe that no love is perfect without passion of the body and love of the soul. The great and wonderful love that links them both is the love of mate for mate through all eternity.—No other woman—no other man will satisfy. For those who love like this, marriage is but the link that binds them in chains most beautiful, and hallows the whole relation of lover and beloved. For those who love like this age cannot touch them; disease cannot disfigure; sin, sorrow, trouble, all must be forgiven.

"I am not ashamed to speak to you of my passionate longing, because I love you with an everlasting love. I am not angry, beloved; I cannot be, because you do love me like this. But will you try to understand I am the kind of woman to whom only the greatest love is acceptable. Do not try to change my decision. Look deep into your heart and you will know I am right. You ask me to help you; I am going to help you. I go to Paris with the intention of doing so. More than anything in the world I desire you to live nobly and be happy.

"Do not be impatient with me for writing at such length—a long letter, but it contains the whole of my heart's life.

"God's peace be with you, dearly beloved. Let no shadow of anger or reproach or misunderstanding lie between us. I have tried to speak courageously. What matter whether you love me so long as the idealism within you burns bright.

"One thing more—if there is someone else you love, and who does not care for you enough to marry you—for the sake of the tremendous love I bear you be honourable towards her—I will pray that you shall attain your heart's desire.

"EUGÉNIE."

Hypolite finished the last page. He dropped his head in his hands, great sobs came tearing at his throat, and his shoulders heaved convulsively.

Thus Drouot found him when he returned.

"I am a brute and a coward," he wept; "I have hurt her, and I love her—brute that I am—I love her; my God,

how I love her! You were right, Camille, ten thousand times right. Eugénie is right, too. There is a great and noble love that comes from the soul. That is the love Eugénie feels for me; and, before God, it is the love that I, though unworthy, feel for her. I am going to her now at once, to ask her forgiveness, and to beg her to honour me by becoming my wife."

Tears stood in Drouot's eyes.

"You will not regret it, *mon cher*," he said.

"I can catch the midday train," Gaston continued excitedly, looking at his watch. "Come with me, Camille, as far as Vauclou. I need your company."

In ten minutes the little train leaving Acquarelle was bearing Gaston on his way to Eugénie. Step by step along the road where she in exaltation and agony had passed, followed her the lover who now knew that the world held for him but one woman—but one way of love.

CHAPTER III

FOR more than a week Clémentine had been in the stable, and Marie-Anne, when she returned from her mission to the Villa des Fées, observed the fact that the cow was restless, pulling at the head rope, lowing and looking pleadingly at the door. This worried her.

"She wants her walk, poor creature," Jacques said. "It has been impossible to take her out much in the snow—I have been too busy these last few days. But do not vex yourself, Marie, I will let her out in the great meadow."

"No, let me take her for a walk," Madame Rouston cried eagerly.

She too felt restless. Both Marguérite and Eugénie were absent. She missed them, and for some days now the rain had kept her indoors. She craved for the sight of the long vista of high-road leading to Vauclou. She wanted the emotion that came to her as she walked the road of her marriage journey with her spirit husband at her side.

"Do you think you can manage her all alone?" Jacques asked, somewhat anxiously. For Madame Rouston appeared singularly bent and fragile. The cold weather seemed to

have shrivelled her—and, in the last six months, she had aged considerably, nevertheless, looking up at big Jacques, the small wizened face crumpled into a smile.

"*Mais, mon garçon,*" she said mildly, "Clémentine is the gentlest of animals, and, I veritably believe, she is attached to me."

"Of that I am sure," he answered, smiling. "Well! promise me that you will not go far and I will put the head rope on her. A very little journey will content her, and it looks like heavy weather again," he added, glancing up at the sky.

"I will not go far," the old woman promised, turning to smile at him as she mounted the stairs.

Five minutes later Jacques appeared at the gate, leading the brown cow, who looked with joy at the tiny figure of Madame Rouston as she descended to the pathway dressed in white cap and shawl, a full skirt and heavy boots. Clémentine's brains were not of a high order, but she knew Madame Rouston was indulgent and would permit her to do much as inclination prompted.

Jacques and Marie watched these quaint companions as they proceeded up the lane.

"She grows smaller and more frail every day," he said.

"You are fanciful, *mon Jacquot,*" Marie-Anne asserted, as they entered the house together, Jacques' large hand on his wife's shoulder.

"Nevertheless," he began—but he stopped, for he had been about to say he would not give much for Madame Rouston's chance of living out the year. Many of the neighbours had noticed, and remarked on this increasing fragility. But he checked himself, remembering that it is not well to mention death in the presence of the unborn—therefore, dropping the subject, he stooped and kissed his young wife.

"Great goose," she cried, but she returned his kisses. "Oh, *mon Jacquot,*" she whispered, "how happy I am. How thankful I am for your love."

Her eyes filled with tears as she remembered Eugénie's face that morning when she put the letter into her hand. The young girl's beautiful sombre eyes were sunken, the lids swollen with weeping, her mouth almost bruised, its redness emphasizing the extreme pallor of her skin. She

had clasped Marie-Anne convulsively and walked away down the village street, turning at the corner to wave farewell.

Jacques, to whom Marie-Anne had imparted a somewhat abridged version of the story, under seal of secrecy, had been half inclined to sally forth and give the author of Eugénie's unhappiness rough usage. But Marie-Anne had restrained him.

"Well, I must not dawdle," he said, reluctantly releasing her. "I have to take Madame de Vaclume's little boys out riding. I shall not be back till the afternoon. They are going over to Crépuscule to take *déjeuner* with the Baron de Cramond."

"*Allez*," she cried. "You will be late."

Madame Rouston, meantime, had taken the narrow path that led to the plain. The ground was still sodden, but the wind had dried the grass. The day was gloomy, and the wind wept and sobbed, making a soft hushing sound, and, at intervals, a long whine, in the shuddering branches of the thicket on her right.

As she walked the old woman repeated her rosary.

"*Ave Mariu ! gratia plena, Dominus tecum*," she whispered.

She held her rosary in her right hand ; round the other she had twisted the end of Clémentine's head rope.

At the corner the great brown cow stopped, searching plaintively for grass, while Madame Rouston continued to say her rosary, her eyes on the distant horizon.

Presently Clémentine tugged at the head rope, and the old woman continued her walk. At the cross road she waited to let a flock of sheep with their tinkling bells go by. Frightened at the sight of the cow, the flock parted, three or four sheep passing on the right of her, the rest to the left. The shepherd, in blue blouse, sabots, and wide trousers, whistled as he walked.

"*Que ça porte bonheur*," the old woman said, peasant-like, believing the dividing of a flock is a good omen to one whose name be mentioned at the moment. "Let it bring good-fortune to Marie-Anne." Then, crossing herself devoutly, "And to the little unborn one."

She took the road which, making a circuit of Cortot's farm, led to the main road to Vauclou at the point where it left the village.

As she passed the bare grey walls of the farm, she could

see Jean Cortot at work among his men, pitching roots into a machine which cut them up for his cattle. He had thrown off his coat, and his arms, bare to the elbow, swung with a regular rhythmic movement, the muscles and veins standing out and the roll of his shoulders visible beneath his shirt as he turned his body. Pausing for a moment, he shouted a cheery good morning to her. In front of the great barn she could see Madame Cortot, in white cap and blue check apron, scattering corn for the chickens. To them both she waved her small knotted hand in greeting; but she did not stop. Her mind was fixed on that one thought—the reaching of the main road, where, from out the shadows of the past, stepping lightly in the wind as on so many other occasions, her spirit husband would come to meet her and again accompany her on that wonderful wedding journey.

She reached the main road. Clémentine stopped and began to eat the grass.

"Not yet," Madame Rouston admonished, giving her a gentle tug; "wait, my Clémentine, until we reach the little rock half-way to Croix-St. Jean. Then you shall eat, and I shall sit awhile—for I am tired."

She trudged along the roadway, a tiny bent figure, following the cow. As she went, she continued softly to repeat the words of her rosary, but her eyes were no longer on the distant horizon. Her back ached, her head felt queer and light, and it was an effort to her to lift her feet in the heavy boots. Her voice quavered at intervals. After a little while she stood still to rest, essaying to straighten herself up.—It seemed a long way to the little rock. The weather was milder, and Clémentine walked so quickly. She could not know, of course, that Madame Rouston was tired!

Again, while they waited, the cow began to crop the grass. But the snow had beaten down and rotted the herbage so that, not finding pasture to her fancy, Clémentine again tugged at the head rope.

"*Courage*," Madame Rouston admonished herself, and once more began to walk. She had nearly reached the rock when giddiness took her. She stopped, pulling feebly at the head rope to arrest the cow. For a moment Clémentine waited, looking round inquiringly, while the little old woman leaned against the crown side of the beast to steady herself. Then the cow, seeing a tuft of good pasture ahead, went

forward again, while, with tottering footsteps, the old woman staggered after her.

"Wait for me, Clémentine," she gasped painfully, her voice cracking and two large tears rolling down her cheeks. But the cow moved steadily forward. Again Madame Rouston staggered, then fell, in a pitiful little heap, on the ground. The rope slid from her nerveless fingers, and Clémentine, finding herself free, moved on into the field, trailing the head rope after her.

Madame Rouston tried to rise, but she seemed to have lost all power in her limbs. The grass smelt very sweet and the wind crooned above her. She wanted to rest, so she lay still.

