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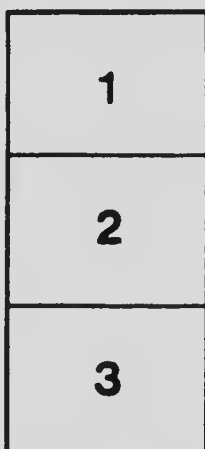
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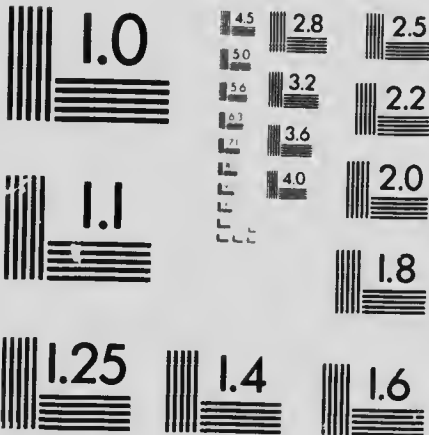
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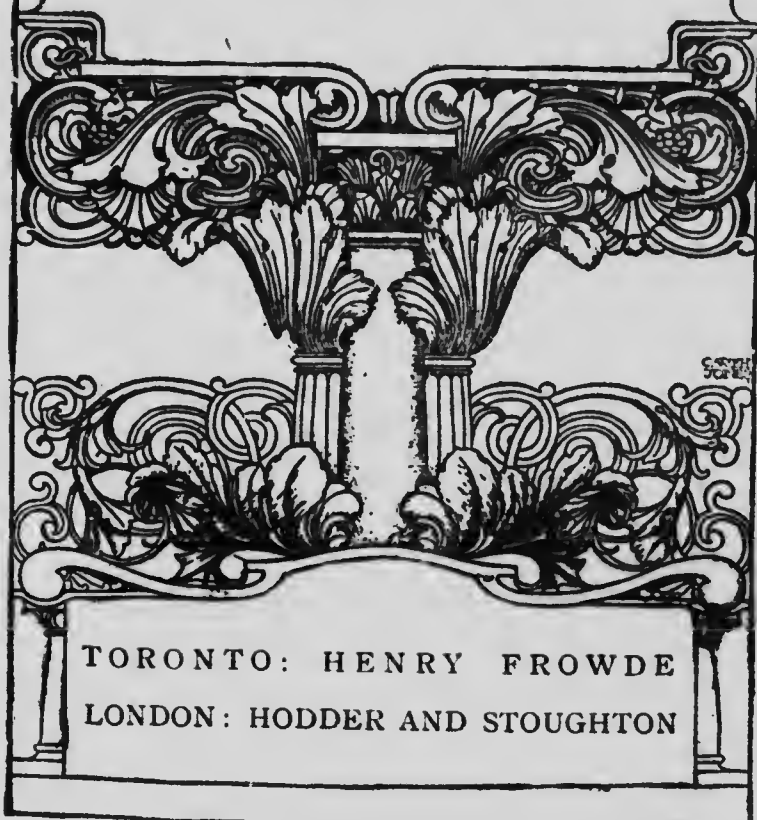
**DOCTOR XAVIER**



# DOCTOR XAVIER

BY

MAX PEMBERTON



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## CHAPTER I

THE press about the doors of the theatre increased as the day wore on ; and many of those waiting in the front ranks of the queue gave place to newcomers and abandoned their advantage. It was a hot day of July, and the sun poured down fiercely upon the torrid steppes of the Strand. Whirling dust and a venomous breath of the drought bore witness to the enduring heat and its harvest of flagging energies and leaden steps. The bevy of young girls lingering about the stage-door of the Casino Theatre envied its sisters who had gained admission to the sheltered corridor, and waited their turn before the dread tribunal. Voices were to be tried to-day ; new engagements made for the great dramatic spectacle which should delight London during the autumn months. Advertisements for artistes attracted many aspirants. From suburban purlieus, from offices, from remote country parsonages, even from the kitchen and the scullery, the would-be famous came. All types, all conditions of girlhood and womanhood were to be observed in the throng. Bedraggled mothers, abandoning hope upon the threshold, but too weak to draw back,

stood elbow to elbow with stylish "soubrettes" trained to the business and vulgar in their display. Timid creatures hid their faces and seemed already ashamed of their mission. But here and there, one frankly ambitious spoke of chance and opportunity, of her great desire to "appear," and of her belief in a vocation. But for the most part a tacit truce of rivalry prevailed. Each knew that the other's gain might be her loss. The battle was often for bread.

Esther Venn had arrived at the theatre at a quarter-past ten, and finding many already in the corridor before her, she took a place by the iron gates and waited patiently until she might be called. Tall and countrified and very quietly dressed, she was at once the subject of remark; and the poodle dog which sat so patiently upon the edge of her skirt did not escape some pleasant comment from the light-hearted girls who would have made friends with him. Some said, not unkindly, that dogs nowadays earn more money upon the stage than human beings! while one dark-eyed beauty from Clapham expressed the opinion that if justice were done she would be riding in a carriage with a King Charles spaniel upon her knee. To these and others Esther answered with what kindness she could, that the dog would never leave her; and being strange to London she had thought it would be no harm to take him to the theatre—a confession which provoked some merriment and not a little instructive chatter.

"Ah," said one, "you'll have many things to



learn about the profession, miss, and no mistake neither! 'Tisn't all what the people in front see of it, believe me. You ask Clara over there what they paid her for fourteen calls at the Temple, and notices up on the Saturday. Oh, it was different when I first began. Every young lady didn't want to play the lead and rob poor girls of their daily bread. As true as the Lord's above me, I've been twenty-two weeks waiting for this job, and here I am no better than the rest, and just as likely to wait twenty more."

"Don't frighten the young lady," said another, less pessimistic and more vulgar; "she's all right, she is—they want 'talls' for the front row, and she's just the height. I could have gone on last May if I'd a bin as tall as she is; but there, it's always something. Come to that, I shall drive a chariot at the Folly, and a pretty job, too, at sixteen a week and shout your lungs out. Oh, the profession, what it's coming to, I don't know!"

"It's the amateurs as ruins it," said a substantial lady, who obviously suffered much by reason of the heat. "Just think, my dear, here I am away from home at nine, and eleven o'clock's gone and my glass of stout with it. What I'm going to do, I really don't know."

She volunteered other information, both about the number of her children and the importance of those occasions upon which she had caused her husband to make a distressing appearance before a magistrate. Esther Venn, drawing back ashamed for the publicity which was thrust upon

her, wondered if these dreadful people were indeed typical of a London theatre and its people. She had gone there as a last resource. Penniless, friendless, she knew not whither to turn for shelter or for bread. Pride had carried her from her quiet home in Exeter; pride forbade a return to its inhospitable portals. She came to the theatre as to some final tribunal which would pronounce a verdict of the supreme moment. So much she had hoped of it, so greatly believed those fabulous tales of its opportunities and rewards. And now she stood in this vulgar company, where every word jarred upon a sensitive ear, and the rouged cheeks, the brazen gestures and the laughing, pencilled eyes spoke of a world of which she had not even dreamed. Vain errand, indeed; London's solitude was more kind than this place of blank despair. Esther would have drawn back even then had the throng permitted. But the crowd was too deep and firmly wedged in the narrow passage. A commissionaire had all he could do to maintain even a little discipline in those serried ranks.

"Come, young ladies," he said, kindly enough, "pushing won't help you, don't you think it will. First come, first served; that's our motto. The theatre won't run away, so there's no need for you to look so sharp after it. Stand back there and keep quiet, will you."

His last words were addressed in severer tones to a froward girl in the second rank, who related at quite unnecessary length, and in an exceedingly unpleasant voice the precise circumstances which had induced her to refuse the part of principal

boy in a country pantomime. The difference of opinion was at its height when the door at the end of the corridor opened and shut very quickly, and, a slender girl passing out with buoyant step, the commissionaire astonished Esther by touching her upon the shoulder, and saying,—

“Your turn next, miss.”

She had waited long hours for this summons; but now when the ordeal was at hand and all must be won or all lost in one deciding moment, the rashness of her act and the improbability of success robbed her of that little self-possession which remained to her. She followed the commissionaire with faltering step, vainly racking her troubled head for a word or story which should help her in such a dilemma. Of theatrical managers she knew nothing—her knowledge of the stage was such as she had learned from travelling companies as a spectator in a provincial theatre. The dim splendour, the tawdry pretentiousness of the stage which she now crossed revealed to her the draped mysteries of an unknown kingdom. It seemed to Esther that she went down into some pit, where the walls were daubed with sickly green paint and the sunshine veiled by whitewashed windows. The darkened theatre oppressed her with a sense of its immensity. Stalls and galleries were covered up by druggets, each of which might have harboured its particular ghost. Flaring gas jets illuminated dusty corners. Nothing was new, nothing whole. The stage manager's room helped this harmony of disorder. It was very poor, very insufficient, very dirty.

The man himself proved to be but an ordinary person. He sat before a little table dictating letters to a driven clerk. A third person stood in a patch of shadow cast by a crazy screen, and appeared anxious to disguise his identity. The manager himself finished dictating his letter before he so much as noticed Esther or in any way recognised her presence. When he did so, it was to stare at her for many minutes, as he would have stared at some curiosity offered for purchase or approval.

"Well," he asked at length, in a quick, restless way, "and who are you, young lady?"

"My name is Esther Venn," she said quietly. "I wrote to you about an engagement."

He laughed softly—perhaps at the idea that he should read a letter of this kind.

"And is it for yourself or your dog that you desire employment?"

Esther answered quite frankly.

"Oh, which you please. I am sure my dog will not refuse an engagement."

The retort amused him, and he stretched out a hand to beckon *Mouton* to his chair; but the poodle, a judge of men, showed his teeth and began to growl. Esther held him firmly by the collar; she was afraid of the consequences.

"He doesn't like strangers," she said, apologetically. "I'm afraid he's given to first impressions."

"With a desire apparently to leave them upon my calf! The dog is not engaged, Miss—er, let me see, you said your name was——"

"Esther Venn," she repeated quietly, hushing *Mouton* at her feet; "Esther Venn, of Exeter."

"Who is now anxious to be Esther Venn of the Casino Theatre. A common ambition, young lady; I hope you have more than the common talents."

"I should be very surprised if I had," said Esther, in spite of herself.

"Come, that's not a bad beginning. Most of the people who come here are Calvés in disguise. Can you sing at all?"

"My friends say that I can."

"Ah, one's friends generally do—when one is listening! Have you brought any songs?"

"None; but I can remember some."

"To your own accompaniments?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Then go to that piano and do your best."

He indicated an open cottage piano drawn across that corner of the room which was nearest to the door, and composing himself in his chair he sat like one resigned to a painful ordeal. In spite of her ready answers, Esther was in such a state of nervous agitation that her hands trembled when she tried to draw off her gloves, and the few introductory chords found her fingers heavy as lead. Presently, however, she began to sing a dainty *chansonette* in a voice of singular freshness and charm. Music was wont to carry her out of herself, but its spell to-day seemed absent, and she had no heart for it. Her singing was without verve or any depth of expression; she knew its shortcomings. Perhaps an anticipa-

tion of failure already deprived her of the will to make an effort. She understood the consequences of refusal. If she did not obtain an engagement this very day, to-morrow might find her without a roof above her head. She said that she must do her best; and saying it she did her worst. The freezing tones in which she had been commanded to sing were in some measure responsible for this. She felt already that she hated the perfumed and larded man who sat at the writing-table. And his friend, the unknown who stood in the shadow of the screen, what was he doing there? Esther believed that he came out while she was singing and stood at the table. It was quite a relief when a voice said—

“Thank you, that is enough.”

The unknown was in the shadows again when she rose from the piano.

“It’s shocking, isn’t it?” she exclaimed, with a hard laugh. “I really think I left my voice in Exeter.”

Otto Hemming, the manager, did not take the same view; he was more courteous—indeed, almost deferential when she had ceased to sing. She knew that she had done very badly, and could not understand it at all. For an instant she really believed that the coveted engagement was hers. The man was quite polite.

“You have a pretty voice but it needs training,” he said, in a way that she felt to be not altogether unflattering. “I suppose you have had a local master?”

“I was taught by a poor Frenchman at a half

a crown a lesson. Major Venn, my father, died when I was a child," she replied quietly. "There is not any conservatoire in Exeter, at least, none that I could afford to attend. My stepfather keeps the library there——"

"I see; your pages were mostly in waiting. And so you thought you'd come to London to make a living on the stage?"

"Indeed I didn't! I came to make a living by my pen."

"Worse and worse! The editors thanked you, I suppose, and the manuscripts came back; oh, I know, I know! and now you come to my theatre without any qualifications at all just because there isn't anywhere else to go to! Isn't that the truth, Miss Venn, just the truth?"

She began to put on her gloves and to button them maladroitly. The great ordeal was over, then! She had failed. London and its solitudes were before her! She tried to answer bravely, but her throat was husky and her lips dry.

"It's the truth," she said at last, "the simple truth; I came to you because I failed elsewhere. There is no need to say anything more, I think?"

"Not the slightest, Miss Venn. I wish you better fortune. You have the presence for the stage but not the voice. Frankly, the employment that I could offer you is not such as you would care to take. Your better instinct, your education, would compel you to revolt against it. I am led to speak frankly for your own sake. If you will leave me your address, it is just possible that I may communicate with you again. Do not

rely upon it, but regard it as a possibility. Your case interests me, and I will do what I can."

Esther said "Thank you very much," and drawing off her glove again, she took the pen which he offered her and wrote her name and address upon a little slip of paper. Another applicant was already in the room before she had finished; and receiving an abrupt dismissal she crossed the bare stage again to the light of the day. The throng of applicants still pressed close in the corridor; the stout lady still aired her bibulous grievances. No one spoke to Esther or so much as noticed her; and calling *Mouton* to her side she went out to the tropical heat of the Strand and knew that she was alone.



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## CHAPTER II

SHE was alone, utterly alone. Of all those thousands who went hurrying eastward, westward, of all the toilers, all the idlers, what was her trouble to any one? Esther, indeed, believed that this was the end of it all, the end of those harassing years of neglect and slavery, in her stepfather's house; of the strife, the hope, the ambition which had carried her to London to seek her fortune. She had but a few shillings left in all the world. Until the rent of her dismal garret was paid, she had no right even to the daily bread of which her need was so great. She was without friends or even acquaintances of whom she might crave the most trifling hospitality. Three months ago she had come to London believing that there, at least, some simple employment would be open to a cultured girl. Her mother's death in the winter of the year severed the last tie which bound her to the cathedral city. An unsympathetic stepfather, whose poverty and sloth had made her home intolerable, permitted her to go to London without scruple or doubt. Even at the bitterest moment of failure, pride forbade her to renew that servitude. As

she had sown, so would she reap. In London she had suffered; if need be in London she would end her suffering.

She walked along the Strand, westward, toward Charing Cross and the Parks. The heat was almost tropical; the dust choking. She envied those who could afford the luxury of a penny 'bus. The meanest restaurant, with its poor display, offered to her eyes the menu for a king. She had never known what hunger was before; but to-day the word had a new meaning for her. She was afraid to look in the confectioners' shops; afraid to linger near the eating-houses lest she should be tempted to draw upon that little store, and to find herself without a roof when night came. Every step cost her an effort. She was compelled to stand motionless, even to rest against a befriending door lest she should reel and fall upon the pavement. In St. James's Park she sat at last by the water's edge and uttered a low cry which was wrung from her very heart.

"What shall I do? Dear God, what shall I do?"

*Mouton*, faithful dog, pressed close to his mistress like one who knew her trouble, and for many minutes she sat with his face held up to her own, and all consciousness gone of that seething world wherein she had failed so supremely. Scarcely a voice of London's life spoke to her in the parks. The whirling sea-gulls circled about her vainly; a boat drifted by with laughing passengers; there were idlers upon the iron bridge; but she believed herself to be far away from the city, in the sunny

lanes of Devon where her childhood had known its only pleasures. How many years had passed since she was a child! What dark hours she had lived! How little sunshine had there been in all those days of poverty and struggle. And now it must end in this! Esther looked at the water, and believed that she could sleep. She nestled closer to *Mouton* as though for protection. Yes, it would be good to sleep, to rest, to dream, as she had dreamed in the days of long ago. A sense of final surrender overpowered her; she could do nothing more, she thought. If this were destiny, so let it be. She had done her best.

A hand touched her upon the shoulder and she started up like one surprised in a guilty act. The green park, the shrubs, the water, the trees, took shape again as though at some magic touch; and beyond them she beheld the spires and roofs of London. Quite a long while passed, however, before she could collect her wandering thoughts; and then, for the first time, she became aware that a stranger was standing at her side and waited to speak to her. Esther looked at the man questioningly. Something in his manner invited her confidence, and she did not turn away. He was exceedingly well-dressed; his clothes were faultless; but it was the face of the man which attracted her, not as one is attracted by mere good looks, but by the consciousness of force and will. Esther had never seen a pair of eyes which could at once express so much kindness or so quickly win her trust. She was not

afraid, not in any way alarmed. The musical voice was a pleasure to her.

"Accept my most humble pardon for this intrusion, Miss Venn."

She started when she heard her own name, and put her hand upon *Mouton's* collar.

"I do not know you, sir," she said.

"But you are about to, I hope. My name is Doctor Xavier. I have taken the liberty to follow you from the theatre."

She did not know what to say, was confused, and not a little embarrassed. The stranger, again apologising, seated himself upon the bench and began to speak quickly.

"I have followed you from the theatre, because I believe that I can help you," he said. "Forgive me, I was in the room during your interview with Otto Hemming. I heard you sing—a very pretty voice, Miss Venn; but it must be trained. I heard you say that you desire an engagement in the theatre. Allow me to say that you are not fitted for that, you are too sensitive, too clever, too ready to despise the trivialities of life. Your success will be made another way; it will be in an honourable employment which will give you pleasure. I came from the theatre to offer it to you—in my service, in that also of my sister. You are wise enough and clever enough not to regard this as an impertinent intrusion. I am sure you will permit me to continue."

He waited for her to speak; but she did not know what answer to make to him. Conflicting emotions of surprise and joy forbade her to ex-

press herself as she wished to do. She sat with heightened colour and beating heart, unable to thank him or even to say "Yes." He understood her difficulty; he did not misconstrue it.

"You do not answer me," he continued; "I appreciate your silence. London is a terrible city for those who fail, Miss Venn. The successful know little of its darker side: it is left to the unsuccessful to discover it. The Casino Theatre could write a history which few would have the courage to read. I heard many pitiful stories there this morning. They are better forgotten. Whatever we may do or wish, there will always be countless human beings in the world whom we cannot help. The pleasure of helping even one should be a privilege. If you decide to help me, please regard it in that light."

She turned earnest eyes upon him; the compliment both surprised and pleased her.

"To help you!" she cried, amazed. "Oh, no! it is you who are offering to help me!"

"Not so, Miss Venn; nothing of the kind. Your loss of a possible career will be my gain. I am asking for all your time, your talent, your fidelity—I do not offer you any great reward. The only return I can make is the shelter of my sister's house, a home, friendship, the society of cultured people. If you consent to my proposal, the rest will be easy. We will settle it at home in five minutes. My carriage is over there by the palace gates.

Esther looked toward the spot he indicated and perceived there an elegant single brougham drawn

by two roan horses. She felt instinctively that she was at some crisis in her life. She believed with the religious faith of her childhood that this encounter had been foreordained for her salvation and security. Willing to say "Yes," and to say it from her very heart, nevertheless a certain prudence restrained her. Why had this man come to her? whither would he lead her? There was so much to ask him. She did not know how to begin, fearing greatly that a question might give offence.

"Your offer is very kind," she said nervously. "Will you think me ungrateful if I ask you something?"

"You have every right to do so."

"You speak of employment in your sister's house. What should I be expected to do there?"

"You would be expected to assist a man who is trying to do what he can for the human race—especially for your sex."

"You are a doctor; is it in connection with your profession?"

He rested his arms upon the broad handle of his ebony cane and looked a little wistfully across the waters.

"I am not a doctor—I am a pupil. My page is not in the written book, it is in the life, the light, the humanity about us. The earth is my school, the heavens are my university. I do not study men's bodies; I seek to know their minds. All that the field of Nature can give for the happiness of mankind, that is my subject. No, I am

not a doctor, Miss Venn—I am a child, groping blindly for the light which is hidden.”

“And you think that I could be of service to you in your studies, sir?”

“I am sure of it. That is why I am here. Consider, you are familiar with books—books are meat and drink to me. You like beautiful things—I cannot live without them. You are cast out, a stranger in this city—I am an exile from my home and country. You have talent to offer—I have money to buy. Is it not what the world calls business? Let us begin with that. Business first and friendship afterwards, yes, it must be friendship afterwards, Miss Venn.”

He laid a gentle hand upon her arm as though to bid her follow him. When Esther looked up, she beheld a pair of kindly eyes which seemed to say, “I have need of you.” *Mouton*, her dog, laid his shaggy head upon the stranger’s knee and began to make friends with him. She accepted the omen and made up her mind without further delay.

“I will go and see your sister,” she said.

### CHAPTER III

THE carriage waited near the gates of Buckingham Palace; and a footman, in a neat black livery, summoned it when the doctor appeared. Esther was not accustomed to the formal and exaggerated politeness with which Doctor Xavier now treated her; indeed, she had never ridden in such a carriage before, and her sensations were those which she could neither describe nor wholly enjoy. Had she been quite sure of the wisdom of the step she was taking, the experience would have been altogether pleasurable; but the offer had come to her with such dramatic suddenness, it was so surprising and unexpected, that she neither realised it nor believed altogether in its good faith. True, the immediate necessity, the dreadful despair which had tormented her an hour ago, were already of the past and forgotten. She was going to a home, whatever it might have in store for her. No longer would it be necessary to scheme for her daily bread in the garret which sheltered her. Grateful always, she was very grateful for this respite. The excitement of the journey fascinated her and was not to be resisted. Again and again she asked herself, "Where are



we going; what does he really want of me?" Doctor Xavier, on his part, said nothing to abate this curiosity. He treated her from the first with a deference to which she was quite unaccustomed. The polished manners, the courteous phrases of the born gentleman pleased her and were not to be resisted. Her knowledge of men hitherto had been gained from the provincial city. This man was unlike any other she had known. She could not imagine her title to his homage and regard. He addressed her as one no less learned than himself.

"We think alike," he said, while they drove rapidly northward toward Oxford Street and Marylebone. "I can see that we observe Nature from the same standpoint; it is a good beginning and will help us. You, at this present moment, are telling yourself how beautiful the park is looking; I am saying that it would be beautiful if there were no people in it. Reflect how men and women are robbing the world of beauty to-day. They multiply and spread; the city thrusts out its arms; the woods, the rivers, the pastures perish. In time this England will be one stifling city. Those who love solitude will find it after many days. A thousand years ago a forest thrived on this very spot. You could have built a hut and lived a week without seeing a man. Nowadays, there are twenty families in the hut and a man must go far afield if he would be away from other men. We shall make the journey together and study as we go. I will show you solitudes of mountain and valley which years

of travel and labour have purchased. The book of Nature is in many volumes, Miss Venn: few read it through. We should all be the better if we did. We should not write such stuff as that—we should despise it!"

He took a yellow-backed volume from the leather-case before him and turned its pages scornfully. It was a work upon the decadence of the century; the triumph of a gloomy German.

"This fellow has gone to the letter S," the stranger went on; "he writes of the human swamp. He should have begun at A, and written of the art of life, which thinking men make their own. If you showed him the sun, it would blind him. We live in an age which does not like the sunshine. The majority is always looking downward, backward; but the new generation will lift its eyes to the heavens, it will rend the veil and enter the unknown. If it no longer believes in death, it will be because science has taught it that life is eternal, indestructible the spirit of the celestial scheme. I am a pupil, but those who come after me will be the masters. Let us help them to come quickly. It is possible to do so!"

Esther had never heard any one talk like this. She did not realise at first, perhaps, how much the personal magnetism of the speaker attracted her, or how very closely she was listening to him; but she was conscious of a desire to listen and of a sense of mental inferiority which she had rarely experienced in the presence of any other man. Her suspicion that the Doctor talked merely to

avoid her own curiosity was quickly put aside; for his earnestness convinced her, and she could not resist the spell of his voice. For that matter, the journey was all too short; and when the carriage stopped, she had quite forgotten her doubts. It remained for the house itself to awaken them.

Esther knew little of London, and had lost her reckoning in the excitement of an experience so new; but she was aware that the carriage had crossed Oxford Street and thence had driven northward towards Regent's Park. When at last it stopped, they were at the doors of a low-pitched house which stood behind high walls and was shut in by heavy wooden gates. A little garden faced the door and displayed a wealth of common gilly-flowers and sweet-smelling shrubs. In shape as many dwellings round about, Esther's sharp eyes at once observed in what way the Doctor's house differed from them. It had no windows, she said; at least the windows were all bricked-up. This circumstance of itself troubled her not a little, and she could not imagine the reason of it. Why should any one fear the sunlight, a scientist of all others! She was still trying to satisfy herself, when the Doctor, standing at the carriage door, surprised her by anticipating the question.

"You are wondering why I have no windows?" he asked, with a laugh. "Well, come inside and I will show you."

He held out his hand, and she entered the house with him. An elderly butler, English and

well-trained, took his master's hat and cane and asked him if he had lunched. Esther heard the carriage driving away on the gravel path and then the heavy oaken door was shut with a clang behind her. She trembled a little at the sound, for she had never seen so curious a hall as that in which she now stood; the vision of the garden beyond was like that of a fairyland.

"You are anxious about my windows," said the Doctor, lightly; "well, you see, we like an Eastern light, Miss Venn, and make one. It is not pleasant to have neighbours who count the days when your curtains go to the wash! Observe! you have never seen the sunlight shine so softly—is it not beautiful?"

Esther perceived now that the house was built in the Italian style—a quadrangle about a spacious garden. Two great windows lighted the hall; but they were unlike any windows she had ever seen or read of. An exquisite glass of the faintest roseate hue permitted the rays of light to stream down through a device of crystal and green leaves, so cunningly placed that the whole apartment glowed with a gentle radiance of the softest tints, more restful to the eye, more pleasing than any light that could be imagined. Elsewhere all was fantastic and surprising. Masterpieces of art caught the rays of electric lights, cunningly placed, and showed their finest details. The mats were Eastern and of surprising softness. Flowers stood everywhere: the rarest orchids, the loveliest blooms, so perfectly chosen, so artistically matched, that the colour scheme was never

marred or vulgarised. Esther said that she had entered a wonderland. A fountain splashing in the garden shed a delicious perfume upon the air. Her weariness, her hunger, left her at the door. The very silence was bewitching. London seemed so far away. When the Doctor spoke again, she started at the sound of his voice.

"I can see that you like my house," he said, well pleased. "Women are always the children of first impressions; and you are no exception. When we have had lunch, I will show you some of my curiosities; but first I must introduce you to my sister; she is very much alone here, and will be glad of a companion."

He struck a gong twice while he spoke, and the reverberations had hardly died away when a well-dressed woman descended the stairs and came up to him with outstretched hands. Esther judged that she was about thirty years old, a brunette, with a Spanish type of face, an abundance of black hair and the whitest of teeth which showed a little prominently when she smiled. Her eyes were deep-set and dark and her manner buoyant and almost girlish. Doctor Xavier kissed her affectionately and then led her forward to Esther.

"My sister Julia," he said; "this is Miss Venn, Miss Esther Venn. You must learn to know each other quickly—you will have so many hours to pass together."

Julia took Esther's hands in both her own and welcomed her with quite effusive pleasure.

"So you have come to help my brother—you

cannot think how glad I am. Esther Venn— Esther Venn, oh, what a pretty name! And you are tired, my dear, I can see that you are tired. Come upstairs and let us begin to know each other. I'm sure you are just dying for your lunch!"

She would not hear a denial, and led the way upstairs to a pretty bedroom, from whose windows the garden of roses and the fountain dreamily splashing in the sunlight were more plainly to be seen. Of other houses there was not a trace. Esther might have been in an old French *château* a hundred miles from cities and men.

"My brother loves beautiful things," Julia said, helping her to take off her hat, and pouring water for her in a basin of the daintiest French china. "He must have them wherever he is. The garden is his own creation. It is only a little thing, but in Spain and France he will show you others. Everything in this house is here because it is beautiful. He devotes his fortune to the study. I will show you some of his treasures afterwards. You are tired now, and there is the lunch gong."

Musical bells chimed softly from the hall below, an octave deep and sonorous and pleasing, like the chimes from an Italian Campanile. Esther had little preparation to make, and she tidied herself quickly, and said that she was ready. She felt that she ought to be ashamed of her shabby black gown; but the kindness of these people, their simplicity and friendship, forbade any thought of that kind, and she went down-

stairs with a confidence which quite surprised her. Luncheon, she discovered, was already served in the dining-room upon the ground floor. The scheme of this room was entirely white, with chairs and curtains and carpet of the richest crimson. Here, as in the hall, bewitching effects of light were contrived by fantastic windows. A few sketches hung upon the walls, and each had its own lamp above, that its finer work might not be lost. The glass was Venetian, green as a tulip's leaf. Esther noticed how brightly the silver shone, and how rarely chased was the great goblet by the Doctor's plate. The whole room impressed her with a sense of luxury carried to the last point, but not vulgarly nor obtrusively. The wine she drank was the golden Valdepeñas; it stimulated her flagging energy, encouraged her sense of happiness, and renewed her unspoken expression of gratitude. What had she done to deserve this change of fortune, so sudden, so supreme? But an hour ago she believed that her life had been lived; and now a young girl's courage lifted her up to new scenes of success and ambition. How she would work for such friends as these! How she would serve them!

Ah, if she had known what days awaited her in the Doctor's house!

The talk was all of common things during the luncheon hour. Doctor Xavier ate little and drank less; but he had a fund of anecdote which was inexhaustible; and he gossiped now of Europe, now of America, in a way which delighted Esther, though much of it was beyond her understanding.

She gathered from it that he had been a traveller in many countries, and that his residence in England was but accident, which, in some way, he lamented. He spoke of the possibility that he would not remain long in the city; and, turning to her, he asked her how she would like to go to Spain.

"It is my country," he said, "although I am an exile at this moment. My English was learned in America, at Harvard University, to which I owe my education. I say education, but no man is educated at a university. His education is Nature's task. She teaches him every day while he lives. I have asked you to my house, Miss Venn, to help me in such self-imposed studies. We will charter a university together. My sister shall be the bursar and feed us."

"It is the only merit he allows me," said Julia gaily. "If I wish to make my brother angry, I ask him what he will have for dinner. Oh, my dear, just think what we women have suffered because of men's dinners! You are lucky to be in the laboratory! I envy Francis his books sometimes."

"And yet she will not read them for five minutes together," said the Doctor, not unkindly. "There are no novels there, Miss Venn. Beautiful princes do not expire at the feet of languishing damsels. I have not a single book which Lewails the loss of the baron's diamonds, or extols the gentleman who stole them. Pity my misfortunes! I told you that I was a pupil; it is for you to teach me."



He turned the subject with a laugh, and went on to ask his sister of her day and its programme. Would she be at home to dinner? Was she going to the theatre afterwards? As for Esther she would, perhaps, be glad to rest to-day. The Doctor suggested a hammock in the garden amid the roses; tea should be served there at five o'clock. Esther must ask for anything she wished; the whole house was at her disposal. When he had suggested other plans for her comfort, he withdrew to his library, and left the girls together. Julia, in spite of herself, appeared to be more at ease in his absence; she took Esther by the hand, and went out into the garden with her.

It must have been three o'clock then, and the delicious hush of the summer afternoon was everywhere to be felt. Esther thought the garden not less beautiful than she had imagined it. The grass, she said, was the softest she had ever trodden upon. The masses of roses were bewildering; rare blooms, some of them familiar, some unfamiliar, shed a delicious fragrance upon the balmy air. The fountain cast a spray of an unknown essence, which cooled the atmosphere and added to its perfume. The silence was intense, and in some way almost unnatural. You could not hear any sound at all from the streets around. The quaint windows of the pavilion looked down upon you from every side. It might have been an uninhabited house; and yet Esther quickly discovered that it was not. Indeed, she was still gazing curiously at these oddly-shaped

windows, when a face appeared suddenly at one of them, and instantly arrested her curiosity. It was the face of a young woman, a hideous, distorted, and yet singularly pitiful face. For an instant the figure appeared at the casement, and was then dragged back as though by an unseen hand. Esther, she knew not why, started at this sudden apparition. It was just as though a voice had said to her, "Beware!" Who was this girl? What was she doing in the house?

Now, it chanced that Julia still wrestled with the ropes of the hammock during this momentary scene; and so both her companion's astonishment and the subject of it were not observed by her. Esther, troubled as she was, had already made up her mind to say nothing about it. A shrewd wit told her that if she were really in danger, confession would not help her. She could not imagine that such a man as Doctor Xavier would trap a young girl for any felonious purpose. Nevertheless, there was something about the house and its people which baffled her understanding and awakened her suspicions. Terrible as her situation had been but an hour ago, she was not quite sure that this change was for the better, and very greatly apprehensive and doubtful, she listened to the merry Julia and her gossip.

"There's one thing we're expected to do in this house, and that is to make ourselves comfortable," she said, sinking down upon a pile of cushions and arranging her books upon her knee. "The Doctor believes in the art of life, and while it gives me what I want I am his faithful disciple.

You do not know what a clever man he is, dear. I often read in the papers about other scientists, and wonder if they know half as much as Francisco Xavier. Beautiful things have been the passion of his life. Day and night he lives for them. There is not any beautiful art of which he does not know something. Those sketches you saw in the dining-room, they were all his work. He has written music which has been performed in the theatres of Milan and Paris. While you and I sleep here this afternoon he will be in his laboratory and perhaps—you never can tell—discovering something which may astonish the world to-morrow. It is my misfortune, I try to interest myself in all these things, but I am just a helpless creature, and it cannot be helped. You, I believe, will take my place. I know he wishes it. A woman can help sometimes where a man is useless."

"I shall do what I can to be useful," said Esther, a little eagerly. "It was very kind of Doctor Xavier to offer me this engagement, and I am only too desirous to prove myself grateful. But, you see, he has never asked me what I can do, and I fear I'm not as clever as he thinks me. My education has been all my own. I taught myself in the library which my stepfather used to keep at Exeter. Except for this visit to London, I have never been anywhere or seen anything. Of course, I could write Doctor Xavier's letters and, perhaps, help him with his books; but I really have no talents, Miss Julia. I am not a clever girl."

"The Doctor doesn't want a clever girl; he wants a willing one. Your only duty is to obey him, my dear. Whatever he asks you, obey him always. He is very kind and good; but I never wish you to see him angry. Remember, when he is cross, that he has suffered much. His own country has not treated him well. I do not think he will ever go back there. You and I must make his home happy in England. I am sure we can do that if we try."

Esther had hoped that she would speak more of the Doctor, and particularly of her own duties; but Julia Xavier could never talk for more than five minutes together on any one subject; and now she went rambling off to speak of theatres and singers and of the world of restless fashion wherein her own part was so well played. They spent the sunny afternoon in such careless talk, and at five o'clock tea was served to them in an arbour by the lawn. Esther did not see Doctor Xavier again until dinner-time; and although she looked up often to the windows of the pavilion, the figure which had so frightened her did not reappear. She fell to wondering at last if it had been merely her imagination. Nevertheless, the impression remained. She knew that there was some secret of this house she had yet to fathom. Perhaps in her heart she believed that it was an awful secret.

## CHAPTER IV

MADAME JULIA, as all the household called her, had insisted upon sending for Esther's luggage early in the afternoon, and she would not hear of any one but herself arranging with the landlady. From the first she played the part of an elder sister, who wished to put her guest entirely at ease ; indeed, she lent Esther a pretty gown for dinner and laughingly declared that at last it had found a worthy owner.

"Do not thank me," she said ; "you look so pretty in it. Ah, my dear, what a thing it is not to be anxious about your figure. Mine quarrels with my dressmaker every time we meet ; I haven't, positively, the energy to scold it ! I am just born for an armchair and Mudie's !"

She went on to say that a maid should be engaged especially for Esther ; but, meanwhile, Georgine, her own girl, would do what she could. In the bedroom, everything that a woman of fashion might desire was laid out. Mirrors panelled the doors of an old French wardrobe ; little lamps, cunningly shaded, flattered the plain and enhanced the prettiness of the more fortunate

tenants. The brushes were heavily wrought in silver; bottles of essence, pots of cream, unknown preparations, of which Esther had not the smallest need, littered the table before her glass. She dressed herself with such simplicity as she could, combing out that soft brown hair which was the best gift of her beauty, and confessing to herself, perhaps, that her eyes had already regained something of their brightness, her cheeks of their colour. In the drawing-room she found Doctor Xavier, dressed as any civilised Englishman at such an hour; and, there being no other guests, they went into dinner without delay.

The meal was simple, but served with necessary elegance. Two of the dishes, at least, Esther had never tasted before; she drank but little wine; nevertheless, she was astonished to find that the food had stimulated her in a way quite beyond her experience. From a sense of doubt and mistrust she passed gradually to one of confidence and quiet mental exhilaration. The desire to talk came naturally; and she found herself, much to her own astonishment, possessed of an eloquence of which she had never dreamed. The Doctor, in his turn, seemed not a little surprised both at her learning and her knowledge; and, turning the subjects skilfully, he led her from book to book with the skill of an old diplomatist, who has a purpose to serve. In the drawing-room afterwards Julia sang to them, in a low full contralto voice which the conservatoires both of Leipzig and Paris had trained. Esther had rarely heard any one sing with such delicate phrasing or such depth

of expression ; and when Doctor Xavier himself took a violin in his hand and began to play one of Chopin's nocturnes, even her untrained ear could recognise the master. By and by, the Doctor put the instrument down for a little while that he might talk to her of the music of southern countries, but chiefly of Spain.

"That which we call the finest music," he said, "is a matter of temperament. I hear the Swan Song, but it does not move me, because I am not a Saxon ; but I would not belittle it. The man who belittles great things has no instinct of greatness. I admit that the German music is great, but I would give it all for one bolero from my own Spain. If we are true patriots, it must always be the same. Put an Englishman in the wilds of America and ask him what tune the wandering minstrel is to play—shall it be the 'Song of the Evening Star,' or just your 'Auld Lang Syne.' Ah, I seem to know what he would say !"

He took up the violin again and began to play an old-time Spanish dance. The music held him as by some magic spell he could not resist. His emotions were transparent and easily to be read—love of country, the pathos of exile, the futility of regret. In the end, anger appeared suddenly to master him, and he ceased abruptly and threw the fiddle from him.

"Ah, my poor Spain !" he cried ; "if you will not have me living, you shall have me dead."