Then, from out the spirit world, the unseen husband came to her. She stretched out her trembling hands, but to her seeing they were no longer age-worn or knotted. Once again she was young and fair—a bride dressed in white. Once again she crossed the threshold and, in the arms of her beloved, she tasted the bliss of perfect love. It seemed to her that there came, from out an infinity of space, the sound of his voice calling her. She felt that she was falling, falling, falling. Then she had a sense that somehow her imprisoned spirit, which had remained for ever in possession of eternal youth, struggled, battled for escape from that worn and aged body. And, as she strove to reach the voice calling from out the limitless ether, she herself became no longer body but spirit. Like a beautiful butterfly, breaking forth from long sleep in a chrysalis, the soul freed itself, floating out into the vault of space, mingling with the spirit of the husband lover who had waited for her so long. Once more had Madame Rouston taken that wonderful wedding journey; and this time she crossed the threshold of Eternity to dwell for ever in the Courts of the Most High, with the beloved of her soul. The long parting was over.

Five minutes later, Drouot—passing on the little train—observed, as he stood smoking on the platform with Hypolite, a strayed cow, standing knee deep, with trailing head rope, in the pasture.

"Gaston," he said, pitching away his cigarette, "I am certain that is the Fonçets' cow—what can it be doing out here?"

He looked anxiously around and perceived the little crumpled heap of that which had been Madame Rouston at the foot of the rock.

"Something is wrong with the old woman. I am sure of it," he cried, anxiously craning his neck. "I must get down."

He prepared to leap to the ground, but Gaston restrained him.

"No, *mon vieux*, we arrive at Croix-St. Jean in five minutes. What is the use of breaking your neck? Far better descend there and take a carriage."

"Yes, it might be wiser," Drouot assented; "but I cannot bear to lose time, if there is anything wrong."

"You would lose more time if you were to break your leg," Gaston asserted, holding on to him. "See, we are already in sight of Croix-St. Jean."

At Croix-St. Jean, Drouot alighted, and hurried back with the only available vehicle—a two-wheeled cart belonging to a farmer. But Madame Rouston was past all earthly help. She lay sleeping—her head pillowed on the grass, her rosary in her hand, an exquisite smile on her face—the wide-open eyes looking with glad welcome on one who had come to fetch her home.

Drouot picked up the fragile little body and carried it tenderly in his arms.

They took her back the short distance to Cortot's farm, and Drouot immediately telegraphed to Marguérite to return without delay, as—her mother was seriously ill.

Jean Cortot, when they had reverently placed the corpse on the bed of the spare room, knelt down and kissed the hand that held the rosary.

"It was the death she would have wished," he said gravely. "She wanted to be buried here in her native place."

"*Mon Dieu!*" cried Madame Cortot, weeping. "How happy she looks!"

CHAPTER IV

WHEN Eugénie stepped out into the tumult of the great terminus she stood for a moment in the crowd. The roar of many voices and the thunder of the city came to her like the sound of the ocean—the waves of life tossing, stirring, beating—for ever restless, for ever trying to beat away the soul from the little island of this world on the resistless tide of destiny.

She turned faint, and the weariness of her long vigil almost overwhelmed her—for she had not slept, but lain weeping until the dawn. Now, sickened by emptiness and the bitter weeping, she realized she was in urgent need of sustenance. She remembered the station restaurant, where she had lunched on her way to Acquarelle with Madame Périnot. She knew she had enough money left to get some food. So, making her way down the crowded platform, she mounted the great staircase.

Seating herself at a table by the door, she ordered some soup; and, while waiting, to distract her own attention from the faintness which grew on her, she picked up a copy of the weekly illustrated paper lying near her on an empty chair.

Opening it at random, she came face to face with a page of portraits. For a moment her heart seemed to stop beating for she recognized in them the face which Gaston had shown her in "Commedia." There were four pictures in all. One of "La Panowska driving her troika"—the others in the character of different operatic rôles. Beneath them the words "La Panowska returns to the stage—'*tout Paris*' will greet the news joyfully; for the fascinating and talented lady had a warm corner in the heart of every Parisian. Interviewed at the Hôtel R— yesterday, she declared that, as yet, she could give no details, but that the rumours concerning her return were based on fact."

Eugénie put down the paper. She had a sudden inspiration. This day belonged to her love. Therefore she would go to the Hôtel R— and see Wanda. She would plead for

Gaston. It might be that she could put the case better than he had done himself.

Strengthened by the prospect of direct action, she drank her soup. It seemed to her that, unconsciously, she had come on a mission for her beloved. Fate had shown her that which she was to do. If she loved him here was her chance to prove it—and she did love him—loved him enough to plead with another woman for his happiness.

Filled with this conviction, she paid her bill and departed, taking a tram which would eventually land her at the Étoile, near which she knew the Hôtel R—— to be. It seemed to her impossible to falter in her task. She was weary, spent with weeping, broken with emotional strain, but an irresistible impulse was on her to go immediately, to have done with the whole matter, afterwards to return to her work—to absorb herself in her singing.

At the Étoile she left the tram and, looking at the clock over the station, saw that it was on the stroke of one. There was no hurry for the moment—she told herself—she would sit down on one of the seats in the open for a few minutes, for she was exhausted. She knew that the coming interview would wring her heart. When it was over she would go to Marguerite and tell her the whole affair. The thought of this gave her a measure of comfort, for she was certain that Madame Périnot would understand.

A heavy drop of rain fell. Then another and another. The pavement became spotted, and, once more, the sluices of the heavens were unlocked.

She got up and crossed the road, and turned up the wide stretch of the Champs Élysées, walking steadily, under the pattering rain drops, until she came on a level with the Hôtel R——.

The tall porter, under the great portico, looked inquiringly at Eugénie—clad in her simple check gown and black hat and carrying her suit case in her hand.

Certainly she had not the appearance of one of the regular visitors of the hotel. But the young girl, unconscious of his criticism, entered, and asked at the bureau for Mademoiselle Panowska.

For Wanda never employed her title of Princess on the stage, considering it vulgar to use it as a lever for advertisement. She was habitually addressed and billed as Made-

moiselle Panowska. Hence Eugénie was neither aware of her married state nor of her social standing; nor did the hall-porter—taking her to be someone connected with the theatre—trouble to enlighten her.

Therefore he replied that Mademoiselle Panowska was in, but he did not know if she was receiving.

"Will you find out if she will see me?" Eugénie asked.

"What name, please?"

She asked him for a piece of paper and wrote on it:

"Mademoiselle Massini begs Mademoiselle Panowska to see her for a moment—*concerning M. Hypolite.*"

Folding the paper, she gave it to the man, while he entrusted it to the care of a diminutive page. Eugénie's heart beat sickeningly. She longed to run away, to make her escape before that unconcerned and diminutive page should return. But, putting strong restraint on herself, she waited.

After a few minutes the boy came back with the message that the lady was at luncheon; but, if the matter was urgent, she requested Mademoiselle would go up to her private suite and wait. Eugénie signified her desire to wait and was conducted upstairs to Wanda's apartment, where she was left in charge of Wanda's maid.

"Mademoiselle will wait here," Fanchette asserted, showing her into a luxuriously furnished sitting-room—steam-heated and oppressively fragrant.

The maid returned to the inner room, leaving the door slightly ajar so that she might be able to keep an eye on the visitor.

Eugénie, putting the little suit case down, sank into a great arm-chair, something approaching a stupor of weariness and sleep overcoming her. She sat very still, staring mechanically about her.

Sorrowfully she compared the surroundings in which Wanda lived with her own home. This woman had advantages over her to which it was unlikely that Gaston or any other man could be wholly indifferent.

A grand piano stood in the corner of the room, and, near by, an easel, an immense photograph of Wanda Mélisande.

The young girl could not see the face very clearly from where she sat, but she knew that the whole picture was

graceful and very lovely. She looked away—unable to endure the beauty of the woman whom she believed Gaston loved.

Then, outside in the passage, she heard the whisper of a rustling silken petticoat. The door opened, and Wanda—clad in a neat blue serge tailor costume, the last word of Parisian smartness, and a small black toque, with *Paradise plumes*—stood before her.

For a moment Eugénie remained gazing at her. For the living Wanda was even more attractive than her portrait. She was exquisitely finished in every detail. She wore a simple white silk shirt open at the throat, and her patent leather buckled shoes glistened beneath the hem of her skirt. A gold *chatelaine* dangled from a heavy gold chain round her neck. Her blue eyes sparkled and her yellow hair shone beneath the smart little hat. Her cheeks glowed with youth and exuberant health. Her fresh mouth was delicious, and there was light-hearted mischief in her smile.

Rousing herself, Eugénie rose slowly. Her desperation seemed strangely out of place in the presence of this brilliant young woman. She looked at Wanda, her eyes pleading for help, and at last the other woman spoke.

"You wished to see me?"—she looked at the paper in her hand—"concerning M. Hypolite?"

"Yes," Eugénie murmured. She put her hand on the back of a chair to support herself. Wanda's glance travelled over her cheap clothes and rested on her beautiful face.

"You come with a message from him?" she inquired politely.

"No," the other asserted. "I bring no message, I come on my own initiative."

Wanda drew in her breath sharply.

"I know your name," she said. "M. Hypolite mentioned you to me once in casual conversation, telling me he had taken an interest in your voice." She shrugged her shoulders. "I have no doubt he is very charitable."

Eugénie flushed. There was a pain at her heart.

"He has also spoken to me about you," she said steadily.

"Ah!" Wanda ejaculated. "Sit down," she commanded.

Her amusement had vanished, and her mouth set in hard lines. She moved across to the door of the inner room and, softly closing it, she returned.

"What can you possibly have to say to me?" she inquired, raising her eyebrows disdainfully, for she was annoyed with this *midinette* who spoke to her as on equal terms.

Eugénie, though determined to answer, was for the moment unable to do so. She sat down again in the arm-chair and clasping her hands nervously in her lap, looked up at Wanda.

"I have things to say to you," she replied at last. "I find it difficult to begin—therefore I beg you to be patient. She waited a moment, then continued earnestly: "I have come to you because I believe M. Hypolite to be unhappy and I think it is in your power to make him less so—I am certain that you, knowing this, will do your utmost to help him——" She stopped, her voice breaking.

Wanda took a cigarette from a box on the table. She walked over to the fireplace and, leaning one elbow on the mantelshelf, lit the cigarette deliberately.

"Are you not just a little interfering and impertinent," she asked, watching the smoke from her cigarette and fidgeting with one dainty foot so that the steel buckle flashed.

"May I ask by what right you take it upon yourself to meddle with M. Hypolite's private affairs for him? Are you sure that he would thank you if—as I presume is the case—you are acting without his knowledge?"

Eugénie leant her chin on her hand, her sombre eyes staring into space, while she thought for a moment.

"I think he would understand," she said slowly; "for he must have a certain right."

"What right?" the other demanded imperiously—then, maliciously—"What are you to M. Hypolite, then? Are you his mistress?"

Eugénie started. Again she flushed, but she looked steadily at Wanda as she answered:

"I am his friend—once he asked me to help him. He told me that you had made him very unhappy, and that my friendship would aid him. Therefore, I am come to you as a friend to ask you to do for him that which I cannot myself accomplish."

"What do you want of me?" Wanda asked impatiently. "It is easy to see that you are in love with him. Do you want for my blessing on the alliance?"

She smiled ironically, flicking the ash off her cigarette. The young girl answered painfully:

"It is true that I am in love with him; but he is not in love with me."

"Ah!" Wanda returned sarcastically, "that is a thing which often happens! Is it to be my rôle, then, to persuade the reluctant lover that I am unworthy of his admiration, and that he would be more profitably employed in bestowing his devotion upon the rising star who worships him?"

"Stop!" cried Eugénie. "You do not understand me—I have not come to plead for myself, but for him." She paused a moment, gasping. "I have come here to beg of you if possible to try to understand and to care for him. Oh! I am certain you are worthy of his love, that you could make him happy if you would but try—if you would take the trouble to know him better you would find such noble qualities in him. He is a man whose devotion would be worth much. I beg of you to consider the matter, for he is so unhappy."

Wanda raised her eyebrows. She took another cigarette and lighted it.

"You seem to have studied him pretty closely," she said. "By the way, when did you last see him?"

"Yesterday," Eugénie whispered, torn with memory, racked with agony. "Yesterday at Acquarelle."

"Then he has returned to the country?" Wanda said, with assumption of indifference.

She was still smarting from the fact that he had not accepted her frank invitation to come and renew their old relation. Now, in addition to the fact of his undoubted snub, she learned that he had gone straight to this girl at Acquarelle. She was furious, and her anger made her ruthless. She knew that Gaston no longer cared for her, that, in all probability, he loved Eugénie; therefore, with the savageness of a wild cat, she essayed to make her suffer.

"I did not think," she said carelessly, "when I said goodbye to him three days ago, that he was particularly sorry for himself!"

"You saw him three days ago?" Eugénie exclaimed, and again pain stabbed at her heart.

Wanda answered with a light laugh.

"Is that surprising to you?"

"No, why should I be surprised?"

"Three days ago," she thought, "and only yesterday

he came to me and said that he loved me." She fought down her agony and turned again to the matter in hand.

"Mademoiselle," she said, "it is true that I love Hypolite with all my heart. But what I wish for more than all the world is his happiness. If that happiness consists in marriage with you, I beg you, by the right of a woman who loves him, to consider if you cannot possibly care for him. I do not know"—she paused—"I shall, perhaps, never know what has passed between you, for M. Hypolite is far too loyal to speak of it. But I cannot believe that anyone whom he loved could long remain indifferent to him. That is," she added, "if there was no one else for whom they cared."

"*Mon Dieu!*" Wanda cried insolently. "Perhaps you have at last touched the truth of the matter. Certainly there are, in my case, quite a number of people who are attached to me. Why should I throw the glove to Hypolite?"

"They cannot care for you more than he does?" pleaded Eugénie.

"*Fichtre!* What do you know about it? Let me tell you that there is nothing—nothing, do you hear, that you can tell me about Gaston Hypolite which I do not know already. And listen—it is impossible for a woman to be more intimate with a man than I was at one time with him. I tested him to the *nth*—and, having tested him, found him wanting."

She laughed, but her eyes were hard, and she was white with anger.

Eugénie got up. A terrible nausea was upon her. She wanted to get away from this woman.

"I will go," she said huskily. Her vision became blurred, and the brilliant room seemed to turn and sway, and she clung to the back of the chair, striving to steady herself.

"Let me counsel you," Wanda continued viciously, "not to interfere in the affairs of the men of your acquaintance. Your impertinence will invariably bring you well-merited rebuff. In this case your interference is particularly inappropriate since, between the union of Hypolite and myself, for which you seem so anxious, there remains to be removed a little obstacle—of trifling importance, no doubt, in your estimation, yet none the less obstructive—namely, my husband!"

Eugénie's eyes widened. Then, as the full meaning of Wanda's words penetrated her brain she swayed, put up

hand to her throat, and fell heavily across the arm of the chair in a dead faint.

"*Fichette!*" said Wanda again laying down her cigarette, and hurrying to the inner door. "*Fanchette,*" she called, in her clear tones, "quickly, please bring me my fur coat and gloves."

Fanchette appeared in the doorway, bearing a sealskin pelisse over her arm, and a pair of buff-colored gloves. She uttered an exclamation when she saw Eugene, unconscious and collapsed.

Wanda shrugged her shoulders.

"It is nothing," she said impatiently. "—something equally silly. I do not know what she wanted of me—I cannot wait now." She took the jewelled watch on her wrist. "I am going with the Baron X—, and already it is raining."

She slipped into her g coat and turned to the door.

"You, my Fanchette, will restore the young woman to her senses—if she has any. You had better give her something to drink and send her off. If she wants money, let her have it—if not—" she shrugged her shoulders again, and swept out of the room leaving Fanchette bending over the inanimate form of Eugene.

A few minutes later Wanda, in a lovely, drove her famous horses in the Bois de Boulogne, which later turned to a heavy rain was falling which later turned to a heavy rain. But the Baron X—, undaunted by the weather, made ardent propositions for a future and enjoyment. Wanda listened to him with light railleuse. His little *Madinette* were forgotten—he had failed to keep his appointment, therefore he must be erased from memory. In the exhilaration of her new lover's company the last thought of her old love was extinguished.

CHAPTER V

COMING to herself, Eugénie saw a kindly, sharply featured face bending over her, while a strange voice cried :

"*Tiens !* all is well now—mademoiselle is recovered. What can have taken mademoiselle ? " Curiosity shone in Fanchette's intelligent eyes.

"It is nothing," Eugénie answered faintly ; " I beg your pardon, but I think I am not well."

She struggled unsteadily to her feet. " I will go home," she said.

" You had better sit still a little while—till you feel all right. *Tenez !* smell those salts," and Fanchette handed her a great silver salts-pot.

Eugénie sniffed them, and their pungent odour revived her.

" Drink some of this," the woman said, offering her a glass of cognac and soda.

But the young girl pushed it away. The smell of it nauseated her—besides, she could not touch food or drink in Wanda's house.

" You are very kind," she said, " but I do not require it—I shall be all right when I get out into the fresh air."

She was possessed by desire to fly from an atmosphere which she felt to be contaminating. She knew now that Wanda Panowska had been Gaston's mistress, and the agony of that knowledge was intolerable.

Fanchette put down the glass and went swiftly to the window, pulling it wide open.

" There," she said, as the rain and wind swept in, " there—that will revive you ! The Princess never will have the windows open. She likes her rooms hot and heavily scented. That is how it is in the winter in Russia—sometimes even those who are well accustomed to the ways of the Princess, find it trying."

" The Princess ! " Eugénie questioned, breathing in the fresh air thankfully. " I thought that Mademoiselle Panowska was a singer ? "

Fanchette nodded.

"So she is, but she is also a princess in her own right. Besides, last year she married her cousin, the Prince Yerlatsky."

Eugénie clung to the back of the chair for support. Her head swam.

"When did you say she married?" she asked faintly.

"Last July it was—just at the end of the opera season in London. The Prince came quite suddenly. They were married at the Embassy, and, within a week, we were in Russia, at K——."

"That is why Gaston was ill," Eugénie thought. "He loved her, whether they sinned or not, and she married someone else. Poor Gaston—and now he cannot forget her."

She straightened herself mechanically and, picking up her little suit case, held out her hand.

"Good-bye," she said gravely. "Thank you for your kindness. Please tell the Princess I am sorry to have troubled her."

"I can do nothing further for you?" Fanchette asked.

"Nothing," Eugénie replied.