Julia viewed this distress with some alarm ; but

she did not try to explain it to Esther. Seating herself at her brother's side, she took his hand in both of hers and conversed with him very rapidly in the Spanish tongue. He heard her at first reluctantly, then with some interest; until, at last, he took her suddenly in his arms and kissed her.

"Yes, yes," he said in English, "the day will come—I am hastening it. We will go together."

Esther viewed this little scene with trepidation, for it suggested some new mystery of a house which already had been fruitful in mysteries. She was quite wise enough, however, to feign indifference, and, going to the piano, she played a nocturne pianissimo that the others might not be embarrassed by her presence. When she looked up again, Doctor Xavier had left the room and she was alone with his sister, who appeared anxious to apologise for him.

"My brother is very brave," she said; "but these years of exile cost him much. He was once a great man in Spain, my dear—not in Spain exactly, that is, but in his own kingdom of Cadi. The people would gladly have him back, but he has quarrelled with his prince, and I fear it will never be made up again. You, perhaps, may help him where I am useless. We are both hoping that. He has asked you to his house because he believes so much in your cleverness. I must not tell you to-night exactly what you can do, because he wishes to tell you himself; but believe me that he is very good and gentle, and will never bring



you to any harm. You will serve him faithfully, dear Esther, you will do it for my sake."

Esther did not at all understand how a young and penniless girl, whose education was her own, and who had so little knowledge, even of her own country, could help a stranger in such a matter. She said as much, but not as one who appeared unwilling.

"I am not clever; I fear the Doctor is mistaken in me," she protested. "Of course I am very anxious to know what he wishes me to do, but if you tell me that I am to wait, I will do as you desire. At least I could never forget his kindness to me this morning."

"He is kind to every one," Julia replied; "he can almost break his heart over little starving children in the streets. Believe me, dear Esther, you will never have anything to fear from Francisco Xavier. Whatever happens, remember that he desires you to be happy, and will be disappointed if you are not."

She laid a little emphasis on the words, almost as one who would utter a warning, and this was not lost upon Esther. Indeed, when she went up to her own bedroom at eleven o'clock and found herself alone, the whole events of that strange day recurred to her one by one like the pages of some exciting story she had read in her childhood. How different it had been yesterday! Then she stood upon the brink of a woman's supreme temptation. No certain home was open to her, no prospects in this great heartless city. She had been driven from door to door

like an outcast whom none would harbour. All her fine schemes of success and advancement in London turned to ashes, and were blown away upon the winds of despair. The long hours at the doors of the theatre, her rejection there, the bitterness of failure, were of too recent occurrence to be forgotten. She knew that she had suffered greatly, and from suffering had passed almost with fabulous swiftness to the extreme of joy. Employment, shelter, good friends, of these the Doctor had spoken when he invited her to his house. And was it a true message? Could she believe it? This silent beautiful house appeared to invite her to rest and forgetfulness. Might she trust in that appearance? Was there nothing beyond it which a woman must dread? Esther did not dare to deceive herself so far. There must be a secret, she thought.

She undressed at her leisure and reluctantly turned out the lamp by her bedside. It was so absolutely quiet in the room, the summer's night fell so still that not a leaf seemed to stir in the garden, nor a whisper of the trees to make itself heard. For quite a long while she lay seeking to win sleep, but failing to compose herself. Once she thought she heard a soft footstep upon the landing outside, and she started up in affright and listened intently for many minutes. Reassured by the silence she laughed at herself for such babyish alarms, and lay back to dream again. It must have been very late when at last she fell into a gentle slumber, and she had not been asleep very long when she awoke again, but without fear,

and not unwillingly. Very greatly to her surprise she discovered that her room was now lighted up by a soft mellow light, which at first she believed to be moonlight shining down upon her bed. In this, however, she was mistaken, and when she had lain a little time, bewitched by the translucent beams, she perceived that they fell from an aperture in the wall in a spreading arc of green-white light, so soft and gentle to the eyes that Esther seemed almost to be in some dreamland, where everything entranced and pleased her. Anon, she felt that the light compelled her to sleep in spite of her desire to remain awake. She closed her eyes and opened them again, tossed and turned a little restlessly, tried to wake up, but failed to do so. The spell was irresistible. She had no will to resist it, and was on the point of sleeping, when she became aware that a face regarded her from the open door, and that a man with the complexion and dress of a Moor peered in at her as she lay. Had Esther believed that this apparition was anything but that of a dream, she would have fled the house upon the instant and never re-entered it, but a confidence she could not explain, some spell of the light deprived her, for the time being, both of the power to rise and of the wit to think. Surprising as it was she did not feel in any way alarmed. The face did not frighten her, she had no fear of the man who watched by her bedside; and telling herself that it was all imagination, she fell suddenly into so heavy a sleep that all the scene was instantly blotted out, and not one

memory of it remained. When she awoke the birds were singing in the garden, and the fountain splashed merrily. Sunlight fell upon the western wing, and busy servants were crossing the quadrangle. Esther scarcely remembered that she had dreamed, or if she did, she never doubted that it was a dream.

## CHAPTER V

A PRETTY gown of French muslin had been laid upon a chair in Esther's dressing-room while she slept, and she found other witnesses to her maid's industry and the forethought of those who harboured her. Everything had been prepared for her upon the lavish scale which the later day art of luxury demands in a rich man's house. Esther was so unaccustomed to anything but the barest necessities, that this profusion bewildered her, and she dressed timidly like one who is afraid of a gift and the price which must be paid for it. Nor could she fail to contrast her fortunes of to-day with those of yesterday. Then she put on her shabby gown in a dismal attic overlooking the Tottenham Court Road. Her neighbours had been the poor tenants of the mean houses, the poverty-stricken, and the starving. The very breezes came to her laden with the city's grime. The green lanes of her own Devonshire seemed so far away. To-day she awoke in a palace of the story books. Marble, exquisitely white, panelled her bath-room; water ran clear as crystal in her bath of porcelain; the fragrance of roses perfumed the sweet air of morning;

the lawns below her window caught up the dancing beams of light and hid them in a heart of emerald. A sense of rest and happiness possessed her, and was not apart from gratitude. What right had she to be in such a house, or to enjoy such luxuries? To what end were they offered her? She could not answer. There must be the secret, she thought.

Esther had no watch, and she did not know what time it was, nor if the others were already about. When she had dressed herself, and taken one last peep in the glass, without any great thought of her appearance, she went downstairs a little doubtfully, half believing that it was very early, and that she would find none but the servants in the dining-room. In this, however, she was mistaken, as an English chubby-faced boy-in-buttons, whom she discovered in the hall, hastened to assure her. Esther could not altogether account for it, but the presence of this English lad reassured her. She asked him who he was, and he answered loquaciously—

“I’m Billy, miss; I blacks the boots.”

“Then please to tell me what time it is, Billy?”

Billy wiped a very black hand upon a cheek scarcely whiter.

“It’s ten o’clock,” said he, “or eleven—call it somewhere betwixt and between, miss.”

The intelligence was a little vague; its deficiencies did not occur to Billy.

“They won’t say anything to you, ’cause you’re new,” he went on. “I always gets up when I

wakes, but that ain't early enough for 'em! You'll excuse me not blacking your boots, miss, 'cause they're brown. I know I ain't done right — Billy never does! "

Esther assured Billy that he was a paragon of wisdom and went on into the dining-room. Madame Julia, whose ample figure carried a dark green riding-habit well enough, sat already at the table reading her letters; but Doctor Xavier was not there, nor had a place been laid for him. Esther had been prepared to apologise for her late appearance, but Julia would not hear of it, saying that it was Liberty Hall, and that every one came down exactly when he or she pleased.

"I never dress until I wake; that's Irish, my dear, but true. When you get to my age, you'll snatch every hour of sleep you can and be glad of it. Imagine it, I am thirty-three next March, and every hair of my head is beginning to say, '*Passé! Passé!*' In five years' time it will be somebody else's hair, and I shall be resigned."

Esther laughed with her and felt greatly relieved. Whatever her doubts had been when she was alone in her own room, the presence of these gentlepeople invariably banished them. Here was a woman, whom she had seen for the first time yesterday, treating her with greater kindness than she had ever known in her life. The refinements of the household, the luxury of her surroundings, never once troubled Esther with any recognition of social inferiority or dependence. She was received just like any

honoured guest. Madame Julia posed as a merry woman of the world, who had an old friend to entertain. She talked of balls and theatres, and of the friends she had met in the Row that morning. She promised Esther that they should drive together at five o'clock.

"We'll go into the Park before dinner; and I must try and persuade the Doctor to take us to the theatre afterwards. He is dreadfully difficult, my dear. When you are as old as I am, you will say that all men are. If you will, they won't; and if you won't—well, it depends upon their will! I am one of the miserables who have to obey. I often wonder if any one in this world is brave enough to contradict my brother Francisco!"

She did not know what these few simple words meant to the young girl who heard her. When that wooden door closed upon Esther yesterday with such a dismal clang, it had seemed like the door of some prison opening rarely to the world without. But if they were to drive in Hyde Park, if they were to go to the theatre, what possible cause had she for alarm, Esther asked herself. Could she not leave the house any day, go back if she would to London's solitude and the vortex of her misfortunes? She knew that she could. She was half afraid of her liberty. The remembrance of that garret was like that of some prison cell from which a friendly hand had delivered her. She prayed God that she might never go back there.

"We will meet at lunch, my dear," Julia con-



turned, when breakfast was done, and the last of the long letters had been twice read. "You must go to my brother this morning and see if you cannot help him. He is waiting for you in the laboratory. If you do not feel equal to it, please tell me so, and it shall be another day. But I am sure he would be very glad if you went this morning."

Esther said at once that she would be delighted to go. She had come to the house to make herself useful, and her habits of industry did not brook delay. To this Julia answered that her brother would be well pleased; and waiting only to gather up her untidy letters, she conducted Esther at once across the quadrangle, and they stood at the door of the laboratory. Esther has confessed in later years that this morning of waiting at the Doctor's door was one she would never forget to her life's end. Hitherto, she had been unable to imagine, in any way, the services which Doctor Xavier claimed of her. That they were of a common kind, the house and its appointments forbade her to believe. If they were secretarial duties, nothing would have been easier than to say so at the first interview; but deeper matters were hinted at, and now they were to be made known. Esther trembled in spite of herself when she entered that strange room. She knew from the first that it was a clever man's holy of holies; but the reality surpassed her imagination.

Let us follow her to a vast apartment, windowless but gloriously lighted, though the lamps which illumined it were invisible. A mellow

radiance, white and pleasing, flowed down through a frieze of crystal, fantastically cut into shapes like those of fabulous diamonds. Hangings of gold-green silk fell in many folds and hid the panelled walls behind them. The oddest statues, bizarre, fantastic, sometimes horrible, figures brought from the distant East, brazen gods from Burmah, the finer work of European artists, filled the corners and decorated the ledge between the frieze. Of the common appurtenances of a scientist few were visible. A microscope stood by the Doctor's table. In an alcove, to which a flight of steps led up, a dome-shaped roof covered a great telescope and its machinery. There were Eastern lamps finely wrought in silver, whose wicks floated in baths of perfumed oil. An immense circular mirror, swinging upon a bright steel chain, stood close to the writing-table, and Esther perceived near by it that which looked like a magic lantern of unusual size. The carpet was green in tint and very soft to the tread; the chairs matched it, large and luxurious and inviting sleep. The writing-table was Chinese, oddly carved, but singularly beautiful. Esther noticed in one of the corners a bent figure, emblematical of life; and this appeared to be falling downwards to the ground with a hand outstretched to mark the hours upon a silver disc. This she thought to be a clock, and she was not mistaken. Doctor Xavier himself seemed amused at the impression which his study made upon her.

"Yes," he said, anticipating her question, "I tell the time by that. When the figure droops

and sleeps, my day's work is done. It reminds me that I am human, and that if I ask of my humanity too much, I shall fall as that inanimate thing; but, unlike it, shall not rise again. Come, Miss Venn, that's not a bad lesson to begin with. Please to sit in that armchair and think of it a moment. I have a letter to write."

Esther sat down in the chair without saying a word. The room did not invite loud words. Even Madame Julia scarcely dared to venture there; she stood with one hand upon the knob of the door until her brother had spoken. Then she nodded encouragingly to Esther and withdrew. For many minutes doctor and patient might have been in ignorance of each other's presence. The silence at length was broken by the Spaniard, who turned suddenly in his chair and asked a question.

"Well," he said, "I find an exemplary patient. She is full of curiosity and she does not say a word. She sees that this is a very strange room and is too polite to remark it. Is not that so, Miss Venn? You are saying that it is an uncomfortable place?"

"I was thinking it," replied Esther frankly; "it is not uncomfortable, but peculiar."

"Exactly, peculiar. The abode of a man who does not like the sunlight. Yes, I see that you are concerned about my windows. I shut out the day—why? Because the day annoys me."

He cast a pen aside, and rising began to pace the room with his hands behind his back, the figure of a master introducing himself to his

pupil. Esther was delighted to listen. Her desire to know became almost impatience.

"Yes," he went on, "I am a peculiar person, Miss Venn, principally because I shun my fellows. Imagine a case! I have an abstruse subject. I believe that I am on the threshold of some discovery which will be helpful to my fellow-men. For the time being I live in the heavens. Then a gardener crosses my lawn, supposing there are windows, and I ask myself why he is going home to dinner at half-past eleven o'clock. Bathos, you say? I admit it. Unless we go into the desert, we cannot escape it. Some day, if you are willing, we will go there together; but it will be of your free consent, not upon compulsion."

He threw himself into one of the great arm-chairs near to the sofa upon which she was sitting, and stared at her in a way that she could have resented from any other. For the first time now she could analyse his features and form her own ideas of his age and character. She said that he would be nearing his fortieth year. Not a single vein of grey could be detected in the thick black hair which fell in natural curls about his well-shaped head. His skin was clear and fresh, almost like a boy's. The wonderful eyes did not impress her less than when she had first looked into them. In any assembly of men, she thought, Doctor Xavier would have been a commanding presence, both by right of intellect and natural gifts. Power the face suggested and with power the will to command obedience and to ensure it, the right to lead other men and to enjoy their

confidence. Esther was not afraid to return the glance of such a man, she never doubted him. At the same time she did not believe that he could wholly win a woman's affection.

"I shall be very glad to help you, Doctor Xavier, if I can," she began, determined to bring him to the point. "Will you please to tell me exactly what I am to do for you? I think it would be better to begin that way."

He turned in his chair and rested his chin upon his elbow.

"Yes," he said, "that is necessary. Let me be as brief. You are here to assist me with scientific experiments, Miss Venn; to benefit by them, I hope."

Esther's heart quickened a little when she heard these ominous words. Scientific experiments might mean so much. Her experience suggested to her that they could not be unattended with danger.

"I am quite ignorant of science," she said, after a pause. "If there is anything that I can do—write your letters or look after your books, I am sure I should do it very willingly. Is it help of that kind you want?"

The Doctor shook his head, he was amused at her offer.

"No," he said, "it is not help of that kind, Miss Venn. It is a service which, if we are successful, will make my name beloved by woman. It is a gift to humanity, I put it in a word, it is the gift of beauty."

Esther had heard many times in her life of

people who had claimed to make women beautiful for ever; but they were always spoken of as impostors, and many of them, she knew, had been justly sent to prison. While it was impossible to believe altogether that Doctor Xavier was such an one, nevertheless, she was greatly frightened by his confession, and this she did not attempt to hide from him.

"Oh, but Doctor," she said, with almost childish simplicity, "how could I help you in that?"

He had looked for just such an answer from such a subject; indeed, it seemed to please him, and with great gentleness he continued—

"Pray hear me to the end, Miss Venn, and permit me to ask another question. Is it wrong to take the cripple and to give him limbs? Is it wrong to graft a flower that you may make it more beautiful? Is it wrong to bring the glory of the heavens nearer to us that we may know something of the heavenly truths? Is all the quest of the beautiful in art and literature and music a crime? Am I wrong at this moment when I hold in yonder flask a remedy for one of the most awful diseases to which humanity is a victim? Shall I hesitate to cure the leper because in health he will be less repulsive? Ah, no; you will never say that! Like all young people, your judgments are impulsive, and the argument comes afterwards. At this moment you are telling yourself that I am a common quack who would sell a powder or a paint to a credulous public. It is the poorest compliment you could pay me; but your

young experience is sufficient apology. Understand that if you decide to be my fellow-worker, it must be of your own free will and not upon compulsion. I am a servant of science and I would make disciples. If I attempt to do something which no scientist has done before, it will not be as a charlatan but as pioneer. The simile of the grafted flower is the simplest that I can put before you. I would add to Nature's gifts; but I would add naturally. The beauty that I can win from the light and the water and the earth is to be won by a natural law which I shall make known in due course to other students. In my operating room I believe there are profound secrets. When you have thought it over, you shall tell me if you wish to master them with me."

Esther's face blanched when she heard the words "operating room"; for it suggested to her the stone floors and the dreaded tables which she had once seen in a hospital. She but half realised the logical sequence of the Doctor's argument, and the impression that what he proposed was forbidden still troubled her.

"I will think it over willingly," she said. "I fear I am very stupid, Doctor. But then, you see, never thought very much about my appearance. Do you really believe it is possible to make a woman beautiful by natural means?"

"I believe it is so, I am not sure. You are very plain with me, and I will try to be no less honest. Twice already I have failed in my experiment. You say, perhaps, that I have no right, therefore, to continue. If I believed that

the failure was my own and not that of the patient, I should accept your view. But I do nothing of the kind. I have failed because those who worked with me could not think as I think, could not surrender themselves wholly to the ideas which I followed. From the first they were governed by vulgar desires; they wished money, place, love; mentally they opposed themselves to the physical law. With such subjects I could do nothing. She whom I choose must be one apart from the world, for the time being, at any rate. She must be willing to live the simplest life. She must see beauty in all things about her. She must regard herself as the apostle of the creed which, in due course, will be joyfully accepted by the world. She must be kind and gentle, lifting her eyes to the heavens, desiring to see the greater glories beyond. She will be no servant of pride or self-conceit; she will know that she is but the instrument of this message. Her confidence will be absolute; she will regard me as a brother who wishes her happiness. She will let me carry all her burdens in distress—if that were possible beneath my roof—she will come to me, and I shall share her most troubling doubts. She will be honoured in this house and make it her home. Miss Venn, may I say this of you?"

Esther clasped her hands upon her knees, and regarded the Doctor with a troubled look. The plain truth was that while his words should have satisfied her just doubts, that which she had seen—and especially the face at the window—were present in her mind to perplex and distract her.



Nothing that the Doctor had proposed, she thought, might not be undertaken by an honest girl; but he had spoken of failure. Was it possible that the face she had seen from the garden was to be connected with this!

"I should be very sorry to appear ungrateful," she exclaimed suddenly; "but I really do not know what to say. I am a little frightened, Doctor, and I cannot help it. You said something to me about those who helped you before. Would it be very dreadful to fail?"

He divined her difficulty instantly. She has seen something in the house, he thought. He knew that it made it more difficult.

"Ah," he said, "I put it clumsily. I talk of operating rooms, and you think of a hospital. I speak of failure, and you imagine personal suffering—perhaps illness and disease. See how a man who desires to be frank may misrepresent himself. You believe that I am asking much—courage to face dreadful things, penalties, distress. Let me here and now assure you, as I am a man of honour, that none of these things exist. If I fail, you will remain with me if you wish, or go to your friends, the same gentle young lady that I have found you. Others have not done so, I admit; but their own follies were responsible for their misfortunes. They would not submit, and they suffered for it. Science, Miss Venn, is not to be trifled with. She demands all or nothing. Those who have assisted me would have taken the middle way. For the time being they are punished; but the punishment will pass, and as

they came to me, so, at length, will they go, neither better nor wiser. For you, I fear no such failure. Once your mind is made up, you will succeed. I am as sure of it as I am of myself."

He bent toward her and appeared to exert all that indomitable power of his will which few were able to resist. Esther decided, she knew not why, that this man would never harm her. He compelled her already in some measure to share his own enthusiasm. The quest of beautiful things, the right enjoyment of God's gifts could never, she thought, be wrong. And yet she had so much to ask him. She was convinced that she could never quite express her doubts.

"I wish I could believe in myself as you believe in me," she confessed at last. "It is all so new, so strange. I would like to say 'yes,' but all sorts of silly things prevent me. You see, Doctor, I have not the least idea what you really want me to do. How can I help your experiments? I have no knowledge except the little I have got from my father's books: it would seem childish to you. If I were clever, it might be otherwise. I should be so frightened of my stupidity; perhaps it would spoil everything."

He laughed at this frank avowal, believing that he had won her.

"When the flowers bud in the suns of May," he asked, "what cleverness of theirs helps them? When the sky at sunset is aflame with a golden arc, is it Nature's gift or man's accomplishment? You can help me by submission, Miss Venn; you can help me by doing nothing. Come, I will show

you the operating room ; it will frighten you very much, but afterwards you will be braver."

He crossed the room, and drawing a curtain back disclosed a panelled door of which he held the key already in his hand. Esther had started up at the words, "operating room," for she half believed that it would justify her evil anticipation, while, in the same breath, she could tell herself that she was silly to be afraid. The Doctor, perceiving her hesitation, threw the door wide open and bade her enter.

"Come," he said, "it is not so very dreadful. I am sure your courage will be equal to it."

Something in his tone reassured her, and, calling upon her courage, she went over and stood at his side. Ah, that dreadful theatre ! It was smothered in Gloire-de-Dijon roses from floor to ceiling. Esther's wildest dream could not have surpassed the surprise of it. A fragrant perfume, rich and pungent, came to her through the open door, and would have been overpowering but for a delicious spray, like a shower of sweet rain, absorbed by the air almost before the marble fountain cast it out. Gentle breezes of the summer day stirred amid those gold-white leaves, and were sucked in by the silent fans. Long windows, giving upon the sheltered lawns, permitted a vista of tree and flower and bush, like a scene remote from men in a forest's heart. Indeed, a wizard's hand might have created this picture for a fable of the splendid ages. Esther could but stand entranced, fearing to set foot upon that carpet of flowers or to disturb the

perfect beauty of that chamber of roses. It was not real, it could not be, she thought; while the Doctor, in his turn, did not take his eyes from her. Surprise and delight were written upon her astonished eyes. She had a young girl's imagination, and could people this quaint retreat with the figures of a forgotten dreamland. When the Doctor told her that the room was her own, nothing could keep back her cry of delight.

"My own room—mine!" she said.

He took her hand and led her into it.

"Your own—to be the mistress of it; to come and go when you will, sometimes, perhaps, to invite others; but your own, first and foremost. Let me see you take possession of it. Come, this sofa is just the place to think out a difficulty."

He led her across the room to an ivory sofa, which was but a shell smothered in roses to such a depth that, when Esther sat, she appeared to sink in a very bed of leaves. Her quick eyes were already examining every nook and cranny of this new and rare possession. The walls, she saw, were paperless, but wreaths of the yellow roses hid their nakedness. There was no carpet but that of the glorious flowers. A table of jasper, in the centre of the room, carried a huge bouquet of the sweetest blooms. By her side stood an immense lamp of silver, so placed that the light of it must fall upon the sleeper's face. The marble of the fountain, which played in an alcove near the window, was white as snow, unblemished in its purity. A hanging book-rack swung from a silver chain, so close to Esther's hand that she

could take a book from it without rising. A cottage piano in satin-wood, inlaid and richly painted, faced her when she entered. A flagon of the clearest crystal had been filled with yellow wine; a goblet stood near it upon its little table. Except for the door to the Doctor's study, and the long French windows which gave upon the lawn, Esther could detect no other entrance to the room. The laburnum trees by the wall and the bushes round about forbade her to see that side of the house wherein the living rooms were built. She might have been in the heart of a garden a hundred miles from any city. Birds from many countries hopped from wreath to wreath of the roses above her, and showed no fear at her presence. The murmur of water falling was restful to the ear and like a lullaby. The Doctor did not fail to observe its effect upon her.

"This is your room," he repeated, "and you will be the mistress of it. I see that you would like to be alone and to think of all I have said to you. The morning is the friend of clear thought, Miss Venn; to-night at dinner you shall give me your answer—yes or no."

He quitted the room, closing the door sharply behind him. Esther was left alone to hear the splash of the fountain in the marble basin, the twittering of the birds in the silent garden.

## CHAPTER VI

AT five o'clock upon the same afternoon Julia, remembering her promise, drove out with Esther in a pretty victoria drawn by two roan horses, and as they went the loquacious creature had a hundred things to talk of. Scarcely had the gates closed behind them than she confessed that she had seen her brother and had been delighted to hear of Esther's acquiescence in his plans. Of this, she said, she had been sure from the first.

"I knew it, my dear—I knew you would never be so silly as to throw away such a golden opportunity. Francis believes that he can make you the most beautiful woman in the world. He is not the man to deceive himself. What he says he can do, he will do; and just think how happy your consent makes him. We are to be more than friends now; we are to be sisters. I shall call you Esther, and you will call me Julia. There will be so much to do between this and the end of the season, and we sha'n't have a minute to spare. Oh, my dear child, just think of the gowns you must buy! Here's Homburg not a month off, and after Homburg our shooting party at Douvaine, and then the Villa Cara for the winter;

and after that—who knows, it may even be my own dear Spain and our palace at Cadi. And you must have gowns for all of them—oh, the joy of it, to begin with nothing! And I have such a wardrobe full that I could clothe a city! I envy you!”

Esther was a little surprised that her consent to the Doctor's proposal should thus be taken for granted, for she had not said a word that would imply consent; and, indeed, her answer was still to be made. She judged, however, that it was not the time to speak of it, and, avoiding the subject, she endeavoured to question her companion for her own enlightenment.

“I am sure that Doctor Xavier is both clever and kind,” she said, in a winningly simple way. “What I fear, dear Julia, is whether one is right to do as he wishes. I have always been taught to be afraid of vanity; and, indeed, I am very happy as I am. Even if your brother succeeded in his experiments, surely I am not the best subject he could choose.”

Julia took her hand in her own and drew her close, as though some new bond of love already united them.

“Nonsense, nonsense!” she protested. “Whatever my brother does is for the good of humanity. Don't you see, you dear little child, how much happiness would come into the world if women could be made more beautiful? And you—you are the sweetest subject a man could have! We shall be so proud of you, Esther; you will always be remembered as the brave girl who did this

service for your sisters. Ah, my dear, if it is wrong to desire beautiful things, then we are very wicked people! But I shall never believe it; I shall always say that Francisco Xavier is a leader among men."

Esther did not quite trust this ready woman of the world, believing her shallow and possibly a little fickle; but the arguments themselves were very plausible, and, indeed, a similar process of reasoning had galled her that day. After all, she said, if it were really with scientific truths that the Doctor wished to experiment, and she would suffer no harm because of them, there was no good cause why her consent should be withheld. A lover of compromise always, it occurred to Esther that she might give a conditional answer, keeping to herself the right to withdraw it if anything were done of which her woman's instinct might be ashamed. In plain words, she determined to tell the Doctor that she would try to serve him, but that the right must remain to her to say "no" when his experiments offended her. Nevertheless she was not prepared to confess as much to Julia, and she took refuge from the argument in silence.

There had been a few light showers earlier in the day, but a delicious fragrance of the later afternoon accounted for a splendid park and for a very cavalcade of open carriages. London's gaieties had almost exhausted themselves in these later days of July; people were glad to drive in the fresh air, and so to make their plans for Homburg or the Solent. Esther used to tru-



the gravel paths by the Achilles statue when first she came to London, and now she remembered how she had admired the rich equipages and the wonderful gowns of the great women who looked down upon her. The change which a day had brought into her life was almost beyond her comprehension. Here she sat dressed as those others whose names were on every tongue. She, too, could now look down upon many a poor creature who welcomed the shelter of her robes because she dreaded the discovery of her wish sunshine. The carriage in which she now rode had come from Paris, and had sent many an order to its fashionable builder. The gowns had cost Doctor Xavier seven hundred guineas. Esther observed that her companion was everywhere recognised and saluted. Women stared after the carriage a little enviously; the men regarded it with obvious favour. Esther was glad that she was not compelled to speak to any of these people. She was greatly afraid that when the carriage stopped by Rotten Row some chattering woman would be presented to her, and, perhaps, wish to know her story. None troubled them, however, for quite a long time, and while Julia's eyes were everywhere, and she nodded continually to her friends and named them for this great person or that, Esther was very willing to be a faithful listener, and to hide herself from observation, if that were possible. She had, indeed, just congratulated herself that they would escape with the merest recognition, when she observed her companion flush suddenly, whether with surprise

or pleasure she could not tell; and immediately afterwards a young man, dressed as other idlers about him, but remarkable even in their company, stepped up to the carriage and held out his hand like one well pleased at an unexpected recognition.

"Mademoiselle Julia!" he cried, "is it really Mademoiselle Julia?"

Julia had turned away for a moment, as though she did not wish to be seen, but when the young man thus addressed her, she turned toward him, and answering in French, she said—"Oh, your Highness!—can it really be you in London?"

The new-comer laughed good-humouredly, and, leaning upon the dashboard of the carriage, he fixed his eyes not upon Julia, but upon Esther by her side. She, on her part, tried to avoid his glance and to appear preoccupied; but something in the face attracted her, and she discovered herself, to her annoyance, staring at him continually.

"Yes," he went on, still in French, but so slowly that she could understand him without difficulty, "yes, I am in London, mademoiselle. You, perhaps, will know the reason why."

Julia did not respond immediately to this appeal. She appeared to be much distressed, and anxious to terminate the interview.

"I do not know the reason, Prince," she protested, and then she added, "I am sure my brother is no wiser."

The young man's face clouded at the words, and he could not conceal the embarrassment which her answer put upon him.

"I thought your brother would have written

before," he continued, almost reproachfully; "but there is some explanation, no doubt. If the Doctor would care to make it to me, I am at Claridge's Hotel. Please take my message to him, mademoiselle; it would be in three words—'The Prince regrets.' Can you remember that—'The Prince regrets'?"

Julia's face regained some of its lost colour and she appeared to win back her confidence.

"You cannot regret as he regrets, Highness. I am afraid it is all too late now—the past has made the future. But I shall deliver the message—oh, yes, it would be just to you both."

She drew herself up with a dignity which astonished Esther not a little; while the Prince—for thus he had been addressed—hesitating for a few minutes, turned to Esther at last and said—

"Pray present me to your charming companion."

Julia had forgotten even that she had a companion, and she started at the mention of her name.

"How rude of me—how very rude! Of course, I will present her. This is my friend, Miss Venn—Esther dear, His Highness, the Prince of Cadi."

Esther had never been so troubled in all her life. She did not know what to say, what to do. She was not sure whether she should offer her hand or withhold it. Very wisely therefore, she said nothing, and the Prince, after a few commonplace remarks, bowed and withdrew. Julia

at once ordered the coachman to return, and they drove away rapidly towards Regent's Park. It was evident to Esther that her friend was greatly troubled. The meeting had quite upset her. She admitted as much by and by.

"This will be very unpleasant news for the Doctor, my dear. He has dreaded something of this kind ever since he came to London. You must, like a good girl, just go away to your own room when I tell him. He and the Prince were old friends, child. They quarrelled a year ago; I have never known why, but I am sure my brother was not in the wrong. You can imagine how much it grieves him. I am trembling like a child at the thought of telling him."

Esther saw that it was true; and she was very glad when the carriage entered the drive of their house, and the doors once more closed upon her. The butler said that his master was in the study, and Julia went there at once; while Esther ran up to her own room, and finding *Mouton*, her dog, waiting wistfully by the window, she sat down in a low chair and took him upon her knees.

"Oh, my pet, what strange things are happening to us!" she said, in her childish philosophical way. "Where are we going to. *Mouton*—what's to become of us? Who are these people? Will they be our friends?—tell me, *Mouton*, tell me, tell me!"

The dog laid his paws upon her lap, and looked up into her face as only a dog can look. Across

the court Esther heard the sound of voices, but chiefly that of Francisco Xavier himself, now rising as in a hurricane of anger, anon dying away to tremulous silence. In the garden long shadows fell upon the closing blooms and the restless leaves. Esther's thoughts went hither, thither: now to the bower of roses which was her own to live and dream in if she willed: anon to the momentous choice she must make, and from that to the stranger who had spoken to her in the carriage. She had not seen many men in her uneventful life, but this one she thought she would remember, however long she lived. It was not a mere question of fine presence; he was so unlike any man she had ever known. His dignity of manner, the quiet gentle acts, his kind and thoughtful face remained firmly set in her memory. She knew she could repeat every word he had spoken. She saw him again with his elbow resting upon the dashboard, and his dark eyes searching her own, and that indefinable something which is the first link in the chain of a woman's affection. She hoped that it was not by any right of birth that he had thus earned a claim upon her memory. She did not think that it was. She knew that he would already have forgotten her, if, indeed, he ever gave her a second thought. And this she confessed to *Mouton* with just a little sadness.

"We are nothing, my dear—we have our bread to get, *Mouton*, and we must do our duty. Oh, help me, my pet, help me to do right!"

*Mouton* gave her an answer in a warm caress,

pressing his shaggy face close to her own. Together they watched the twilight fall; and thinking still, it came to Esther suddenly that if she remained in the house, she might see the Prince of Cadi again.

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## CHAPTER VII

DOCTOR XAVIER was not at the dinner table, nor did Julia offer any explanation of his absence. Esther imagined that she did not wish to speak of it before the servants, and in this she was right; for when coffee had been served in the white and gold boudoir, and the exceedingly lonesome-looking butler had withdrawn from the room, the loquacious Julia at once began to satisfy her curiosity.

"There's been a dreadful scene, my dear. I knew there would be. Francis believed that the Prince was in Madrid, and he is very angry with him for coming to London. He neglects his country, my dear, and it will end in ruin. I told you how they quarrelled; and I am dreadfully frightened that harm may come of it. If the Prince should call here, I dare not think what they would do. You must be his good angel, Esther; you must be kind to my brother now."

It was like the chapter of a romance to Esther, and she was surprised at the interest with which she found herself listening to this candid admission. That some mystery attended the presence

of the young Prince in London, had been evident to her from the beginning; and these fragments of the truth but whetted her appetite for more. She was ashamed to tell herself that her interest was in the man and not in his country, of which she knew nothing; but she was aware that this was the case, and she tried to hide it from Julia.

"You said that Doctor Xavier and the Prince were old friends, dear Julia," she answered presently. "Will they never be reconciled? I don't understand it, of course; but I always think that when people have quarrelled it is better for them to meet and speak to each other. I am sure that your brother would not bear animosity against any one."

Julia shook her head.

"The kindest of men are the slowest to forgive, Esther. My brother has suffered much at the Prince's hands; he has been patient—too patient—for years. I do not think he will ever forgive him. If he does, it will be because you ask him to."

The words astonished Esther more than she could say.

"Because I ask him, dear Julia! How can it concern me? Oh, I am sure that I should never ask him!"

"Never be sure of anything, child. I used to be sure of things a few years ago, but I am not so rash now. Francis is hoping so much in you. He would not hear me at all until I mentioned your name and told him how pleased I was that you were to stay with us. That made him for-



get his trouble. He will have something to work for now. He will not think of Spain all day."

She went on to say that science had always been the Doctor's recreation. Even when he had governed a kingdom he had given his leisure to scientific pursuits. Medicine owed him much; he had discovered many new drugs and employed them successfully. In the medicinal use of electricity he was a master. He hoped to confer many benefits upon the human race before he died; and he now gave his whole time to the work.

"We shall stay in London until the season is over—of course I would not leave before, dear—and then we shall go to Homburg and the mountains. I envy you who have never been to my own dear South! Here, in England, you do not know what sunshine is: it is cold and flat, and, oh, so dull! We live in the South; we are musicians, artists, singers; we gather flowers in the valleys and breathe on the hills. This London suffocates me. If it were not for my brother, I would go away to-morrow. But he admires your doctors. He says he can study here. The libraries help him. And now he has you—oh, my dear little Esther, I love you for saying 'yes'!"

Esther, in fact, had never said "yes" at all; but she was not courageous enough to disturb her friend's happiness, and she began to see that her own "yes" or "no" went for very little, and that these people already took her consent for granted. Indeed, when Doctor Xavier entered

the boudoir at a later hour, he at once crossed the room to her and thanked her for that which she had never promised.

"My sister has made me very glad to-night," he said, laying a hand upon Esther's shoulder and almost whispering the words. "I knew that I had found a little friend and comrade, but I wished her to tell me so. We shall begin our work to-morrow morning. I trust that you will never forget it, *camarade*."

Esther scarcely knew what reply to make to him. His face was unusually pale, and there were dark rings beneath his piercing eyes. She imagined that he had suffered much in the few hours which had passed since they returned to the house; but she had no heart to answer him unkindly. For that matter, her mind was already made up to remain in a house where so much kindness was shown her, and she permitted the Doctor to assume her consent, merely saying, "I trust not; indeed, I am quite confident of it. You will find me a willing pupil, Doctor Xavier. I could never forget what you have done for me."

"You will forget it at once," he said, protestingly. "It is my first command. The favour is on my side; it is I who should say, 'thank you.' We will discuss it no more. The piano is open—sing to me, little *camarade*; I like to hear your voice."

Esther went to the piano obediently; and while she sang she perceived that the Doctor sank back upon the sofa and closed his eyes like a man trying to win rest. Truth to tell, a little

weariness had fallen upon them all, and when eleven o'clock came, even Julia was ready for bed.

In spite of her new anxieties, and of the unknown future looming before her so mysteriously, Esther slept a dreamless sleep from which the sun of morning alone awoke her. Her first thought when she awoke was one of relief that no silly imaginings had troubled her sleep. The false moonlight must, after all, have been pure imagination. The Moor, whose face she thought to have seen at her door, was surely a creature of her fatigue and trouble. She dressed this morning with greater confidence; and when she opened her window, and the sunshine fell into the room, and the perfume of the roses floated upon the sweet breeze of the day, she confessed that it would be difficult to find so beautiful a home, or one in which a young girl might make herself so happy.

She dressed at leisure, knowing that she was in good time to-day. Her work would begin after breakfast, and her anxiety that there should be no delay had awakened her at an early hour. In the garden below gardeners were gathering the rose leaves and watering the lawns. Esther fell to wondering how many servants there were in the house, and was busy with her reckoning when some one knocked upon her door, and believing it to be the maid, she said, "Come in." To this invitation, however, no one responded, and when the knock was repeated, she crossed the room quickly and opened the door.

"Who is it?" she asked.

A voice answered her out of the darkened corridor—

"Señorita—the bath is ready."