She walked slowly to the door, her head high, her eyes misty with tears. Descending the staircase, she paused every few steps, for she was utterly weary. Absolute desolation possessed her. She had tried to help Gaston, but she had failed. She realized that, did he indeed love the Princess, there was scant happiness in store for him. Wanda was not a woman of tenderness or depth of character; but a coquette—a light-o'-love—and the young girl, loving him with all her soul, perceived this.

Coming out of the hotel into the driving rain, she remembered she had no umbrella; she had left it in the corner of the kitchen at La Maison Grise to dry—La Maison Grise, where little Marie-Anne had been so kind. If it were not for Gaston's presence she would go back there now, for she felt an immense distaste to return to the Place des Loups. Victorine would want to know why she had returned so suddenly, and it would not be easy, being so tired and so bitterly distressed, to give adequate reasons for her arrival.

Then, suddenly, she remembered Madame Périntot was in Paris. She determined to go to the Rue des Masques.

Breasting the hill to the Étoile, she met the fierce wind and rain ; and, with the thought of taking refuge with Marguérite, a certain sense of peace came to her. Reaching the Étoile, she stood on the edge of the pavement waiting for a tram which would take her to the Boulevard Farnouchelles. The confusion of noise and movement dazed her. The crowds jostled her. Motors hooted, tram-wheels screamed and ground as they turned the circle of the Place, and, all the time, the wind, gathering force, lashed the streaming rain against her.

At last she mounted the tram and began the familiar journey. "With Madame Périntot," she told herself, "with Madame Périntot I shall find rest—she will counsel and help me—I shall sleep to-night." As she leaned against the rail of the centre platform the rain and wind, finding their way in under the canopy, beat on her face. The trees in the Parc Monceau rattled, their bare branches dripping in the fast thickening rain. Along the wet pavements foot passengers hurried home under streaming umbrellas. The sullen sky, dark and lowering, was crossed by flying lines of pale vapour. In the Boulevard Farnouchelles the tram passed long rows of shops ; taxis flashed by glistening with the wet ; teams of draught horses laboured over the stones to the "Huyp, huyp," of the drivers, their great backs and flanks steaming in the damp air, their sweat mingling with the drenching rain. On every hand the life of the streets vibrated, pulsed, clanged, back and forth, even as it had done when, glad of spirit, she left Paris filled with the love that was now breaking her heart. For, beneath the weeping skies, paralysis had laid its clutch on her soul. Strive as she would to look forward, holding on to her belief in those splendid voices which had called her from out the future, it seemed to her that life was ended, that nothing but blank mist of despair lay ahead.

At last the tram stopped at the Place Farnouchelles, and Eugénie, stepping out, crossed to the other side. Retracing her path to the opening of the Rue des Masques, she turned down it and in a minute was mounting the stairs to Madame Périntot's apartment. She remembered the first day she had climbed those stairs. How long ago it seemed ! What was the meaning of her coming—of that extraordinary push of Fate, through which she had been persistently thrown in

the path of the man whom she now loved so despairingly? It was cruel that she should suffer thus! The wound was so deep that she was unable to bear the smart of it patiently—and yet—and yet she believed that even her suffering must be part of the Divine scheme of her Creator.

She pressed her finger on the bell, and heard the long answering whir. She waited—silence. She listened, but no sound reached her from within, though without she could hear the scream of the wind and sweep of the rain. As she rang again, persistently, someone approached the door, fumbled at the latch, and there was the sound of gentle sobbing. Eugénie rapped, and the door was opened by Euphrasie. The old woman's eyes were red with weeping.

"Ah!" she exclaimed. "It is Mademoiselle Massini! I thought you were at Acquarelle."

"I have come to see Madame Périntot," Eugénie answered. "But what is the matter, Euphrasie? What has made you cry?"

The old woman sobbed afresh, raising her apron to her eyes.

"Madame Périntot has just gone to Acquarelle. We received a telegram an hour ago, saying 'Madame Rouston is seriously ill, come at once.' Madame Périntot was distracted. She did not lose an instant, but, hiring the first motor that passed, set out to join her mother. She would not even go by train, thinking to reach Acquarelle quicker by road. God grant," she added, with a fresh burst of sobs, "that she may arrive in time."

Eugénie leaned against the door jamb. Tears filled her eyes at the thought of gentle old Madame Rouston struck down by illness.

"Do not cry, Euphrasie," she whispered, putting a kind arm round the shoulders of the weeping woman. "Perhaps it may not be so serious as you fear. When I left Acquarelle this morning Madame Rouston was quite well—we must hope for the best. I will come round to you early to-morrow for news. If Madame Périntot is with her she will surely get well."

But Euphrasie refused to be comforted.

"She is old," she wept, "and she has no strength to combat illness. When the old and frail are ill at the turning of the year—they die."

Eugénie went down the stairs and out once more into the downpour. She did not take the tram again, for she knew it would only bring her the more quickly to the Place des Loups ; and, for some reason, unaccountable terror assailed her at the thought of her meeting with Victorine. Marguerite's absence and the sad news regarding Madame Rouston had broken her. Mentally she could see nothing ahead of her but fear.

As she walked the heavy rain made her skirt sodden and found its way into her boots. Her hat became limp, and the rain soaked through on to her hair. Nevertheless she moved slowly, almost against her will, weighed down by that deepening reluctance to encounter Victorine.

At last, wet to the skin, she reached the Place des Loups. It looked desolate in the driving rain. She could hear the cry of the wind in the iron railing that masked the mouth of the metro. She passed in under the *porte cochère*. Little tufts of green showed between the cobblestones. Pools had collected in depressions of the pavement, while a stream of muddy water flowed from a defective pipe. Beneath the verdigris-encrusted tap someone had left an old bucket, into which the water dripped with reverberating plonk, plonk, at regular and monotonous intervals. The gloomy, unwashed windows looking on to the courtyard, showed like the grim, half-shut eyes of a dead person in the tenebrous winter dusk.

Eugénie shivered as she entered the doorway. Again fear stalked her, and a horror of something unknown.

Behind, on the other side of the courtyard, a loose wooden shutter flapped, as gusts of violent wind forced themselves down the funnel of the narrow court, to churn out, whistling, through the *porte cochère*.

As she went slowly up the creaking stairs she was almost overcome by trembling and a sensation of nausea, for something strange—of another world—walked beside her, and spirit hands plucked at her skirts. She could feel the entreating, voiceless presence of intangible beings who would have turned her back from mounting the staircase.

Twice—transfixed by some monstrous terror—she hesitated and would have gone back ; but the thought of the pitiless rain outside deterred her. She had no other refuge, and she was tired—dead tired—worn out with weeping and

agony of mind. She could endure no more fatigue. She must rest.

The door of the tenement was open and banged noisily in the wind. Victorine must have returned early. She went in and closed the door. But no Victorine greeted her. The window was open, and the white curtains, soaked with rain, hung outside. On the table was an untidy litter of half eaten breakfast. A piece of meat, half-cooked and torn as though some animal had gnawed it, lay in a frying pan on the floor. The room was dirty and cold, the grate choked with ashes, the floor, table, and chairs were strewn and littered with unwashed garments, crockery, and torn paper—as if someone had made havoc, deliberately destroying all order and decency. Eugénie went into Victorine's room, and a sense of suffocation overcame her. The bed was unmade; and again, on every hand, disorder, dirt and neglect greeted her. She opened the window and retreated to her own room. There all was untouched—as she had left it. The ivory crucifix hung over her bed, but to her surprise it was veiled with purple. For Victorine, entering there, had been unable to contemplate the symbol of her religion. She had covered it up until the day when she should be free to worship as of old. Otherwise this room—the room which belonged to her beloved child—was fresh and sweet, for she had tended it with loving care. Leaning out into the fresh wind and rain the young girl looked away in the direction of the *Sacré Cœur*.

"God, Thou who knowest my sorrow, help me," she whispered, crossing herself.

Then closing the window she began to take off her sodden clothes. Her hands were hot and dry, and she began to shiver as if she had caught cold. Her hair was wringing wet and her head ached. She changed her wet skirt and boots. Her hair she left hanging down her back to dry. Taking her boots in her hand, she went into the kitchen, with the intention of clearing up some of the disorder. But overcome by giddiness and nausea she sat down on a chair by the table, setting the boots on the ground by her side. Putting her elbows on the table she leaned her forehead on her hands. The sickness lessened, but she ached from head to foot. Gradually her arms and hands dropped on the table, her head drooped over them and, after a minute, she slept.

CHAPTER VI

ON the day of Eugénie's flight from Acquarelle, Victorine had been down all day at Les Halles. Since the midnight Mass at Montmartre, the terror which pursued her became more horribly fixed in her mind. All night she would lie wakeful in the darkness or tramp the streets, the destruction of her moral fibre accelerated by the confused torment of the painted *vacarme* of madness that leapt to her vision from out the all-enclosing blackness. If she slept, it was with the knife beneath her pillow and the horror of monstrous dreams devouring her brain; so that she woke exhausted, involuntarily uttering fierce cries which she stifled by forcing great pieces of the sheet or blanket into her mouth. Then, her teeth chattering, her head aching with the relentless stroke as of a hammer on her brain, she would roll out of bed and lie on the floor mouthing filthy speech and clawing at the ground with hands and feet, like some boneless, impotent monster. Sometimes, for a whole day she ate nothing. Then, ravenous as a beast of prey, she would tear half-raw food, almost choking herself in her voracity. She became absolutely unable, save during the few hours she worked mechanically in Les Halles, to maintain even a semblance of self-control. In her tenement she moved to and fro, aimlessly, with the action of a caged creature, her eyes rolling, her slobbering mouth hanging open. She became so unkempt and filthy in appearance that the children in the street jeered at her. Down at Les Halles no one would buy from her; while, everywhere, she fancied that the phantom pursued her. She grew afraid of the dark, for hideous faces with bleeding mouths leered at her from the shadows—diabolic shapes hunted her; burning eyes watched her every movement; demons yelled at her, throttling menace of destruction. She no longer dared to look at the knife, for an obsession was on her to shed blood—and she knew that she must hold her hand until the appointed victim lay beneath it. Yet, in the circle of tenebrous horror

in which she lived, that obsession of massacre—of carnage—grew within her, till not even her famous grandmother—la Couleuse du Sang—debauched leader of organized atrocity, could have excelled that fever to kill, to cut, to slay, to wreak insane vengeance upon and to mutilate humanity.