She peered into the gloom, afraid to credit her senses. At the first glance she could only distinguish the long white robe and the piercing black eyes of a stranger; but, anon, the face took shape. She detected a brown skin and gleaming white teeth; and lower down, the long, bony hands of the Arab. Esther knew that she had seen this man before. His were the eyes which had watched her while she slept. She recognised all too clearly the oval face and the bronzed features—and she recognised them with a fear she dared not express. Indeed, her heart beat rapidly, and the room seemed to swim before her eyes when she said—

"What do you mean—what do you want with me?"

It were as though this silent, threatening figure devoured her with a glance. As she receded, the man advanced. Esther had never been so frightened in all her life.

"The bath is ready, señorita. I am Yussuf, His Excellency's servant. The girl breakfasts—I come to tell you. Please to follow me."

For a little while Esther neither moved nor spoke. Why had this man dared to enter her room last night, she was asking herself. Why had the Doctor permitted it? What reason could he give? She was angry, dazed, and not a little terrified. Her first idea was that she would quit

the house at once, fly from it as from an abode of danger which she had no right to face. Then her simple womanly logic came to her aid. Why should she not question the man?

"I have seen you before," she said. "You were here last night. Why did you take the liberty?"

The Moor showed a row of gleaming white teeth and smiled all over his sun-bronzed face. After all, he did not look a very dangerous person.

"Do not be afraid, señorita. I am a very old man. I have heap wife in Morocco. His Excellency wished you to sleep. Old Yussuf must obey. He lights the sleep-lamp. He makes the bath, señorita. Follow him and he will show you where."

It was an incoherent story, but Esther took heart at it. Certainly, this Moor was a very old man. Esther remembered the moonbeams which had fallen upon her while she slept. It would be natural, she thought, that Doctor Xavier should employ strange agents. And he would not employ one whom he could not trust. She determined to tell him the whole story directly they met.

"Is it Doctor Xavier's orders that I am to go to the bath now?" she asked, determined that the man should not find her afraid.

The Moor nodded and led the way down the corridor.

"Yes, yes, now," he said; "His Excellency wishes it. You are to go to the bath three times

every day. His Excellency's order. I will conduct you."

He had turned to the right at the end of the passage, and following another corridor he showed her a quarter of the house which she had not yet visited. She was still very much perplexed by all that had happened; but the new scenes to which she was introduced quickly put it out of her mind and occupied her interest. For the Moor had descended a flight of marble steps which brought them to a low-arched gate of bronze oddly decorated with figures of nymphs and centaurs. Upon this gate he knocked twice, and when some one unseen opened to him, he said—"Enter, señorita, if you please. They wait for you."

It was evident that he was to leave her here; and she confessed herself not unwilling to be relieved of his presence; indeed, she counted the bath in which she now found herself as not the least of the many surprises of that strange house. Esther at first believed it to be a Turkish bath, although one of unusual magnificence; for she had read accounts of these in her father's books, and had known women who had ventured into such a bath in her own city. Her curiosity was instantly awakened, and she found herself impatient to gratify it. A rotunda of considerable altitude, panelled entirely with white marble, lay just beyond the gates, and Esther observed with pleasure the clear cool water of a plunge bath stirred into gentle ripples by a murmuring spray, which fell from a Cupid's wings. A luxu-

rious couch, heaped up with cushions, offered rest to the bather; while little tables at its side were littered with books and ivory knick-knacks. The ceiling itself was dome-shaped and gilded; windows of rich stained glass permitted a changing light to fall upon the tessellated pavement. Facing the entrance, Esther observed a flight of steps leading from the frigidarium to a smaller apartment wherein water flowed in silver basins, and here were marble benches for the bathers with douches and other apparati. One of the attendants of the bath, quite a young girl dressed in a long blue wrapper, had received Esther at the bronze gates; and while she spoke English it was with some foreign accent which made her a little difficult to understand. There were others with her, young also and similarly attired; but they appeared to be Japanese, and Esther did not hear them speak. Her guide quickly intimated that which she wished her to do.

"We will have the drill first, mademoiselle, and then the vapour. The Doctor has prescribed this in your case. You will please to undress and put on your gown. Another day you can come straight to us from your bedroom. It is proper to rest as much as possible in the bath. You can ask me any questions; but please do not talk more than is necessary."

Esther undressed as she was instructed, and having put on a loose robe of muslin and felt slippers, such as are worn in Eastern baths, she followed the attendant down the stairs and through the lavatorium to a bright open room,

which served the purpose of the Doctor's gymnasium. The accessories of this were such as Esther had always associated with gymnastic exercises; but when she came to use them, she observed the difference. The Indian clubs, which the attendant now put into her hands, were provided with soft sponge-like grips, saturated with some liquid which had a pungent odour. Esther remembered the *Arabian Nights*, and how that a doctor had cured a king by such an old device as this. She did not, however, use the clubs with any less confidence; and when her body was in a glow, the attendant led her to a curious swing, wherein, seated in a wicker cradle with her feet resting upon a second bar, she was bidden to swing herself for a specified time. From this she passed to a fatiguing exercise, where light weights were lifted gradually from the floor and as slowly set down again. The grips of these also were found to be saturated with the same pungent liquid. These exercises continued at intervals for some twenty minutes; and when they were finished she was given a glass of milk with which some drug, whose taste she recognised, was mingled. Esther said that the same medicine, whatever it was, had been administered in one of the sweets at dinner yesterday. The flavour was not unpleasant, and the effect of it was to induce a slight sense of languor and the desire to rest. Just as at the mid-day meal she had been stimulated, so this morning and last night at dinner sleep had been invited. Indeed, the attendant at once led her from the gymnasium



to a low, vaulted mosque-like apartment upon which it gave, and here informed her that the bath was to begin.

"There are three processes, mademoiselle," she said. "first the vapour, then the massage, and then the electricity. Try to rest here, and to sleep if you can. The bath will do you a great deal of good. You will be very much refreshed afterwards."

She made a sign to one of her assistants, and instantly the room was filled by a soft vapour of steam, grateful to the lungs and pleasant to breathe. Esther reposed upon one of the long marble couches with a wooden pillow beneath her head, and she now folded her hands upon her breast, and inhaled the refreshing steam. The benefit of this was both immediate and remarkable. Esther had never known, she thought, what it was to fill the lungs to their utmost capacity with air that both soothed and stimulated her. She breathed for the very pleasure of the act, long, satisfying draughts which expanded her chest and sent the blood coursing swiftly through her veins. Her skin, at first harsh and dry, anon became soft and pleasingly moist. She experienced that pleasant content with all the world which follows rest properly employed. That any one should resent such treatment as this, or deem it to be empirical, never occurred to her for a moment. The Doctor had promised her that she should be the servant of science. She admitted that he was keeping his promise, and she knew already that she had to deal with a

master-mind. It was very still and silent in the room, and the serenity of mind with which she could view her past and the future she had chosen for herself astonished Esther. She fell wondering what success would mean. They had not called her pretty at home, paying her that poor compliment of saying that her face was "pleasing." She knew that she had unusually beautiful hair, and that her skin was naturally fair and soft; but she did not believe herself to be what the world would call "good-looking." Should the Doctor justify himself at all, her future might be greatly changed. Esther had always understood the power which beauty bestows upon a woman. She would have been untrue to her sex had she not wished very much in her heart that the Doctor might succeed. His experiments already interested her beyond her hopes. Her curiosity had been awakened, and she would have been very sorry to have drawn back.

The half of an hour passed in these silent meditations, and at the end of that time the attendant returned and invited her to go to the lavatorium. Here the Japanese girls were waiting, and they at once took possession of Esther; and placing her beneath a refreshing spray of luke-warm water, they began to massage her. Esther had not understood until that time what massage meant; but she quickly became aware of its beneficent results, and of the skill of the operators. Nimble fingers chafed every muscle of her body. Flasks of perfumed oils were opened and rubbed gently upon her skin. The face especially interested

those about her; and one of them, apparently chosen because of her greater cleverness, sat down at Esther's side, and bidding her shut her eyes, she entered upon the task like an artist who has a picture to make. For a full hour, at least the work went on. Esther did not fret at the delay, nor find the process tedious. Her body was now in a warm glow, like the body of one who has been engaged in active and healthy exercises. She felt stronger, capable of exertion and mentally alert. A second glass of the milk being administered to her, she was then led to that which her attendant called "the chamber of lights." Here electricity proved to be the agent of those experiments in which the Doctor had so greatly interested himself. Esther perceived that the walls of this room were toned to a delicate shade of green. A single armchair, placed in the centre of the apartment, had for its neighbour that which looked like a giant magic lantern. From a switch-board attached to one of the walls, many electric wires fed little lamps in shape like telescopes. All the attendants grouped themselves about Esther when she entered this room, and began to fix the lamps on iron stands and to focus their rays upon her. Presently she sat in a very bath of light. Beams of intense brightness, like those from miniature searchlights, warmed her flesh and seemed to pierce her through. The exquisite colours which dazzled the eyes were in themselves a pleasure to behold. Esther thought that all the hues of the spectrum were shown to her while she sat there. Now golden. now deep

purple, anon a radiant blue, bewitching shadows of pink, the whole gamut of the beauty of colour revealed itself to her. When her eyes were dazzled by the light they covered her head with a silken veil, and so played with the beams upon her neck and arms. She was conscious of great warmth, but never of a temperature that was hurtful. A stimulating current of electricity coursed through her body and acted upon every organ. Mentally, the effect was bewildering in its swiftness. Esther felt that she could face any peril, dare any venture by the help of that unseen force which now animated her. Her natural timid and retiring disposition gave place to a courage and self-reliance most welcome to her. And this was the remarkable thing, that these attributes did not at once pass away when the bath was finished. Upstairs in the frigidarium, the young girls dressed her anew in a long morning gown from Paris. They gathered up her hair, and bound it with a garland of flowers. A jewelled brooch, with the word "remerciments" set in brilliants, she received without question, although she knew it was the Doctor's morning gift to her. By what process of reasoning it came about, she could not say; but she began to have a great delight in the very risks of those experiments. The luxury, the exhilaration of it all cast a spell for good or ill upon her. The long mirror showed her a face she never would have known. She began to say that Doctor Xavier might yet make good his words, and confer upon her a gift whose price she did not dare to estimate.

In the frigidarium she rested for a full hour. It was twelve o'clock when they opened the bronze gates and told her that the task was over. She had not breakfasted, and was very hungry; and she heard with pleasure her attendant's final instructions.

"Breakfast is served in your own room, mademoiselle. The rest of the day is your own. Doctor Xavier is away to-day—you are your own mistress."

Esther crossed the sunny garden, scarcely knowing if she were awake or dreaming. No one appeared, and the absence both of the Doctor and the loquacious Julia confirmed the attendant's words. In her own little room she found a harvest of roses no less rich than of yesterday. The fountain still murmured and cast a refreshing spray upon the cooling breezes. But more welcome still was the breakfast set out on its snowy cloth—the golden wine, the luscious fruit, the snow-white bread. Esther sat at the table and began to eat with healthy appetite. The scene, perhaps, was still unreal to her, the change beyond her imagination. She would have been entirely happy in it, and no longer regretted the consent she had given, but for that silent voice which still would ask, "Must no price be paid; is there indeed no secret?"

She knew not; she knew nothing—how could she?—of the terrible days before her.

## CHAPTER VIII

DOCTOR XAVIER did not return to his house for fifteen days, nor was there any word from him. Such news as Esther received she found upon the morning of the second day in a closely written letter from the loquacious Julia. It was a rambling epistle, written in the characteristically pointed hand of the foreigner, and Esther blessed the education which had led her in Exeter City to master the amazing caligraphy of Deans and Chapters. She read the letter twice, and even then was scarcely enlightened. Julia spoke of grave events, which, for the moment, had compelled her to leave London. Her brother, she said, was greatly occupied by the affairs of his own country. She had hoped that he had done with them for ever; but new circumstances had arisen, and they claimed his attention. For herself she was at Dinard, playing a little, bathing a little, flirting a little.

"Bear with me patiently, my dear Esther," she went on, "when I tell you that I have actually had an offer of marriage. He is fifty-two and not ashamed of his age. He calls himself the Comte de Magnac-Lavat, and he is quite bald. It was

pathetic to refuse him ; but, my dear, a husband for Julia, the sister of Francisco Xavier ! Try to imagine her adding up accounts and crying about the halfpennies—of which (be gentle to her, Miss Prudence) she has lost a large number at a horrid game they call *petits chevaux*."

Another page spoke of Esther's comfort and of her natural surprise at the absence of her hostess. Julia appeared to be very anxious to set her at her ease. "You really must not be dull while we are away," she said. "The house is Liberty Hall, and you are to regard it as your own. I have told the coachman that you will require the horses ; and when Francis returns I am sure he will take you to the theatre. I shall try to be in London by the end of July and then we will be able to go to the lakes together. Oh, these northern winds, how they make me shiver ! It will be different in Switzerland, *chère amie*. I shall have so much to show you there, and it will be nothing but sunshine and flowers. So *à bientôt, ma petite*—with much love from your friend and sister, Julia de Montalvan.

Esther read the letter with eager interest, and particularly the signature, which was new to her. She had understood the Doctor's name to be simply Xavier—which, indeed, was but one of his Christian names commonly employed by him when travelling. But now she remembered again that he was a Spaniard by birth and probably the descendant of some old Spanish family of note. In this respect Julia's letter was not unsatisfactory. There was so much to do, so many

surprises awaited her daily in that house of wonders, that she grasped at any straw of argument which would permit her to remain there with confidence. Each day, in the early morning, she went to the bath as she had been ordered. New marvels, new wonders of the water and the lamps were revealed to her upon each succeeding visit. From day to day the physical exercises developed and the curriculum was varied. Esther lived in a dreamland of flowers and light. They taught her to swim and float upon the limpid water; it appeared to be their object to familiarise her with beautiful scenes and beautiful objects. In her own room the picture was ever changing. She discovered fresh blooms there every day. The food that she ate was delicious and wisely chosen. She would roam for hours in the rose garden and enjoy the dreamy silence of those verdant walks. Rest more absolute could not have been forced upon any human being. She had no cares save those of her imagination. The days came and went as precious moments of the glorious summer time. She did not care to venture into the turmoil of the city, though often invited by the servants who waited upon her to do so. Sometimes she would catch a glimpse of old Yussuf, the Moor, watching her from an angle of the courtyard or lurking in the shadow of the trees. She was not afraid of this man, but his presence, none the less, would cause her to start and to remember the circumstances under which she had first seen his evil face. But in spite of him she spent the long afternoons in a cushioned



hammock with books to her hand and the note of the singing bird in her ears. Once or twice London and its unadorned reality stood before her in the presence of Billy, the page. She liked Billy, and invariably called him to her side; but *Mouton*, the poodle, with a finer taste, used to growl at him and show forbidding teeth.

"What do you do in this house, Billy—what is your work?" she asked him one day as he stood biting his nails on the grass before her. Billy answered without hesitation—

"Oh, I bowls at 'em in the park. Me and Dick goes up to the pitch every night except when it's boot-blackening!"

Esther knew something of cricket and she tried to interest Billy.

"What's your average, Billy; how many runs can you make?" she asked him.

Billy scratched his head.

"I ought to make lots, but I don't make none," he said. "Dick, he bowls curly ones. I put the ball in my pocket larst night and come 'ome. He thought it was lost—but it wasn't, you see! Fine times, miss, he had, 'unting of it among the babies!"

"Oh, but that wasn't honest, Billy. You'll never make a cricketer if you play like that! Does the Doctor approve of your being out so much?"

"Don't know, miss; never ask him. You see, I'd have to go to foreign countries to do that. Why, he isn't here—no, not three months a year!"

"Then who takes care of the house when he's away?"

"Why, old Fatty—Spencer, the butler."

"And is there no one here but him?"

"Well, there was the young women—but they got the sack! My eye! they did carry on!"

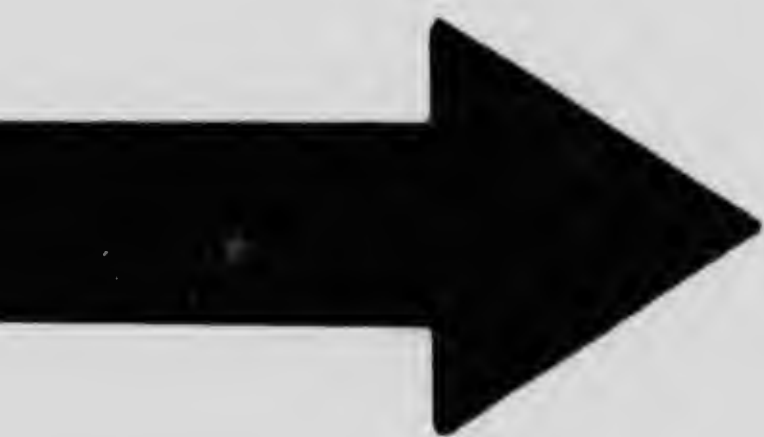
"What young women are you speaking of, Billy; who were they?"

Billy would have answered, perhaps, but catching sight of the Moor, who was crossing the lawn, he darted away suddenly and left Esther's curiosity ungratified. When she came to think of it she imagined that she had seen the face of one of these girls at the window on the day of her arrival. It did not alarm Esther so much when she remembered that Doctor Xavier had spoken of previous experiments and of his failure. She quite understood that disposition and the will to succeed must be given to experiments. The others, he said, had destroyed his work by their own obstinacy. Esther determined that, in her own case, no such charge should be made. Day by day now her interest in this momentous undertaking increased. Was it possible, was it right, she would ask herself, that a woman should desire such success or labour for it? And against this she would pit the Doctor's argument and remember that everything which contributed to the happiness of humanity contributed also to its beauty. The laws of health, upon which later day civilisation insisted, the unceasing battle with disease and death, what were they but instruments to make mankind more beautiful? Sometimes she would steal to the mirror and look at herself furtively as though afraid of her own

temerity. The face that she beheld there won some new gift of health and prettiness every day. Colour, she said, had returned to her cheeks. Her eyes were wonderfully bright. She had a clearness of skin which was in itself a dower of great price. Often when the vision of the glass was accidental she would start back from it as from a revelation of beauty which almost bewitched her. Was this the Esther she had known? By what miracle had such a change come about? Was it merely that of luxury and dress? Esther could not believe that it was wholly so. The gowns with which the Doctor's liberality had supplied her were, indeed, the masterpieces of a French costumier's art. From time to time in the privacy of her bedchamber she would put on some perfect *mélange* of silk and chiffon; and, amazed and fearful, would ask herself if any of those who had once known her would say that this was the old Esther. Nevertheless, the question "why" was asked vainly. Why had she been chosen? For what purpose? Ah, if she could but have answered that!

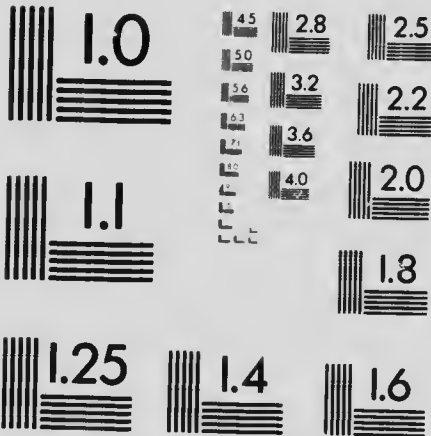
We have said that fifteen days passed and found Doctor Xavier still absent. It was upon the fifteenth night that Esther heard of his return, and heard of it in a way that at once startled and perplexed her. It had been a wet afternoon, with a heavy thunderstorm about six o'clock. The close air and great heat resulted in such a nervous headache as the old time used to give her, and Esther went to bed at an early hour, and for a





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little while slept restfully. When she awoke, she thought it must be the middle of the night, for the moon shone full and golden, and the beams revealed the arbour of the garden like a glen at a forest's heart. Esther would have slept again, and was dozing off, when she heard a murmur of distant voices like those of monks chanting an office. Anon, a wild haunting melody arose, fitful and weird; and to this there succeeded a harsh guttural intonation, which again gave place to the sweeter music. Esther, believing that Doctor Xavier was still away, and that none but the servants remained in the house, started up when first she heard the singing, and sat, amazed, in her bed until the last wild chord had floated away upon the still night air. Anxious to learn who the singers were, she put on her dressing-gown, and, going to her bedroom window, she opened it very quietly and peered thence into the garden. For many minutes neither sight nor sound rewarded her. The bricked-up windows of the Doctor's study forbade her to ascertain whether he occupied it or no. Her own little room, near to it, had the windows shut and the blinds drawn. Esther could not detect a light anywhere in the house. She could hear no voices. She would have returned to her bed, baffled by the mystery, but for a sudden cry which arose upon the far side of the quadrangle, and was answered by a low guttural exclamation, and then by the heavy thud of a falling body. Esther did not at once understand the meaning of this, nor could she account for the presence of strangers in the

garden. She imagined that the servants would be awakened presently and the alarm be raised; but when no one appeared and no voice was raised, her growing dread of some veiled mystery became a fear surpassing words. She did not dare to move from the window; she feared that some one would detect her there and resent her presence. Anon, she thought that she observed figures moving among the trees, and, then, as the greater surprise, she beheld Yussuf, the Moor, carrying a candle, which his long bony hand sheltered from the wind. Her curiosity now was raised to the highest pitch. She remarked that the Moor crossed the quadrangle to that corner of the garden whence the cry had come. Another, and he a stranger, followed at Yussuf's heels and carried a second silver candlestick; and, together, the men stooped at last as though over some object which lay hidden by the trees. In this supreme moment Esther first learned the truth. A man had been struck down in the garden, she said; he was dying, perhaps dead. She could see the Moor staunching a wound with a handkerchief that fluttered in the breeze. Fascinated, although her heart beat wildly, and her fear remained unabated, she did not move from the window. It was her ardent hope that Doctor Xavier might be in the house; and when she heard his voice, a great weight seemed to be lifted from her mind. What could have happened, she asked. She judged that it must be something terrible.

Many minutes passed in this intolerable



suspense. She perceived figures moving to and fro between the trees and anxious messengers running from the house to the garden and back again. No one appeared to accuse another or to defend himself. But once did Esther identify Doctor Xavier; and this was at the moment when the Moor lifted a candle and the whole picture stood out like a vignette in the darkness. In that instant the scene was fully revealed. A man lay upon the grass and four stood about him. Esther observed that he was in evening dress; and that they had torn his shirt open to staunch a wound in his side. The Doctor himself held a glass in his hand, and put it from time to time to the prone man's lips. At a little distance apart the moon's beams discovered another actor in this grim drama. He appeared to be a foreigner, and a loose Spanish cloak covered him to the knees. In defiant attitude he leaned against one of the silver birches, as though entirely unconcerned at that which was passing so near to him. Anon, he approached the kneeling figures, and Esther heard him asking questions. This man, she imagined, had struck the blow. The dreadful mystery of it all appalled her. What was this house in which such things were done? Why had she entered it? In despair of any answer she turned away at last and lay shivering upon her bed. The reaction was intense. She was punished, she thought, for her vain ambitions. She determined, if it were possible, to quit the house tomorrow. And then, she heard her own name. The Doctor called her from the lawn beneath her

window. She answered him at once, for she was glad to hear his voice.

"What is it—who is there?"

"It is I, Esther. Please dress and come down to me. I see you cannot sleep—it is imprudent to stand at the window after rain."

She knew, then, that she had not escaped detection; and, greatly hoping that he would be able to calm her shattered nerve and to offer her some reassuring explanation, Esther dressed herself quickly and went down into the hall. It was with no little hesitation that she stood upon the threshold of a scene of which every detail still haunted her. She feared that she would never have the courage to approach that place of death or even to look upon it collectedly. When, at length, she summoned her courage to her and opened the long window giving upon the lawn, she discovered that the Doctor was alone and that the others had vanished. Not a trace remained of deed or actors. Doctor Xavier himself smoked a cigar with apparent nonchalance.

"Come," he said, approaching her directly, "I wish to talk to you. It shall be in your own room, Esther. The night air is not good for us. You should have put a shawl about your head."

Esther was too much interested to answer him, and she followed timidly at his side while he crossed the lawn and lighted a silver lamp in her boudoir. Here everything was as she had left it but a few hours ago. Her own sketches lay untouched upon the table; the books she had been reading were still open. The fountain splashed

almost with a weird sound in the silence of the night. One fact, however, permitted Esther to form an instant conclusion as to the events which had so greatly agitated her. The door between her own room and the Doctor's study was no longer locked as it had been during his absence. Evidently some one had entered her boudoir and had forgotten to close the door upon leaving. It now stood so much open that Esther perceived the soft green carpet and the polished tables of the great room beyond. Cards littered the floor; decanters of wine were plainly visible in the soft mellow light which flowed down from unseen lamps. Doctor Xavier's first act was to close this door and then to draw the heavy brocade curtains across the window of her boudoir.

"Now," he said, motioning her to the sofa, "if you will permit me to finish my cigar, I should like to have a chat, Miss Venn."

Esther obeyed him, as she always did, and sat down, not a little awed, waiting for him to speak. No words of hers, she thought, were called for, nor would they help him.

"You were at the window," he began, directly she was seated, "and you are aware of the unfortunate accident which has happened in this house to-night. I can quite admit, Miss Venn, that any young girl might be alarmed. It is never good for a woman to be the witness of men's differences. In the case of my own nation, our quarrels, unfortunately, do not, like yours in this country, begin and end with words. Let me say at once that two of my friends quarrelled in this

house to-night and that one of them, unhappily, has some occasion to repent his hastiness. I do not think that his wound is serious; but I am exceedingly sorry that he should have received it under my roof. A philosopher, no doubt, would remember the old apothegm about a gambler's folly and its consequences. I say nothing, because I regard life as a gamble from the cradle to the grave. If we do not play with cards, we find more dangerous tools—men, women, nations, powers and principalities, our own ambitions, the follies of our friends. Cards are responsible for many pitiful misfortunes; but they are not often of the graver kind. I hope they will not prove to be so to-night. Lorenzo, my cousin, is more frightened than hurt. I regret the misfortune chiefly for your sake; but you will be wise to remember that such a thing is not likely to happen here again."

Esther listened patiently, for he seemed to be offering her an apology for the distress she had suffered. Observing that she was expected to answer him, she took refuge in a general confession rather than a specific assent.

"I heard some one singing in the house and that woke me up," she said, naturally enough. "Then, while I stood at the window, a man cried out, and, of course, I was very much afraid. I did not know what to think."

"Certainly, you would not. The friends who visited me to-night were from the country of Cadi, Miss Venn; some of them are Spanish mountaineers; others are of the republic of Andorra.

They sang at my request. You hesitate to believe, perhaps, that I am a romantic person; but the reverse is very much the case. The note of a song, the perfume of a flower can recreate country for me. When I hear such a wild hill song as you heard to-night, I quit the cities and become a free man of the woods again. My heart is in Spain and will ever be so. Some day, let your happiness and opportunities be what they may, you may know the same longing for your own country—for a lane in the pretty Devonshire you have left, or a scene associated with your childhood—as I have known to-night. I could wish you no better fortune than to hope that you will be able to gratify such a natural desire. There is nothing on earth quite so bitter as expatriation from the land of your birth."

It was plain to Esther that he suffered much in this admission; and while the vague innuendoes of his promise perplexed her, and she could not imagine under what circumstances she might be an exile from England, she perceived that his regret was very real, and that all this splendour of home and power of riches meant nothing to him if it might not lead him back ultimately to the land of his fathers.

"I could never leave my own country for ever," she exclaimed, sympathetically. "Whatever new ties might bind me, I should think of Devonshire and my childhood. If you wish me to go abroad with you, please let it be on the understanding that I can come home when I wish. I could not consent to go otherwise, Doctor Xavier."

He looked at her in a kindly way, and smiled at her womanly stipulation.

"My child," he said, "when the day comes that you are really an exile from England, it will not be for me to say 'yes' or 'no' to your request. In that day, you will have forgotten the very name of Francisco Xavier. I speak enigmatically; but at the moment I cannot speak otherwise. If you admit that all my schemes are for your good, you will not question me. Other things you may see and hear in this house, or in some other house of mine, which will disquiet or alarm you. Believe me, as I am a man of honour, that you yourself are as safe here as in your father's home. I can say no more. Your welfare could not be dearer to me if it were that of my own daughter."

She believed him absolutely, even when she could not wholly understand him. The master-mind wrestled with her own and did with it what it would. That he was keeping something from her, she had known from the first; but what it was, whether of good or ill, she had not time to imagine. Nor did he permit her any continued opportunity for reflection; but passing swiftly to other subjects, he began to question her upon that which had happened during his absence.

"Yussuf gives me a good account of you. I hear that you are a willing pupil, and are following my prescriptions faithfully. The alarm which you suffered to-night will be useful if it teaches you that courage is one of the finest gifts of your womanhood. There are many things to alarm us

in life, if we do not use our brains and ask ourselves if we are right to be afraid. Of that, however, I do not wish to speak any more. The men who have quarrelled must settle their own differences. They are nothing to me. I am more concerned in your own experiences, Miss Venn. You must forgive me if I question you a little closer."

Esther said that she was very willing to answer him; and in her own simple way tried to tell him of the treatment she had undergone and of its effects as she realised them.

"I am much stronger and very happy, Doctor," she said. "The baths do me a great deal of good. Of course, it is very quiet and restful here, and I feel as though all the cares of life had been suddenly taken from me. I do not want to go away; and yet I have the energy to do all sorts of mad things. The garden is a fairyland; sometimes I wonder if I really am Esther Venn or somebody else. Every one has been so kind to me. I cannot speak too well of the servants."

He nodded his head; and taking a lamp from a bracket, he held it high above her head that he might see her face more clearly.

"Let me look at you, Esther," he said; "let me see if I can believe you."

She looked up at him, a little ashamed at his scrutiny; but understanding it, nevertheless. For quite a long time he regarded her as a sculptor might have regarded a statue upon which he was working. The result, apparently, gratified him.

He set down the lamp and went on with his questions.

"You say that you can rest here: it is a good sign. A disposition to rest is one of the secrets of health; and health is indispensable to our success, Miss Venn. For the present we will go on as we have begun. When we have left England for the mountains, it will be time enough to speak of change. If I am gratified with what has been done, at the same time, I make no rash promises. Your obedience is a kindness to me and earns my gratitude. Add to it by permitting me to make yet one more observation—I think it will interest you."

He turned upon his heel, and entering his own study Esther heard him unlock a bureau and afterwards lock it again. When he returned, he carried upon his arm a long blue robe with a hood attached and a girdle trailing upon the ground. This he asked her to put on, and helped her to do with an interest that he could not conceal. Esther perceived that the cloak was of a strange fashion and apparently old; she had never seen a more perfect shade of blue or one so rich and pleasing. Why she should be asked to wear such a robe, or for what purpose, she could not conceive. That it came from Spain she never doubted. She had seen a picture by Murillo in the National Gallery, and the Madonna there was gowned in such a cloak as this. Moreover, a cross of diamonds adorned the hood and there were other religious emblems in gold and jewels, while a short cape falling from the shoulders



was embroidered with passion flowers. When Esther had put the robe on, she discovered that it was too long for her, and fell in folds about her feet; but the Doctor had no sooner fastened the silver clasp beneath her chin than he uttered a loud cry of astonishment and stepped back like one delighted at his handiwork.

"Inez del Cadi!—it is Inez del Cadi!" he muttered, again and again; and as though to convince himself beyond doubt, he lit up other lamps, which the roses shielded, until a dazzling light fell upon them and gave a newer radiance to the splendid blue and the sheen of the glittering cross.

"It is a miracle, mademoiselle—nothing less than a miracle!" the Doctor went on, enraptured. "Some day you shall profit by it. I cannot tell you now; you would not understand."

Esther confessed that understanding was impossible; nevertheless, she would have ventured a question but for the sudden clang of a bell in the outer courtyard and an answering echo of footsteps heard upon the gravel paths. This tinkling signal immediately arrested Doctor Xavier's attention, and listening intently for a minute, he appeared to be the possessor of some new idea.

"Stay," he exclaimed, "my friends return—I must not refuse them. Wait here—it is lucky and may help us."

He left her wondering at his agitation; and when he was gone, she leaned back upon her couch of roses and tried to master the secret which appealed more strongly to her troubled

curiosity every hour that she remained in that house of mysteries. The vain task left her weary and fatigued. A quarter of an hour passed and the Doctor did not return—she heard a distant church clock strike one and still he did not come. Fatigued and overwrought, she succumbed at last and fell into a gentle slumber. From this she was awakened by the rustle of a rocade curtain and some hushed cry of surprise at her window; and looking up, she beheld a face she recognised. It was that of the young man whom Julia had named "The Prince of Cadi."

## CHAPTER IX

WHEN Esther awoke in her own room upon the following morning, she discovered a strange maid at her bedside. The girl said that her name was Suzanne, and that she had been engaged by Madame Julia to accompany them to the South. Esther liked her face and did not hesitate to invite her confidence.

"Do you come from Paris, Suzanne?"

"From Arles, mademoiselle; but I was with Monsieur at the Château St. Paul, and I am to accompany you there to-day. All your things are packed, and the tickets are taken. We are going from Charing Cross at eleven o'clock."

Esther could scarcely believe her ears. Doctor Xavier, she remembered had often spoken of his château on the borders of Spain; but that he contemplated such an early departure from London was never in her thoughts. The events of last night undoubtedly inspired such a hasty change of plans. They quitted London because of that unhappy affair in the garden; and their journey, in some way, resembled a flight. This reflection troubled her not a little. The news

was so unlooked for that she could not at once realise it.

"Does the Doctor accompany us, Suzanne?" she asked, dressing hastily and with little care. "He did not speak of this last night, and I had no idea we were going away so soon. I certainly did not think it would be until Madame Julia returned."

Suzanne had no time for explanations. She busied herself about the room as though all the responsibility of an anxious day were hers.

"We shall find Madame at Paris," she said, stolidly. "It would be a pity that she should return when we are going. Monsieur has left the house already and will meet us at the château. He asked me to say that he is sorry we must go alone; but we shall do very well, you and I, mademoiselle, for, of course, it is my own country and I shall not lose myself there. Monsieur has left a letter for you in your own room. We have not any time to lose, but we need not hurry. Ah, mademoiselle, we are lucky to go to the Château St. Paul—it is the most beautiful house in all the world! Such flowers, such gardens; and Toulouse so near, when one begins to want the shops. You know Toulouse, mademoiselle—no? Then Monsieur will drive you there, and you will say that it is Paris at the foot of the mountains. I love the South! This England is so cold and sad. When summer comes, it only teases you and goes away again before you know it is here. It is always summer at the Château St. Paul."

She went babbling on while she flitted hither and thither, now snatching up a gown, now packing a portmanteau with the dexterity which only a long training could arrive at. With whatever agitated thoughts the prospect of this long journey filled Esther, it meant nothing to her sprightly maid. Suzanne would cross Europe as readily as she crossed Regent Street. Paris or London, she made no complaint. Esther's acquiescence she took for granted. Why should any one in the world refuse to go to the Château St. Paul if the opportunity were offered? That would be a *gaucherie*, indeed. As for Esther, she was too perplexed either to argue or acquiesce. That her prospects would be changed in France she could not assume. She had received many kindnesses at the Doctor's hands. Why should she now look for other treatment? Self-reliant always, she believed that, at the worst, she could win her way back to England again if any misfortune overtook her. And in France, was it not possible that she might meet, and come to know more intimately, a man who, twice seen, she desired ardently to see once more.

Suzanne had spoken of a letter from Doctor Xavier; and this was delivered to Esther at the breakfast table. She found it couched in affectionate words, but brief, as the maid's instructions. The Doctor said, shortly, that business of the gravest importance had called him from London and would detain him for some days. He was disappointed that they should not make the journey to Château St. Paul together; but

Esther, he was sure, would excuse him, and would hasten to his sister who awaited her in Paris.

"London has nothing left," he wrote; "why should we linger there? We shall breathe in the mountains, *camarade*. The purpose we have set ourselves to achieve needs God's fresh air and the breezes of the hill-lands. We shall find them at the Château St. Paul. I count upon your interest and fidelity. To-night at the Ritz Hotel in Paris you will find my sister Julia. She will be your guide until I come. For the rest, the maid has all things necessary. Do not speak of the little gift I am leaving for you—these things are business, and friendship must not make them impossible. I greet my little colleague fraternally, and am her devoted, Xavier de Montalvan."

The gift of which he spoke was an ivory purse containing English gold and banknotes to the value of a hundred pounds. Esther did not resent this gift nor was she unwilling to make use of it. She had never hidden it from herself that she might be the instrument of her patron's enduring fame; and furthermore, the idea of being alone upon the Continent without money, had at once occurred to her as something even her courage could not face. The tenor of the letter, indeed, invited her confidence; and she began to be not unpleasantly agitated at the thought of seeing other countries and other cities. When Suzanne announced that the carriage was at the door, she put on her cloak and hat with

the expectations of one who is going upon some unlooked-for holiday; and from that time until her arrival in Paris at half-past five o'clock, she confessed that she had no interest but those of the changing pictures about her. The sunny scene, the lake-like Channel, Calais with its babel of tongues, the dreary sand-dunes by Boulogne, Amiens and its tunnels, the hedgeless monotonous plains of Northern France; and lastly the grim fortifications, the towering houses, the busy streets, the bewildering labyrinths of that Paris she had imagined so often, carried her as in a dream to her journey's end. And how Suzanne chattered—how France inspired her! Esther said such a talker she had never listened to; but she was none the less glad that Suzanne was with her at the Gare du Nord to order about the chattering porters and to lead her safely through that deafening maze.

"Is it a big hotel, Suzanne?" she asked, when they had left the station and were clattering away toward the boulevards. "Shall we get a room, do you think?"

Suzanne was almost too amazed to speak. As if any one who had not got a room, would go to the Ritz Hotel!

"Monsieur Xavier telegraphed this morning, as if he would not, mademoiselle! In France, he can command anything, oh, all the world knows Monsieur de Montalvan! There will be the best rooms for him; and we shall find Madame Julia there to tell us what to do. Look yonder; that's a café, mademoiselle. You have none in England

—ah, you don't know how to live! How should you when you have no cafés!”

They had turned into the great boulevard by this time, and all the garish life of Paris went crying, laughing, rolling before their eyes. Esther had read something of the city in the guide-books years ago; but the reality was so very different from her childish conceptions. She wondered if there were one sad person in this Paris of actuality. The shaded walks, the noisy boulevards, cafés, shops, churches, suggested a scene which a novelist might depict but which could not exist. Esther found herself asking a hundred questions; she cried out with delight at every changing pageant. The journey was, in truth, too short; and when the cab stopped before the doors of the Ritz Hotel, she was almost sorry that it was over.

“Is it here, Suzanne, is this the hotel?” she asked.

“It is the ‘Ritz,’ mademoiselle. You have never seen anything like it. I will go and find out which rooms you are to have.”