At Les Halles the women began to whisper that something contrary to nature had taken Victorine Dupont, for she had the air of one whom the Devil chased. Shameful stories concerning her passed from mouth to mouth of how one person and another had seen her walking, at night, amid the fleshly traffic of the sisterhood of the streets. All her old acquaintances began to avoid her. At last, finding her stock left on her hands, she no longer attempted to sell, but spent the day wandering restlessly to and fro, more often than not haunting the fish market. There she passed hours at a time in gutting fish. This occupation afforded her a certain relief. But the women, at first amused at her, became superstitiously alarmed, fearful lest her strange ways would bring them ill-fortune. Finally they refused to let her help them and bade her begone; but Victorine, with foul abuse, retorted that the market was free to all, and she would stand sullenly disconsolate, her fierce, bloodshot eyes fixed on the quick moving knives, her hands, with the fingers working, clutching at her petticoats.

Thus, on the day of Eugénie's hurried return to Paris, she had, according to her custom, roamed restlessly until she reached the fish market. There, lost in gloomy thought, her appearance was one to provoke disgust—so much so that several persons turned aside in order to buy at a stall in a less unsavoury neighbourhood. Exasperated by her continual presence, at last the stall-holders bade her "take her Devil's glance elsewhere." But Victorine stood her ground, arms akimbo, pouring forth volleys of abuse, while the remaining customers hastily retreated. Furious at her behaviour, the angry women gathered round her in a body, pelting her first with the wastage of fish trimmings, then, taking up great skates and cod, they beat her with the shiny bodies of the fish, till, knocked breathless by the blows, she fell to the ground. Getting on to her feet—livid—maddened—she fled from the market, chased by a scoffing crowd of fish-wives, out into the wet.

For hours she roamed in restless haste, neither knowing

nor caring whither she went. How long a space of time passed thus dolorously she could not have said; but the driving rain soaked through and through the heavy grey shawl she wore over her shoulders, while, in her terror, she groaned piteously, for whichever road she took the phantom flitted always before her, now running down alley-ways with flying hair, now beckoning, white-faced and with hideous, bleeding mouth, or smiling at her maliciously from the cavern of some dark *porte cochère*.

Victorine tramped on, desperate, in execrable suffering, engulfed in the storm of her brain, burning, torn with misery, ravaged by fear, madness leaping on her. The fierce wind swept round corners, buffeting her; but she fought with it as with demons. The stinging rain beat on her face, but she spat her curses at the elements. At last her wandering brought her to the Place de la Bastille. She waited a moment, panting, the sweat streaming down her face.

Then, on the wind, the murmur of many voices seemed to reach her, which, rising, grew loud, until it became the angry roar of a great multitude. Not one but numberless ghosts assailed her. Surging round her in a whirling, unseen throng, they jostled her—shrieking—yelling—plucking at her—howling like wolves. In their fierce onward movement they bore her along with them, till, in their company, she beat upon the walls of a monstrous prison, and screamed with them, passionately echoing their hoarse cries. The sense of their unseen and savage presence drove her to frenzy. She heard the rush of a thousand feet. Half naked bodies slipped from under her hand; tattered garments brushed against her; and, in the greyness of the gathering darkness, she began to distinguish wild, half-starved faces glaring at her. Then, with a wail, they passed her, sinking into space; and again she heard that rush of feet—the confused movement of a multitude, turbulent, insistent, brutal, savagely primitive, battering at the gates of cruelty and mediævalism, maddened by repressing and crushing despair, a tempest of coming revolt and violence rolled around her in the storm. And all the while individual voices—shrill and piercing—cried to her from out the tumult, goading her on to assault—to profanation—wild laughter—slaughter—brutal killing—to revolt—carnage—massacre—till, fearful of unmitigated catastrophe, she fled, struggling on again, stumbling blindly

forward till she found herself standing in front of the immense doorway of Notre Dame.

For a time she leaned against the portal—drained of volition and strength. Then, as she waited, the dragged relic of an unhappy *fille de joie* came towards her, advancing a skinny hand with a mumbled prayer for alms. Victorine did not wait to look at her. She hurled herself into the porch of the great cathedral, and, pushing through the leather doors, flung herself into the dimness within.

The interior of the great church was almost in darkness. In the distance, at the far end, red lights gleamed. Echoing footsteps sounded in the aisles.

Victorine, whose entry had been a desperate taking of sanctuary, stopped short, clinging to the wall. Tears were falling down her cheeks. Surely here she would be safe from the horror that accompanied her? Filled with hope, she took the aisle to the right making her way to the ambulatory. As she passed the confessionals a faint murmur of voices arose. Priests were confessing penitents; and kneeling figures waited, at a little distance, the moment of their turn.

She moved furtively onward until she reached the chapel at the back of the High Altar. It was almost in black darkness. Trepidation clutched her, for, ahead of her, among those kneeling figures, she saw the form of the phantom slipping away into the shadows. She turned, meaning to retreat; but, behind her now, she saw it leering hideously. Then, shivering, like some scared animal, she played terrible hide-and-seek with it. First it seemed in front of her; a moment after, she would find it following her. She knelt down, but it pushed her, till she felt the soft youth of its body laid coaxingly against her own. Then she rose, slobbering, sweating, trembling, insane—pursuing and pursued.

She turned in desperation from the ambulatory and, clinging to the grille, looked through the iron railings to the High Altar. But, in the dimness, she could not discern the cross lifted on high, only to her straining, terror-blinded vision was revealed the monstrous, desecrating figure—immense and shadowy—immobile, yet grossly human—of the Goddess of Reason, which looked down at her mockingly, while its lips poured forth blasphemous praise of the never-ending struggle for the supremacy of the sex over the soul—defilement of all things holy and of good report. She saw, too,

that the figure was surrounded by a whirling crowd of foul harpies, who laughed as they danced.

Victorine stumbled towards a confessional. Like one blind, she lifted the curtain, but she saw that the *prie-dieu* was already occupied. For there, her black hair streaming over her shoulders, knelt the phantom.

Victorine let fall the curtain, paralysed with misery. Wildly backing away, her staring eyes met those of the priest. It seemed to her he looked at her jeeringly, with the light blue eyes of the singer—the man whom she was ordained to kill—the man whom she had seen upon the stage with Eugénie in his embrace.

"Not here, oh, God, not here," she moaned, as she fled down the aisle, followed by the mocking laughter of the dancing throng. Glancing back, it seemed to her that the man—the priest—coming out of the confessional pursued her too. She turned aside, flinging herself down on the steps of the pulpit, and he passed her. Swiftly, then, she got up, looking for him. She could see him no more; but from the steps of the altar came the mocking laughter of the terrible daughters of carnage, and the thud of their bare feet beating on the floor.

As she stumbled down the aisle, from among the shadows of the archways there looked out at her horrible, twisted, medieval creatures, fantastic human shapes—beings distorted and mutilated beyond recognition, by torture abominable and ingenious—creatures half burnt—blackened—withered, half flaming; formless from the rack, bloated, scrofulous, leprous, their grim, pallid faces like those who have already sunk into eternal torment. They surrounded her, clamouring, mouthing, writhing, dragging themselves over the ground, with crawling movement of impotent limbs; crying for alms—for blood—the blood of vengeance, of sacrifice—of revenge and retaliation for the monstrous suffering inflicted on them in life—plucking at her skirts with fingers rotting with disease, calling on her with cracked, flute-like voices to kill, prodigiously to kill. And, all the while, on the steps of the High Altar, she heard the feet of the whirling crowd of madwomen, who danced, circling round the Goddess, crying:

"You shall destroy—you shall slay!"

With a fierce, smothered cry Victorine tore herself from the clinging forms, beat off those disease-rotted fingers, till, howling with maniac laughter, the decaying creatures fell apart,

disrupted. Out into the gathering darkness she fled—out into the streaming rain, while, within the church, it seemed to her she could still hear the sound of those terrible dancing feet and the ungodly laughter of those putrefying victims of feudalism and the so-called "ages of faith."

She tramped on through the streaming streets. But she did not heed the storm, for up narrow alleys, across broad thoroughfares, bridges, streets—and streets again—the hideous terror which stalked her was her companion still. The knife, hidden in the bodice of her dress, she had had ground and sharpened only yesterday. Now it pricked her, as if an unseen hand goaded her on. She tore it from its hiding-place, and hurried along, demented. At times she would fancy that she had trapped the phantom, and, rushing forward, she would plunge the knife into the empty air, only to stumble on again, uttering hoarse cries that were lost in the howl of the wind and the roar of the traffic.