Esther knew little of hotels save those in her own city of Exeter; and this hotel, she imagined, would be much like the best with which she was acquainted. She entered it without curiosity; but no sooner had she passed the doors than the magnificence of the corridor, the vista of court and fountain and of a vestibule which has no equal in Paris both startled and awed her. That any passer-by might claim the hospitality of such a place as this was beyond belief; and yet she



was claiming it. Esther had never seen those who are the leaders of cosmopolitan society before, and the pretty women of many nationalities, carrying themselves with the courage and the confidence of wealth and position, and gowned as only Paris or Vienna can gown the fortunate, presented a pageant in which she felt she could play no part. Her own travelling dress, good as she had thought it that morning, now looked shabby and out of place. Some instinct of the days of poverty and strife held her back and robbed her of courage. Esther used to tell Doctor Xavier at a later day that but for Suzanne she would have run away from the Ritz Hotel. "I never could have faced all those women," she said. And he would laugh at her and answer, "They would have given all they possessed, my child, for those black eyes of yours!"

Suzanne discovered that their rooms were upon the first floor, a little suite overlooking the fountain and the courtyard. The dainty taste of the old French furniture captivated Esther; the privacy consoled her; and when the girl unpacked a taking gown of silk and chiffon and had dressed her hair to the best advantage, she could admit that after all the ordeal below might not be so terrible. So far, she was without tidings either of Madame Julia or the Doctor; but a telegram delivered at half-past six o'clock explained their absence. Julia telegraphed that she had lost the train from Dinard and would not arrive until to-morrow morning; and while the news was little

comforting, Esther made the best of it. She was even persuaded to dine in the white and crimson room below; and coming at length to perceive that she was at no disadvantage at all even in such a company, she made bold afterwards to take a seat in the corridor and there to enjoy the music of the Hungarian band. No one would know her, none ask her name, she thought; but in this she was mistaken, for the band had hardly begun to play when some one addressed her; and, turning, she found herself face to face with the Prince of Cadi.

He was in evening dress, with a light black cape hanging loosely from his shoulders. Esther imagined that he had not dined at the hotel, but had returned to it from some other house. The button of an Order showed beneath the lapel of his cape. His white waistcoat had no ornament of gold button or watch-chain. He was in the act of drawing off his white kid gloves when he addressed Esther, and in her surprise she looked up swiftly at him, and could not conceal the pleasure of her recognition. Then, for the first time, perhaps, she understood why his face had seemed familiar to her even upon their first meeting. Once in an old history she had seen a picture of a Spanish king, an engraving after one of Velasquez's masterpieces; and although it represented an older man, none the less the young Spaniard before her might have been its subject. The upturned moustache she found particularly characteristic of his countrymen; his crisp curly hair, parted in the centre,

had been well brushed back from a pleasing forehead. Very clear lustrous eyes spoke of exercise and healthy habits. His skin was unusually fair for one of a Southern race. She judged him to be almost six feet in height, but not quite. He had an easy, graceful manner, although it was a little masterful, by reason of an old habit of authority and privilege. When she came to know him better, Esther discovered that the Prince could not brook contradiction. His own master from an early age, he regarded men, and women too, as his servants; and this service he rewarded with a generosity which was often as foolish as it was undeserved. He had many talents, but rarely chose to apply them patiently or with perseverance. One by one he visited the cities of Europe, and made his dwelling there until he had exhausted the city's pleasures. At the present moment he was in Paris until some new adventure should engage him; and this sudden unlooked-for encounter with her whom he called "the pretty English girl" at least amused him. Simply saying, "Permit me," he drew a chair to the table, and at once ordered a waiter to bring them coffee. When he had lighted a cigarette, he asked her of the Doctor.

"I have come to Paris to see him, and I hear he has gone to Marseilles. There are very few men whom I would travel a mile to see. The Duke of Montalvan happens to be the exception."

Esther started at the words. She was not

a little interested in the favour shown to her by one who occupied so great a position; but her curiosity quickly got the better of her surprise.

"Why do you speak of the Duke of Montalvan? Are you referring to Doctor Xavier, Prince?"

He regarded her with some amazement.

"Ah, then you are ignorant of his incognito, Miss Venn?"

"I only know him as Doctor Xavier."

The Prince laughed. "I must introduce him to you. He is concealing something," he continued lightly. "You can never trust middle age, Miss Venn; it is only youth which is entirely frank."

Esther looked at him with very serious eyes.

"Do you think it is always wise to be frank?"

"Oh, I—I never think about it! Thank heaven, I am not a diplomatist. My dictionary is 'yes' or 'no.' You must put it down to my education. I was never taught lying as a fine art. If we sit here long enough, you will get all old Francisco's secrets out of me. Are you very much attached to him, Miss Venn?"

Esther leant her chin upon her hand, and asked herself if she were.

"Can we be attached to people whom we have known only a little while?"

"Oh, if you press it, I must say 'yes.' Let's see, it was fifteen days ago that we first met."

"Yes, yes; but I was speaking of Doctor Xavier, Prince. I have only known him a few weeks."

"And have yet to discover all his infamies. I detected them long ago. He loves me so much that if I died to-morrow he would wear roses in his hair. Seriously, are you a friend of his sister's?"

Esther blushed deeply at the question. She knew that she dare not tell this stranger why she was in Doctor Xavier's house.

"No, I cannot say that. I think Madame Julia likes me; but it could scarcely be friendship yet. I am old-fashioned, you know; I don't believe that one can be friends in a day."

"I will call you an acquaintance, then. They tell me that she is expected here to-morrow morning. Will you present her with my regrets that I am called away exactly an hour before she arrives."

Esther understood that he was jesting; but the jest had a sting which he could not conceal. His own *bravade* apparer 'ly struck him as an imprudence; for, anon, he became more serious, and then Esther listened with interest.

"Are you an old traveller, Miss Venn—do you know much of Europe?"

"I know nothing, Prince; I have never been out of England before."

"Ah, what luck, to have it all before you! I am *blasé*, you know. There is a stage in a traveller's life when he realises that the world has nothing left to show him. He wishes to

escape the marvellous; he positively does not want to see the deepest waterfall or the highest mountain. Five years of travel have taught me that its future is more than its present. We do not realise great scenes truly until we have left them. We remember a few, and they remain unforgettable pictures while we live. Each has his own Eldorado—mine is in Spain. I have been twice round the world, and would give it all for a little château in the hills, whose doors are shut to-day and whose rooms are empty. Cities enable me to forget. That which appeals to the ear wearies less than that which appeals to the eye. You can always cull some new emotion from Wagner's music; but if you stop for a month at a mountain's foot, you are simply bored. Is not that your own experience?"

"I will tell you when I have seen a mountain, Prince. Of course, music does appeal very much to emotional people; I know that from my own experience. When I have been for a month in the Pyrenees, I shall consider myself no less an authority upon mountains. Some day, perhaps, I will tell you all about it."

"'Some day!'—ah, that dreadful 'some day.' It is the curse of life. We see a lovely face and say that some day we may find it again. Do not deceive yourself with 'some day,' Miss Venn. The man who enjoys life is the one who has no *mañana*. I am a Spaniard, and my nation has sold its birthright for to-morrow. The same procrastination finds me in this hotel to-night, when I should be the first among my people. Be

warned in time—have nothing to do with ‘some day.’”

A deeper meaning lay behind his words, but Esther could only take the larger sense of them.

“I will not forget your warning,” she said, “but you would not have me promise to tell you to-day, when I do not go to the château until to-morrow? That would be Irish, you know.”

“Then I prefer the Irish manner. Let us cultivate exactness. In one month from this day I will come to your house and you shall answer me yourself. Do you forbid it?”

He leaned across the table so far that Esther could almost feel his breath upon her cheek. A true instinct had told her from the first that destiny intended this man to play some part in her own life. What part it might be she did not dare to think. She knew only that she was attracted by him as she had never been by any other living being. She felt that if he commanded her, she would obey; it might even be would follow where he willed. And he, in his turn, schooled to read women truly, was not ignorant of his power. She was charming, he thought, this little English girl; he must know more of her.

“Will you permit me?” he repeated. “Will you permit me to come to the château?”

“How can I forbid it, Prince? I am Doctor Xavier’s guest, and, of course, he would be glad to see you.”

He laughed ironically at her simplicity.

"Glad—when he is crossing Europe to avoid me! Oh, no; your friend, the Doctor, does not tell you the truth, Miss Venn, if he says that he is glad to see Arthur of Cadi! Naturally, he says nothing. He would not wish you to think that he stands between me and my people; he would not admit that because of him I must lose a kingdom and a home! No, I do not fear him: it is not that. But as I am cursed, as my nation is cursed, with the fatality of delay, I do not practise what I preach. An idle stream invites me to drift upon it, and I let my barque go where it will. Some day it will be different—ah! that splendid 'some day'!"

Esther had but the vaguest ideas of these momentous matters to which he referred, nor would she speak of them. That some grave quarrel had driven the two men apart was very evident, but how it had come about, or of its nature, she could not form any impression. The stranger's confidence invited her own. She did not fear to interrogate him in her turn.

"Have you known Doctor Xavier long, Prince? Was he once a friend of yours?"

"I will not deny it—I could not fairly. The fault is neither his nor mine—it is caprice and a woman, Miss Venn, the fount and origin of every quarrel that man takes part in. Have nothing to do with either. Abjure the crimes of your sex. Let me find a man's heart and a woman's eyes when I come to the château. Is it a promise—is it agreed that I am to come?"



She was conscious of a new note in his address; and her heart beat a little quickly when she said—

“Shall I promise for ‘some day’ then?”

“No,” he said; “for to-night, that you will be my friend!”

He held out his hand to her, repeating the words. She did not know what to say. Desiring his friendship exceedingly, she could but stammer—

“I will tell you in Spain, Prince—some day—some day——”

When he had left her, she remembered for the first time that she had forgotten to call him “Highness.”

Madame Julia arrived at the hotel in time for *déjeuner* on the following morning. Esther had thought much of the Prince's words during the night, but she hesitated to speak of their meeting until she discovered that Julia was already aware both of his arrival in Paris and of the encounter in the corridor. For the first time since she had known her, Esther perceived that this fickle woman was displeased with her and strangely capricious. She did not complain, she uttered no accusation, but sullenly retired to her own room and forbade any one to come to her. Not until they were together in the train for the South did she seem to repent of her outbreak; and then, bursting of a sudden into tears, she kissed Esther passionately and protested that she wished her happiness.

"You were right to see him, dear. Of course, you know my brother's wish. You are to be his wife some day. Why should you not have met him!"

Esther could not answer her. She trembled like one grown suddenly cold. She did not know whether it were with pleasure or fear.

## CHAPTER X

WE have shown under what circumstances Esther quitted Paris, and how that, in the company of Doctor Xavier and his sister, she paid her first visit to the Château of St. Paul. With her life in Spain, and afterwards in France and Italy, this story concerns itself but little. We know that she lived in close seclusion for nearly five months; we hear of her in the mountains and the cities; but her life is always uneventful, and it is not until the month of the following January that she appears with dramatic suddenness upon the social horizon of Paris, and instantly is the foremost figure in that capital of enthusiasms. Such a change in a young girl's life can find few parallels in the story of woman, nor does the account of it lose force by the most modest estimates of the sensation which attended her *rentrée*. Unknown, unsought, she had gone out. She returned to hear herself called the most beautiful woman in France, to be the spoiled child of the salon and the theatre, to have the social world at her feet. If she, herself, remained the attractive girl that Francisco Xavier had found her, if she were unconscious both of her influence and her beauty, this

happy circumstance owed not a little to her own decided character and the good common-sense she had inherited. Vanity at any time was repellent to her. None the less, she knew that some miracle had influenced her life—a miracle so simple and true that faith could not be withheld.

She had come to Paris secretly, accompanied by the loquacious Julia, and unaware of the object of the unexpected visit. Five months of the solitudes left her unprepared for this surprise. At the Château St. Paul, in the Pyrenees, at Thonon by Lake Geneva, at Rome, at Venice she had been the willing slave of Francisco Xavier. All that the Spaniard's mystery of science could do for her had been done unsparingly. The restful life, the exquisite scenes by lake and mountain had won her content and quieted her doubts. She no longer believed that her master had other aims than those he declared to her. Perhaps she even dreaded the day when his work should be done and success must crown it. The solitudes fascinated her always; she quitted them with regret. She was never more surprised than when, at Lausanne upon that memorable day of January, Doctor Xavier spoke once more of the city and the world.

"The mountains can give us no more," he had said. "We are like bees who have sucked up the last drop of honey. Come, we will return to Paris without delay. It may be the last journey we shall ever make as students together."

Esther was perplexed at the enigma of his words, but obedience was now a habit to her,

and she accompanied him to the North without question. In Paris, as we have told, she played for a brief while her part in that social comedy of which the French are such consummate masters. Everywhere—at the opera, in the Bois, in the houses of the privileged—she bore unconscious witness to the truth of the Spaniard's claims. Men said that she was the most beautiful woman that Paris had ever seen; even women raved about her. As indifferent to the praises of the one as to the envy of the other, Esther carried her own secret and hid it from the world as a precious thing. Good sense forbade her to remember the one romance of her life, and yet she wished to remember it. That she would see the Prince of Cadi sooner or later she never doubted. When she met him after many days in the house of the Spanish Duque de Rina, she accepted the encounter as inevitable. The Prince lived in Paris now, and naturally, would meet her. He was not greatly changed, she thought; certainly he had lost nothing of that attractive personality which so won her interest five months ago.

The night was a memorable one for Esther in many ways. She had been introduced by Doctor Xavier to splendid scenes abundantly since she arrived in Paris; but this scene at the house of the Duque de Rina surpassed them all. Nominally a *soirée musicale* for the nomadic aristocracy of the French capital, to Esther it was chiefly a vision of immense rooms and brilliant women, of soldiers and statesmen and priests, but preeminently of a glittering throng which divided

as she entered upon Doctor Xavier's arm, and watched her almost in silence as she swept up to the dais whereon the Duke and Duchess received their guests. For the first time then, perhaps, she knew that the master-key of a woman's power had been entrusted to her. This buzz of tongues, these envious eyes, could not be mistaken. Everywhere in that immense salon men were saying, "Marvellous!" women were exclaiming, "Who is she?" Esther, in her simplicity, did not dare to ask if the triumph were wholly hers, or in part that of curiosity awakened by some tale of the marvellous. She was dazed, it may be frightened, by the very applause which the master-mind had earned for her; and when one by one the leaders of Paris were introduced to her, she answered them, scarce knowing what she said. In her own words she felt that she was playing a part, was not the Esther of the old time; nay, that she had become the victim of some entrancing dream from which she would awake to stern reality presently. Everywhere she went she heard the whispered murmurs of surprise and admiration. The voices of strangers rang harshly in her ears, the music exhilarated her to an unusual degree. She dreaded the moment at which her friend would leave her; and when that moment came she was like a child lost and frightened. And what more natural that another should hasten to take the Doctor's place. Esther was but half surprised to find herself face to face with the only other man she had ever known in Paris.

The Prince had been standing in the door of the great conservatory which gives off the Duchess's boudoir. He wore a white uniform of a Spanish regiment of hussars, and while his eyes had followed Esther restlessly since she entered the room, he made no movement to recognise her until she was alone. Then, without hesitation, he crossed the room and held out his hand.

"At last!" he said.

She looked up quickly and coloured at his ardent glance. The five months which had elapsed since she saw him had added something of dignity to his manner, and robbed him of a little of his boyish imperiousness. But the change was for the better. Esther could admit that no salon of Paris had shown her a figure more distinguished. He, in his turn, was unable to take his eyes from her face. He knew not what to think or say. Her very beauty found him silent.

"You are the good Samaritan," she said, a little imploringly. "The Doctor has left me, and the rest pass by on the other side."

He recovered himself with an effort and offered her his arm.

"Old Xavier, at least, is a generous thief," he said; "he leaves the treasure behind him. Let us go into the conservatory, Miss Venn; I will promise you wine if there is no oil."

He opened a passage for her through the press of men, and discovering a giant palm in a secluded corner, and a low couch behind it, he

sat at once and began to talk with that easy familiarity which the years had made a habit.

"You are greatly changed, Miss Venn; I hardly knew you. If I did not wish to pay you a compliment, I would ask you to be angry. We do not recognise those who become famous; we want to be recognised by them. If old Xavier had not taken himself off, I should have been afraid. He can spare me ten minutes, I am sure."

Esther answered very naturally.

"Ten minutes! Oh, but that's a long time! And he will be looking for me. I should be terrified if I missed him, Prince. Imagine being lost in Paris, and advertised for in the newspapers! Doctor Xavier might not think I was worth a reward, you know!"

He hastened to contradict her with a Spaniard's graciousness.

"Old Xavier's riches would not be reward enough," he said. "The Bank of France would be ruined, Miss Venn! I have been three years trying to lose Francisco Xavier, and I have not succeeded. It is impossible to lose such a man, I assure you. He has enjoyed your society for five months—is it not so? Then I shall not ask his permission for my ten minutes. Let us be serious and ask what you have been doing. You were going to Spain when I saw you last. You must tell me that you like my country. It is the one subject upon which I am a bigot."

Esther was able to tell him that, and she did so very prettily.



"We were at the Château St. Paul for five weeks," she said. "The Pyrenees are very grand, more beautiful even than Switzerland. Perhaps it is because there are not any people there. Travel is so much vanity, that we like a country which few others have seen. But I have never really been in Spain, you know; only on the frontier."

"You were at the gates of Paradise, then."

"Of Paradise? Oh, but it was very hot. We used to go up into the mountains every day simply to breathe. I think your Spanish summers are trying—you won't hate me for that?"

"Not at all. The English nation knows so little of the sun. By and by, when you live in Spain, you will forget your prejudices. If there were more sun in England, you would not all work so hard and look so gloomy. We Spaniards do nothing and sing upon it. We are easily contented: it is our supreme virtue."

"And yet you live out of Spain, Prince?"

His face clouded for an instant and he looked away from her.

"I—oh, I am a unit and I speak of the nation. It is more difficult to practise than to preach. My country is much to me; I live in Paris to defend it from evil tongues—besides, the French cooking is so excellent."

He turned it with a laugh and went on to discuss her experiences in Switzerland.

"You have learned old Xavier's secret," he

said. "Paris will not rest till she shares it with you. I am very serious when I say that he is a wonderful man. Years ago in Spain I knew that he would do much. Do you understand, Miss Venn, how much he has achieved already? Possibly not. You cannot realise that all the city is busy with your name. You cannot realise that you are the most beautiful woman in the world."

She turned away, unwilling to think of it.

"I love the country, and am always happy there," she said. "Doctor Xavier is very clever and he deserves his fame. I am sure there can be no one like him. Some day all the world will ask his help. I have never understood why he chose me."

"He chose you because he could not find a better subject. Forgive my frankness. I know something of his work; I knew it long ago in Spain. It would never be possible to call him a charlatan. You, yourself, are naturally unwilling to give up his secrets. The work has been one of months—and travel, too, has improved you. I speak as a man who knows many women. You have gained much by association with others."

Esther shook her head.

"No," she said, "if I have gained anything, it has been by reflection. It is true that I have travelled much, but I have spoken to very few people."

"And your reflections—ah, your reflections, I should like to share them!"

"They would not interest you—you would not remember them."

She looked at him for an instant a little archly; and in that moment, he remembered the promise he had made in Paris five months ago.

"Yes," he said, "I have a splendid capacity for forgetting. But there are redeeming features. I visited Spain in spirit—and you forgive me, I see that you do, since you are wearing my roses."

Her cheeks reddened, and she made an impulsive gesture as though to cover the betraying flowers with a white-gloved hand. Some one had placed the roses that afternoon upon her dressing-table, a pretty bouquet carried in a jewelled holder. She had not inquired whence they came; she simply wore them.

"You have been very busy, Prince?" she asked, avoiding the more dangerous ground.

He answered her with a shrug, and took a cigarette from a little gold case.

"Permit me," he said "it is a habit of mine to smoke when any one speaks of business. As for that, yes; my weeks have been laborious. I shot at Chantilly with the Duke; October found me at Trouville. We could have steamed from there to Bayonne and come across to you; but, after all, we might have been too late. Regrets are useless. Life is short and travel is tedious. I remember that energy is really very troublesome; it earns a statue in a market-place or a tomb in a cathedral—I desire neither. Admit the logic."

"I don't admit it at all, Prince. Others are

better, surely, for our work; and are we not all in some great scheme of things, each with his own part to play? You make fun of it, or I would argue with you. I can see that you are not serious."

He blew a little cloud of smoke into the still air, and seemed to muse for a little while; then he said—

"Perhaps I am not. The day will come which will find me awake. Let me postpone it as long as possible while I tell you that you would make an excellent priest if you were not too pretty. Believe me, Miss Esther, I am dumb with surprise."

Esther read a deeper meaning in his compliment, and did not resent it. She thought that she understood this man wholly as she had never understood a human being in her life. When she was with Francisco Xavier there had often been a sense of the obscure and the unrevealed, and it perplexed and restrained her. This young Spaniard of the cities never once left her in doubt. A child would have understood him—he was utterly unable to hide his impulses either for good or evil. Esther knew to-night that he loved her; she read his story in every glance.

"Yes," he continued impulsively, throwing away his cigarette and bending over her until she could feel his hot breath upon her cheek, "You are the most beautiful thing in all the world! Paris has told you so, but it is the truth. Your face haunts me—it haunts me, I say! I shall come to the Avenue Hoche to-

morrow—I shall follow you wherever you go; I defy you to forbid me——”

She was a little afraid of his sudden ardour, and she stood up to escape a gesture which was almost a caress.

“I have no right to see you,” she protested. “And there is Doctor Xavier—he is looking for me!”

The Doctor, indeed, had already returned, and stood now in the door of the conservatory, watching her with that close scrutiny of which she was conscious sometimes even when she could not see his face. A little to her surprise, he did not address her companion, nor did the Prince wait for him to do so. Simply saying, “Until to-morrow!” the young man bowed and left her, and she went up, in some confusion, to her friend.

“I have been waiting for you,” she pleaded. “It must be very late.”

A contented smile crossed his face, and he drew her arm through his own.

“It is time for us to go home, *camarade*,” he said; “our work is done.”

She did not read the meaning of his words aright, nor could she quite understand that almost pathetic kindness with which he had treated her since they quitted Spain. The vast rooms were still crowded when she returned to them. Eyes followed her now as they followed her two hours ago. She heard the echo of voices, the music of the violins; and then she passed out to the crowded courtyard, and, finding their brougham, she asked why they were alone.

"My sister has gone on to the house of the Comte de Fleury," was his answer. "Do not be anxious about her, *camarade*, she is old enough to take care of herself. I wish to talk to you a little while to-night; we shall have few opportunities."

The carriage rolled out into the broad Faubourg St. Germain, and the darkness of the gloomy street fell upon them. Esther became aware that the Doctor was still holding her hand and regarding her with those deep-set eyes which, she thought, could read her very soul. For five months now she had been as closely associated with this strange personality as any daughter with the father of her house; nevertheless she could say that he was almost a stranger still. Moods of gentleness or of irritation, absent moods, the zeal of the scientist, sometimes the passion of the fanatic and the exile baffled and repelled her. To-night his voice was caressing as a child's. He held her hand affectionately while he spoke. She understood that he had to tell of grave matters.

"Esther," he said presently, "I made a promise to you in London six months ago. Say, *camarade*, have I kept it or have I failed?"

"You have kept it—kept it a hundred times!" she exclaimed reproachfully. "I have known nothing but happiness in your house. You have shown me another world. How can you ask such a question!"

He turned away and looked at the shimmering pavement upon which a few flakes of the drifting snow had begun to melt.

"Yes," he said, "I made a promise, and I have redeemed it. You are the most beautiful woman in Paris to-night. The world is open to you. You have in your hands a power which is the most subtle a woman can possess. Use it for the good of those who win your love and confidence. In my own time, we will bestow our secret upon others, but that day is not yet. Perhaps it may never be. Destiny plays strange tricks with us when opportunity is our need. I am more concerned to-night, Esther, that you should call me friend. It may mean something in the days to come."

His mood alarmed her not a little. All the best instincts of her generous nature were awakened by this appeal. She felt like one who is asked by a father, "Do you trust me?" She longed to tell him much, but could say so little.

"You have given me life itself!" she exclaimed. "I could never thank you enough! I have no words to thank you. You are the best, the only friend I have ever known!"

He drew her to him and kissed her.

"Call me that always, *camarade*—call me that whatever befall."

The carriage stopped with his words, and they alighted quickly and went up to the splendid apartment he had engaged for her in the Avenue Hoche. Esther has never forgotten that great white salon dimly lighted by shaded lamps, so full of riches, so dainty in its minutest ornament; that salon in which she stood to say "Good-night" to her friend and benefactor. For a

moment she saw him, his kindly eyes beaming upon her, his cloak thrown back, his white glove crushed between his iron fingers; then, without a word, he was gone, and Suzanne, her maid, stood at her elbow.



## CHAPTER XI

ESTHER slept but little that night. Despite her desire to sleep, the scene she had quitted haunted her and she could not escape it. In some measure, too, the ominous "good-night" which Doctor Xavier had spoken warned her of impending change and of some new way of life at present undeclared. She feared that such a change might not be without its dangers. The fortune which had come to her might, said an evil voice of foreboding, be taken away. In moods of depression she would imagine herself helpless, friendless, the inconspicuous figure of the theatre's door. From such depression the mirror was her habitual refuge. She knew that she had become a very beautiful woman.

She could not sleep, and the strange room contributed to her unrest. It was very tasteful, very complete; but its old French furniture, its parquet flooring, the long stiff glasses and the pictureless walls robbed it of homeliness and suggested the visit. Esther regretted in some way the pretty chalet at Thonon and the life in the country of the vines. At the worst, she thought, they would spend a few weeks in Paris before returning to

the sunshine and the South. If she had any consolation it was in her own precious secret, but half confessed even to herself. Here in this city, from whose sights and sounds the hill-lands had taught her to link, the romance of her life had been found. Esther, recalling the scene at the Duke's house, closed her eyes, and like one who dreamed while waking, she repeated Arthur's words.

"He loves me," she said, "he loves me—and to-morrow I shall see him!"

There is no hour more supreme in a young girl's life than this. Content in her dreams Esther fell asleep at last and did not wake until the morning was far advanced, and a newer, stronger voice of Paris echoed in the avenue beneath her window. She knew that it was very late, and in that suspicion the untiring Suzanne confirmed her when she came bustling into the room with the steaming coffee and the dainty bath-gown.

"Ah, mademoiselle, you sleep well! It is almost time for *déjeuner*. And the Doctor left so early. Do you know that it is eleven o'clock—of course not; we never know what time it is when we are asleep."

Esther admitted the truth of this sage reflection, and chiding herself for idleness she dressed without delay and went into the salon to find her breakfast already waiting for her. Despite the month of January the morning was warm and sunny. People moved briskly beneath the limes of the avenue as though welcoming an unlooked-for day

of premature spring. Esther could not resist the influence of this sunny morning, and when she reflected upon the liberty she was likely to enjoy in Paris, and upon the fateful days that might await her there, all her fears of the night were forgotten and she abandoned herself to the delight of the passing hour.

"At what time did Madame Julia return, Suzanne?" she asked of the bustling maid; "it was very late, I am sure."

Suzanne, skimming about the room like a bird, answered gaily—

"Ah, she was late enough, mademoiselle, for she is not yet returned. It is always like that in Paris. You walk, you drive, you laugh, you eat—but sleep!—heaven, who would sleep here! There's so much to see. It would be a *bêtise* to sleep, mademoiselle."

Esther laughed at her drollery, but she was, none the less, troubled at Julia's absence.

"Did Madame leave no message, Suzanne? She must be staying at a friend's house. Perhaps I ought not to have my breakfast until she comes; it seems so selfish to go on."

"Not selfish at all, mademoiselle. Every one 'goes on' in Paris. Perhaps Madame Julia will never come back at all. I do not know. There is the Doctor's letter."

She indicated an envelope upon the large writing-table at the further end of the room, and Esther recognised at once the strange handwriting of her friend and master. She had been not a little mystified last night by the enigmatical

words which Doctor Xavier addressed to her, and now when she heard that he had quitted the house and that this letter was his message, she opened it very anxiously and read it through to the end as something at present beyond her understanding. The formality of it startled her. She had not read many lines when she realised that it was a letter of farewell.

"14, AVENUE HOCHÉ,

*"At midnight.*

"DEAR MISS VENN,—

"Your determination to consider me still as your friend will allow something to that necessity which compels me to quit Paris so abruptly, and will forgive the brief farewell which alone is possible in this emergency. Such facts of my life as have become known to you during the pleasant months we have laboured together in a common cause have taught you that, if science is much to me, my country is more. ✽ Events, changing and swift, call an exile from his retreat and command his service. My fellow-countrymen summon me and I go to them, whether it be for good or ill I know not; but as a patriot and a servant I accept the call. The same cause compels me, for the moment, to restore to you that independence of life and action which I asked of you six months ago. We have set ourselves an aim and we have reached it. More eloquent than any words of mine must be that voice of Paris which you have heard so unmistakably and will hear again in those happy days which I trust await you. The gift which you possess is the

rarest and most precious which women can win. It will open every door to you, set no confines to your ambition, save those which your own character and actions may trace. Use it as becomes your wise discretion and your gentle disposition. Remember, that there is nothing beyond your reach if wisdom is your master. Some day, it may be, your destiny and mine will draw us together again. I leave that to the unwritten future, but for the present I say that the man of science thanks you, that the friend remembers you. The rooms which you occupy in Paris are your own, for your occupation or disposal as you may think fit. And, furthermore, the Bank of France has my instructions to pay to you upon the first days of January and July in each year the sum of twenty-five thousand francs, that you may be deprived of nothing to which my own way of life has accustomed you. This trifling obligation you will permit to a man whose vanity you have flattered and whose scientific fame you have assured. Believe me that his farewell is not spoken lightly or without a sense of that kindness and patience he has enjoyed at your hands, and you will find him always in memory and grateful homage,

“Your devoted,  
“XAVIER DE MONTALVAN.”

Esther put the letter down, and standing at the open window she watched the people in the sunny Avenue below. Her first thought was that they were strangers to her, and that she had been left

utterly alone in this great city. That Doctor Xavier would change his mind, or return, she knew to be impossible. Every sentence in that letter spoke finality, the end of those months of wonder and surprise. The play was done with; she must face the world alone. So instantaneous a change of fortune could neither be appreciated nor realised in the first moments of its declaration. Esther moved from place to place in her room, mechanically and dreaming. The magnificence of the ornaments with which that apartment had been furnished conveyed no sense of riches, perhaps did not even please her. She passed from bureau to bureau, here opening a drawer, there looking at a picture, but saying all the time, "I am alone—alone in all the world!" Suzanne's voice, heard in her bedroom, recalled an affection for this lighthearted girl which, hitherto, she had not admitted. After all, there was Suzanne! And Doctor Xavier had been very generous to her. Esther pressed her hands to her forehead like one incapable of clear thought, while she asked herself many times what she should do, whither turn, where seek a friend! Was it all real, or were those months of mystery but creatures of imagination? Would she awake in London in her garret, the unknown, uncared-for, country girl? The glass forbade that hallucination. Her own beauty was a precious thing to her now. And none could rob her of it. Esther stood suddenly and asked herself if that were so! Would Francisco Xavier's gift endure? Some whisper of an evil premonition told her that it might not.

Suzanne came into the room anon and asked her what she wished to do. The girl was evidently aware of her master's departure; but she waited for Esther to speak of it.

There is the carriage, mademoiselle, and the Bois. It is not good to be in the house when the sun is shining. You must make friends in Paris—ah! you will not be long about that! When one is beautiful all the doors are open! Take my advice, mademoiselle, and drive to-day. We can think about England afterwards. Oh, the good God forbid that it does not snow when we go there!”

Esther heard her patiently and then asked of the Doctor.

“What time did he leave, Suzanne?”

“Very early, mademoiselle—at six o'clock this morning.”

“And Madame Julia?”

“He met her at the Gare, mademoiselle.”

“Did he leave any other message for me, Suzanne?”

“He said *Au revoir*, mademoiselle. Of course it would be that. And we are to enjoy ourselves—we are to eat, dance, laugh, drive. As if one would cry in Paris! He has left you the carriage, and Philip is to drive—ah! the villain! but he can drive well. Shall it be for half-past two, mademoiselle? The days are short, and we must catch the sun.”

Esther, acting still like one in a dream, said that it might be as Suzanne dictated; and afterwards she dressed herself, deliberately and but half

aware of that which she was doing. In the park her carriage was second to none. She knew that men turned and stared at her, that women whispered when she passed them by. But their homage meant little. Two questions agitated her unceasingly. Why had Doctor Xavier left her in Paris? What was her own future to be? The generous allowance of which the letter had spoken was a recompence, in some way unearned; and yet in others her due. She was wise enough to see that she had large claims upon her benefactor. For six months she had devoted herself, heart and soul, to his service. Some humiliations were inseparable from such an aim as he pursued. Esther had given unstintingly, and this was her reward. She was quite a long while before she understood that her allowance was to be two thousand pounds a year, and that the furniture and the rooms in the Avenue Hoche were her own. When she returned to those rooms at five o'clock the drive had refreshed her, and her first perturbation had passed. She was alone, truly; but how fortunate in her loneliness. A letter from the Bank of France informed her that the sum of one thousand pounds stood there to her credit. The whole world was open to her if she did not care to make Paris her home. Perhaps she thought of Devonshire and of the cathedral city, and of the lanes and gardens of her own country. But if she had any mind to visit them, an influence more potent restrained her. She remembered the Prince—was he not still in Paris? Esther's cheeks were burning when she



reflected that he might come to her. But it was not with fear, for she knew that he loved her.

He came at half-past five, driving a pair of horses in a light mail-phaeton, and wearing a long coat trimmed with sable, and a cap to match it. The night had set in chill and cold; filmy flakes of snow began to fall as soon as the sun had set. Esther was in the very act of assuring Suzanne that she could not possibly dine at a restaurant, when the bell rang loudly, and that blithe maid went hurrying away to answer it.

There had been many callers in the Avenue Hoche since they came to Paris—the flat had been besieged by idlers abundantly; but Esther knew, with a woman's instinct, that this was no formal visitor, sent there at the dictates of curiosity. She was not at all surprised when the Prince entered without ceremony, and at once informed her that he knew of Doctor Xavier's absence.

"I defied you to forbid me," he said gaily, "and here I am. It is snowing outside, and my horses are gone. You are far too generous to send me away, Miss Venn. I appeal to your instincts of pity."

He slipped off his fur coat, upon which the glistening drops of snow were melting, and delighted, apparently, by her embarrassment, he spoke of Francisco Xavier.

"So Il Demonio has gone to Spain," he said; "I heard the news in the Jockey Club this morning. Naturally my friends in Paris hasten to remind me of my misfortunes. 'Your cause is

lost,' they tell me, just at the moment when I am saying that it is won! Permit me a cigarette, and I will tell you all about it. I am sure you are anxious."

She did not tell him that she was not. His attack was so swift, his manner so irresistible, that she had neither the opportunity to forbid nor the will to deny him. For the first time since the Doctor had left her, she realised that she was not alone in Paris. Why should she send away the one friend she had found?

"Doctor Xavier went away very early," she said, offering him the only possible explanation. "I had no idea he was going, or I should not have allowed you to call upon me. He has gone to Spain; the affairs of his country call him there."

"Of his country and of mine; of course. Do you know what I am asking myself just now, Miss Venn? I see that you do not. Well, I am asking myself precisely how far Francisco Xavier has played upon your credulity."

"Upon mine? Oh, please do not say that. I have never doubted Doctor Xavier's honour."

"Then you are probably the first person who has paid him such a compliment. I came here to-night to recite a little page of history. Do not imagine that I am the hero of the story—far from it; I am the dupe. Francisco Xavier shall get his deserts, no more, no less. I will tell you the truth about him."

It was plain to Esther that a great deal of honesty dictated this hasty confession. She perceived now that the Prince had come to her

apartments determined to tell her the story of his life. She thought she understood why he wished to make her his confidant. If she were ill at ease and a little absent in her manner, the unusual circumstances of his visit contributed to her agitation. After all, Doctor Xavier's departure was not an accident but part of a subtler design to bring her face to face with the man who had been his friend. With what object she could not say. She listened with engrossing interest while the Prince spoke. At last the master-key of this grave secret might be entrusted to her.

"I have always believed Doctor Xavier to be my friend," she confessed with some concern. "If I do not know anything of his past, I cannot blame him. Why should he have told me, Prince? What have I to do with it?"

He leaned back upon the cushions of the sofa and laughed a little ironically.

"What have you to do with it? Yes, as your Shakespeare says, 'That is the question.' Why did he quit Spain and go to England? Why am I an idler in Paris when I should be at the head of my people? Is it not all a splendid puzzle, a game of chess with human figures? Oh, do not think that he is not clever! There is not a finer head in Europe! I am no more able to stand against him than the shingle against the sea. But I make a move, nevertheless: that is why I am here to-night."

The riddle of it silenced her. She could neither answer nor help him. When Suzanne carried in

the tea-tray, she was relieved. She dreaded, she knew not why, that which must come after.

"Do you take tea, Prince?" she asked, interrupting him with a commonplace. He threw away his cigarette and held out his hand.

"From you it will be nectar. We Spaniards poison ourselves with chocolate; but you will make me your English tea in Spain, and we shall call 'five o'clock' a fashion. Let us take that which is best from both countries and begin with ourselves."

He laughed at his own idea and began to sip the steaming tea. His jest brought the blood to Esther's cheeks. She was sure that she ought to protest, but she had not a word to say for herself.

"I have always heard that the English are unpopular in Spain," she remarked, aimlessly. "Why should I be the exception?"

"Because you are the individual and not the nation. It is only a lunatic who quarrels with others because they are not fellow-countrymen. I have been twice round the globe, and it seems to me that a man who is born in San Francisco is at heart much the same as the man who is born in Paris. He eats, drinks, and sleeps; he loves and is loved—lucky man! Let us leave him for a moment and return to Spain. I have not a time-table with me or I would have looked out our train; but I think it will be the Sud express, Miss Venn, at half-past seven in the evening."

She put down her cup, determined to be serious.

"Why do you speak like this, Prince," she protested; "why do you offend me?"

"Then you are offended? No, I refuse to believe it. You are merely unaware of the circumstances. I will tell you about them; I came to do so, if you do not forbid me?"

"No, I am anxious to hear them."

He settled himself upon the sofa and watched her face intently while he spoke.

"Then let us go back a little way, and I will ask you a question. What do you know of my country—what do you know of Cadi, Miss Venn?"

"I know little, Prince, practically nothing."

"As I thought; it is scarcely, I imagine, a name to you."

"It certainly is no more."

"In your school days, perhaps, you saw it marked as a little yellow spot upon the maps of Spain and France. You heard that a Prince ruled it under the suzerainty of the Republic. You have read that its people were Spanish, wild mountaineers, hardy fellows of the hills. If you had been a reader of travellers' books—which heaven grant you are not!—you would have known that it is a rich country because of its mines; and that in its capital, the town of Cadi, there is the life, the gaiety and the society of an older Paris. All that is the schoolmaster's preparation for our parable. One would have had to read the newspaper very closely to write the inner story of that fascinating State. I am not a historian—no, I know more about a racehorse

than diplomacy; but I will try to be your historian to-night. Cadi, Miss Venn, has had many princes. I am the last of them. My father died when I was thirteen years old, and, by the laws of my country, a Regent was appointed. That Regent was Francisco Xavier, your friend. He educated me, he was my guardian, friend, until my twentieth year. I trusted him like a brother. From my earliest days I had been taught that the loyalty of my people was unalterable. Judge of my awakening when I discovered in my twentieth year that if I were the Prince of Cadi in name, Francisco Xavier was in deed! He had won the allegiance my youth lost me. A united State was united no longer. My friends were the youth, the romance of my country; his were the wisdom, the balance, the sagacity. Twelve months later they called me to the throne. I found myself a splendid nonentity. The very cries in the streets were for Xavier de Montalvan. The papers that I signed were his handiwork; the laws were his laws. But the army was mine! I drove him out of Cadi, and France approved. Henceforth I was my own master in name and deed—you are interested, Miss Venn. I do not weary you?"

Esther, unable to take her eyes from his face, showed how great her interest was.

"But you, yourself, Prince—why are you not at Cadi now?"

"I will tell you in a word. Because I have not fulfilled Cadi's law."

He shifted uneasily in his seat and turned away from her while he spoke.

"By the custom of a thousand years," he said, "the princes of my country must marry within a year of their accession. That year is up in ten days from this day. If I let the tenth day pass and remain as I am, my kingdom goes to another—my rights, my possessions, my authority are taken from me. Francisco Xavier is banished, but his name remains beloved of his friends. In ten days he will achieve his ends. Do you know why he quitted Paris this morning?"

He turned his ardent eyes upon her, but she could not meet that steadfast gaze, and stammering a commonplace would have concealed her agitation thus.

"I am very sorry for you, Prince. If I had known——"

"How should you? It is not old Xavier's habit to make a confidant of his friends. Even I sometimes fail to understand him. Why, for instance, has he left you in Paris? Shall I say it is because he wishes you to be my wife?"

"No, no! indeed no!" she cried, drawing away from him; but he held her hand and drew her toward him in spite of herself.

"Let us make an end of the riddles," he said. "You know that I love you, you have known it since that night I first found you in this city and spoke the promise. Can such a man as I am be mistaken? If I were a boy, the son of one city—yes, I might deceive myself; but I, who have travelled twice round the world, who have known the best and the worst of men and women—Esther, could I deceive myself? No, no, I love

you with all a man's heart—I shall love you to my life's end! Esther, you can save me—you can save my country. Come with me, come to Cadi as my wife!"

She tried to silence him, but the words failed her; and overwhelmed and trembling, she let him close his arms about her and felt his lips upon her own, and knew that this was her destiny.



## CHAPTER XII

THE marriage of the reigning Prince of Cadi to one whom Paris had already learned to call "*La Belle Inconnue*," was the brief sensation of a winter month. People discussed little else for many days. A beautiful woman had come to the city; she had been seen, she had conquered. The pretty romance made gossip for the cafés while it entertained the salons with eloquent mendacities. From the *chroniques scandaleuses* you got a hundred versions, every one of them a lie. Some said that the bride was an American of fabulous wealth; others declared that her English was acquired, and that she came from Spain. There were twenty apologies for the hasty marriage, and each of them more false than the other.

In the end, Paris came to the conclusion that it really was a young man's story. It remained for the Prince's friends to declare that he had sold himself for good bank notes, and that his repentance would be speedy.

Esther knew nothing of this, nor did any unkind word reach her ears. She had promised to marry Prince Arthur, because she believed that

by marriage he would save his kingdom. So little, until this moment of decision, had she dared to consider the question, that even until the end she could not wholly understand how greatly she loved and was beloved in her turn. She lived, indeed, amidst surprises and excitements which denied her leisure. Though she had been willing to reflect, opportunity forbade her. Sometimes in the silence of the night she would ask herself whither she was going, to what unknown land or people. But the days were all too short for scruples; and if any hidden logic guided her, it was this: that she had found a friend and that he would be faithful to her. In her lover's presence, she never doubted her own wisdom. He approached her with a passionate ardour which forbade even protestation. She had never believed that a woman could mean so much to a man, could so change his life and influence his will. From the moment when she had said, "I will be your wife," scarce an hour of the waking day found him absent from her side. The morning brought his roses; together they breakfasted at Durand's, or one of the greater cafés. The afternoon found them driving in the Bois; there were dinners and theatres at night. What time had she for that preparation so necessary! If it had not been for the Prince's friend, the untiring, laughing, scheming Pauline, Baronne d'Arbois, Esther declared that she would never have been married at all.

Pauline, Baronne d'Arbois has been a leading figure in the later-day world of Paris. The

Church, the State, the salon, the theatre, have, in turn, been ruled by her. Prince Arthur had no friend more enthusiastic, perhaps none so frequently embarrassing. When Pauline heard of his approaching marriage, when she learned that his bride was alone and friendless in the city, no carriage was fast enough to carry her to Esther's side.

"Ah, my child!" she exclaimed in rapture, "what a splendid secret—and all Paris knows of it! I have come here at dear Arthur's request. You must let me be a sister to you. You must positively leave everything in my hands."

Esther was overawed by this well-schooled woman of the world, and cheerfully gave up her independence. She had exacted from Arthur a promise that their marriage should be in some part a secret, and he had acquiesced willingly enough.

"Secret or public, what does it matter if it gives me Esther!" he answered. "I will be married in a cellar, if it please you. Of course we must not forget your English birth. There will be a ceremony at the Embassy, and afterwards at St. Eustache. The Baronne will be there—no gate in Paris could shut her out. We shall have to tolerate her because we are going to her house to breakfast afterwards. I have thought about all the rest, and it is quite settled. We shall take the Sud express to my chalet at St. Girons; Gaudarez, the Captain of my Civil Guard and my oldest friend, will go on to Cadi with the news. If, as I expect, the people receive it with acclamation, we shall spend a

fortnight at the château and then visit our capital. You need not ask if I look forward to that day! Ah, to take you to them, Esther, to take the most beautiful woman in all the world!"

She had nothing to urge against it, although the doubt he had expressed remained in her thoughts. He, however, was full of his scheme, and chiefly of that part of it which concerned his kingdom.

"Old Xavier believes that he has outwitted me; but we shall see!" he said, like one anxious to be convinced. "You owe him much, Esther, and we must be kind to him. I have always been willing to honour him if he would consent to serve. But he desires to be the master. He believes that he can rule in Cadi and that the people will banish me. I imagine he is greatly mistaken. You see that I am doing exactly as he wished me to do. It remains to be known if I am wise."

He did not admit to Esther the grave doubt which harassed him; in truth, his object appeared to be so to occupy her time that she should have neither the leisure to repent nor the will to draw back. And in this he easily succeeded. It seemed to her but yesterday that he had said, "I love you!" and the words were still in her ears when Suzanne awoke her upon her wedding day. From that moment her impressions were blurred and vague. She remembered the sunny streets of Paris, the white satin clinging to her subtle limbs, the orange blossom twining about her splendid veil—but distantly, as in a dream.

Paris said that the Church of St. Eustache had rarely been so crowded. Esther recollected little of that service. She recalled the press of figures, lights against a background of gold; towering palms, the face of a priest, another face—that of the man she loved, close to her own, and whispering often, *Je t'aime!* The concluding scenes were at the church door, where the beggars of Paris pressed close upon the skirts of the rich. Esther remembered driving away in the Baroness's brougham to the Hôtel d'Arbois, in the Faubourg St. Germain. A hundred women kissed her there, men pressed her hands; she heard the music of a string band; she saw her husband everywhere, his uniform of white and gold conspicuous even in that abode of colour. Then, swiftly, the scene changed. Maids were busy over her. She put on a pretty gown of green and gold with sable about the neck of it. Congratulations were showered upon her. She passed down the immense staircase where the soldiers of the serried ranks were those of the guards of Paris. A carriage conveyed her quickly to the station. She remembered that Gaudarez, the captain, chaffed her husband about the tickets. A bell rang, a horn was blown, the train steamed out of the station upon its way to the South. She was alone with her husband at last. The *coupé* which had been engaged for them seemed so full of flowers that Esther thought their very odour insupportable. Arthur's first act was to let down one of the windows a little way and to speak of his friend Gaudarez.

"He is a splendid fellow," he exclaimed, waving a hand to a distant figure on the platform, "and he follows us to-night. Of course, our people must know at once. He will go on to Cadi to-morrow. It is a long journey, and I could not take you there without a rest. Come, little wife, there are none to see—I must kiss you!—must! must!"

He covered her face with passionate kisses, and holding her close with a Spaniard's ardour, he made the confession due to her.

"Ah," he said, "my people will forgive me when they see you—I never doubted it! They must forgive me!"

She looked up at him, a little troubled.

"Are they so very terrible, then, your people, Arthur?"

"They are not terrible, they are merely foolish. But the law is there; and I am the first man who has ever broken it."

"I do not understand you, dearest; please tell me."

"There is nothing to tell," he continued, with a gaiety which was so plainly forced that it did not deceive her. "By the law of Cadi I am supposed to marry a Spaniard. I have not done so. Very well, my people will be amused. At first, perhaps, they will grumble; but afterwards, when they see you, little wife—ah, then——"

He kissed her again, like one who would thus silence her suspicions. He did not tell her that by the law of Cadi the penalty for that which he had done was death.

"You should have told me before, dear," she pleaded, with a gentle protest. "I do not think it was right of you to have kept it from me."

He mocked her fears, but so caressingly that she did not resist him.

"The girl who has reigned in Paris will certainly reign in my own country," he said. "Are you not the most beautiful woman in all the world? Let them search Europe—where would they find such a wife for me? You know that they could not, Esther—the glass tells you so every day! You are mine—mine! and I would not give you up for all the kingdoms of the world!"

He went on to blame himself for his candour, assuring her that the very law had long been forgotten in Spain, and promising her that when he met old Xavier again, she would be the mistress and not the pupil.

"Mine is a free people, but they love their Prince. While he observes the common law, nothing is denied to him. They will fête us to the end of time, little wife. We shall dine all day and feast all night. You must like Cadi! I say that it is the greatest city in Europe, and the palace has been the treasure-house of kings. Gaudarez goes on to make everything ready for us. I have ordered carriages to meet us at Foix to-morrow at dawn, and we shall reach St. Girons in time for breakfast. Ah, *ma mie*, what days of love before us—what days of love!"

She listened patiently, although her suspicions were awakened. From the first she had told herself that sooner or later a cloud would darken

the horizon of her happiness. Here was the truth at last. Esther would not hide it from herself that if this law of Cadi were strictly enforced, her marriage could be nothing but morganatic. Spain would not recognise her; she would occupy the least enviable position that can fall to a wife.

"If your people like me," she said, expressing all her doubt. "Are you sure of it, dear Arthur? Have you thought what the consequences of dislike might be for us?"

He leant back upon the cushions and tried to play the philosopher.

"I never quarrel with the present, Esther," he said. "We lose half the happiness of life when we ask questions about to-morrow. Does it really concern us, except sentimentally? I am a rich man; and whether I make my home in France or in Spain you will share it. That is enough for me. If Gaudarez comes back and tells me unpleasant things, I shall not cross the frontier. The lamb who lies down with the wolf is not accustomed to dine upon mutton. If Cadi says 'no,' very well; we will return to Paris and shake the snow off our heels. But it is foolish to anticipate that which may not happen. My people are romantic and our little story will please them. I have implored Gaudarez to lose no time. He understands how much depends upon him. The rest of the programme is our own. We arrive at Foix about sunrise; it is a long drive through the hills, but my horses can do it in eight hours. We should be at St. Girons in



time for dinner. The place is bleak enough, and I regard it merely as a stage. If Gaudarez hurries, he can let us have the news on the third day. We shall then ride on to Oust, and if we have any luck we should be in the palace within the week. I want to show you the palace, Esther. My ancestors have lived there for more than a thousand years—but do not think you will see any ghosts. We have built a new wing, and furnished it in the French style. You must choose your own rooms and send to Paris for decorations. Of course, I do not mean you to live in a mountain city all the year round. We shall spend three months there, and earn our holiday. Some day I will take you to Devonshire, and you will show me the pretty places. Oh, I know! all you English people are homesick, and you will be no exception. If I wish to make you happy I must take you to England—and, of course, I wish it, heart and soul, because I love you! Yes, I love you, and would defy all the world for you!”

Esther could not but respond affectionately to such a faith in her own future. She had lived too long in a wonder world to quarrel with her present fortune or to anticipate the loss of it. Her husband's promises did not appeal in vain to a responsive imagination. She was always a willing listener when he spoke of his home and people. Despite her desire, she could not depict the city of Cadi, nor imagine its circumstances. Her idea of a palace was such as London and Exeter had given her. She did not believe that the house to which she was going would in any

way resemble the palaces either of bishops or of kings. If the plain truth were told, Arthur had been so much the lover and so little the prince, that she forgot sometimes that very gulf which the social law would place between them. He loved her; she was his wife. The rest must be in his hands. She cared not what it might be if thereby he won happiness.

They dined at Orleans at half past six, in the restaurant car there attached to the express. The wooded country through which they had passed delighted Esther, and she had a truer understanding of the beauty of Western France. The quaint village suggested a rural seclusion which even Paris and its gardens had failed to show her. But here and there a crucifix or an image, catching a glow of the sinking sun, bore witness to the peasants' faith and a creed unchanged. As night fell and the train rolled onward toward the South, even the villages became rarer and the towns more transient. Occasionally, through the night, Esther could look out of her windows to see figures upon a station platform and to hear the clanging of bells and the blowing of horns; but the hum of wheels and the cradle-like motion of the carriage won sleep for her, and when she woke at last they were at Toulouse, and another train awaited them. Thence, during the early hours of morning, they sped on toward Foix and the mountains. Day was just glimmering in the heavens when the first stage of that long journey

came to its end; and stepping out upon a wide platform, Esther knew that she was at Foix.

"We shall find my servants here, and the carriages," Arthur had said while he helped her to the platform and stacked their dressing-bags beside her. "We must have some hot coffee and then get on. I told them to put fur rugs in the carriage and two of my heavy coats. We'll make a soldier of you, Esther; you won't complain of the uniform when you get up into the hills."

She was but half awake, and not a little afraid of the strange eyes which here stared at her so curiously. Though it was then a little after six o'clock in the morning, quite a number of people had gathered upon the platform at Foix to meet the express; and they bustled hither and thither, shouting and pushing and exchanging their effusive greetings in a way quite characteristic of a Southern race. Some of them, Esther observed, were soldiers, and these she disliked cordially, for they stared her out of countenance, and taking advantage of her husband's absence, proffered an assistance entirely unnecessary. She had feared that some demonstration of welcome would have awaited them at Foix, and it was not without satisfaction that she found herself just an ordinary traveller alighting at a country station and doing battle with the difficulties of a terminus. Arthur, however, was anxious that she should not misunderstand such apparent neglect, and he offered her explanations over their hurried meal.

"I knew that you would be tired; and, besides, we are in a hurry," he said. "These people

would make speeches for a month if we gave them any encouragement. We shall have enough of that sort of thing to go through when we arrive at the palace. It is a long drive from here and I don't want my little girl to be dreadfully tired. Come, drink up your coffee, Esther; drink it while it is hot. We sha'n't get such a chance again until we reach St. Girons."

She obeyed him meekly, expressing her recognition of his consideration.

"You are very thoughtful, dear Arthur," she said. "I am sure I should run away and hide myself if any one presented me with an address. You must please ask them not to—even at Cadi."

He laughed and helped her to fruit. When breakfast was done, he went out to summon his servants, and Esther was left alone for a brief while in the corridor of the station. She did not know what instinct made her turn suddenly, or why she should have been conscious of some presence there which was not friendly; but it chanced that as she turned, she perceived a man almost at her elbow, and recognising the bright dress and the white bernouse of the Eastern, she saw that it was Yussuf, the Moor, Doctor Xavier's servant. For an instant she beheld his keen, piercing black eyes regarding her ominously. Then he vanished as mysteriously as he had come, without word or sign, and almost before she had realised how greatly his presence frightened her. Arthur found her still flushed and agitated, and it was difficult to tell him exactly what had happened.

"The Moor they call Yussuf, Doctor Xavier's servant—I have just seen him in the corridor!" she stammered, a little wildly.

He laughed at her fears, and instantly reassured her.

"Of course you would. He is going to Cadi, as we are. What are you afraid of, Esther? What has the man got to do with you?"

She could not tell him. She would not say how much she feared the omen.

In the courtyard of the station they found an old-fashioned barouche, and with it a *fourgon* for their luggage. Esther noticed that the liveries of the men-servants had once been showy, but were now a little worn and faded. The carriage itself suggested the France of the Empire; but the horses were magnificent, and what was more, there were four of them.

"It is eight years since I was at St. Girons," Arthur said, like one a little dubious about the reception awaiting them in his house. "To be frank, I have almost forgotten what the place is like. The steward says that it needs a fortune spending on it. Most of these old castles in Spain do; but as no one has a fortune, they remain uncared for. I have ordered the house-keeper to light fires in every room, and to do the best she can. If you were a sportsman, Esther we would go and hunt ibex to-morrow. The men here come of a hardy stock, and make splendid hunters. Some day I will show you the Pyrenees, and you will laugh at the Alps afterwards. There is nothing in all the world like Garvarnie, at least

I think so! We do not let off fireworks, and we do not love German bands at St. Girons; but we are none the worse for that. Switzerland has copied the Champs de Mars and is done for. At St. Girons you may live as the old knights lived a thousand years ago. Does it tempt you? Not a bit? You are asking for the young knights already!"

He ran on, anxious to please her, and pointing out the many beautiful scenes of that magnificent country. Esther had visited Switzerland, but she could already admit the remoter grandeur of the Spanish mountains. The scenery was the superb realisation of one of Gustave Doré's pictures, she thought: vast, gloomy and awe-inspiring, and, upon that, bewitching and speaking of eternal summer. The road wound ever upward, here above a splendid valley, there through the forests of pine; amid mighty crags, or upon the border of abysses so terrible that the eye could not fathom their gloomy depths. There were villages on the verdant plains below: clusters of red-roofed houses like dots upon a chart of green; churches from whose steeple sweet bells called the peasants to Mass. At the valley's heart a little river went leaping and foaming in a bed of black and forbidding rocks. The snow-capped peaks crowned all—a distant range of giants, so far away, so stupendous in their grandeur that they might have marked the boundaries of the unknown world.

. . . . .

They reached the castle at five o'clock that

afternoon. For an hour at least darkness had shut out those fantastic pictures of gorge and height which the long afternoon gave them so abundantly. Esther lay in her husband's arms and lost all sense of time or place. When she awoke he was lifting her from the carriage, and the light of a lantern flashed in her face. Night had come down in earnest now; the wind whistled dolefully through the caverns of the hills, and Esther, but half awake, believed at the first that some accident had overtaken them. A moment later, however, she perceived the narrow windows of some building above her, and could distinguish a cluster of spires and a great arched gate, through which the barouche drove away. The sound of strange voices, too, fell upon her ears; and then, out of this bitter night she was carried swiftly to the warmth and the light of some vast room, and waking thoroughly she knew that the journey was ended and that this was Arthur's home.

"Come," he said gaily, brushing the snowflakes off his coat, and holding his hands to the ruddy blaze, "come and warm yourself, little wife! You are really at St. Girons—you are home at last!"

She loosened her cloak and bent toward the flaming logs. The room in which they sat was ill-lighted enough, but she could see something of its immensity and of that strange *mélange* of riches and poverty it displayed. The chimney-piece, she thought, must be the largest in the world. You could have roasted an ox upon the hearth, and high above the ingle bizarre figures,

carved in jet-black oak, lifted a baldachino to the very ceiling. A buffet, just as odd, matched this giant chimney-piece. The walls were hung with torn and tattered tapestry. Chairs and tables of oak might have been hacked by the swords of an army.

There was no carpet on the floor, but the candlesticks were of pure silver and worthy a king's house. Esther's first impression of this room was of its homeliness in spite of all. The weird scenes she had quitted in the mountains had left her a little awed and afraid. She was like one who had found a haven from the night. It was all shut out now—all behind her; these amazing walls were her defence. Her lover stood beside her; the blazing fire brought the blood back to her stiffened limbs.

"I am sure that I shall like it, Arthur," she exclaimed upon an impulse of her gratitude. "How kind you are to me! Imagine being alone on that dreadful road! I shall never let you out of my sight while I am here!"

He knelt beside her and took both her hands in his own.

"Never!" he said, "it is a promise—never until my life's end."

They dined alone in the great hall, the old steward, Martinez, waiting upon them. When dinner was done, Arthur showed her a prettier room, furnished in the fashion of France, with Louis XV. ornaments and an old piano, which, like all old pianos, had once been the property of Chopin. Here for an hour she played to him, and



then at his bidding (for her fatigue was unmistakable) she followed an old woman of the house up a narrow winding stairway to her bedroom, and was left for the time being alone. That sense of homeliness she had discovered below was not lacking upstairs, despite walls of white stone, and windows which recalled the years of chivalry. Blazing logs upon an open hearth suffused a gentle warmth, and cast their welcome glow upon the high groined ceiling. The bed was curtained with dimity, white and spotless. Many candles stood upon a wide dressing-table; there were even fresh roses from the valleys in vases of Sévres. From the windows, which were little more than loopholes in tremendous walls of stone, a vista of the pass could be seen, and the road by which they had come up to the castle.

The night fell calm and still, and the wailing wind had ceased. A moon, waxing full and enshrouded in golden mist, rose up between two frowning peaks and pointed the untrodden snow with gems of fire. The sky itself was luminously blue and altogether bereft of cloud. Esther perceived that the castle stood upon a spur of rock and thence thrust out its Moorish gables above an immense abyss. The road to Foix resembled nothing so much as a winding stairway, zigzagging from peak to peak, and oft so narrow that she wondered a carriage might follow it safely. Vivid as her impressions were of the country to which the day had introduced her, this moonlight scene surpassed all the

grandeur of its changing shapes and the variety of its weird defiles. Mighty precipices abounded there at the height of the pass. Black basins of rock, prodigiously deep and surmounted by spires and pinnacles which evil spirits might have shaped, suggested a nether world, unknown and profoundly mysterious. The snow-caps themselves won beauty of the moonlight; some of them were but rounded domes, gentle to the eye and pleasing; others, jagged and twisted, leaned at such odd angles and were so tilted from the perpendicular that you might have thought a touch of the hand would have sent them headlong into the valleys below.

Esther found this scene of gorge and crag so alluring that she delayed undressing for many minutes to enjoy it. She was alone in the room and none troubled her. Her maid, Suzanne, was to follow them from Paris to-morrow—the willing housekeeper spoke Spanish with amazing volubility, but had no other tongue. Esther was very pleased when the old woman went about her business and left her to herself. She had never been a lover of strange faces, and at such an hour she did not desire them at all. If amid the natural excitement of that night her thoughts passed in any way from her present occupations, it was to remind her how far she had journeyed from England, and in what circumstances of isolation and dependence. Arthur's love meant so much to her in this lonely house. She clung to it as to something which would safeguard her wherever they might be, and sooner or later

would carry her back to the world again. If she had ever questioned the meaning of her love, this night answered her finally. She was naturally a girl of great courage, but she joined to this a disposition to rely both upon the fidelity and the affection of the friend she trusted. This gaunt castle, so silent, so remote, asked of her those qualities of mind and heart which were most characteristic of her girlhood.

She had changed her dress when first she entered the room, and put on a rose-pink dressing-gown in its place, allowing her abundant hair to fall upon her pretty shoulders and trying to feel at her ease. The glass showed her a rosy face, and arms and shoulders superbly white. If her thoughts wandered from the entrancing present, it was to remind her of the hand which had showered these gifts upon her and had made her future possible. She could not think hardly of Doctor Xavier, nor believe him to be her husband's enemy. She was so supremely happy herself that she desired the happiness of others and of all who had befriended her loneliness.

Such reflections caused her to be a little pre-occupied and to undress at her leisure. She awoke from them suddenly to remember what a long time she had been, and was about to make greater haste when, looking from the window by chance, she beheld something upon the mountain path which instantly arrested her attention and, she knew not why, excited a swift suspicion. But a quarter of an hour ago the utter loneliness of that road and the solitude of

the pass spoke eloquently of the winter's night ; but now, observing it for the second time, she perceived that there were horsemen upon it, a straggling company riding up in single file and making, as far as she could judge, for the postern of the castle. The moonlight showed her these figures with great distinctness. Effulgent beams scintillated upon the bright barrels of their rifles and silvered bit and spur, and all their stern accoutrement. She thought that she could place their captain, a cautious horseman, who turned from time to time to address a trooper near to him, or who halted for whole minutes together to observe the gate he approached. Esther could not imagine why those men came to St. Girons or what their business there might be. If she leaped to some wild idea of the truth, her own precarious past was not altogether unconcerned with it. From the first she could not believe that such happiness as had come to her could endure. There must be a price, a surprise and a rude awakening. Here, upon the road to Foix was the witness to the justice of that scepticism. The silent cloaked horsemen, the untrodden snow, the glittering peaks above, towers and turrets in the gloom below, helped her imagination in its new alarm. She was sure that danger menaced her. Nothing could banish that premonition—and stubborn in her submission she began quickly but with some composure to dress again. When next she looked from the window, the Bartizan Tower hid the men from her sight. Esther bound up her hair, pinned it

loosely, and trying to tell herself that she was foolish to be afraid, she went to her bedroom door and opened it. The narrow winding stair by which she had ascended was in darkness now. She distinguished voices—that of her husband and, as she believed of the steward Martinez—and somewhat reassured by these she withdrew into her room, and for a little while heard nothing but the sound of her own heart beating.

These suspicions—unjustified but girlish—endured for a full five minutes. Esther was quite ready to tell herself that her acts were very ridiculous, and that the horsemen were no other than travellers crossing by night to Spain, when a quick step upon the stair turned her eyes to the door again, and she was about to open it when her husband burst in unceremoniously and by word and manner at once confirmed her doubts.

“Where are you, Esther?” he asked; and then perceiving her, exclaimed, “why, you are still dressed!”

She told him everything, without disguise.

“It is very silly of me, but I have been frightened—and Arthur, what does it mean—why are those men at St. Girons?”

He asked her “what men?” pretending to be ignorant of it; but she persisted—

“I went to my window and the snow was untrodden—then I looked again and there were soldiers riding up! What is it, dear; please tell me?”

He made a brave effort, but he could not conceal his apprehensions from her; and so, holding

both her hot hands in his and kissing her, he put the best face he could upon it.

"Something has happened — perhaps it is Gaudarez who has news for me. I have sent Martinez to the gate. You must lock your door and wait until I come up. Of course there is no danger, but it is as well to be careful in this wild place. You must not be frightened, Esther. The people about here are all my friends; they would do anything for me."

He broke off abruptly and dropped her hands. A woman's wild scream, ringing through the hall below, gave him the lie and left in his eyes the wild look of a hunted man. He kissed Esther passionately, his pulse throbbed in every vein.

"I will soon settle this," he cried; "wait till I come." And without another word he went down the stairs and she was alone again.

She did not lock the door, it occurred to her even then that he might be driven back and return to her. Holding a candle in her hand she took up a position at the stairs' head and waited more fearfully than she had ever done in all her life. The suspense was intolerable; the shadows upon the winding stair she peopled with dreadful figures. The worst was known now—the swift cataclysm in which life, happiness, all might be lost. From the hall below came the sound of angry argument and of swords trailing upon the boards. Arthur's voice, clear and distinct above the others, was raised from time to time in command or entreaty; but it gave place suddenly to a sharp cry like that of a man stricken down

unawares. Esther believed that they had killed her lover; she reeled half swooning against the wall; the light fell from her hands and she waited in utter darkness. What awful crime had been committed? The uncertainty drove her as with a goad. She could hear the clash of swords, the deep breathing of men in anger, the shuffling and gasping cry of those who fight for life. Hoarse shouts filled the house; they died down as suddenly, and silence, profound and meaning, followed upon the uproar. In the ebb of the storm the messenger of death spoke clearly. A body fell with a heavy thud, unmistakable, dreadful to hear. Esther could control herself no longer. She ran wildly down the stairs and broke in upon the scene.

Twenty men were grouped about the hearth in the great hall, and the swords of three of them were unsheathed. Such light as fell upon the room shone upward from the reddening embers of the logs. Capricious rays, they flashed out upon forbidding faces and grim figures, leaving as in the shadow of the grave the body of a man who had fallen dead across the table. Esther's silent tread had been heard by none, but the cry which escaped her lips when she entered the hall brought every eye upon her and sent the swords to the sheaths. A burly man, fat and squat and threatening, strode towards her without ceremony.

"Ah," he said in broken French, "you save us the trouble, then, señorita!"

She shuddered at his touch, but her courage did not leave her.

"Where is my husband?" she asked. "What have you done with him?"

The man dragged her to the light and laughed in bravado.

"The Prince sends his compliments, señorita. He is called away. Yon fellow had a message but is too lazy to speak it. Come, we were waiting for you. It is time to be going, señorita."

She snatched her hand from the man and, covering her face, shut out the figure of the dead. It was not Arthur but another who lay so still in the shadows. Her relief was intense; she turned to the men, imploring their pity.

"Where is my husband?—oh, in God's name, take me to him."

No one seemed very willing to answer this pitiful appeal, but when she repeated it with tears in her eyes and her hands outstretched to them, a young trooper stepped forward and said—

"By the Virgin, señorita, but I will do what you want."

It was a chivalrous boast but vain. Scarcely had he spoken the words when another—a wild hill-man, drunk and reckless—pulled a dagger from his girdle and drove it to the youth's heart. He rolled headlong, almost to Esther's feet, and while his life's blood gushed out upon the floor she lost all consciousness and fell, swooning, by his side.



## CHAPTER XIII

A FRESH wind of dawn blowing coldly upon her face awoke Esther from her dream-like swoon. She opened her eyes and became aware that the sun was shining upon her face and that the night had passed. Anon, her situation shaped more clearly, and she understood that she was strapped upon a horse's back and that the animal's uncertain step rocked her as in the rudest cradle. She was very ill and her brain burned, defying all clear thought. If she remembered anything of yesterday, it was at first indistinctly as something which she would well forget. One by one, however, events shaped themselves. She recalled her arrival at Foix, the scene at the station, the drive through the hills, the silent gorge, the castle perched upon the height. She dwelt upon Arthur's passionate tenderness when they were together at their journey's end. She recalled her musings in the bedroom, the picture of the snow-bound road, and then, as in a flash, the whole story of the tragedy! Her despair at such a moment was beyond words to describe. She knew not whence the outrage had come, or why. At one time she was willing to think that there

men were brigands of the hills who would carry her to their hiding-places where she might expect a fate worse than death. But this thought she quickly rejected. No mere hill-thief would venture an attack upon her husband's house. She must find her answer in a subtler plan—nor could she separate her misfortunes from the story of Arthur's kingdom and of his months of exile. He himself had warned her that all might not be as he would wish it. This hour of crisis was the justification of his doubts.

She suffered terribly from the cold, though they had wrapped fur coats about her and even covered her face with a woollen shawl. The bonds which bound her to the saddle were cruelly tight and left her hands and feet white and bloodless. She could have cried for very pain of it, and yet suffered in silence. That many accompanied her upon this strange journey the circumstances of the hour denied. From time to time she heard a harsh voice encouraging a horse or cursing a loiterer, but the voice was never answered and it always ended in guttural self-approval. The road itself told her nothing. She perceived a mighty wall of rock upon her left hand, rising sheer, as it were, to the very heavens. Her eyes could not fathom the abyss below and she understood that they were upon the ledge of a precipice, descending to the valley's heart. Thus, for a full hour, she endured her torture with a woman's unbroken courage. They could but kill her, she said. She could be content to die if she knew that Arthur lived.

The *cortège*, if such it might be called, halted at last, and for the first time Esther beheld the face of one of her captors. This man she recognised at once for the burly ruffian who led the troop last night. His uniform was blue with metal buttons. He wore an odd-shaped busby and carried an ancient sword at his belt. As last night so now, his air of self-importance was tremendous, and not less ridiculous than the French tongue he delighted to misuse.

"So," he said, crying out in mock surprise, "Her Highness is awake! Come here, Pablo, come and help me to pay my respects."

He lumbered from his horse and tugged clumsily at the ropes which bound her. She was so faint and bloodless that she could scarcely stand when her feet touched the ground; the touch of the man's hand was loathsome to her, and she drew away from him, clinging to the horse. "Please leave me," she exclaimed, "please leave me alone. I do not want your help."

He laughed loudly, and, breaking into Spanish, addressed her in a long speech of which she could not understand a single word. When he remembered his broken French again it was to excuse himself upon a pretence of necessity, but with the air of one who would say, "I do what I please!"

"The ropes were tight? yes, would you fall down the mountain? I, Alonzo, I make it my business to save your life. You are cold, but the wine will warm you. Here is the *posada* of Vic-Dessos. We shall eat and drink, *señorita*—

ay, can you eat and drink? Well, I can, if you will not!"

The sunshine and the softer air of the valley brought the blood back to Esther's tingling limbs, and although she felt very sick and giddy and her heart sank at every word, she did not answer the man nor again appeal to his pity. The place they had come to was a little grassy knoll above the bed of a mountain cascade. Here was a rude inn built of planks. Peasants sat at a little table beneath the shelter of a clump of pines. The valley itself spread out far and wide upon her left hand, disclosing a pleasing scene of field and pasture and nestling villages. Now that she could count the number of her escort, she perceived that the company was five in all, and that one of them was the man who had struck her befriender down last night. Not a shred of romance could she now permit these roving bandits. The less kindly sunlight declared many a rent in their tattered uniforms and showed their accoutrement as but a metal sham. They were indescribably dirty, ferocious in mien and obviously drunken. Whither they were taking her or to what end, she knew no more than the dead. Wild stories of the Pyrenees and its mountain bands had been told her often in Doctor Xavier's house. She believed that her story was the simplest—she had fallen into the hands of the hill-men and would be lucky to escape them with her life.

They led her to a seat before the inn door, and there left her to rest her weary limbs. A Spanish woman, fat but not unkindly, set a bottle of harsh

wine before her and a mess of kid's flesh from which she turned with loathing. Her escort, meanwhile, drank deep and quarrelled no less liberally. The leader himself, the man they named Alonzo, appeared to Esther to have a genius for long speeches which was altogether remarkable. From time to time he addressed her as though she had been an audience of ten thousand, in a tongue entirely foreign to her and with an emphasis absolutely unnecessary. His fellows, meanwhile, played a game with greasy cards and pointed their remarks from time to time with a fine display of Spanish knives. The intruding peasants, taking in the situation at a glance, went off one by one, and left the robbers in possession of the inn. No scene of contrasts more picturesque could have been discovered or imagined. Yonder on the heights was the glory and the solitude of sternest winter; here in the valley the murmur of streams, the rustling of leaves, the pasture land, the first-fruits of a Southern spring. When the bellowing voice permitted her to hear it, Esther was conscious of that buzz of insect life which ever follows abundant sunshine. The cascade, leaping down from boulder to boulder, gave a weird music whose note was plaintive and not a little melancholy.

Esther's brave demeanour both perplexed and angered the leader of the band. He had sent the landlord hither, thither, in quest of such meagre entertainment as the inn could afford; and when Esther would do no more than sip her wine, and turned sick and faint from the mess of food they

offered her, he was alternately threatening and persuasive.

"Ah," he said, "we must teach you to be obedient, señorita. You wish to frighten us. Look at me, Alonzo Delarez—am I one to be afraid? By the Virgin of Cadi, I am not frightened at all! Here is a little whip, señorita. If you make me, I shall know how to use it. Observe my features; do you detect any weakness there? Holy Image! I have known some obstinate females in my time. It is like a woman to die for spite—but you shall not die, not just yet, señorita, so please to eat. Do not compel me to forget myself."

She did not look at him, did not say a word. He carried a riding whip in his hand, and he gripped the leather of it tightly, while with the other hand he pushed the dish toward her.

"Do you hear?" he repeated, "I am ordering you to eat!"

Again she did not answer, did not make a movement. Chagrined at her obstinacy, he caught her by the wrist and raised his whip suddenly.

"None of your fine airs here!" he exclaimed, with the bully's delight at her helplessness. "Will you eat that meat or will you not?"

She believed that he would strike her, and she did not shrink from the blow. The others applauded him, crying, "Well done, old Alonzo!" The woman of the posada stood with folded arms watching the scene indifferently. The question had been put for the third time; Esther believed

that nothing could save her from this terrible ignominy of a blow, when, without any warning, a loud clatter of hoofs was heard upon the path, and before any man could stir hand or foot a troop of cavalry swept down the defile and reined back in a dramatic halt at the very door of the inn. For an instant Esther did not know whether the newcomers were friends or foes. She perceived many bright blue uniforms and heard an officer talking angrily. Then she understood that the ruffian, Alonzo, was excusing himself as best he could; but he had not uttered many words when some one snatched the whip from his hand and beat him unmercifully. Esther saw the blood running from his face while he grovelled upon his knees before a burly trooper; she beheld the remaining bandits flying wildly to the hills; then some one spoke to her, and she burst into a flood of tears.

"Good God, mademoiselle! what does this mean—who are you? How did you come to this place?"

She raised her eyes, and found herself face to face with a man of fine presence, and apparently of some thirty years of age. He wore the uniform of a regiment of hussars, bright blue in colour and heavily laced with gold. His white-gloved hand rested lightly upon the gold hilt of his sword. His words seemed well meant; he offered her a soldier's homage.

"Do not be afraid, I beg of you," he said. "I am the Comte de Foix; these are my men. You have nothing to fear from them."

She dried her tears and answered him quite frankly—

"My home is at St. Girons—I arrived there from Paris yesterday—if you could send a message there, my husband would be very grateful to you."

He turned and called a trooper to him. Nothing was easier than to do as she asked.

"You are staying with the Prince, then, madame?" he asked.

"I am his wife," she said.

The Count regarded her with a look expressing both amazement and incredulity.