At last, frenzied, she reached the Place des Loups, and ran, like a wolf on the trail, under the *porte cochère*—for the phantom danced before her. The rain beat on her as she passed through the courtyard. It was almost dark. The draught of wind screamed at her down the funnel, and flapping the loose shutter, fled out behind her, chill and gusty. A hollow dripping came from the tap. Victorine, streaming with wet, mounted the stairs, wolf-like, relentless. Ahead of her glided the phantom; behind her she heard stealthy footsteps. Looking back she saw that she—the pursuer—was pursued; for behind her came the light-eyed musician who was to be her victim. Intangible, yet distinct, he followed her; she seemed to stand between him and the phantom. She stopped for a moment and the following ceased also, as if one waited below—concealed and listening. She looked upward and, from out the gloomy well of the staircase, the head of the phantom peered down at her—white-faced—gaping—with bleeding mouth. She drew back, shuddering, lest the blood from that hateful wound should fall on her.

Then again a paroxysm of frenzy seized her to track down and destroy the disturber of her peace. Like one possessed, she ran up the staircase; her body was bent almost on all fours; her lips were drawn back from her teeth; her mouth hung open, slobbering, and the jaw snapped unceasingly, her breath hissed with a snarling sound. At the stairhead she

paused, knife in hand. There was no one there. She looked below, but her pursuer also had disappeared. Only the howl of the wind and the sob of the rain were audible.

Stealthily, with infinite cunning, she opened the door of the tenement. In the half dark she could see a figure seated at the table; the back was towards her and black hair hung down to its waist. On the floor, beside the figure, lay a pair of boots. She recalled her first seeing of the phantom. With a fierce, raucous cry—terrible as that of a wild beast—she sprang forward, all her weeks of pent-up torment finding outlet of revenge. She seized the figure by the neck. Then, as the body writhed, struggling to raise itself, and uttering choking cries, Victorine dropped the knife in order to gain greater hold of her victim, and exerted her brute strength to turn it over. For it seemed to her that the creature cried out to her with the voice of Eugénie. Angered by this accursed prostitution of her niece's form, she sought to silence the voice. She remembered in a flash Eugénie's telling her of the two little chords that lay within her throat. It seemed to her, as she struggled with the phantom, that with the silencing of that voice, her niece's power of song would die. So, with fearful strength, she took the body in both hands and raised it in the air, bringing it down with a crash amongst the litter of crockery on the table. As it lay on its back she seized it by the throat to stifle any further cries, but, shaking the throat and head, she found that resistance had ceased. It lay limply, the head drooping back over the edge of the table, the hair streaming to the ground.

Triumphantly she drew back, breathing heavily. She had silenced the terror which had destroyed her peace and rest. There remained but one thing more—to punish the evil one who sought the damnation of Eugénie's soul.

In the dim light she stood still, gasping for breath, while again the wind raged without, shattering, beating, rattling on the windows, and the rain sobbed and swished against the panes.

Suddenly another sound broke the silence. Slowly ascending the creaking staircase she heard a man's footsteps—she counted the flights. Someone was coming up to the top landing. Then Victorine knew—with frightful intuition—that the hour which she had waited for had come. The musician, lured by the resemblance of the phantom to Eugénie,

was being delivered up to her at last. The hour of her salvation was at hand. The end of her task was within her reach.

Searching feverishly on the ground, she regained possession of her knife. With stealthy caution she set the door ajar, and, lest it should swing to, she placed against it the pair of boots that lay beside the table, then she drew back and waited in the shadow behind the door.

CHAPTER VII

GASTON, advancing up the staircase, stumbling in the darkness, stopped at intervals. He was obsessed by a strange presentiment of evil. Try as he might to combat the feeling, he was consciously penetrated by gloomy, spiritual fear—fear of something tragic and inevitable which awaited him. He looked forward to the coming interview with Eugénie in profound agitation. All day—since he had made up his mind that the greatness of their love demanded marriage—he had visualized that meeting, visualized, too, that holding of her in his arms, and the ultimate marriage.

It seemed to him that never before had he tasted such happiness. For now—purged of evil—he would steep his life in the purity and idealism of her nature.

A great and yearning tenderness came over him. Eugénie had said that she longed to bear him a son, and now his desire towards her was less passion than an immense necessity to fulfil, not his own wishes, but that splendid longing of hers to create, by their mutual love, a being who should be the child of their intellect—a seal set on the union of their two spirits. And, as the moments passed, his love for her grew. Nevertheless, mounting the stairs, he came slowly, ashamed of his former misconception of love. Still he told himself she would forgive, because of the nobility of her nature. A sudden overwhelming sense of Eugénie's presence came upon him. He could have sworn that, in the darkness, she put her arms round him and he felt her lips touch his. She seemed to stand in front of him, pleading, imploring, striving to drive him away from her. But the more she strove to drive him away the greater became his

desire for her. With that unseen spirit influence he fought—sickened to faintness by fear.

He leaned against the wall, and the beating wind and sobbing rain shattered against the house. Below in the courtyard the loose shutter clacked noisily. From above he thought he heard a strange cry, as of some fierce animal. He listened, but there was silence again.

Then, with a rush, Eugénie's unseen presence seemed to enfold him, holding him in close embrace, as if—though speechless and lacking tangibility—she entreated pitifully that he would stay his footsteps, holding him back with loving insistence from some terrible danger. But the determination to reach his beloved actually and without further delay gave him strength. With gentle force he put aside that tender, restraining presence. He climbed the remaining stairs. Turning at the stairhead, he followed the passage till he reached the third door. It stood ajar. Knocking lightly, he waited, but, receiving no answer, pushed it wide open.

Indistinctly, in front of him, he could make out the form of a woman lying across the table. The head—partly concealed—drooped back over the further edge, the long black hair reaching to the ground. The feet and legs hung from the side of the table facing him, while the hands were outstretched, palms upwards. Instinct told him that it was Eugénie. With a great cry he flung himself through the intervening space. Touching one of the hands he felt that it was limp.

With trembling fingers he lit a match and held it over the face. He saw that the mask was waxen white, there was no sign of life in the wide eyes. The match flared, flickered, burned out and dropped, leaving him in darkness. Then he began to sob, for he believed that Eugénie was dead. A terror of great desolation closed down on him—a horror of irretrievable loss. In a passion of tenderness he buried his face in Eugénie's bosom, while his hands clasped her shoulders.

"Oh! my beloved," he cried. "Soul of my soul! Body of my body! Mother of my child! Spirit and soul that I have loved, that I shall love through all eternity. Love! love! answer me! Listen to me! I came here to ask you to be my wife—mother of a son to me—hear me, pure

soul, if you are near ! Oh, God, let her hear me ! Do not let her drift out into eternity believing that I do not love her ! Soul of my Eugénie—hear me—for my heart is broken ! ”

He threw himself face downwards on the unconscious body, clasping it and pressing it to him in a paroxysm of weeping.

“ Hear me, my beloved ! ” he cried in agony. “ I love you—I love you—my desire—my wife—hear me ! Flesh of my flesh ! ”

But only the sweeping rush of the wind and the tempestuous wash of the rain answered his despairing appeal.

And Victorine watched him—waiting in the shadow, exultantly biding her time, tense, relentless, passionately glad ; for, as he embraced the phantom, she understood that this was the sign that the moment of her opportunity had really come.

She crouched down, creeping forward stealthily—like a panther that waits to spring ; and, while he cried aloud, catlike she mounted the chair behind him. Then, with a great snarl she sprang upon him, perching on his back like some terrible beast of prey, clinging to the struggling body, her eyes bloodshot, her lips drawn back, her mouth open, foaming, slobbering. For a minute she clung to him. Then as he, writhing, slipped—his feet losing their hold on the floor, his hands sprawling, gripping, scrabbling amongst the crockery—she loosened one hand and brought the knife down with her whole force on his back. But the thick cloth of his overcoat turned the blow ; and Hypolite, exercising all his strength, succeeded in throwing her off, so that she fell violently to the floor. There she grovelled, looking up at him with an expression so menacing, so bestial, that he drew back from her in horror.

For a moment she remained groping for the knife which she had dropped—then, as her clawing fingers closed over it, she gave a grunt of satisfaction and blundered on to her feet.

Hypolite, bewildered by the suddenness of her attack, had turned round facing her. He leaned back against the body of Eugénie, and, along with the horror of the discovery he had just made, there gripped him an intimate physical fear, for he knew that he was confronted by insanity ; by a mad creature, powerful moreover, and inspired by personal and malignant hatred of himself ; armed, too, while he was defenceless. He knew, also, that whatever purpose

might remain in her turgid brain was concentrated wholly now on intent to kill him, whereas his own purpose was indefinite. It disgusted him profoundly to touch this woman, and angered him to know that she was, in all probability, more than a match for him in strength. The neck of her bodice, which had been fastened with a cheap silver brooch, had burst open, and her red throat—more like that of a prize-fighter than that of a woman—showed. She appeared the epitome of coarseness, of neglect, and unsavoury animal vigour.

For a little space she stood still, and, musician-like, he orchestrated the three distinct sound *motifs* that broke the stillness—the sobbing thump of his own laboured breath, the constant reiterating rattle of the wind tearing at the windows, and, faintly, far below in the house, the slow tread of some person mounting the first flight of stairs. It seemed to him that the third and distant sound importunately took possession of the more important theme—intimately claiming a part in the drama and asserting a superior right to his own—that the rhythmic beat of those steps introduced the coming of the grey terror of Death itself, which—tremendous—irresistible—absolute—arbitrarily claimed the right to hold the balance of judgment between slayer and slain. Victorine, too, had caught the sound of that coming. Penetrated by the same sensation as Hypolite, she listened—tense, inhuman, rigid—her head half turned, as an animal who, having tracked down its prey, winds the hunter who stalks it in its turn.

To Hypolite that pause in the drama was unendurable. Sweat broke out on his forehead, and, with irresistible impulse to end the suspense of his own position, he flung himself forward, clinging with both hands to the upraised hand that held the knife, in an effort to twist it from Victorine's grasp.

Taken unawares, her fury increased. She struggled to bear him down and wound him, while with her left hand she tore at his fingers with her nails.

"Liar and seducer!" she screamed raucously, as she succeeded in wrenching one of his hands away. And so great was her strength that, holding him by the arm, she rocked him savagely to and fro, lifting him almost off the ground and kicking him with her heavily shod feet.

Sick at such punishment from woman, Hypolite held his own with difficulty. She, leaping like a frenzied dog on a chain, again and again nearly lifted him off his feet. And every time that she lifted him she cried out with voluptuous enjoyment of her own strength and passionate anticipation of the coming killing:

"*A mort ! A mort !* death to you and to all accursed aristocrats. Death to all foul-living sons of vermin ! Breeders of blood-suckers are the accursed aristos !"

Battered to and fro by her, first against furniture, then walls, at first his feeling was that no retaliation in the way of brutality was possible in dealing with a woman. But the instinct of self-preservation began to triumph over any chivalry he might have entertained towards her sex.

She played with him—as a cat with a mouse—and, believing his resistance to be a negligible quantity, loosed him for a moment for the joy of gripping him again. But Hypolite, seeing his opportunity, caught her by the shoulders—striving for the mastery. Back and forth they swayed in embrace of hatred, staggering—as in some fierce Bacchanalian dance—some stern treading of a deathly measure with fate, in which to tire or stumble would mean the last step—the final step which would lead to dissolution. Hypolite felt her great body shudder, while his own muscles were wrenched and strained, less in the effort to master her than to maintain his own footing.

Dazed—almost light-headed—he resisted her mechanically, his mind beginning to reflect her madness under the horror of that moral strain. He began to wonder, vaguely, whether he cared after all. If Eugénie was dead—wouldn't it be better to let go—to accept the ruling of fate—to permit this high priestess of horror to celebrate a primitive rite—uniting them indissolubly by death and blood? Would not he thus, by accepting the end of all things expiate his own baseness, pay in full the price of his past cruelty to the woman he loved?

Then, with the thought of her, came a cleaner and finer conception. Eugénie would not have counselled that weak giving in. With a tremendous effort he shook himself free of those encircling arms and took Victorine by the throat, choking the stream of abuse. Throttling, she leaned back, trying to twist her neck from his grasp. She let go the

knife and clutched at his hands with desperate fingers, lacerating the soft flesh of his wrists with her nails. But Hypolite held on, while slowly turning her, as on a pivot, so that he might get between her and the door, then, feeling her resistance less, he flung her from him so that she fell headlong in a corner of the room.

With his head down, his hand raised and crossed over his forehead, his body bent—the limbs moving aimlessly like those of a man who has been racked—he lurched blindly out of the door. And, as he went, there swept over him an agony of grief. His mind, for the time being blurred and abnormal, could remember nothing but that in the room, he quitted so strangely, lay the body of the woman he loved—whom he had come to hold in his arms—whom he had meant to kiss as never woman was kissed before—the woman who should have been the mother of his son. Blinded by a rush of tears—drunk with desolation—he forgot Victorine, who, grovelling on the floor in the darkness behind him, searched feverishly for the knife; he forgot, too, the coming of that third and all-important factor in the drama which now mounted the stairs. Without looking where he went he turned away, took the passage to the left, and, reaching the blank wall, sank down exhausted in a paroxysm of weeping. And his very inability to make further provision for his own security proved the saving of his life. For Fate and Death, taking the stage, linked hands, barring him from the drama and allotting the principal rôle to another and worthier man.

Hence it followed that Victorine, in her headlong rush from the door in pursuit of her victim, plunged the knife of sacrifice into the heart of that third and, as yet, undiscovered actor in the drama—the man whose footsteps had beat a rhythmic measure to her fierce hounding of her intended prey. He, whose footsteps had to Hypolite heralded the coming of Death itself, intercepted the furious woman, who, taking him for the seducer of Eugénie, meted out swift vengeance lest he should again slip from under her hands. As the body sank beneath her blows, she hung over it uttering low, guttural cries—inarticulate expressions of fierce and voluptuous gladness—while the blood, spurting up, dyed her hands and bosom red.

As she stood astride the body, Hypolite, conscious that

she had not followed him, raised his head, looking in the direction of her clamour. He was irritably conscious that, as some noisy, barking dog, she jarred him, interrupting his passion of grief for the pitiful spoiling of the beloved one whom he had come to believe necessary to his existence. But, as he looked through tear-drowned eyes, he saw that another had suffered the death that should have been his; that the killing which had been meant for him had been stolen by another. For him alone, in the dignity of his sorrow, should have been reserved that violent and tremendous end. Anger—childish and unreasonable—filled him. He tried to get up—to expostulate—to heap jealous abuse on the head of the man who had stolen his rôle. Impotently—as though striving in a dream—he tried to force obedience into his limbs so as to reach that indeterminate blur of murdering and murdered humanity.

And, conscious that his efforts were both ridiculous and ignominious, he crept painfully, holding on to the wall. Halfway down the passage he collapsed, fainting. Again it seemed to him that he felt the presence of his beloved—that she caressed him—sustained him—touched him with gentle persuasion of soft hands—he felt her breath—the scent of her presence—the feminine sweetness of her person. Again he looked up—holding on to consciousness with determination. He continued that ungainly progress, resolved to dispute the right of victim with the usurper. But that journey to death seemed long—his limbs remained weak, and his dumb, tear-stained face stared childishly at Victorine as she swayed above the body.

She had lifted the knife high and, gazing at it, laughed in exultation that the hour of her deliverance at last had come. Then as Hypolite watched her, drawn by the magnetism of his gaze, she looked down the passage and met his eyes. An extraordinary expression of fear came over her. Her mouth hung open and she remained staring at him—petrified.

How was it that the man she had killed—whose body lay at her feet—gazed at her—living—from the shadows?

Terror-stricken, she slipped on to her knees and, seizing the shoulders of the dying man, looked into his face; and, looking, she cried out like one in torture, for the face was that of the benign and kindly priest her confessor, the Abbé

Goujon. Suddenly the eyelids drooped over the glazing eyes. It seemed to the wretched woman that he shut her out from his vision. She let the head drop on to the ground and watched, as if fascinated, a feeble fluttering movement of the fingers. For a moment they flickered, then slowly closed over the heavy wooden rosary that hung at his girdle. With a galvanic movement those feeble white priest's hands closed strongly upon the symbol of his faith—loosened it and raised it in the air. At the same instant the passing soul flared in the worn-out husk of the body, and he half raised himself to a sitting posture. Again Victorine met his gaze. His eyes opened wide and remained fixed on hers. His lips trembled in the effort to pronounce words which eluded him. It seemed to her that he spoke voicelessly as, with the hand holding the rosary, he made the sign of the cross with the dignified sweeping movement habitual to him. Then his hand dropped—his jaw dropped, and he stifled with a rush of blood from the lungs. The wooden rosary clattered to the floor, and Victorine, looking up, saw a crawling figure coming towards her. Filled with an agony of terror and despair, she beat her head on the ground. Three times she cried out "*Mea culpa—mea culpa—mea maxima culpa*"—but still the figure came forward. Then, lacking courage in the face of what she believed to be another and more cruelly tormenting phantom, she turned round and began to pull herself up the railing behind her, determining thus to escape by suicide from the horror of the supernatural.

Hypolite, seeing death by violence about to reject him, flung himself forward, strengthened by anger.

"*Attendez !*" he cried hoarsely. "You have not finished—you make a mistake !"

He lurched towards her as she swayed catlike on the rickety balustrade. She slipped, hanging half over the railing, and his outstretched hand clutched her skirts. But as she kicked at him, he slipped in the fast widening pool of blood, and fell, while the railing gave with a sudden crack. He felt the rough rasp of the serge of her skirt slip through his fingers as he sprawled on the ground across the corpse of the priest. Looking over the edge of the broken balustrade he saw her body bound down the well of the staircase like some monstrous ball, ricochetting, till it lay still with a final

thud on the floor far below, while the knife, leaping from her hand, tinkled thinly as it fell.

Hypolite felt blood soak through the knees of his trousers. He heard a rush of feet and voices below—a confused shouting. Then, hardly conscious, bruised and shuddering, he staggered up, incapable of further understanding—conscious only of a desire to go back to the room where his beloved lay.

Stumbling and weeping, he reached her and sank down—his arms clasping her knees. He tried to raise himself, for he was filled with an unconquerable yearning to kiss her face. But in his efforts to get up he pulled the body of Eugénie down on to the floor beside him. Hypolite put his arm round her shoulders and her long hair swept his cheek. In the darkness he searched for her face, and, finding it, set his lips there. Then a great and tremendous emotion flamed in him, for the faint flutter of breath stirred in the mouth beneath his. He knew that Eugénie was not dead.