"The wife of my Prince, madame!—impossible! This is his own regiment. Please do not jest with me. I am one of His Highness's oldest friends."

"Sir," she said, "I would ask you if any one in my circumstances would wish to jest. If you doubt me, send to St. Girons at once. I do not know whether my husband is alive or dead. You can understand what I suffer."

He did not seem to hear her; his hesitation was not to be disguised. Some of the hussars, by this time, had dismounted from their horses and they held them in a circle about the inn door. The landlady had gone flying into the house at the first word spoken. The bandit, Alonzo, hung limp and dead above the moaning cascade. They hanged him without pity from a branch of the oak in the garden of the inn. When the Count next spoke, he gave an order which sent six of the troopers at the gallop toward St. Girons.

"Let me have tidings before sunset. The Prince is to know that I have ridden to the



frontier with this lady. If you find any stranger in the castle, hang him without question; say that the Comte de Foix is your authority. You others, get a litter ready. Madame cannot walk. Let a file go on to Merens and prepare breakfast. We shall be there in an hour."

They obeyed him with that rare dispatch which characterises a well-drilled troop. East and west horsemen went clattering up the pass. Others entered the inn and emerged with wood and ropes and sheeting. Esther, whose tears were still undried upon her face, watched them with eager eyes. She was not thinking of herself but of six who rode headlong to St. Girons. The Count had said that he was taking her to Cadi. She was sure that she was not mistaken. She wondered if his will were adamant.

"You are ill, madame," he said, with characteristic sympathy. "Please tell me exactly what has happened. I may be very stupid, but I am still in ignorance."

She told him from the beginning.

"I am the adopted daughter of Doctor Xavier of Cadi. I was married to Prince Arthur in Paris two days ago. We came to Foix by train and then drove to St. Girons. It must have been eleven o'clock at night when these men entered the castle. I saw them from my window and told my husband. He made light of it, and left me—I have not seen him since. When I went down to the hall he was not there. I must have swooned. I remembered nothing more until I awoke almost at this inn door."

"Your anxiety is unnecessary," he replied, suavely. I have no doubt whatever of the Prince's safety. These men are vulgar thieves. They will scatter directly a troop appears in the hills. I imagine they were in ignorance that the Prince was at St. Giron. They certainly have not courage enough to do him an injury!"

With this and similar assurances he did his best to persuade her. She thought it a little odd that he had never once spoken of her marriage or appeared to recognise it. He addressed her as a stranger, it may be as one who had shared the hospitality of St. Giron; but of her act and its consequences he was careful not to speak.

"In any case we shall not be long in doubt," he said; "my men have definite instructions and will obey them to the letter. If you feel equal to it, we will now go on to Merens; I am sure it is the wiser course, madame."

It was plain to her that he would insist upon it, and the futility of further protest being evident, she gave her reluctant consent and thanked him for his solicitude. Troopers had, by this time, contrived a rude litter of poles and sheeting and in this they carried her from the inn—for she was far too weak to walk, and even the most trifling exertion caused her an effort. Esther wondered, in spite of all, if any English girl had ever crossed the mountains in such a fashion—escorted by a hundred Spanish hussars who had snatched her from insult or from death. The troopers' jangling arms, the bugle's deep note, the tossing plumes, the capering horses suggested some wild pageant

of the hills which no story-book surpassed. Her imagination would have delighted in such a spectacle but for that vivid doubt which followed every step and harassed her unpityingly. Was Arthur alive? When and where would he come to her? Had her love-dream ended for ever? She knew not. Some crisis of her fate had overtaken her, and the future lay in God's hands. Esther, troubled in her new security, lay back upon the pillow and let the sunshine fall upon her tired face. In the end she slept, and in her sleep she heard her lover's voice.

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## CHAPTER XIV

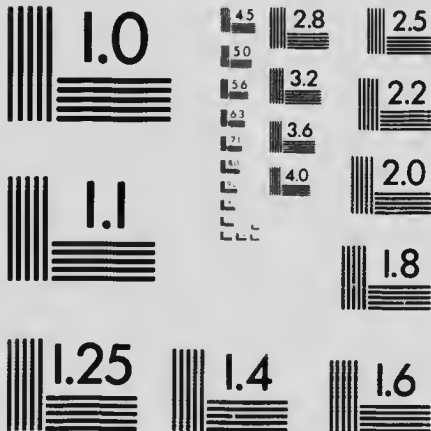
It was twelve o'clock when the cavalry rode into the hamlet of Merens, and some quarter of an hour later when Esther herself arrived at the inn door and was at once shown up to a spick-and-span bedroom upon the first floor. The kindness of those into whose hands she had fallen, and the refusal to believe that ill-news of her husband was possible had done not a little to restore her strength; and although her wrists were still red where the cords had bound them, and her cheeks had lost their rosy colour, her desire to be active caused her to make light of these troubles, and to assure the Comte de Foix that all was well with her. The inn itself stood a picture for the eye—white and clean and conspicuous in a pretty village. A little girl who had once been in England, and was a great celebrity upon that account, attended Esther to her room and could not do enough for her.

"It is my Uncle José who keeps the inn," she said, delighted at a chance of airing a foreign tongue. "I have been three years in England, miss, in Regent Park. Some day I hope to go there again. The English come to Merens when it is summer time, and I speak to them. It is



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funny to hear their Spanish, miss ; they say, ' Si, si, señorita,' and think it means everything. Have you come from Garvarnie?—no ! Oh, but you should see Garvarnie ! It is the most beautiful place in the world. And all the English go there. Will you have hot water, miss ? Wait, then, and I will run ! ”

She raced away like a hare, glad to be occupied, and more particularly to tell her friends below that miss was really English. Esther meanwhile laid aside her black mantilla—the robbers' legacy—and when she had bathed her face in clear, cold water and arranged her disordered dress, she opened a folding glass above the washing-stand, and so beheld herself for the first time since she had quitted St. Girons. The change in her appearance both distressed and surprised her. She had not believed it possible that one night could so alter her or leave such traces of its events. None would call her beautiful to-day, not even in flattery. The ghastly pallor of her face, and the deep black rings beneath her eyes, recalled in an instant the Esther of seven months ago, the Esther of the garret and the theatre door. Nevertheless she could not at once believe in the truth which the glass disclosed to her, and she said that such a punishment of her imprudence would be greater than she could bear. Was Francisco Xavier but a charlatan after all ! The mirror could not lie. Esther buried her face in her hands and would not look in the glass again.

—This fit of despondency did not long endure. There are depths of despair which, when fathomed,

leave the mind calm and uncritical. Never from the first had Esther wanted a woman's courage, or proved herself unworthy of that self-confidence which is life's surest staff. Reflection told her that no woman could go through what she had gone through and come out unscathed. She was ill, weak, anxious. Let there be good news from St. Girons and the colour would come back to her cheeks, the brightness to her eyes. This she did not doubt; and greatly helped by her own good common-sense, she made what toilet she could and went down to the *salle à manger*. Here a tempting breakfast awaited her. Not in vain had the little Spanish girl spent six months in "Regent Park." Tea was the national drink of England, therefore it must be ready for the English miss, and ready it was, poor yellow stuff, boiling and tasteless. But the bread was spotless; the omelet, the eggs, the mutton, excellent. And to these the Comte de Foix, who sat with her, added words of good cheer. He promised her to wait at Merens until they had the news from the mills.

"It is in my mind," he said, "that the Prince was not in the house when these rogues left it. Possibly he had gone to the nearest post for assistance. If that is so a few hours should bring him to us. You must really make an effort to get well before he comes, madame. I have a great responsibility, and it is my duty to remember it. Please to drink all the wine in that bottle, and when you have drunk it, I will order another to be opened."



He pushed a bottle of white wine to her, joining in her amusement at his proposal. She was a little astonished that he avoided discussing those events of which she knew he was thinking deeply. Here, as upon the high road, no mention was made of her marriage to the Prince; and yet the omission was so discreet that she could not resent it. The Count displayed the urbanity and the polish of a cosmopolitan. He had been much in England, had raced his horses there, had shot a Yorkshire moor, was a member of half the Jockey clubs, and numbered many acquaintances in the social world. Esther could not help wondering what he would say if he knew her story, her simple life in the old cathedral city, her bitter days of poverty and struggle. But she was quite wise enough to say nothing about them. She encouraged him to talk.

"I know all the cities of Europe," he said, with some pardonable vanity; "but, really, I would change none of them for this little provincial town of Cadi to which we are going. It has all the advantages of Paris, and is not one-fifth the size. Its theatre is one of the finest in Europe. When there is only one playhouse in a city, a man does not spend an hour in the morning asking what he shall see at night. Those who are fond of old buildings discover that our cathedral is as old as the Romans. I suppose it is an advantage to have things very old, especially when one is referring to one's female relatives and their fortunes. In Cadi you go to a Roman church at eight o'clock in the morning and to an English

racecourse at twelve. There is five o'clock tea at Dumine's, one of the finest restaurants in Europe; and for a fortnight at least in every year Jean de Reszké at the opera afterwards. Our women are the prettiest in the South: there are so many of them that we do not quarrel. We have a breed of horses which few countries can surpass. If you like riding you will like Cadi. Tell me that you paint, and I will show you Murillo's masterpieces for your models. If you sing, there is Felipe Marcia, who will give you the execution of an angel and the abuse of a jockey. Our people are quick in their affections, but changeable. We cry 'Viva' to-night, and hang the man to-morrow. Duels are to be arranged at all hours of the day and night. You can get a man killed for sixpence, and buy the judge for threepence-half-penny. Perhaps that is why we are so happy. A careless race, readily victimised by an adventurer—such a people is difficult to govern. It demands many qualities in a ruler—will, firmness, an appeal to its romantic side, singular patriotism. Our Prince has already been too long away from us. I am very glad to hear that he is returning."

She listened to him with eager ears. Arthur had already told her much of his countrymen; but he viewed them from another standpoint than this flippant man of the world. The Count's confidence, however, was greatly to her liking. Even at the luncheon table she would listen from time to time for any sound upon the road which would speak of tidings and the messenger. She was not ungrateful to her companion for his

brave effort to divert her thoughts and compel forgetfulness.

"I wish I could share your faith," she exclaimed dubiously in answer to his repeated assurances; but it is all like a nightmare to me. Imagine it, Count; I was married in Paris the day before yesterday, and here to-day I do not know whether my husband is alive or dead."

He did not appear to hear her, and it was plain that he would not discuss her history.

"Do you think I should be sitting here at my breakfast if I thought the Prince was in danger?" he asked with an honesty he meant to be transparent. "You have been the victim of an impudent outrage; but the Civil Guards will see that justice is done. We make short work with such fellows on the frontier. The Civil Guard shoots them at sight if it cannot catch them; a rope is all they get when they are taken. Come, let us forget it if we can, and go out into the garden. I will show you the hills above Cadi, and we shall see my messenger coming over the pass."

His confidence was infectious and not to be resisted. She went with him to a little garden behind the inn, and there beneath the shadow of a plane tree, coffee was served to them, and they delighted in such a panorama of height and valley and fertile fields as only the Pyrenees can show. In the village below them, hussars were gossiping with the maids or loitering before the windowless shop. The door of a neighbouring chapel stood open, and peasants went in and out, as the musical bells called them. The quiet and repose

of it all would have appealed greatly to Esther if her question had been answered; but it was three o'clock before the horseman appeared at the height of the pass, and half-past three when he came clattering up to the inn door.

"The news is good or he would not be in such a hurry," said the Count, starting to his feet and striding out. "Do not move; I will lose no time."

He went away, and was gone, as she thought, an interminable time. Distressed to the last degree, the victim of an agitation she could not control, Esther rose from her seat and restrained herself with difficulty from following him. She counted the minutes of his absence, and losing reckoning she started to count them again. The suspense was intolerable. When the Count returned he told her with a laugh that he had not been a full minute away.

"Yes, yes!" she cried, entreaty written in her pleading eyes, "but Arthur, my husband, what has happened——"

"Absolutely nothing, madame! It is just as I thought. The Prince had gone to the station when you were taken from his house. He is perfectly well and approves of what I have done. You are to accompany me to Cadi without delay. He will follow us as soon as may be."

She would have said, "Thank God!" but something in the Count's manner alarmed her; and searching his face with her shrewd eyes she told herself that he lied; and so she did not say a word, but turned from him like one who must be alone with her grief.

They found a travelling carriage at Merens and a sturdy team of horses to drag them across the pass. Esther thought their progress all too leisurely; but the road was steep and winding and the hussars were in no hurry. It was four o'clock when they quitted the village, and half-past five when they crossed the frontier which divides the kingdom of Cadi from the territory of France. Here had been set up a guard station, and formidable officials regarded the traveller with not a little curiosity, though neither by word nor gesture did they offer her incivility. The country itself was singularly beautiful and less rugged than that about St. Girons. Gentle grassy slopes showed many a picturesque chalet or grazing herd. Cattle bells jingled in the silent glades. The snow peaks were far away like a haze of fantastic cloud beneath an azure sky. Such travellers as they passed spoke of a sturdy race, clean and quick and busy. Anon, the pass carried them into the heart of a forest where giant trees filtered the welcome sunlight, and many a knoll and thicket might have borne witness to an English summer.

The Comte de Foix, riding by Esther's carriage, did not fail to point out the natural beauties of the pass nor to dwell upon them patriotically.

"It is a wonderful country," he said, "and I wonder that so few English visit it. Forgive me for saying so, but you are not a people of ideas where travel is concerned. You go to the Riviera and the sirocco kills you; or you hibernate at Biarritz and bewail your gloom. Here in Cadi,

you may take winter or summer as you choose, the snow on the heights, the roses in the valleys. There is no climate so severe, none so gentle in the world. Our invalids go five hundred yards up the hills and laugh at the doctors. Consumption is unknown among us. If a man coughs, he is a curiosity. We are simple, gay, rich, hospitable to strangers, and, as you will gather from my words, exceedingly modest. In another hour, you shall see the city itself; I hope it will be a surprise to you; I feel convinced it will."

"At least, I hope to find my husband there," she exclaimed, caring little that she interrupted him. "If Cadi puts an end to my anxiety, I shall always be grateful to it."

"It cannot fail to," he responded gaily. "No one is anxious in this country. We shall not permit you to be the exception."

She thought it to be an evasive answer, and was greatly harassed by the persistency with which he ignored her own position and the station to which her marriage had entitled her. That his polished manner concealed something from her she had been sure since she quitted Merens. Yet what it was, or what subtle conspiracy prompted his actions, was beyond her power to imagine. The Count, meanwhile, had a hundred stories to divert her; and presently breaking off from them when they emerged from the defile he indicated a house upon the hillside and asked her to regard it particularly.

"As a friend of its owner," he said, "you will be interested in that place. It is very old but

very beautiful; the house of a man who has done much for Cadi. I am referring, of course, to the minister, the Duke of Montalvan."

Esther was greatly interested. The house he indicated stood in a cleft between the hills, with great woods in tiers behind it and a pretty lake in the hollow of its park. Massive ramparts, flanking towers, the keep and bastion of a castle justified its claim to great antiquity. She wondered if Doctor Xavier were there now. Her sense of isolation was lost when she reflected that she was at the gates of her benefactor's house and that the night might bring him to her.

"I should greatly like to see Doctor Xavier," she said with animation. "It is not a fortnight ago that he left me in Paris. He was very kind to me in England, as I think you know; I lived more than six months in his house. Of course he would be very surprised to see me. We said good-bye like those who will never meet again. Perhaps it was not all so purposeless as it appeared. But I cannot flatter myself that I am the subject of Doctor Xavier's intentions. You would understand that, Count?"

"I can admit nothing," he said cavalierly. "The man who leaves woman out of his calculation is a poor fellow; his political arithmetic cannot be worth much. Let us say that the Duke did not consider Cadi quite as amusing for you as Paris. He would naturally remember that since you say he is your friend."

"I have believed him to be so, Count; a friend to me and to my husband."



It was a direct invitation to him to speak ; but the old diplomatist skilfully avoided the dangerous ground. Esther could detect hesitation in every word he spoke.

"Cadi owes the Duke much," he said reflectively, "perhaps her very existence as a nation. If she has been saved from the French, it is Francisco Xavier who has saved her. I speak of matters with which you cannot be familiar. There must always be one dominating mind in the councils of a Government. A minority of my countrymen has found that mind in the person of the Duke de Montalvan. The rest do not think ; they are the children of the sun, idlers, living for to-day. An appeal to their intellect goes for nothing. You must appeal to their heart and sentiment, and the scientific mind fails in this. When the Prince returns, I trust that we shall unite these factions. His absence has been greatly resented ; but fortunately for him we have short memories in Cadi. You observe how little I touch upon our merits, madame. At the corner by the inn yonder I will leave the city to speak for itself. It will not be very long now before you hear the Duke in his own defence."

He spoke as one who would say, "My duty is done" ; and when he had reined in an instant to look back at the road they had traversed, as though to assure himself that none followed, he put his horse to the gallop and pressed on like one who would overtake the leaders of the troop. The cavalcade had entered a pleasant wood by this time, and many a shady glen caught up the



evening light and gave an entrancing vista of grove and thicket and the forest's heart. Beyond this wood, where the trees opened out and disclosed a stately avenue, there stood a crazy inn upon the hillside; and from the plateau before its doors Esther first beheld the spires and roofs of that city wherein she was to suffer so much. The sun was setting now, and it flashed crimson stars from many a window above the towering ramparts and splashed with gold the lazy river at the city's heart. The road itself wound about the hillside like a silver thread upon a field of green. Esther could admit that the scene was a bewitching one, surpassing all that she had imagined of Cadi and its capital. The gentle hills, the bordering forests, the multitude of houses, the spires and turrets upstanding through the centuries, the hum of the busy life revealed to her a world of which she had never dreamed. And in this city she would find the man she loved, would answer those tormenting questions which never ceased to present themselves. Of other ideas she had none. Her own position as the wife of Cadi's Prince must not be remembered, nor would she permit herself to consider it. Esther believed that she was going to her husband and that to-night she would find him. All else must give place to this; her love was predominating.

The Count had left her at the crest of the hill, nor did she see anything further of her escort until the city's gate was reached. The night fell suddenly, as ever in the Pyrenees. A cold wind swept down from the hills; lights began to

twinkle in many a homestead ; the Angelus rang out from every steeple. As the twilight deepened and shadows fell across the road, Esther became aware that some one had ridden up to her carriage ; and when she turned her head, thinking it to be the Count, and wondering that she had not seen him fall back, she perceived, with no little alarm, the white bernouse and the ill-omened frock of Yussuf, the Moor. Very surprised to find him in such a place and, it may be, not a little alarmed, she wrapped her mantilla more closely about her face and sat back in the carriage to avoid his glance ; but he rode up boldly to her side ; and, bending over from the saddle of a great black horse, he insisted upon being heard.

"It is I, Yussuf, señorita ; please to listen."

"What do want with me?" she cried ; "why are you here?"

"Because I am your friend, lady."

"Yes, yes ; then what do you wish to say?"

"That your husband must not come to Cadi—I, Yussuf, know it. Keep him away, lady ; he must not come—they will kill him."

She sat very still, fumbling with the veil about her face. From the first this Moor had been a figure of ill-omen. Why should she pay any attention to such a madman's story. Nevertheless, her heart beat quickly ; she felt that she must hear him to the end.

"I do not believe you," she replied with great composure ; "what has my husband done?"

"He has married a foreigner, lady. He has broken the law. Do not let him return to his

judges. They are bringing you here because they know that he will follow. Keep him out of the trap—they will kill him."

She uttered a low cry, and the veil fell from her face. At the same moment the carriage swept up to the city's gate; guards surrounded it; she heard many voices in argument; saw the lights and the life of the streets beyond the barrier. But the Moor had disappeared in the press of the people. Esther knew not whether he were friend or enemy. The shadows seemed to be closing about her life. She entered her husband's city, and it seemed to her that the gate of some mighty prison closed behind her as she went.

## CHAPTER XV

ARTHUR OF CADI was too well acquainted with the character of his countrymen to doubt for a moment the meaning of the attack upon St. Girons or what the outcome of it was likely to be. No sooner had Martinez, the steward, informed him that there were horsemen at the gate of the castle and that they were set upon an entry, than he named them the servants of Francisco Xavier and of that party which was hostile to him in the councils of his Government. None the less, his wit was unable to say precisely what part they had been hired to play; and while he did not fear for his life nor for the life of the woman he loved, he understood the hazard of the game and entered upon it with the courage of his race.

"It must be Alonzo of Vic-Dessos and his band," he said, leaping to his feet and listening to the frenzied blows upon the gate. "I had never thought of that, Martinez. What, in God's name, do they want here?"

The steward answered with the quiet cynicism which thirty years of that dangerous servitude had taught him.

"They will tell you when they have blown open the locks, Highness," he said cynically. "Listen to that; they are upon the drawbridge already."

It was at this moment that Arthur ran up hurriedly to Esther's room and made such provision as he could for her safety. A quick thinker, it occurred to him at once that his old enemy, the Duke, had struck this blow with a Spaniard's subtlety and more than a Spaniard's swiftness. Under cover of these hired ruffians, whose complicity could be so lightly purchased, he had veiled an attack which opportunity elsewhere denied to him. Arthur said at once that his marriage was the key to this open declaration of hostility. That they would, if they could, carry him to Cadi, there to answer his enemies in the city, he never doubted; and it flashed upon him that he must outwit them at any cost, even at the cost, as it would appear, of cowardice and flight. This was in his mind when he commanded Esther to lock her door. If he could but reach the guard at the post upon the summit of the pass, this bandit's crew would get short shrift and the rest would be easy. Thus it came about that, risking all upon a supreme venture, he fled from the house to the stables, and bridling the first horse he found there he leaped upon his back and set him at a gallop for the station on the heights. Such a counterstroke was not within the calculations of Alonzo and his fellows. They had posted a man at the stable gate, it is true; but a slash of the whip across his face sent him flying from

his saddle, and before he could recover himself, Arthur was a hundred yards up the pass, and, roused by the outcry, his enemies raced after him in hot pursuit.

An inexpressible tenderness toward little Esther was the first inspiration of this wild ride. Since first he saw her in London, nearly seven months ago, Arthur had found her different from all other women; had been aware of a mutual sympathy which waxed strong with the days and had culminated in complete abandonment to the impulses of a passionate affection. If he had wronged her, love must plead for him. At the worst, he thought, Cadi could refuse to recognise his marriage and leave him his liberty. They would be exiles together, caring nothing for that which they had lost. This reality of a momentous night brought home to him in an instant the deeper responsibilities he had ignored. He began to perceive that he was face to face with an ambitious and a relentless enemy, with one who would stand at nothing which opposed his ambitions and his ends. Arthur knew that he himself possessed none of those gifts which make the subtle statesman the successful diplomatist. He had only a man's good courage, a birthright to the affection of his people; but these, he said, might yet suffice. A certain joy of that antagonism filled him as he galloped wildly up the pass. He knew that a woman had roused him to effort at last. The old indifferent life was done with: he would remember his manhood for Esther's sake.

We have said that a number of the hill-men followed him upon the pass; but of these several quickly abandoned the pursuit, leaving such glory as was to be got to their more courageous fellows. The perils of the road might, indeed, have deterred men of sterner courage, for it was often but a bridle track above the gorges, a ribbon winding about the higher peaks. One stumble upon the snow, one false step, and a man would have gone headlong down five thousand feet to an unknown grave in the black abyss below. Arthur, a horseman from his very childhood, cared nothing for the danger. The snow flying from his horse's hoofs, the black shadows, the cries behind him braced his nerve as to some combat of which the prize was liberty. Yonder, high up above this world of silence and the night, there flashed the lights of that station which was his goal. Let him reach its doors, he said, and Francisco Xavier were answered indeed. He called to his good horse and laughed at the sounds behind him. And yet they were drawing nearer—that thud of hoofs was more clearly to be heard; the race was not won. It had scarcely begun.

He had taken a horse at hazard from the stable, ignorant that the beast was one of those which had drawn the carriage from Foix that day. Already over-driven, the rigours of this road left it so utterly exhausted that its brave gallop degenerated anon into a mere canter and ultimately was little beyond a trot. This alarming truth came to the rider suddenly at the very moment

when he was flushed with success; and drawing rein because he must, he began to think that the game was with old Xavier after all. There below on the winding road the first of his pursuers emerged from the shadows. Arthur knew not how many followed him from the castle; but he perceived that flight would help him no longer; and saying that he would sell his life dearly, he permitted his horse to walk and so waited for the men.

This relaxation of effort brought with it a clear understanding of his position and a darker side to a mental picture from which he could not turn. His quick survey of height and gorge failed to inspire him with an idea. Upon his left hand the rocks went up sheer to their snowy peaks in the azure above. No eye could find the bed of the gorge below him. The winding road shut out that flash of the station's lights which so cheered him five minutes ago. He believed that the end must be here, and wheeling his horse regardless of the peril, he prepared to meet it. It was a moment of intense suspense, for he was an unarmed man and he believed that many followed him from the house. An intent ear, magnifying the echoes, said that numbers trod the path. He could scarcely believe his eyes when but one man emerged from the shadows and halted prudently. He was but an advance guard, he thought—and yet he was alone. As for the fellow himself, he appeared to be a burly hunter, thick-set and bearded. He carried an old shot-gun slung at his waist; showed a belt brim-



ming over with pistols. Stumbling upon his quarry it were difficult to say whether he were the more surprised or afraid.

"Halt there!" he cried with sham bravado; "halt there, or I shall certainly fire!"

Arthur laughed contemptuously; and deliberately taking a cigarette from a little gold case, he lighted it and blew a cloud of smoke on the still night air. The moonlight showed the figures of the two silhouetted against the silvered rocks. The silence was intense. A stone falling to the gorge below raised echoes which had the magnitude of thunder.

"Well," cried Arthur, at last, "and who the devil are you?"

The man, reining back his horse a little way as though to avoid a fierce onslaught, was so taken by surprise that he answered truthfully—

"I am Ramon of Vic-Dessos, señor. You must come back to the house with me!"

"What!—to see you hanged? Do you know that if I raise my voice, I can bring the guard? Let me give you a little advice, Ramon of Vic-Dessos—get home to your bed before I throw you down the gorge!"

He did not wait for any reply, but leaping nimbly from his horse, ran toward the man and seized his bridle rein.

"Come, now, rascal!" he cried, "I am in a hurry. Go back before I flog you—do you hear me?"

Such a threat, so unlooked-for a reversal of the parts they were to play, left the hill-man speech-

less with surprise. For a little while he sat unable to utter a word, and it was not until he perceived that his horse was actually being backed toward the edge of the precipice, that he snatched a pistol from his belt and tried to cock it. But he was clumsy and maladroit, and a heavy blow from the butt end of Arthur's riding whip sent the weapon from his grasp. It discharged as it fell and a loud report echoed through the hills.

"Come, come, Don Ramon, you will certainly shoot yourself! Do you not know that pistols are dangerous things? I must protect you from yourself. Get down now if you value your precious life!"

Arthur spoke and acted like one who enjoyed some paltry jest; his contempt provoked the hillman to a frenzy of rage and panic. Vainly he bent down from his saddle and would have gripped his antagonist by the throat, but sure hands kept him back; he could feel them like iron about his ribs, and his startled horse plunging forward he fell heavily upon the very brink of the abyss. An arena more hazardous never invited wrestlers to the contest—upon the one hand the rocky wall, upon the other the frightful precipice. Of this, however, neither stopped to think. They were locked together henceforth, arms binding arms, nails gripping the flesh, sweat upon their faces, their muscles like cords; feet, loins and thighs wrestling for the mastery. Life was the stake they played for—Ramon of Vic-Dessos that the guard might not

shoot him at dawn, the Prince that Esther might not wait for him in vain. And so they rocked to and fro, now against the sheer wall, now so close to death that one touch would have sent them down together. Jagged rocks, uplifted in the cascade below, awaited the issue. One would feed them anon.

It had been plain from the first that the peasant was the stronger man; and that if his grip had been sure, his strength must soon prevail. But Ramon of Vic-Dessos had been taken at a disadvantage, and having little purchase upon his antagonist, he could but force him toward the abyss by that sheer strength which the mountains gave him. Inch by inch and foot by foot he appeared to be accomplishing his purpose. With death staring him in the face, and a death terrible to contemplate, it was singular, Arthur would say, that he should think less of what such an end might mean than of the home he had quitted and the young wife waiting for him there. So much, in truth, could the name of Esther nerve him that his wits were with him to the end; and even when it seemed that nothing could save him from the abyss, he remembered a trick he had learned in the *Salle d'Armes* at Paris, and had the courage to employ it. Exerting all his strength for a brief moment, he as swiftly relaxed every muscle, and sinking upon his knee he slipped right under his enemy's body. The trick found Ramon of Vic-Dessos utterly at a loss. Believing that his antagonist was utterly exhausted, he made a supreme effort,

hurled his body forward, lost his balance, and plunged forward headlong to the depths with a lingering cry. Arthur watched his body, it seemed for an age, bounding from crag to crag, until it fell bent and broken into the shadows of the pit. Then, reeling and dizzy, he turned to call his horse. The captain of the station, called out by the pistol shot, answered his cry.

They rode back to St. Girons together, recklessly and ignoring the danger. A sobbing dame met them upon the threshold and related, with what coherence she could command, the story of Alonzo's flight. Martinez, the steward, showing a gaping wound, added his tale and besought his master not to leave the house.

"It is a trap, Highness," he said, "nothing but a trap. Do not fall into it. You have enemies in Cadi—why forget it? In God's name I ask you to be prudent."

Arthur answered them by ordering a horse to be saddled.

"I shall follow my wife," he said, "let the road carry me where it will."

## CHAPTER XVI

CADI was ablaze with lights when Esther's carriage drove through its busy streets. It was the diner's hour, and many a window disclosed an animated scene, many a restaurant reminded her of Paris. The avenue they followed deserved its title "boulevard." Cafés and restaurants abounded on either hand, electric trams flashed by crowded with a prosperous poor returning to their homes. There were broughams which might have appeared without shame in Bond Street, smart phaetons hurrying from the parks, well-dressed men and women walking abroad as upon a summer's night. The air itself blew soft and fresh, such an air as one might breathe in England upon a night in spring. Esther had heard much of this city, but the reality filled her with amazement. Spain, the books told her, was an exhausted land; its people sunk in wretchedness and bigotry, its ideals gone, its art dead. This mountain city, thrusting itself in as a wedge between France and Spain, gave the welcome lie to such an account of Arthur's kingdom. The garish shops, the stately houses spoke of wealth and luxury. There were churches which had all

the massive grandeur of a splendid antiquity, factories, theatres, markets, the solid witnesses to continued prosperity. Such life and bustle helped Esther to enjoy her own obscurity, and left her glad that she was alone. From the moment when the Moor had disappeared at the western gate, none challenged or addressed her. The coachman drove doggedly like one who obeyed a distant master; the hussars were left behind; she entered the city like a simple tourist, and went on unrecognised to an unknown destination.

Their way lay by the boulevard for nearly a mile, and thence, quitting it, carried them to a spacious park and ultimately to the Prado; an open square with a cathedral and a palace upon either hand. Here Esther observed with some interest a gathering of the people, which she imagined must be waiting for the passing of some procession or spectacle. It was quite out of her thoughts that the idlers had come together to witness her arrival in the capital, and for some minutes she paid no attention to the group, nor asked herself what its presence signified. Such indifference the crowd did not long permit her. Running with the carriage, the outposts of the mob anon began to jeer and mock her, some cast stones which rattled in the wheels—even well-dressed loiterers pointed a finger at her and seemed to approve the outcry. It was so sudden, so unlooked for, so cruel, that Esther had scarcely time to be afraid. The hussars coming up at a gallop closed about her carriage and beat the

ruffians off; she sank back, asking what it could mean or what she had done to these people that they should judge her so harshly. Iron courage alone can stand against the hostility of an angry crowd—and Esther, brave as she was, felt her heart sink within her. Of what was this the omen; what fate awaited her in the city which could so receive her? The future loomed dark, indeed—she remembered that she was but one against a nation, a helpless girl in the hands of men without heart or scruple.

The hussars had come up at the first alarm, and their presence, if it did not quieten the rioters, at least left them with no better weapons than their tongues. Hissing and hooting, they stood to let the carriage pass into the quadrangle of the palace; and even there Esther could hear their savage cries like the murmur of some human storm drifting away upon the breezes. Her own interests, however, had passed to those whom she must now face, and to the news which she believed awaited her. The building at whose gate she stood was of immense size, square in design and freely decorated with canopy and statue. A blaze of light shone out from an open door; she perceived a group of officers in uniform, and almost before her carriage had stopped, an elderly man, whose cuirass and helmet were of silver, stood at her side and offered her a frigid welcome.

"This is the palace, madame," he said suavely. "I am Colonel Varez, and I am commanded by the Duke, my master, to welcome you in his name."

She answered him with dignity, for she was determined that she would show no fear. She had never lacked a certain stately grace of act and speech, and this did not desert her when she permitted the Colonel to help her from the carriage, and then followed him up a flight of stone steps and into a great hall beyond. The barren grandeur of this vestibule chilled her as with a sudden breath of the night air.

Not a carpet, not a picture relieved the monotony of its marble decorations nor gave colour to the cold stone in which its many statues were chiselled. Esther declared afterwards that it was as though she had blundered into the hall of some national museum and there had found herself face to face with a whole army of obsequious footmen who advanced together and bowed at her approach. Nor could such homage deceive her. From the moment of her arrival at Cadi's palace to the final hour of her sufferings there she did not mistake the treatment she received, or fail to estimate its meaning. Her humiliation would have been absolute, perhaps insupportable, if she had not reflected that it must be brief. Belief in her lover sustained her to the end. She answered the Colonel without fear or shame.

"I have no alternative but to obey you. The Duke, your master, can scarcely wish to put any fresh affront upon me. I am in his power, but I am an Englishwoman."

He bowed and avoided the charge.

"The Duke will speak for himself, madame," he said. "Meanwhile, everything in this house



is at your disposal. Please to follow this lady. She will wait upon you."

He turned to introduce a young girl who waited at his side—a mere child she was, but indisputably pretty.

"This is Mademoiselle Desjardins—permit me to make her known to you."

Esther liked her face, and felt less strange for her presence. Mademoiselle Desjardins herself did not hesitate to make advances.

"I am sure you must be tired after your journey," she began. "It is such a long way from Foix, and the roads are so bad. Won't you come upstairs at once, your room is quite ready."

Esther was not sorry to escape the prying eyes which watched her from every side of the hall, and she went upstairs very willingly. The bedroom to which Mademoiselle Desjardins introduced her was almost as cold and bare as the stone corridor she had left. A bed of ridiculously meagre proportions lifted a huge canopy of carved wood almost to the ceiling. The dressing-table was in gilt, stiff and pretentious. A Louis XV. mirror above the fireplace reflected the back of a marble clock and of candelabras without lights. The wardrobe was in satin-wood, exceedingly handsome, but out of place. A single strip of carpet, new and ugly, covered a few feet of the parquet floor at the bed's head. A glass chandelier with unshaded electric lamps diffused an unbecoming light. There were painted figures upon the ceiling, but damp and dirt had almost effaced their outline. The one merit which the

room possessed for Esther was the fact that she might call it her own; and no sooner was the door shut than she unloosed her wrap and sank into a chair with a deep sigh of relief. Mademoiselle Desjardins, in her turn, did not attempt to disguise anything. She stood at Esther's side and quickly declared herself.

"I am sorry for you—indeed sorry! Is there anything I can do?"

Esther brushed back the hair from her face, and tried if it were possible to understand her presence in that place and the significance of her reception.

"Why should you be sorry for me, mademoiselle?" she asked disingenuously. "Please tell me who you are, and why they have brought me to this house?"

She was answered as frankly—

"I am Marguerite, the daughter of Gustave Desjardins, the French Notary here. My father is the Duke's friend. We have apartments in the palace, and he asked me to help you. I know that you are in trouble, my father said so. The people have been coming to the palace all day, the soldiers send them away. There have been dreadful things done. They killed Ferdinand Morez in the market-place this morning. He was Prince Arthur's friend. The newspapers say it is a revolution. I cannot tell you everything. I should be afraid."

Esther said that she wished to be told.

"Do you know, Marguerite, that I am Prince Arthur's wife?"

Marguerite turned away her face.

"Yes, yes," she said; "but they will not call you that in Cadi. Oh, I am very sorry for you—I cannot tell you how much! If one loves, one knows. Please let me be your friend: you will have so few in this house."

Esther stooped and kissed her. She began to perceive, if it were but dimly, the true danger of her perilous position. She knew now what answer had been given to Gaudarez and his message. The city refused to recognise her marriage. She blamed herself that she had made such a refusal possible. Her own hasty surrender to Arthur's impetuous will earned this swift punishment. She did not hide it from herself.

"I do not understand it; it is all a dreadful mystery to me, Marguerite," she said, rising and going to the glass. "Why have they brought me here if they deny my marriage? Has my husband, then, no friends left? Have they all turned against him. Surely it cannot be true that he has none on his side."

"He has many friends, dear madame, many friends, but they dare not speak for him. Since the Duke returned, every one is afraid. The newspapers say that Prince Arthur has betrayed his country. The soldiers turn against him because they are bought with money; the women are jealous of you. If he should return—but no, he will not do that, he is too clever, he knows that they would kill him."

They were almost the words which the Moor had used at Cadi's gate, and Esther could not

turn a deaf ear to them any longer. She did not ask how it came about that she had won the friendship of this mysterious Eastern. Enough to know that he spoke the truth—that the trap indeed stood open, and that the end was near. Helplessness could but add to her self-reproach. Reason told her from the first that she was a prisoner in the city; relentless enemies surrounded her. What would her own life weigh, she could ask, against the ambition of such a man as Francisco Xavier? Nay, the gloom of the palace impressed her with a sense of her own weakness and impotency; and while she would admit that she had been foolish, no justice, she argued, could set such a price upon her folly.

"You must help me to be brave, Marguerite," she said. "My friends in England will not forget me. I shall return to my own country and tell my story. English people will not judge me hardly. I am not afraid to tell them everything."

Marguerite shook her head.

"If you could!" she exclaimed with excitement. And then lowering her voice she added, "We must not speak of it, dear madame, they are listening to us."

They dined in an adjoining room, and were waited upon by an old man-servant in a shabby uniform. The food was excellent, the wine abundant. From time to time there came up to them from the adjacent courtyard the sound of troops upon the march and of bugles blowing,

mingled ever and anon with the tumultuous and more distant cries of a great concourse of people giving tongue to its excitement. The omens spoke of a waking city and a night of events; but Esther's thoughts were far away, carrying her to St. Girons and the mountain road. She prayed to God with all the earnestness she could command that her husband had not quitted the castle. For her own misfortunes she cared nothing. She did not believe, in spite of little Marguerite's convictions, that any greater harm could overtake her in the city than that she had already suffered upon her journey. She was an Englishwoman, and pride of race defied already this puny country and its insignificant people. Far from desiring to avoid the issue she would have faced it at once, and her wish was to stand before her judges and to ask of what they accused her. Perhaps she could remember, too, that her forefathers had been soldiers; and that if imprudence had given her a youth of poverty, none the less had kinsmen of hers carried their Queen's commission and laid down their lives in their country's service. A mood of defiance buoyed her up. Come what might, she determined that these people should not find her afraid; and when, almost as soon as dinner was done, Colonel Varez returned, she met him with dignity, nor did she flinch before his interrogation.

"Madame," he said, "I must apologise for this intrusion."

She bowed her head. He continued rapidly—

"The Bureau of Security has some questions

to ask you, and their officers are here. I must ask you to favour them."

She cut him short; the quiet irony of her response amazed him.

"I am sure that the Bureau of Security is far too important to be kept waiting," she said lightly. "Please let the officers come in."

He stared at her for a moment with cold steely eyes, which seemed to ask what such a change of front might mean; then, without a word, bade her follow him. In an adjoining room, she found two men seated before a great table, with a single lamp between them. They wore uniforms of dark blue, their peak caps lay upon a chair at their side; one held a document in his hand, the other a pen. When Colonel Varez had left her with them, they subjected her for some while to shrewd and puckered glances, and many minutes passed before she was called upon to answer. But she did not mistake their vocation, they were police officers, she said. The man who spoke to her put his question so abruptly and in such a formal manner that she would have laughed at him under other circumstances.

"Your name and age, if you please," he asked. She started from a reverie and replied with great composure—

"Since I bear my husband's name, I call myself Esther de Medina Celi; my age is twenty-three."

Both the men looked at her with heavy eyes which seemed to resent her answer.

"Yes, that is all very well; but your English name, madame: we want that, if you please."

"Then my name is Venn—Esther Venn, the daughter of Major Venn, an English officer."

They wrote her answer down laboriously with scratching pens. The second question concerned her husband.

"Be pleased to inform us under what circumstances you met His Highness, Prince Arthur."

"I met him at the house of my friend, the Duke of Montalvan."

"You were the Duke's secretary for some months, I think; he employed you?"

"I was not his secretary, I was companion to his sister. It is true that I helped him in his laboratory, but I do not consider that I was his servant."

"The companion to his sister, but not his servant! And during your companionship, madame, you found the means to become acquainted with His Highness, Prince Arthur?"

"Not so; the Prince found the means to become acquainted with me. He was introduced to me by Doctor Xavier."

"By whom, madame?"

Esther had forgotten that they were not aware of the Duke's incognito.

"By Doctor Xavier—the Duke; really you are very stupid!"

They put their heads together and discussed it in a whisper. When they had written three or four lines upon the paper, one of them continued—

"No doubt you saw a great deal of His Highness, madame—he was much in your company?"

"I saw him once in London and three times in Paris before I was engaged to him."

"Permit me to suggest that you lost no time."

"You may be as rude as you please; I am quite defenceless."

"I beg to differ from you; your answers are your best defence. Be careful what you say, your words will be repeated before your judges."

"Is it necessary, then, to take all this trouble."

"It is most necessary. We must understand, madame, under what circumstances you have inveigled His Highness into this absurd marriage."

Esther flinched at the base charge.

"When I am called upon to defend myself, it must be before gentlemen," she said hotly.

"Then you refuse to answer?"

"Absolutely."

He wrote it down upon the paper, apparently pleased at her obstinacy. The next question concerned the place of her marriage.

"We understand that a ceremony was performed in the church of St. Eustache. You are quite aware that such a contract is null and void in Spain?"

"I know nothing about Spain. From the little I have seen I am proud of my ignorance."

"We shall enlighten you, madame."

"Then please begin. You will find me a good pupil. I have so much to learn."

"Remembering that some studies are dangerous."

"I do not forget it. Please to say that I am



an Englishwoman and that I was married at the British Embassy. Your judges will wish to know that—I think they will be interested.”

The men stared at each other a little blankly. This was not the kind of information they had come there to procure. But it was written down, nevertheless, in a flourishing scrawl and with several blots.

“You were married in Paris, madame, and you proceeded thence to the castle of St. Girons. Was it your intention to remain there or to return to your own country?”

“My intentions were my husband’s. They are still so. Really, you waste time.”

“We are not in a hurry, madame; there is plenty of time—perhaps more than you desire.”

“Am I to understand that you threaten me?”

“If you compel us to—yes.”

“And with what?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“With justice, madame.”

“That must be an unusual punishment in this country!”

“You are insolent.”

“No, I am truthful.”

The Spaniard put down his pen angrily. He was not quick at repartee and he could not *riposte* to such lightning thrusts. Defeated and chagrined he sat for a little while silent; then taking up his pen again, he proceeded—

“If you were set at liberty, madame, would you give us your assurance not to molest His Highness again?”

"To molest His Highness!—my assurance! Do you know what you are saying?"

"Perfectly, madame; we require your assurance."

She rose from her chair with calm deliberation. Her face was crimson, but the shaded light did not permit them to detect it.

"Then you shall have it—here and now: that I decline to answer you another word!"

Her temper left them amazed. She had crossed the room to the door and tried to open it, but it was locked, and so she stood there, tapping the floor with her foot and in vain trying to stifle her emotion. The two, meanwhile, spoke in low whispers. Presently one of them folded up the documents.

"Very well, madame, your decision will be reported in the proper quarter. We find you obstinate and insolent. It is plain that you are not telling us the truth. Until you choose to do so you will please consider yourself under arrest."

She made no response. Her hand fumbled with the lock. She would not speak a word. They rose from the table, and the younger man struck a little bell. When the door opened Colonel Varez entered and took in the situation at a glance.

"You would have been wiser to answer the questions these gentlemen put to you," was his suave comment. "We desire to do you justice, madame, but you must be frank with us."

"Your desire touches me!" she answered

ironically. "I have never met so many friends of justice in one day before."

"Madame," he said, "I thought you would have been more prudent."

She resented the suggestion of folly.

"Permit me, at least, to be the judge, since I am the only one concerned!"

"Not so, madame; your answers to-night may concern another more deeply than you think."

"Then since they are true, they shall stand for him and for me—if the truth is of any value in Spain."

"Madame," he said, "I will see that it is so. Do not blame me because I do my duty."

He stood aside, and she perceived that two troopers had come with him to the door of the ante-chamber. Whatever their presence portended, however greatly it alarmed her, Esther did not betray herself even by a gesture.

"You will not be permitted to leave the palace until the Council have decided your case," the Colonel resumed. "Those are my orders, madame—I am sorry that I must enforce them."

"I do not blame you," she said. "In England we are not so very much afraid of a woman."

The troopers conducted her to the door of her apartment and there left her. The lamps were still lighted in the room, but little Marguerite had disappeared. In her place, a shrewish woman, Spanish surely, offered Esther her assistance. She answered that she did not

desire help, and dis . . . ing the woman she locked her door and was grateful to be alone. From the quadrangle without no sounds now came up to her but those of the moaning wind and shivering trees. A mist had settled upon the city and obscured its lights—the sentries paced the corridor with measured tread. Esther counted their steps like one who listened to the rhythm of an omen.

## CHAPTER XVII

SHE heard the hour of midnight struck upon the city's clocks, and still she did not sleep. The indignity which had been put upon her must be repeated again and again like some premonition of evil of which the mind cannot free itself. She remembered that she was one against a nation, but would not be dismayed thereby. Her love was so honest, so loyal, that for a lover's sake she knew that she would drink the bitter cup to the very dregs. Not heroically but logically she could persuade herself that she might yet win her own liberty and her husband's; for she was free-born, and he but the servant of his people. A fitful sleep gave her many dreams at last. She was in London again, in Paris, in Switzerland; she knocked at the theatre's door; a voice called her in the hour of her distress; she recreated her bower of roses, slept in the path of radiant moonbeams, perceived the face of the Moor and believed him to be near her. This latter hallucination no common-sense could baffle. As in London, so here, in a city of the mountains, Esther declared her belief that Yussuf, the Moor, watched her while she slept,

that the dreamy black eyes looked down upon her from the shadows, and that a silver lantern cast the gold green rays upon her tired face. Then as now the figure of the dream left her unafraid. She could not account for the faith which was in her, nevertheless, since he had met her at Cadi's gate she numbered this silent Eastern among her friends, even, it may be, desired his friendship. The omen of the dream contented her.

She lay back upon her pillow, and uttering a deep sigh she surrendered herself to that spell she could not resist. Not since she had quitted Switzerland for Paris in Francisco Xavier's company had such a refreshing sleep been hers. The morning hours found her so still that she scarcely seemed to breathe. Marguerite Desjardins, running into the room at seven o'clock, must touch her with the hand before she opened her eyes or answered that impetuous herald of the day.

"I bring you roses, dear madame," she said, "roses of Cadi. And I have news for you when you are awake. Oh, please, it is seven o'clock and I have been to church."

She chattered ceaselessly, flitting from place to place, now placing her roses in the empty vases, now giving Esther news which greatly surprised her.

"They have sent to St. Girons for your luggage; and it will be here directly. Colonel Varez remembered it—he frightens me, but he thinks of things. Your friend, Madame Julia,

is coming to breakfast with you—but there, we shall never be ready. Captain Pecha of the Hussars told me—I am forbidden to see him, and so I go to church. Have you ever met a friend in church, and tried to pray when he was looking at you? You can't do it, dear Esther—I've tried often and I know. It is quite, quite impossible!"

The child's brightness was infectious, and Esther found herself dressing and laughing at the same time. She was the better for her long sleep, and when she looked in the glass, she was astonished to find that there was a little flush of colour in her cheeks, and that her eyes were clear and bright. The morning itself broke clear and fine. A fresh breeze lifted the misty curtain from the higher peaks; the air was so pure and rare that the distant ice fields shone like so many beds of jewels. In the valleys below them hills and woods caught up the freshets of the dew, and were radiantly green in the morning light. Nearer to her window, the quadrangle of the palace showed Esther a company of infantrymen brisk at their drill. Sentries stood at every gate—tall fellows in white tunics and silver helmets; a military band played in the great square by the cathedral. The people wore a gay air, and went with buoyant step; there was no sign anywhere of that unrest which had disturbed the city yesterday.

"They think the Prince will come to-day," Marguerite said as though answering an unspoken question; "but no one quite knows what

will happen. My father declares it all depends upon the army. Of course, there are a great many who would be loyal to Prince Arthur if they dared, but I think he is too clever to come back just now. The people will laugh at the Duke if he does not come—some of them laugh already. I shall run here at once with the news if there is any—I want to be your friend, dear Esther!”

Esther thanked her with a little pressure of the hand, and continued to dress herself hastily. She did not dare to tell this child how much those few words of doubt meant to her. Her own belief that Arthur would come could not be denied—at the same time she had but the vaguest ideas of the laws which menaced him, or of the intrigue which sought his downfall. Destiny had caught her up in the meshes of the net, and nothing but a miracle, she imagined, could set her free.

She dressed quickly, and breakfasted in a small room of that suite of apartments allocated to her in the palace. Little Marguerite had promised her a visit from Madame Julia, and this came about swiftly after breakfast, when a servant announced the arrival of Madame herself, and that loquacious personage swept into her room and embraced her with the ardour of an effusive race.

“My dear little Esther!” was her almost tearful greeting, “that we should meet like this—that it positively should be you!”

Esther suffered herself to be kissed on either cheek; but she was not deceived by this clever



actress ; and she listened to her hysterical chatter without emotion.

"I thank you very much," she said ; "of course I knew that you would come."

Julia began at once to excuse herself.

"Ah, my dear child, that we should be the cause of your misfortunes—we who loved you so ! I reproach myself bitterly ! When I look at you and see how greatly you are changed—when I remember our happy days in Thonon, I hate myself for letting you go. But no one would listen to me ; I begged Francis not to leave you in Paris—he would not hear me ! 'She will suffer for it,' I said ; I was wiser than he !"

She had contrived in a few short moments to insinuate that Esther must suffer and that she was greatly changed. Malice in the cloak of pre-tentious affection is ever an ugly thing. Julia de Montalvan could not make it pretty.

"So you are really his wife—yes, the telegraph told us so ! My brother published it at once in the newspapers. He could not foresee that it would be so dreadfully resented. Cadi is a little kingdom, and its spirit is Republican. Imagine, my dear, the stupidity of a free country which does not permit its Prince to choose his own wife ! What does it matter, if you are not of noble birth or Spanish born ! You have enjoyed my brother's friendship, and that should be enough. The city must be lost to all sense of reason when it behaves as it is doing—mobs in the street all day and such dreadful things done that I dare not tell you of them ! And now they talk of sending the Prince

to his trial! God help us all, I say, and keep Arthur in the mountains! If he comes here he is lost!"

Esther turned the subject with an awkward question.

"I am relying upon Doctor Xavier's influence," she said. "Since it was through him that I have brought this trouble upon my husband, his honour will compel him to help me. Were it not for that, I should be distressed indeed! But you must not ask me to forget that the Duke is my friend."

Madame Julia took her handkerchief from her eyes and looked at her a little suspiciously.

"My brother is the soul of honour," she declared. "You owe it to him that you are here in the palace when the Council would have sent you to the prison. What he can do will be done. You forget, my dear, that he has but one voice; and that there are many against him. The Government will hear nothing in the Prince's favour. It says that his position does not put him above the laws. My brother has worn himself to a shadow in the cause of friendship—it was such a dreadful surprise to him! He left you in Paris believing that you were going to be very happy. You know how much he valued your good opinion of him—and now it has come to this! Ah, my dear, life is very cruel for some of us!"

"None the less," persisted Esther, "Doctor Xavier can help me if he will. I shall hope to see him here to-day."

"It would be madness for him to come. He must not declare himself—positively must not! What he can do for you will be done when Arthur is tried—for his life, my child; I fear it is for that!"

"Would you have me to believe, then, that marriage is a question of life or death in this country?"

"There are other charges. He has not been true to his position. He spent a whole year abroad—they accuse him of extravagance—even of treachery. But you shall hear it—I promise you, you shall hear his defence. Ah, you love him! and it will be a dreadful thing to hear! But we must learn to be brave: it is all that a woman can be!"

Esther made no reply. The duplicity of which she was the victim could not be hidden either by civil words or by these almost vulgar protestations of good-will. When Madame Julia went on prying to ask her of the wedding ceremony at St. Eustache and of her journey to St. Girons, she answered briefly and without interest. Julia was quite unable to disguise her own motives. She had loved this man. The day of his judgment would be a triumph for her.

"We had begun to believe that he would never marry," she said, aping the simplicity of a child. "He has had so many *affaires*! You must make him tell you of them some day, though. London knows more about his life than you will ever learn. He always admired English women. At the best the Court will declare your marriage

inv? and keep him a prisoner in the citadel. I he will permit you to go to London and live there. We must always try to put the best face on things! If Arthur were really clever, he would not have come to Cadi now."

"Then he has come?" Esther asked wildly.

"I wish that I knew. He may and he may not. If he does, you shall be the first to hear of it. Really, my dear Esther, you will need all your courage."

She went on to reiterate her own promises and to invent upon the spot quite imaginary events as the witness of her friendship. With tears in her eyes she deplored the absence of the English Consul from Cadi. He had gone to Switzerland upon a holiday, and was not expected back until the end of the month. Her brother had visited the Consulate directly he received the fateful news. He was both annoyed and distressed at the Consul's absence.

"After all," she protested, "one man cannot persuade a nation. Francis is much beloved here, but love does not rob a people of their pride. The Spanish faction chose Arthur's wife for him a year ago; they wished him to marry into the royal house. We knew that they would be disappointed. If this were a great European country, all the nonsense they talk would be intelligible; but it is only a province, child, not much larger than one of your English counties, and they are making themselves ridiculous. The worst of it is that while they are ridiculous they are not less dangerous. We are true Spaniards

in pride and temper, as Arthur will find to his cost if he puts his head into the lion's mouth. I do not believe he will do any such thing. Francis has sent messengers to the hills, and they will stop him. That was my prayer before the altar this morning—that our friends may be in time. I dare not think what would happen if he should come.”

It was all a rodomontade, false and sham. Madame Julia had not been to church that morning, and no messengers had ridden out to the hills; indeed, the deception was as childish as it was unnecessary, although it achieved its baser purpose of inflicting pain upon its victim. Had Esther known her own mind less well, she might have suffered a certain humiliation in remembering how little worthy she was of that station to which marriage had lifted her. But this was far from being the case.

“Doctor Xavier must come to me,” she said firmly, “and I shall then be able to explain everything to him. I do not think you will prevent Arthur riding in. What happens to me does not matter at all. I shall try to do my duty, Julia; it would be no compliment to your country to believe that its men are cowards—at least, until they prove themselves so. There are other ways of telling people in London—perhaps I shall find one of them.”

Julia could believe no such thing.

“You poor child!” she said, “how little you know—how very little!”

With this and other vague consolations she

took her farewell. Esther saw no one else that day, not even little Marguerite. The night found her searching the distant hills with anxious eyes. Would Arthur come? Had they warned him? What would to-morrow bring? She could not tell. Slowly but surely the ordeal was robbing her of her will and resolution. She drew the curtains reluctantly at last, and shut out that dim vista of the range and pass which stood up so formidably between herself and liberty. The palace, itself, was as silent as the grave. She might have believed, but for the sentry's footfall, that she was the one living being within it.

## CHAPTER XVIII

NIGHT had fallen upon the sleeping city, a glorious night of a Southern winter, with an azure heaven of stars above and the gentle breath as of a summer eve upon the shrouded earth below. In Cadi itself the unrest which had troubled the capital for many days appeared to have subsided. The rage of parties ended for a moment in a truce of doubt. None believed that the Prince would return. A higher tribute was paid to his wisdom.

This had been the state of things when Madame Julia visited Esther at the palace; but as night wore on, it happened that a messenger rode in to the commanding General's quarters, and thence clattering through the city cried his news, whatever it was, at the houses of the senators and the ministry. A majority of the inhabitants had gone to its bed by this time; but a few loiterers, hearing the bugle call ("boot and saddle"), in the cavalry barracks, were drawn thither by a waking curiosity; and these passing the tidings to others, the sleeping populace presently aroused itself, and the news went, as upon the wind, that the Prince had crossed the frontier, and was riding down to the northern gate. Such a surprising turn was

the very last which the city had expected. Even when a cavalry appeared in the great square, and messengers passed breathlessly from house to house, the most sagacious were unconvinced.

"They go on a fool's errand!" was the cry. "Some one has hoaxed them—wait and see! They will look foolish by and by!" But others said, "It is certainly true; for the Duke has ridden to the citadel." The less probable story gained ground every moment. Excited both by the hour and the event, a considerable mob began to gather in the market place, and to cry out for torches. Demonstrations were made before the Duke's house, and at the gates of the citadel. The cafés took down their shutters and lighted their lamps; throngs went hither, thither, singing national airs or crying for the Duke; the tocsin bell in the cathedral tower boomed out its deep and heavy note. And this bell waked Esther in the palace. She lay for a long time wondering if it were the morning call to prayer, or why, if it were not, she had not heard it yesterday.

She was not conscious at first of other events, nor did the omens reach her ears. That deep, booming bell, reverberating and mournful, prevailed above all other sounds; and it was not until she had listened for many minutes, her eyes shut and sleep still wrestling with curiosity, that she distinguished the greater uproar, and became aware that the city stirred. From this moment a medley of alarms penetrated to her silent room. Now it would be a clatter of hoofs, a jangling of arms in the square before the palace gate; or



again the bugle's blast and the rolling of the drums. By and by she began to distinguish the fervid cries of the senseless mob. She heard her husband's name, uttered in derision. She could distinguish the shouts following many a minister on his way to the citadel. She was aware that many cried for the Duke, and that he was the hero of the night. If the palace had accustomed her to the hysterical attitude of this passionate people, nevertheless the hour and the circumstance mystified one freshly waked from sleep, and forbade her to guess the truth. She rose from her bed under the idea, it may be, that she had slept over long, and that the curtains shut out the day. When she drew them back, the distant panorama of peak and pass was enveloped in darkness, and she could not distinguish even the ice fields on the summit. But the city itself was like a great cauldron, whence tongues of golden light cast their iridescence upon the curtain of the sky. A thousand torches now blazed in the hands of the rioters. So brightly was the sky illuminated that you could follow the moving throngs from place to place, and say when they halted and when they marched on. And loud above all the uproar one name was to be heard. Esther turned quickly from the window when she heard it. Her dread of this had surpassed all. She knew that Arthur had come to the city—she believed that he was already a prisoner.

The mob ran hither, thither for fully an hour, oftentimes without purpose or again rallied by the bibulous eloquence of half-intoxicated demagogues.

In the end, one of these led a multitude to the palace, and defying the sentries by numbers the rioters pressed in to the quadrangle, and grouped themselves beneath Esther's very windows. There, when they were not crying insults upon her name they fell to cursing her husband, and clamouring that she should show herself to them. She had no knowledge of the Spanish language nor of that *patois*, half French, half Spanish, which was spoken in Cadi; but the demeanour of those who insulted her was not to be mistaken. Their voices rose and fell like the thunder of an angry sea; they terrified her, made her afraid of herself, so that she turned out the lights in her room, and crouching in her bed, tried to be deaf to the uproar, and to shut the picture of it from her eyes.

No realisation of its monstrous injustice could blind Esther to the folly of that day upon which she had given herself to Arthur in Paris. This overwhelming, malignant hostility opened her eyes and wrecked the pretty logic which had buoyed her up since the gate of a royal prison closed behind her. She began to see now how great a wrong she had done the man she loved by surrendering to his will. These people, she said, would have been loyal subjects but for that act of theirs, which had so hurt their pride and destroyed their ambitions. And to this was added a great fear, a fear of things unknown and passing experience. Esther believed that the mob would force the palace gates and drag her out. She cowered in the darkness, silent and afraid. Every

sound within the palace, the sentry's footfall, the rustle of a curtain, the creaking of a board, could set her heart beating wildly. It occurred to her quick mind that this visit might not be so accidental as it appeared, and that her enemies in the city might have sent the people to the gate. The circumstances justified her worst apprehensions. If the mob broke into the palace, she did not doubt that it would kill her without pity. She quailed before the outburst, scarce daring to breathe or move. Anon, words were not sufficient for her accusers, and the mob ceased to be content with curses and defiance. Some one cried out that the palace should be taken, and upon this a volley of stones smashed the heavy glass of the windows and sent a *débris* of jagged flint and splintered woodwork in a shower about her bed. For a moment, perhaps, she did not quite realise what had happened, so loud was the uproar when the windows were broken; but the crashing sounds, the current of cold air, the cloud of dust within the room quickly undeceived her. She had the idea that men were climbing up to the verandah, and would burst in upon her presently to take her life. Stones rattled upon the casements like hail which a tempest drives; she could hear the thunder of voices, raging and fearful; and this ferocious hate affrighted her more than the dread of death. Had the mob been accusing an oppressor it could not have roused itself to a greater fury than that which it now vented upon a defenceless girl. Esther suffered a torture of doubt so enduring that she did not

believe any mere physical pain would be compared with it. When the clamour ceased as suddenly as it had begun, she hid her face in the pillow and would not believe that such a miracle had come to pass. Her limbs were cold and trembling. She thought still to hear the voices; the darkness shaped new mysteries for her.

The mob had fled; reluctant as she was to credit her ears, this miracle was the truth. Drawn away by some sudden and more potent appeal to curiosity, the rioters flocked like sheep toward the doors of the cathedral, and there, gathering in serried ranks, they uttered a new name and waited for a new face. It was that of their Prince, then riding to the northern gate and proceeding under escort to the citadel. Esther heard the rushing footsteps, and, asking why the people had gone away, she rose at last from her bed and put on her dressing-gown. It was very cold in her room and when she turned up the electric light, but three globes of twenty were left unskattered. The long windows opening upon the verandah had been utterly wrecked by the stones. Curtains were torn; tables, chairs, and carpet powdered with the glass the volleys had crushed; but the broken casement gave her a clear view of gate and courtyard, and from that place she beheld her husband upon his way to the citadel, and, seeing him, she understood the miracle.

It was a weird picture, distinct and unforgettable. Countless torches, casting their bountiful rays

upon upturned faces and looming buildings, and all those serried ranks of expectant people gave a scene to which night lent its cloak of mystery. The tocsin of the cathedral still rang mournfully; cries rose and fell in the moments of waiting like the murmurings of storm. But clear above the figures of the multitude were the horsemen in their golden cuirasses, the pennons of the lancers, the helmets of the guard, and last of all the figure of one who rode alone upon a chesnut horse, and before whom, meeting him thus face to face, his people fell to silence. Esther declared afterwards that she was conscious of Arthur's presence even before she saw him. A passionate desire to go to him, to stand at his side, to answer the people for him, mocked her helplessness and filled her eyes with tears. Her pride in him declared that he was a worthy figure for the homage of a populace. Tall and manly, sitting his horse to perfection, his white uniform catching the golden light, his demeanour fearless and unconcerned, even the multitude had the will to forget; and many a voice which erstwhile had cursed now blessed him. Cheers broke out and were with difficulty suppressed by an obedient soldiery. Those who had gathered stones dropped them shamefacedly. Young men cried "Viva!" and cared nothing for the consequences. The cavalcade swept by unaccused by the citizens; but Esther lingered still at her window as though some miracle of the night would carry her message to him she loved.

Some one knocked upon her door a little timidly,

and she opened it, knowing that help had come to her at last. Her astonishment was great when she discovered that her visitor was Colonel Varez, anxious to apologise for that which she had suffered.

"Madame," he said, with unaccustomed eloquence, "I cannot find words in which to express my regret."

Esther had not liked this man, but he had the air of an honest soldier, and she would not do him the injustice to believe that his regrets were unreal. A man of few words, he continued to repeat his apologies, and so earnestly that she accepted them without question.

"I have been more frightened than hurt," she admitted candidly. "Of course it was very alarming. It will be time enough to-morrow morning to ask what I am to do. Please be careful, or you will cut yourself with the glass; it seems to be everywhere."

He flung the door wide open and invited her into the ante-chamber.

"I will order them to prepare another room at once," he said; "meanwhile, we are all so very much awake, perhaps you would allow the Duke to add his apologies to mine. He is waiting in the salon, madame. He drove here at once when he learned what had happened."

The news was the best that Esther could have heard. Her desire to meet Doctor Xavier face to face had been with her since she crossed the frontier. Rightly or wrongly, she hoped much from that friendship by which both fortune and

troubles had come to her. Francisco Xavier would never range himself finally upon the side of her enemies, she argued; and so she followed the Colonel with confidence, not a little excited and not a little glad. The salon to which he conducted her was half in darkness when she entered it, but there was light enough for her quick eyes, and she recognised her benefactor at once—a cloaked figure in the shadows. He did not rise to greet her, did not for the moment appear aware of her presence; but, instructing the Colonel briefly, desired him to withdraw.

"I am engaged for an hour, Varez—admit no one."

The soldier saluted and withdrew, and when the door was shut and Esther had advanced a little way into the room, the doctor put his hand upon a switch by his chair and instantly flooded the room with a blaze of light.

"Come here, *camarade*; come here, and let me have a look at you!"

Esther had never known what it was to disobey him, and, despite the somewhat brutal masterfulness of his demeanour, she crossed the room and stood before him, while he, throwing himself back in his chair, regarded her closely.

"Yes," he said slowly, "as I thought—the petals fall but the flowers remain. Do you know that a month has greatly changed you, *camarade*? Time laughs at our little schemes, I see, and yet Time is sometimes wiser than we. When politics give me time to return to my laboratory, I will set down time and trouble among my enemies."

He appeared to muse upon it, clasping his hands and unclasping them several times before he could bring his mind to the present circumstances.

"Let me see : it is not twenty days since I left you in Paris !" he resumed at length ; "much has happened since then, *camarade*—for one thing, you have been very foolish ; for another, I have been premature."

Esther protested ; the first word she had spoken to him.

"Why did you leave me ?" she asked, a little passionately ; "why did you bring this trouble upon me when I believed you to be my friend ?"

He had expected her reproach, but it did not distress him. After all she was but a pawn in the great game he had played. He had still use for her, however.

"I left you in Paris because my own people had need of me. Do me the justice to admit that it was an excellent reason. I saw my country infected by the man in whom she had put her trust, the victim of charlatans, the tool of France, and I knew that I could save her. So I returned to Cadi—the occupations of my leisure were forgotten. If I am to-day, as yesterday, the servant of science, devoted heart and soul to the tasks which nature sets me, duty has a greater claim. You, last of all, will blame me for that ; I am here as a patriot—I have no other interests. That is my story in a word. It is a simple story, *camarade*—as simple as the story of your own



misfortunes, which I am waiting to hear. Please sit down and tell me all about it; I can see that you are very tired."

She sat, as he directed, in a high-backed chair upon the opposite side of the table. The light shone down upon her face and declared its pallor. He thought her beautiful even in her distress; but the beauty was her own and owed nothing now to his art.

"Since you know that my story is a simple one, why do you ask me to tell it?" she exclaimed, a little petulantly. "We are not children, and do not wish to deceive ourselves. When you left me in Paris you knew that I should become Arthur's wife. Your sister told me as much——"

"Then my sister had done better to hold her tongue—let us begin with that. It is the misfortune of women that their economics do not concern their confidences. They should be seen and not heard, *camarade*. There should be a decree of silence for them. My sister had no right to tell you any such thing——"

"Then you did not wish it, Doctor Xavier."

He rested his arm upon the table and searched her eyes with his own as though to catch her closest thoughts.

"I answer neither 'yes' nor 'no,'" he said frankly; "with any other than a Medina Celi, I would have said 'yes.' But I know men, and I am beginning to know women. Let me read your thoughts for you, *camarade*. You are saying that I inveigled you to my house that this intrigue might help me. Is it not so—ah, see how your

sex betrays you! Behold the conspirator against whom such things are charge. "

He laughed softly at his own humour, and the bright light appearing to trouble him, he turned out the lamps again until but one was burning.

"No," he resumed, "it was not altogether that, my friend—I pledge you my honour. I took you to my house that I might gratify a curiosity with which my laboratory troubled me. I found you a willing worker—let it be admitted. You have helped me to say that, under certain conditions, what we call beauty lies within the reach of every woman. To-night I go a step further and discover how elusive that possession is. I say that twenty hours of trouble will undo the work of many months. I find you, *camarade*, as I found you in London; but I am honest enough to allow that you are still a beautiful woman, perhaps more beautiful because you are yourself. So does grief play its part; but my secrets are yours, and when grief is forgotten the gift will remain. Whether that day is near or distant depends largely upon your own common-sense. It would be unflattering to your sagacity to remind you that your precipitate haste has wrought great mischief both for your husband and yourself. Had I foreseen it, I certainly should not have left you with him in Paris. As it is, I say that there is no time to be lost. We must save him, you and I, *camarade*—save him from himself!"

He appeared to rouse himself to some warmth

of regard for the friend who was in danger, and Esther, reciprocating his interest gladly, did not fear to be grateful.

"I was sure from the first it would be that," she said, excited already by his implied promise. "You did not come here to speak of his past; you came to tell me that you are his friend. Everything else is waste of time. Arthur has always such faith in you. I know it will be justified! You can save him if you will, Doctor Xavier!"

She looked him straight in the face like one who would trust him without question; but he could not meet the gaze of her ardent eyes, and she knew then that she had been premature.

"I did not come here to speak of your husband's past—true," he said slowly; "that will speak for itself, and it must be heard, *camarade*. Let us continue with our confessions; they may guide us to a better understanding. When I first perceived, in London, that you had interested a man whom many women had tried to interest and failed, I dismissed the observation as a fallacious one. The circumstances, I said, were unreal, the impression false. You ask me why, and I will tell you as bluntly. We are a superstitious people and the vulgar among us find our consolation in a lie. Our religion, which is the people's life, conveys many truths of human nature; one of them is the truth of womanhood and maternity which we embody in that gentle figure we call 'The Virgin of Cadi. From the earliest days until this nineteenth century our

painters have vied with each other in beautifying that figure and perpetuating it. I, myself, stand apart from superstitions. I believe that they have their place in the human scheme. I neither mock them nor accept them. And yet I will confess that there was a day in London when, had I been a superstitious man, I should have found an omen for my guidance. It was the day upon which I met Esther Venn in the manager's room at the Casino Theatre."

He paused as though waiting for her question; but she answered nothing, and he resumed: "I had gone there upon another affair altogether—a trifling matter concerned with one of my sister's compositions. You will judge of my astonishment when, thinking of anything but the country of my birth, I saw before me one whose face compelled me against my will to recall the fables and their figures. The rest is known to you. The interest you had awakened reminded me of my own studies. I asked why you should not take the place of those who had brought so little faith to my assistance. That your intellect was not of the common order was evident to me from the first. I admitted your candour, your courage, your resolution. I believed that you would humour a scientist's whim—it might be, would help him to a very great work. That which happened afterwards was not of my seeking. I did not ask Prince Arthur to my house; I did not intend that you should meet."

She uttered an exclamation of protest, but he continued quickly—

"When circumstances brought you together, and he told me he must know more of you, I laughed at his request and dismissed it as a folly. But it would not be dismissed; events compelled me to recognise it. I recognised that a man in whom my country hoped must either be faithful to his great position or abandon it finally. This man had been tried in the fire of the world, and had failed. I wished him well, but I knew that his happiness would be found in the gentler arts rather than the strenuous things of life. It was in my mind that this country might deal generously with him, releasing him from his obligations and bidding another take them up. In love and marriage, I said, Arthur of Cadi will find his true vocation. So I took up the challenge and began my work. When I left you in Paris my purpose was to be your husband's friend before the Senate of this city. I determined to obtain for him a princely allowance, to give him his freedom, to say in the Senate's name, 'The Treaty between us is at an end: you have your liberty.' You know what hasty circumstances have defeated that object. Your husband enters the trap which his enemies have set for him. By you, *camarade*, they would strike at him. Their agents inveigle you here, knowing that he will follow—you have heard their triumph in the streets to-night. With me you ask what his friends can do. I answer you: there are two who can save him."

He delivered this defence in a low pleasing voice which held Esther fascinated. The story

of her life for the past seven months seemed to be recited page by page by one who knew and understood every line of it. This man, so subtle, so plausible, defied her keenest scrutiny. Posing there as the devoted friend of the husband she loved so passionately, she yet could be sensible of that reservation which marred the confidence and awakened her suspicions. For many minutes, indeed, her perplexity silenced her and she did not reply. She believed that the whole truth had yet to be told—and in this she was right.

"Two, Doctor!" she said at last; "no, there is only one—only one!"

He turned to her suddenly, stretching out his hand to point at her.

"In a sense I grant it; there is only one—it is you, *camarade*!"

"I—I! Ah, if it were!"

"I mean it; you are the one person in Cadi tonight who can save its Prince."

She began to breathe quickly and tried to be calm.

"You know that I am helpless," she said.

He contradicted her with a laugh.

"Helpless—not so! As I am a man of honour, it is the truth. You can save him this night, here, and now!"

She shut her lips tightly, fearing that she might betray herself. The truth was about to be told; she dreaded it. When she spoke at last it was almost in a whisper.

"You see that I do not understand!" she said  
"I beg you to be plain with me."

He leant over the table and spoke rapidly.

"I will be plain," he said; "the time has come for it. Your husband is a prisoner in the citadel—the people cry for his life. The Senate is ready to condemn him; the Army deserts him. France, under whose suzerainty we are, will not lift a hand in such an affair as this. It is our own for our people to settle. We shall try this man on a capital charge and he will be shot unless—ah, unless, guided by your wisdom, he resigns all, abdicates of his own will, leaves this kingdom which he has betrayed. Is it clear to you, madame: do you understand it now?"

He had not called Esther "madame" before, and the sudden change of demeanour from that of the kindly persuasive friend to the dictatorial manner of the politician and the schemer declared the true part he was playing. She saw it all now; there could be no disguise. Arthur's life depended upon this abject surrender of his kingdom and his birthright. Nothing less would satisfy those relentless enemies whose intrigues had been so subtle and so sure. He must give up all, become an exile from the land of his birth and permit his cloak to fall upon the shoulders of another. Esther knew already what his answer would be. And her own? She buried her face in her hands, afraid to speak! She heard the almost impatient question, and did not dare to answer it.

"Come, madame, I wait for you; is it possible that you hesitate? Am I to assume that this man's life is nothing to you? Will you sacrifice

it for a sentiment—no, you are too shrewd! Cadi has no interest for you; in Paris or in London the generosity of my country will permit your husband to live under those circumstances of luxury and liberty to which prudence entitles him. Will you sacrifice that for a chimera of power?—no, I do not believe it! You will save your husband because you love him—a noble task, a woman's task, madame!”

She looked up at the words and replied with a dignity which surprised him.

“I love my husband; but he shall speak for himself. Is it a woman's task to rob him of his birthright? I have answered you, Doctor Xavier: I shall never answer otherwise.”

He heard her without surprise; he had expected no other response. The bargain he offered her was so little understood. Time must be on his side; and there were other weapons! For her own suffering he cared nothing. It was not to be hidden from him that his words tortured her; he intended that they should.

“You speak in haste,” he said. “Of course your husband must answer for himself since the question will be put to him and not to you. But, madame, have you no part to play, no counsel to offer him; are you dumb when he is alone? I think not; I know you better. When you discuss it with him——”

“Oh!” she cried, “you speak in riddles!”

“Not so; I speak of facts. When you leave this room and drive to the citadel, when you see the circumstances in which he is placed, when



you understand that if he is foolish he may not see the sun rise to-morrow—ah, then, I think, you may have something to say to him! Is it not so, madame? Will you refuse the opportunity?"

"To go to my husband?" she asked bewildered.

"Yes!" he cried, with something of that pose which always characterized him, "to go to your husband."

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## CHAPTER XIX

THE citadel of Cadi lies a little way beyond the ramparts upon the high road to T. It was built by the Moors seven hundred years ago upon the summit of a precipitous cliff at whose foot runs a tributary of the river Ter. Styled impregnable for many centuries, it is now but a relic of the Moorish occupation, of so little account in any scheme of a nation's defence that neither fort nor artillery demands it. And yet the city is proud of this goodly palace, and writers descant upon the beauty of court and fountain, and antiquaries delight in its traceries. View it whence you will, it dominates the valley, uplifting its towers and battlements above the deep abyss and defying you at any distance to say by what bridge path horsemen made its gates in the days of long ago. There are pine woods on the slopes behind it; cascades silver its massive *enceinte*; domes and minarets, whence the Muezzin's voice once called the faithful to prayer, stand up beyond its ramparts. Smooth-tongued guides point out to romantic lovers the cloister of the desecrated harem, from whose fountain a mountain spring still sprays its limpid

jet. Time has dealt kindly with the citadel's walls, and shading them to the rock-brown hues has cast man's work and Nature's in the one mould of its mellow harmonies. The curious traveller upon the valley road would pass the ramparts by but for that gilded dome, beneath which the Mohammedan once acclaimed his Prophet.