He remembered no more, save that the room seemed to be full of people, for he lost consciousness with the knowledge that the faint fluttering breath came as the greeting of his beloved's returning soul.

ENVOI

A MONTH later, on the last day of March, the spring weather was warm and beautiful. Alternating rain and sunshine swelled the burgeoning buds into delicious freshness. The scent of young leaves and coming spring was in the air. The vernal call of eternal youth reigned in the world.

Drouot—painting in his studio—listened to the orchestra of spring sweetness, while at times he looked out into the radiant prospect of efflorescent landscape and sighed heavily, only to return again to his work with renewed vigour of application. After a while he put down his palette and brushes and stepped out into the garden; as he did so he saw Madame Périnot advancing towards him down the path. Her aspect was serious and she was dressed in deep mourning, but, in his opinion, he had never seen her look more comely.

"M. Drouot," she said, "I am come to throw myself on

your kindness, and to ask you if I may stay with you for an hour. Little Marie-Anne is in labour. I am waiting—we are all waiting—and Jacques walks up and down distracted with anxiety. Everyone just now seems to me so self-occupied, perhaps almost cruelly so; even the season is a little unkind and egotistic—at least so it seems to one who is no longer young."

Drouot nodded. Then, silently, he held out his arm and Marguérite put her hand within it.

"Come," he said, after a pause. "Let us walk up and down here. I have not seen you since——"

"Since my mother's funeral," she put in; "and, though many events have taken place since then, the loss of my mother grows daily more bitter. Perhaps I did not know how much the daily intercourse with her sweet, unselfish nature meant to me." Her voice broke a little and Drouot patted her hand gently.

"Yes," he said, "one's mother remains always at the same time the most understandable and the most unfathomable truth in life; and, as long as that truth is an integral part of daily life, unconsciously, we take it for granted. But, when the time comes for the great parting, the rude hand of death stirs us to the very vitals, and the natural human instinct is a hark back to the fundamental mystery of embryology. The passing of the creature who gave us being is a bereavement, the mental shock of which cannot be, and ought not to be, anything but a profound one, to which one renders justice by feeling to the very soul."

Marguérite stood still and took her hand from his arm.

"M. Drouot," she said a little wistfully, "if I were religious like you—like my mother—I should be less knocked down by this blow. But recent events—the loss of her, the tragedy of Victorine Dupont, and now Hypolite and Eugénie's engagement have combined to knock my nerves to pieces. I cannot but be gravely anxious concerning this last—I feel in a great measure I am responsible for the attachment. That the poor woman Dupont was, to a certain extent, justified in her suspicions of him I know—Hypolite's intentions were not always honourable towards her. Just now he has been ill—he is in love—and *tout va bien!* But afterwards—after six months of marriage—will he be faithful to her—or will he grow tired of her and break her heart?"

Drouot thrust his hands into his pockets and was silent for a moment.

"Eugénie," he said, "is the most beautiful creature in body and soul—I have great faith in her. In my opinion she has utterly changed Hypolite's outlook on life. A great artist she may become—I do not doubt it—but, in my opinion, the masterpiece of her life will be the saving of my friend's soul. Without her influence Gaston might have sunk away into something unworthy, and become, with his temperament, a gross hedonist and cynic."

"Ah!" Marguérite interrupted. "Yes, it is all admirable from that point of view—but I confess that, from her point of view, I consider it waste that she should marry him—at the very outset of her career—with her beauty and talent. There are many people—with less to forgive in the way of a past—whom she might have married." She shrugged her shoulders impatiently. "Nevertheless, I know it is useless to protest, even had I the heart to spoil her radiant happiness—they will do as they wish—take the risks, as so many lovers before them—leaving the future on the knees of the gods."

"In the hands of God," he answered gently.

"Ah," she said, "I wish I could believe as you do. I should have more courage perhaps to go on living. Just now I cannot work—my theatre remains closed, and I am full of misgiving regarding Eugénie's future."

Marguérite put up her handkerchief and dabbed her wet eyes.

Drouot looked at her with affectionate concern.

"You find it difficult to believe in the spiritual side of things," he said. "And yet has not the artist, with his power of visualizing the unseen, a greater proof of spiritual existence than any other human being? Is not spirituality Art and Art spirituality?—the link through the imagination and intellect with the unseen and immaterial world which is Eternity, ruled over by the greatest creative artist of all time—Almighty God."

Marguérite was again silent, but a light was in her eyes.

"M. Drouot," she said at last, "if I believed what you say it would give me new courage. Lately I confess I have been beaten down. I had thoughts of giving up my art and coming here to settle, to end my days in simplicity and poverty. I have feared that in bringing the girl out of her natural

environment despite the opposition of her aunt, the tea brimmed over her eyes—"in my determination to put Art before everything I have been the direct cause of the tragedy of Victorine Dupont." She stopped and again wiped her eyes while Drouot made a gesture of repudiation almost angrily.

"No, madame," he asserted earnestly, "you are wrong. Forgive me, but you take too much upon yourself, to beg with, and, to go on with, you are morbid. The first—because you claim responsibility that can alone be laid at the door of Almighty God; the second—because I consider you could not have done otherwise than you did, in justice to Eugénie's talent and your duty to Art. For Art is eternal," he went on, his voice sonorous, his vision keen, "Art is a part of the ideal scheme of the Creator. To the God of Art we are responsible for the power and talent that is in us. If we, of the brotherhood of Art, are faint-hearted and far away from our belief in its magnificent standards, how can we expect those to whom gifts have not been given to believe in the reality of our mission? No, no—not only to ourselves but to every God-born artist, do we owe an unalterable and undeniable duty for the development of young talent that clamours for an outlet—to urge forward the presentation of Art to the dumb world that knows it not—to the blind who see not—the deaf who do not hear; to force the sluggish to listen—to attend—to look—to learn—to bow before the flaming altar of intellect and imagination—to acknowledge the superiority of the unseen over the seen, of spirit over matter." He stopped and put a strong hand on her arm, urgently pressing the tips of his fingers into the soft flesh till he almost pained her.

"You will go back?" he said roughly, almost sternly. "back to work—and forget your backsliding—your morbid fancies?"

"I will go back," she answered, though her lips quivered and the tears made uneven furrows in the powder on her cheeks.

"And as for Eugénie and Hypolite," he continued, pointing in the direction of the vista of hill and plain, "they too have to go back to work; but if they choose to go hand in hand, who are we that we should question their right of decision?"

Marguérite, looking in the direction in which he pointed

saw that two figures—a man and a girl—paced the pathway at the edge of the plain. The girl was bare-headed and they walked slowly. Suddenly Marguérite saw that they stopped and the girl laid her hand on the man's shoulder.

"It is Eugénie," she said, "Eugénie and Hypolite."

"They are happy," he said gravely, and Marguérite saw that the fine lines about his eyes and mouth deepened, and that he threw back his head as if some noble remembrance touched his mind. "They believe in each other; why should we not believe in them?"

"Why not, why not?" Marguérite answered with tears in her voice.

There was a sound of feet in the garden and a man's voice shouting.

"*Mon Dieu!*" said Marguérite, clutching at his arm.

"That is Jacques' voice. What has happened?"

They went out into the garden hastily. Jacques came running down the path, and, as he ran, he leapt into the air. His face was red and his lips moved, but no speech came from them.

"Speak," cried Marguérite, "Marie?"

"She is well!" his voice came hoarsely—then with a triumphant shout:

"A boy—a boy. He is born—my son is born—ah, he is beautiful—my own little man child—and strong—strong as a little bull."

Without another word he turned with a rush and left them, and the two—watching—saw him run leaping and shouting down the garden out towards the slope. Marguérite, with a lump in her throat, saw that Eugénie and Hypolite stood hand in hand listening.

For a moment the three figures remained still—a little blot of sombre darkness against the verdant green of the plain, then, Jacques, turning, stumbled up the slope and went back towards La Maison Grise, while Hypolite, stooping, kissed Eugénie on the mouth.

Marguérite and Drouot turned and entered the studio.

But the two without set forth hand in hand towards de Musset's rock, and all around them triumphant spring radiated from brown, sweet-smelling earth, from springing grass and opening blossom, from the cry of birds and breathing of the wind.



Down by the rock they stood still. Then Hypolite, his voice trembling, spoke.

"Sweet, my beloved, my wife that is to be," he said, "come out with me into the forest, and let us dream together, seeing in our vision the coming of another life that shall be born of your love and mine."

"Beloved," Eugénie answered, "you understand now the meaning of love."

She moved forward, her face serious, her expression tender, and Hypolite, following almost humbly, was silent until they reached the shelter of deep woodland. Then a great briar lying across their path wound itself about the young girl's slender hips. Hypolite, kneeling, detached it with careful fingers. Putting his arms round her, he bowed his head till his lips rested on the hand which hung at her side.

"Love," he said, "there is no love but that of husband for wife. There is no peace, no freedom, but that of eternal union. There is no merit or purity save in creation."

He stood up, and Eugénie, looking in his eyes, answered:

"Since the beginning it has been so and will be so eternally."

Then, faintly ricochetting through the woodland, came the cry of the cuckoo, the cry of vernal youth and spring recurrent after the sterility of winter—symbolic of the unending, the everlasting circle of death and birth.

THE END

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