There is no garrison in this citadel, nor does the government deem it necessary to maintain there, in common times, more than a faithful seneschal and those who assist him in his leisured tasks. From the day when the Moors were driven out of Spain until Cadi arrested her Prince and charged him with treason, the ramparts went undefended and the gates stood open. But this policy of the years passed in an hour in the face of revolution and its animosities. Through the long night which carried Esther upon so strange an errand, troops swarmed up the bridle path and peopled the deserted courtyards and shut the mighty doors. Torches were to be seen on every outstanding crag which commanded the precipitous track to keep and bastion. Gunners, delighting in the novel task, dragged mountain cannon from point to point until they had them upon the ramparts. Within the citadel an activity no less significant soon changed the face of things and declared its purpose. Apartments, long given over to the winds and the rain, were hastily screened by tapestries carried up from the treasure-house of the city. Lanterns glowed in court and cloister, fires were kindled upon open

hearths. The great cliff, upon which the castle stood, might have been visited by vast fire-flies, which hovered like jewels upon its outstanding crags, while a glimmering light upon the sky above could speak of upleaping flames and the mountain's activity.

They had brought the Prince, under escort, to this busy scene a little after the hour of midnight; but dawn was shimmering upon the Eastern sky when a carriage set down Esther at the cliff's foot and Colonel Varez curtly bade her follow him to the heights.

"It is a treacherous path, madame," he said bluntly; "if you are frightened, do not hesitate to tell me so. I will give you a hand at the dangerous places, but you must be careful."

She answered him that she was not afraid. The knowledge that she would see her husband, that, perchance, he knew of her coming, gave her a false courage and steeled her nerves.

"I learned to climb in Switzerland," she said; "I am sure I shall not mind it. Please go on; I am naturally very anxious."

He turned without a word, and began to stride up a rocky path which bridged many a chasm and bordered many a black abyss. Torches in giant crannies diffused their shifting light upon that dizzy road, and, weaving shadows, they helped the climber to deceive himself. By here and there, where the track turned and a false step would have sent the traveller down headlong to the crags below, Colonel Varez offered Esther his hand and dragged her up. The valley shaped

below them clear and distinct in the wan light; a city in a mighty cup, a haze of smoke, a river linking range to range with its chain of rippling silver. These fearsome sights Esther shut out from her eyes with more than a woman's resolution. Her desire to be with her husband defied all danger. She had the will to run; the delay tortured her; she was not conscious of fatigue; a cold breeze blowing down from the snows brought the blood to her cheeks and gave her strength. When, at the gate, Colonel Varez waited to tell her that the journey was done, he asked himself why he had not noticed her beauty before. She found him more sympathetic henceforth.

"The Duke looks for your answer at the end of an hour, madame," he said, while they crossed the drawbridge and stood upon the threshold of the keep. "He desires me to say that this is the only interview which will be permitted you. If you accept this condition, there is no other stipulation."

She said, "Yes, yes, I quite understand;" and a trooper at the Moorish gate, drawing back heavy bolts, admitted them within the precincts. Here a whole company of the guard loitered at its ease about the fires which the cooks had kindled; artillerymen upon the ramparts were breakfasting by the side of their guns. The number and importance of the guard impressed Esther as no mere words or threats could have done. She understood how closely Arthur was watched, how definite was his loss of liberty.

And this truth the very buildings themselves could impress upon her. Gate upon gate opened at their advance; vast walls were tunnelled that they might reach other walls not less vast. The galleries, which once had echoed the Muezzin's call, now answered to the sentry's tread. At any other time she would have said that it was a picture from the dead ages, recalled from the glory of the East to reanimate these deserted cloisters and re-write their story; but doubt forbade her. She pressed on as though delay were unendurable; the end was so near,

They had lodged the Prince in an inner court of the citadel, named in the guide books "The Court of the Alberca," upon either side of which there stood a capacious hall crowned by its cupola and paved with snow-white marble. Splendid draperies, deep blue in tone and wrought with Eastern figures, defended the arches to the cloisters and shut out the mountain winds. A fountain splashed in the centre of the peristyle and cast its jet into a marble basin. Touched with the first rays of the morning sun the exquisite tracery of arch and pillar could not be hidden even from the unobservant eye. Esther was like one carried suddenly into some scene of the Moorish fables; and when her guide drew the curtain back, and showed her the room in which Arthur waited, she hesitated for a moment upon the threshold as though uncertain of herself and of the truth. The hall itself had but the scantiest furniture: a low couch served for chair and bed; an Eastern table showed a

battered coffee-pot cheek by fowl with a common cup. One great rug spread out upon the floor lent the colour so sadly needed. Light streamed dimly through the veiling cupola; it fell upon the face of a sleeping man, whose cloak covered his tired limbs, whose hand rested knuckle downwards upon the pavement. He did not hear the intruders, his sleep was dreamless; but burning lips upon his own waked him, and, starting up, he caught the little figure in his arms.

"Esther! it is Esther! Of course it would be! And I fell asleep—yes, I have been waking for thirty hours; and the bed is soft. Say that I am a brute! I did not even dream!"

He laughed boyishly, and still holding her hands he sprang up and drew her to the light. She feared his gaze, for she knew how greatly she was changed, and hiding her face upon his breast she would not look at him.

"Let me read your story!" he cried, raising her chin with a gentle hand. "Yes, you have been doubting, too, little wife—you cannot hide it from me—the eyes tell me so! You have been saying, 'If!' You are changed, sweet—but it gives you something which you never had. Yes, I do not flatter you; there is life in your eyes now; once there was only the dream."

She hid her face from him again, knowing not how to speak her message; but he led her out into the sunlight, and putting his arm about her began to pace the courtyard as though no secret lay between them and this was a common day of an uneventful life.

"I expected that they would send you—you are their natural messenger. They would play upon your love for me and use it for their own ends. Of course they threaten me. Don't be afraid to say so, Esther. Old Xavier told you to come—he is waiting at the palace for you to bring him an answer?"

She admitted that it was so.

"He offers you your liberty if you will leave Cadi, Arthur. I could not answer for you—God knows I would not! Have I not brought trouble enough already upon you? Shall I let your love for me cost you so much? Oh, I cannot, dear husband, I cannot——"

He silenced her with a new caress.

"I forbid you to speak of it, little wife. They are brave men to strike at me through you—chivalrous gentlemen, and I will tell them so. It has all been a plot from the beginning. Think of it as that and say that we must laugh at it. Oh, I have friends left yet—I shall still trouble them——"

He appeared to be thinking deeply, and comforting her with a lover's assurance he began to recite their story again like one who believed that recital would supply the link in that chain of thought he forged.

"They sent hill-men to St. Girons and then disowned them. You can hire ruffians in the mountains at sixpence a dozen and get some change out! They give it out that my house was robbed by a roving band of gipsies while their own agents are really the aggressors. They pretend to



rescue you and pose as knight errants. Having got you in the city, they know that I will follow—and here I am, not at all alarmed, dear wife, believe me! A man must have very good cards when he plays for a kingdom: he must be sure of his finesses. I do not think that old Xavier's hand is as strong as he imagines it! To-day will show us. I shall appeal to my countrymen—I do not believe in vain. There is only one man against me. It is he or I. This Endymion is a little tired of the moonshine; he wakes up in a hurry and wants to climb the hills. Tell me, Esther, how have they treated you—what happened to you on the road?"

He broached a new subject thus quickly to forestall her questions. A clever actor, the peril of the *rôle* he played insisted upon a hearing; and the changing expression of his face, the puckered brow and the quick glances to right and left in their turn betrayed his reservations. Esther knew how much they had to talk about, and yet the heart of the subject defied her. Arthur fenced too adroitly for that. He desired that she should speak chiefly of herself.

"Tell me," he persisted, "what happened upon the road—how did you leave the castle—who brought you here?"

She answered as directly.

"When you left me in the bedroom, I did not lock my door—I was too anxious. Some one cried out in the hall and I thought it was you. Then I went down. The whole house was full of soldiers, and they were quarrelling. I saw one

who was quite a boy stabbed before my eyes. I must have fainted. The next thing I remember is being upon the back of a horse and seeing one of the men riding at my side. At Vic-Dessos we stopped at the inn and they gave me breakfast. I do not think I was frightened of them. It seemed to me that they were the servants of some one else."

"Of course they were! Old Xavier bought them for a capful of coppers and rewarded their fidelity with a rope. He'll hang the lot if he catches them, to show his gratitude. At Vic-Dessos, I suppose, some one turned up—hussars in a hurry and an officer who swore by the gods that it was an outrage! Who was he, Esther? What was his name?"

"The Count of Foix—at least, he said so, but he told me so many untruths that I am sure I do not know who it was."

"It would be the Count, all the same. Spaniards are good liars: it is one of the national accomplishments. He is not really a bad fellow, and may yet be caught. Most of these officers have been bribed; but I do not think he would take the money. Corruption is a pleasant thing when it gives you some one else's house and receipts your bills. Old Xavier is wading in money just now, but there may be something better. I like the Count; I believe he would come over if I could see him."

"Then I must not say unkind things of him. Certainly he was very good to me—and I do not think I have ever been so glad to see a man in all my life."

"In all your life?"

"You know what I mean, dearest. Just consider; I did not even know if you were alive or dead!"

He kissed her, grateful for her solicitude. Her troubles were in his mind before his own.

"Women are always anxious at the wrong time; they do not measure the probabilities. If you had been a politician you would have known better. My death would not have served old Xavier as well as my life. A popular sentiment is a dangerous thing; it forgives much to a man who is dead, and there are his heirs to consider. My brother, Prince Ferdinand, would have appealed to France. As it is, the old fox will find the better way. Oh, yes, I see it quite clearly. There will be a mock trial at the Hotel de Ville; I shall be accused of State offences; the Duke will pose as my friend—a new kind of devil's advocate! If he can work the people up to it, he may strike at my life—it depends upon his pluck and the French Government. I do not care a fig for banishment now, Esther; but I should be a coward to give up my country without a struggle. That is where the danger lies. I must call my friends to my side and the issue will be the sword. It cannot be anything else—you would be the last to wish it!"

She surrendered to the spirit of this masterful confidence. There is nothing that a woman so much admires in a man as courage; and whatever else he lacked, Arthur of Cadi was never charged with a craven's part. She herself knew

so little of his people or of their affairs that much which he debated left her perplexed and hesitating. If she had a premonition, it was that one who was brave and headstrong pitted himself against the subtle craft of the diplomatist and the schemer; and when she permitted herself to think of this she trembled for his safety.

"The last, the very last to wish it, dear husband," she said with unwonted earnestness.

"Promise me that whatever happens it shall not be—well, because you love me. Oh, I know what this costs you! Sometimes I could say, let me go away, forget me, forget that I have lived! Is not your happiness sufficient for me——"

He did not permit her to continue; but clasping her suddenly in his arms, forbade the promise.

"No!" he said, "not that—I will not hear it! If I have learned to play a man's part, was it not your lesson? Shall I give up the most precious thing in life for a chimera, a pretence of place and power so empty that, but for you, I would turn my back on it for ever? No, no, dearest wife, we will face the world together! The meanest ray of sunlight that falls on me shall light your sweet face too! Let the end be well or ill, my home is here, in the heart of the woman I love!"

She did not argue with him, nor had she the courage to insist. His passionate love for her had been so much the dictator of her actions since Doctor Xavier left her in Paris that the day seemed to have passed when she could either withstand or deny it. She knew that he spoke

the truth, that she was all to him, and that without her life had no gift.

"I have no will but yours, dearest," she said. "God help us to do that which is right! And yet I must answer them to-day—ah, what shall I say? what shall I tell them?"

"That they are cowards to send my wife to me—that I laugh at their threats and deny their authority. Tell them that. Say that I count upon my friends and the honour of my country, and that I shall know how to defend those who are faithful to me. If any one insults you, remember his name, for I swear that he shall answer me! Can you remember that, little Esther?"

"I remember nothing but your love," she pleaded.

. . . . .

The appointed hour drew swiftly to its close. Lovers still in the first dream of surrender, they lost themselves in the promise of to-morrow and brushed aside so lightly the reality of to-day. Each in his own heart said, "The worst cannot be; we shall find a way." Lips pressed to lips, hands locked in hands, they were like children of springtime, hoping ever and faithful to the dawn-ing summer. If Esther remembered the shadow, if the truth came frowning in the sunshine, eyes were closed to it and ears deafened. It could not be that destiny would so deal with them, saying, "Here must the eternal farewell be spoken." When Colonel Varez surprised them, their

laughter echoed in the courtyard. A painter, he said, would have named the picture priceless.

He was a man of traditions, doing his duty stubbornly, and yet not incapable, when duty were done, of enthusiasms and the recreation of the partisan. His fidelity to the Prince was just such as the law of his country permitted. He carried the Council's authority and never questioned it. Obedience to the letter of the law was his guiding principle—he returned to the courtyard when sixty minutes exactly had expired, and asking no questions nor permitting any, he bade Esther follow him, and drove straight-forth to the palace.

The city was awake by this time, and many a gossip at a café's door, many an old woman upon her way to church, discussed the events of that waking night and the greater act which the day must witness. Troops seemed to be everywhere—here drilling in square or barracks, there marching with flags flying and drums rolling, now escorting a minister or riding at a canter to the rendezvous before the great Hotel de Ville. The air of unrest was universal. Esther's quick eyes detected the barricades before the shops; she read men's faces, and imagined that but one story occupied their minds. They were asking what verdict must be pronounced by Arthur's judges to-day. Would it be life or death, sunshine or the darkness, the judgment of mercy or the pitiless decree of the dictator and the rebel? Would this kingdom renounce the son of those who for five hundred years had preserved her

freedom, or would she recall the tradition of her loyalty and save him even yet? Esther knew not. She could learn nothing from those active scenes and troubled faces. The soldier by her side sat stern and silent. A day of gentle breezes and dazzling sunlight mocked the passions which stirred all hearts.

The carriage went rapidly, as though the driver feared recognition. In the courtyard of the palace Esther perceived for the first time that her destination was not the apartment she had quitted. They drove her to the southern wing, to an old quarter of the palace which, though she knew it not, was called "the prison." Massive walls, loopholed windows, spoke of the antiquity of this habitation. It had been the home of the Princes of Cadi five hundred years ago, and in the days of Spain's bigotry many an offender had breathed his last within those gloomy portals. Here, upon the first floor, in that which once had been the bartizan of the fortress, an apartment was prepared for Esther, so cheerless, so bare, that no prison cell would have spoken more eloquently of captivity. Damp-stained walls displayed no other ornament than that of their wheels of swords and rusted armour. Save for one little casement overlooking the square before the Hotel de Ville, the windows were but loopholes in battlements of rock. A gigantic fireplace, with a rude oaken ingle, nursed a smouldering fire of steaming logs. The air reeked of damp and disuse. One solitary chair set against a table that would not have adorned a kitchen. The



sunbeams falling upon the cold stone pavement focussed rays of prismatic light in which the dust of ages floated. But everywhere the nature of the room was declared: it was a prison, neither more nor less; even Colonel Varez admitted that.

"The Duke, my master, is greatly distressed that the Ministry permits you no better accommodation, madame. His influence has not been able to order it otherwise. I will not disguise it from you that your relations with the French Government are responsible for this severity. You will be asked questions concerning that presently; but until they are put to you, I am commanded to hold you a prisoner in this house."

He stood aside to permit her to enter the dismal cell, and for a little while she regarded it with open-eyed astonishment. Logically, perhaps, she preferred this open declaration of hostility to the sham courtesies of yesterday. Now, at last, she knew the truth of her position; and her sense of humour remaining to her, she could laugh at the folly which named her as a servant of France.

"Your Ministry is most discreet!" she retorted. "I am glad to see that I am so important a personage. When this preposterous charge is a little more definite, I shall be quite ready to defend myself. Really, I must be a very clever woman!"

He bowed gravely, for no man had seen Colonel Varez smile; and calling to a trooper



who waited upon the staircase, he bade him bring paper and pens.

"I am merely the servant, madame; permit me to decline any argument. The Duke awaits your answer in a matter which is more urgent. Please make it as soon as possible: I will return in half an hour."

He strode from the room, and the heavy door shut with a clang which re-echoed through the empty building. A trooper had left a sheet of paper with pen and ink upon the table, and for a little while Esther stood wondering what she should write and with what unknown consequences. She was still wearing the winter cloak in which she had gone up to the citadel, and her first act was to loose it and to throw it over the wooden chair, where its bright lining of pink silk gave a patch of welcome colour to that dismal place. Thereafter she knelt before the fire and warmed her chilled fingers and shuddered a little in that atmosphere of damp and evil humours. The plain fact that the gates of a prison had closed upon her at last troubled her less than the base intrigue which would have made her the agent of her husband's compliance. Though she had been prepared for threats and entreaties, a certain confidence in the ultimate triumph of justice had upheld her until this time; but here, within this cell, hope defied her and she would not barter with it. Her love-dream, so brief, was surely done with now! She saw herself cast out to the world to mourn eternally the man without whom life had no meaning.

When she staggered up from her knees the pallor of death was upon her face, her eyes were blind so that she could scarcely find the paper. She sank heavily into the chair, and for many minutes did not raise her face from those arms which hid it from the light.

What should she write? What must her answer be to him who so tortured her, who had found her out in London but seven months ago and saved her for this! Better, she said, that it had ended then; better the degradation, the poverty, the humiliation, than this vision of the dream, this knowledge of love and light and the surpassing hour of woe. She had not asked the help of any man. Destiny might have spared her so easily! And now she must repay to the uttermost farthing for her brief respite. If she could but stand with Arthur before his judges to answer them as he would answer them, hear their judgment and suffer it, then, indeed, might this self-accusation avail her. But she knew that the wish was vain. The dread thought came to her that the eternal farewell might have been spoken. She sobbed aloud, heart-broken and believing the worst.

The minutes passed slowly in a silence upon which neither the city's voice nor any sound within the prison intruded. Esther could hear her own heart beating as she took up the pen and set it down again upon an empty page. What should she write? How should she answer them? Should she say that her husband counted upon the justice of his countrymen? Should she

defend him? or should it be the bold defiance, threat for threat, the braver resolution? The cleverness which compelled her to answer at all was not overlooked. She foresaw that this very paper might be used in evidence against the man they would condemn. She feared to commit herself, feared her refusal. The thread of an answer would be caught up in her mind to be lost immediately in a tangle of her arguments. Had she but one friend in Cadi, then might word have been sent to Paris and its Government. But she knew that she had none. Never had she been more utterly alone.

The pen tumbled from her unwilling fingers—she said that she could answer nothing. Colonel Varez found her new resolve unshaken when he returned at the appointed time. He had not expected it, for, like many in the city, he believed that she was an adventuress and would sell herself for money.

"I fear you did not understand me, madame," he said. "The Duke is waiting for his answer."

She stood up bravely and all her dignity helping her she pointed to the paper.

"It is there, Colonel."

He did not reproach her; his surprise mastered him, and he folded up the paper deliberately and with method.

"Madame," he asked at last, "are you aware what this means?"

"I am quite aware, Colonel."

"That I am carrying your husband's death-warrant?"

She did not flinch.

"I know it," she said, unshaken.

He took a step toward her and held out his hand.

"I salute a brave woman!" he said.

She did not speak. Her lips were twitching, her eyes dilated and turned full upon his own. Not until he left her did she break down utterly and burst into a passionate flood of tears.

## CHAPTER XX

COLONEL VAREZ carried her message to the Ministry at seven o'clock, and at eight the trooper entered her cell with coffee and bread. She welcomed this intrusion and was grateful for the food he offered her. Her grief had left her weak and cold; and when the first passion of it was over, she sat for a full hour oblivious of her surroundings and their significance.

"The bread is bad but the coffee is good, madame," the fellow said. "I will see the cook by and by and do better for you to-morrow. My mother, Guanares, will be up here just now, and then she will make us comfortable. Your bedroom is at the top of that little flight of stairs. If you want to see what is going on at the Hotel de Ville you have only to look out of your window. They say the Prince is to be there by and by—God forbid, say I!"

He was a cheery gossip, who bustled about the room and performed unnecessary services in an unnecessarily clumsy way. Knowing something of the circumstances in which an English lady had become a prisoner in the Bartizan Tower, he yet pretended ignorance, and chattered on as

though it were a fête day in the joys of which he could not participate.

"You haven't thought of it, I suppose, madame, or it would not be news to you," he said. "The first thing I do when I go to a new house is to look out of the window. You never know what may happen. Now, if you will please stand over there, you will see as well as the best of them. We shall have trouble by and by, and some one will be killed. They say there are two thousand guards in the square. I do not know, I have not counted them. But you can see it all, madame, if you care for such things."

Esther heard with surprise. From her window she could look down upon the square before the Hotel de Ville, and upon the crowds already gathered there; and she wondered that curiosity had not sent her there before. Though the scene was viewed from afar, no detail of its picture escaped her. Every window, every roof, tree and wall and fountain, contributed its quota to that mighty audience, always picturesque and entirely heterogeneous. The display of colour was worthy of a Southern race, she said. Flags, bannerets, gay tapestries covered up the white stone of the loftiest buildings. The steps of the hotel were a glittering sheen of rainbow hues, to which the crimson robes of the judges and the white uniforms of the guard lent their staring contrasts. The crowd itself swayed like a shimmering field of human corn. Fierce but brief tumults declared the latent passion of angry parties. The gendarmes were everywhere, cajoling, threatening, beating

the people back with the flats of their swords. All seemed to wait for some figure necessary to the pageant and its story. Esther knew that they waited for her husband. She needed no logician's wit to understand that she had been imprisoned in that very apartment to be the spectator of Arthur's humiliation. Such a shallow device earned her just scorn. She resolved that she would yield nothing to persecution or to threats, and withdrawing from the window she sat again at the table and drank her coffee and ate the sour bread, and shut her ears to the ominous cries.

The bells of the cathedral, muffled by those tremendous walls, chimed the hour of eleven before her brief repast was over. If she had any consolation of suspense, it was that the ordeal must be brief. She could see it so clearly in her mind: the dimly-lighted court, the blazing uniforms, the scarlet robes, the stern figures—one man against a nation, and he alone! Loyalty to her ideals said that the prisoner would play a brave part, answering lies with scorn and conspiracy with indifference. When a volley of applause from the square heralded some greater event, she forgot her resolution and ran to the window, believing that the end had come; but the scene was unchanged, the mob, if anything, more dense; the sunshine more brilliant. The outcry died down as suddenly as it had arisen. The people waited patiently when the knife did not clinch their arguments.

She returned to the fireside, and stirring the

lagging embers drew her chair close to them. Ages seemed to pass before the merry trooper returned, full of the story of the morning. She questioned him eagerly, forgetful of her dignity, desirous only to know. He replied as readily, for he was proud of the authority of knowledge.

The Prince, he said, carried himself splendidly. His appearance in the streets pleased the people. The priests were on his side, but the bourgeoisie were against him. His judges took their orders from the Duke of Montalvan and were not to be trusted. The Prince's answers had embarrassed them exceedingly. They charged him with receiving money from the French Government and intriguing with the Carlists. But the count of treachery was one upon which they chiefly relied. He would have sold Cadi to France, they said, in return for a command in the French Army and the income of a Prince. Of the more personal indictment this honest fellow had the sense to say nothing. He did not tell her that her own name had moved the crowd to a frenzy of anger, that she was spoken of as one in the pay of the French Government, styled "a well-known adventuress, by whose intrigue the Prince had been inveigled to England." An honest fellow, he held his tongue about this. Why should he grieve her? He believed that she would have enough to suffer by and by.

"Mother Guanares is in the kitchen," he said. "I promise you something good for breakfast. The wine in the cellar here is as old as the bishop's. We will drink the Prince's health—



he'll beat them yet, be sure of it! He's a tongue in his head and knows how to use it."

Esther thanked him for his devotion, though she could not share his faith. When he brought her an excellent breakfast, she tried to eat with appetite, but it was a mere pretence. The intolerable day dragged out its depressing hours. It would never end, she thought.

The court pronounced its judgment at five o'clock in the afternoon, and five minutes later a thunder of sounds in the great square winged a message to the lonely prisoner. At first Esther understood those triumphant cries of joy to be the heralds of acquittal, and, rising with beating heart, she went to the window and looked out once more upon the turbulent scene. It was full dark by this time, and lights twinkled in all the windows of the square. Monstrous arc lamps cast their pale glow upon the swaying multitudes, and from the Hotel itself there poured forth an unbroken human stream of soldiers and citizens and the audience of trial. By every corner, in all the doorways, even at the windows of the houses, men argued with men and debated the tremendous news; while troopers backed their horses through the serried ranks and began to drive the people to their homes. Passion dominated the scene and even claimed its dead, but no one spoke that word which had been as a gift of life or death to the figure at the window. Though she pressed her burning eyes close to the misted glass and listened intently to that babel of voices, the torture of the doubt remained. Was Arthur

guilty or innocent, a free man or a prisoner, condemned or applauded? Vain hope! For every hundred voices that cried his name five hundred acclaimed the Duke of Montalvan and bade him show himself. Carriage after carriage drove at a gallop through those shifting ranks; but in none of them was there any face which told the story. And so there came to her reluctantly the dread thought, "He is condemned—Arthur is condemned!" and from that moment she shut the sights from her eyes, and, falling upon her knees, she prayed for her lover's life.

The hours found her attitude unchanged. She was unconscious of time or place, oblivious of self. An excited imagination painted for her anew the terrible story of the day and corrected the brighter picture. She beheld the crowded court, the set faces of the judges, the beloved figure at the bar; she heard the music of a voice, the monotone of counsel, the judgment, "He is guilty!" And then her prayer would be raised anew and she would say, "Folly, folly! it is not true—he is free—he will come to me."

The crowd without dispersed quickly when judgment had been pronounced—the women to their homes, the men to the cafés. If an unwonted restlessness stirred the city, but little expression of it was permitted in the streets. By nine o'clock the square before the Hotel de Ville had resumed its normal aspect save for the patrol of the guard and the vigilant gendarmes. Night came down in the mantle of Spring; a gentle breeze wafted the music of bells; the moonbeams

fathomed the crabbed streets and shone gloriously in the open squares. Within the prison there was no sound save that of the chapel bell and the sentry's foot. As the night wore on and none visited her, Esther's anguish passed all words. Would they never tell her—would none take pity on her? This torturing question was answered all unexpectedly by none other than Francisco Xavier himself, who came to the palace at ten o'clock, carrying a lantern and unheralded. Esther said that he entered her cell like a figure of some evil dream, but she did not shrink from him; he found her the mistress of herself and of her dignity. And his first word was characteristically apologetic.

"Madame," he said, "I am very sorry to find you in this place."

She bowed her head and waited for him to go on. When the trooper had brought a pair of candles and set them one at each side of his lantern, the Duke bade her seat herself.

"The Ministry compels it," he said, folding his hands behind his back and pacing the stone floor like one thinking deeply. "I have protested, but they will not hear me. Evil tongues have been at work, madame; they pay you the compliment of calling you a spy."

She laughed a little bitterly.

"I am flattered," she said. "I did not know that I possessed the brains for that."

"Then you are singularly modest, madame. I should say that you have too much brains to be any such thing and I am a judge of brains."

The assumption of a new virtue flattered him and he stood before her to repeat it.

"Yes," he continued, like one convincing himself of a pleasant attribute, "a judge of brains, madame. I know wise men and I know wise women. Knowledge brings me here to-night—a plain man of business to make a business bargain."

He fell to the measured step again, regarding her with half-closed eyes which told him how greatly she suffered. She would have given years of her life to have had her question answered, but of him she could ask nothing. When he halted before her for the second time his manner changed to one of unusual insolence.

"You are clever enough for anything," he said, "clever enough and pretty enough for anything, my little English lady. Yes, I said that when I saw you for the first time seven months ago—a pretty woman who can be made beautiful, a wise head which will fascinate, rule, lead any man who has not the will to resist it—my diagnosis was correct, madame, You have served me faithfully—I could not have found a better instrument in all Europe."

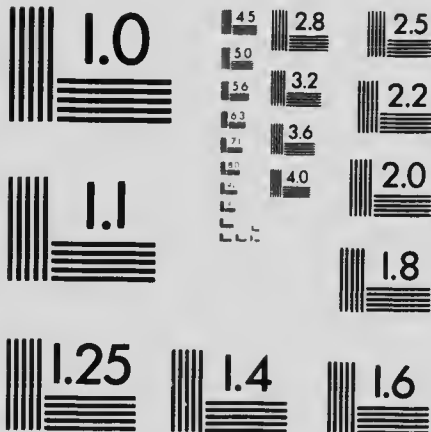
He laughed softly, and, holding the candle aloft, would have looked upon her face; but she turned with an angry gesture, and in spite of her resolution, she asked him the question.

"I would to God that I were a man!" she cried bitterly; "it is so safe to insult a woman who has no friends. If my husband were free——"



# MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

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"You are aware that he is free, then."

For an instant a wild light of hope illumined her eyes. Had he come to tell her this? Was the brutality but a veil? She had no pride left when she saw that it might be so.

"I know nothing," she retorted; "how could I? Who cares that I should know?"

"I care, madame; my solicitude brought me to this room to-night."

"Then your solicitude finds no thanks."

She turned and faced him. He set down the candle and snuffed the wick with his fingers. His task was proving more difficult than he had imagined it. Her self-command baffled him."

"I came," he said at length, "not as the bearer of ill news——"

"Ah, it is ill news, then; I see—I see, you would not be here if it were not. They condemn my husband, and you are the first to tell me of it. Thank you, I am very much obliged."

Her voice had grown a little hysterical, and the irony of grief showed her to less advantage. Xavier welcomed his opportunity; he believed that he could profit by it.

"You are pleased to misunderstand my motives," he said, like one greatly wronged; "it is true that I should not be here if my Prince had been acquitted; why should I? Prudence, madame, would have carried me to London on the wings of the wind. I am not a martyr in the cause of nations—far from it. My personal safety is dear to me, I assure you. No, truly, acquittal would not have found me your benefactor to-night."

"Benefactor! Are we children, that you use the word?"

"We are always children, madame—those of us who succeed in life. The world is very simple, believe me. The greatest men are those who rightly understand the simplicity of the majority of their fellows. In England you call it common-sense. In Spain we espy the devil——"

She interrupted him with a low cry which betrayed the anger of impatience. Her voice was broken and unnatural. But for an iron will she would have fallen sobbing at his feet.

"Doctor Xavier," she said, "if you are indeed my benefactor, tell me of my husband."

He unloosed his cloak and let it fall back from his shoulder. A flare of the embers upon the hearth cast out a ruddy flame and set his face in a frame of the brown-gold light. The whole figure was sinister and yet not unimpressive. It might have been that of a great man surprised in the hour of a crime.

"Your husband, madame," he said, in a tone so low that she could scarcely hear him, "your husband has been found guilty by his judges and will be shot at dawn."

She tried to speak, but her voice failed. Though her face was turned from him he could hear her sobbing like a child in the silence of the night. Her distress did not embarrass him. He waited patiently, standing beside her at the table. His tone had changed when he spoke again, and he employed that caressing note of which he was the master.



"That is the judgment of the Court," he repeated unctiously; "it may or may not be final, madame."

"I understand you—God help me!" she said.

He was not displeased that she should meet him frankly. Like a shrewd merchant he knew that this was the hour of sale and barter. He had much to offer; she had something to give.

"Let me see you sitting down," he exclaimed, with a new intonation which implied leisure; "I have much to say, and you are tired. Let us be at our ease; if I prefer to stand, it is my habit. Come, that is better."

She drew the chair to the fireside at his bidding and sat there, her chin resting upon her hands, her arms upon her knees. The ebb and flow of a flickering blaze touched her pale face with the tides of light. Her eyes were tearless, her nerves quivering. He understood what silence cost her.

"I shall not trouble you with any particulars," he resumed, falling to the monotonous step again like one upon a quest of words; "the Court has heard the evidence and has found our friend guilty. The rest is our work. I told you this morning when I sent you to the citadel that you could save the Prince; you chose to ignore my warning. It would be a craven act to remember that you did so; I forget it, madame. I am content that we begin anew a task which the night must finish."

He paused, believing that her curiosity would interrupt him, but she had nothing to say, and he resumed—

"Yes, a task which the night must finish or

the day will find for ever undone. I fear it is that, madame—to say 'yes,' or 'no' before the sunrise or to hold our tongues for ever."

She quailed at the threat, but she did not lift her eyes or protest that it was otherwise. Her hesitation satisfied him. He continued in a more decided tone—

"When I sent you to the citadel this morning it was in my head that you would achieve nothing. The circumstances were changing, the end uncertain. I foresaw that you would be guided by events. The verdict might be in your favour or the people vacillating; there was still a hope of French action. The day has altered all that; we are confronted with fresh facts and must consider them. At least you will admit that it is different?"

"I admit nothing," she said; my husband has answered you once for all."

"Then your husband is an obstinate fool, lady. Will he sacrifice his life for an empty throne which he has no desire to fill? I do not believe it. He has too much sense—he knows that we are wise enough to be generous. I, myself, will answer for his honour before Europe. What more does he ask? I tell you that he is mad to refuse."

"He asks for justice," was her quiet response; "what right have you to judge him? None—you have none!"

He crossed the room and laid a paper upon the table before her.

"This is my authority, madame," he cried, as

one aping the manner of the theatre. "Oblige me by admitting it!"

Esther took the paper in her nervous fingers and turned to the table to read it. The light was dim and uncertain; he held a candle that she might see, and, holding it could detect the rapid beating of her heart and the hot blood which flushed her cheeks while she read.

"It is not in English," she exclaimed presently; I do not understand Spanish, Doctor Xavier."

He laughed at his own mistake and took another paper from the pocket of his cape.

"I had forgotten," he said; "that is the document. Read it carefully and note that there is a line left blank. Some one must sign the paper presently; ah! you cannot see—shall I read, it, then?"

She pushed the parchment from her, for she knew that when it was signed Arthur would not have an hour to live. Such a challenge failed utterly if it were meant to shake her resolution. She left the paper upon the table and resumed her old attitude.

"Why do you show me that?" she asked, a little absently; "what has that to do with me?"

"So much that at a word from you I will burn it in yonder embers."

She regarded him unflinchingly.

"And the word? Oh, I understand that I must pay. You offer me something: what is it?"

"Your husband's life, your own liberty, an honourable position in England, a generous

recompence from my Government—those are my proposals.”

“You have made that offer before.”

“Under other circumstances. Consider: your husband is obeying a foolish hallucination. He will go to the scaffold for a tradition five hundred years too old for the age; one person alone can save him. The city names you as the agent of his downfall; it refuses to regard you as his wife. If you persist the law must take its course. This man, who has been your friend, will lose his life at dawn; you will be sent across the frontier, penniless and branded as an adventuress. There will be another President—we need not speak of him; he will be generous to you. Renounce your title to this man’s protection.”

“To his protection—how dare you?”

“Bear with me. In the history of every Court there is such a story as yours—the wife whom Governments will not recognise and princes must forget. I am compelled to speak frankly. You can save my Prince from the scaffold; why should I beat about the bush? Resign your claims upon him, say that he is free, keep your secret, return to your own country; my oath shall be your security. I swear to you upon the Cross that we will keep faith with him. Let it be here and now the solemn bond between us—ah! folly, you ask his life, then—you send him to the open grave.”

He stepped back, the words broken abruptly upon his lips. Her cry of anger and shame echoed like a low moan in the silence of the

night. Until that moment he had never understood her truly; but when she confronted him for the last time, with blazing eyes and heaving breast, and hands clenched and cheeks on fire, he knew the woman and said that he had failed.

"Go!" she cried, a passion of hate and despair breaking her voice; "if it were my last word, I say, go!"

Her anger frightened him. It had been no surprise to him if she had fallen dead at his feet. Nevertheless, he did not spare her—he had expected such an outbreak.

"Since that is your answer, madame," he said deliberately, "I will return you mine. Here are pens and ink—I am going to sign this document without delay."

She stood to watch him, quivering like a leaf which a hot wind of night is blowing. He did not take his eyes from her face while he spread out the paper and felt for the mouth of the inkstand with the pen which the trooper had provided. When he had signed the paper and dried the ink at the candle's flame, he would have continued had he not been aware that the door of the cell stood open and that some one had entered in silently. A premonition of danger for which he could not account stilled the word upon his lips and sent his hand to his sword. A figure from the shadows advanced with shuffling step. It was that of a woman, gaunt and wan and terrible.

She shuffled up to him and her face took shape in the aureole of the light. No word was spoken; she did not accuse him—asked nothing, declared

no intention. Some dreadful apparition might have loomed up out of the stilly night to break the word from the man's lips and hold a young girl fascinated. Esther, indeed, moved neither hand nor limb. A scene long forgotten was being enacted again before her startled eyes. Once again she waited in the garden of roses; the fountain splashed in the sunshine; a vain woman babbled vainly; a face looked down upon her from a window; she was afraid but silent. And now she saw the face again, the hollow cheeks, the hectic flush, the withered skin, the outstanding bones, the lust of vengeance in the staring eyes. And the man, no less, shrank back; the pen tumbled from his hand, great drops of sweat stood upon his forehead.

"Who are you? what do you want?" he cried, hoarsely.

The woman answered with a resounding shriek heard far beyond the prison walls—a knife flashed in the air; she struck at his throat and the blood gushed out upon her arms and tattered gown.

"The curse of God be upon your palsied limbs!"—a maniac spoke and laughed horribly—"as you sowed so shall you reap—now—now——"

He fell headlong and she stabbed the prone body again and again. The lantern crashed upon the stone pavement; the table was overturned; the room lay in darkness save for the ebbing glow of the waning fire. None intruded upon the scene; none came between the woman and the man. The awful laughter subsided anon in a low

groaning sound as of a mother fondling a child. To this silence succeeded : the shuffling step was heard descending the stairs one by one as though escape were a labour.

Night engulfed the messenger of death ; Esther was alone, and the door of her prison stood open.

## CHAPTER XXI

A LAMBERT flame twining about a log which the scuffle had dislodged, penetrated the shadows with a generous beam of light and revealed the hidden shapes and all the evidences of strife. It showed Esther that to which her eyes had been blinded in the moment of the deed. For to her tragedy had been swift and paralysing, robbing her of her common faculties and stilling her tongue. She had seen a face in the golden aureole, had heard an echo of mad laughter; and then the dead man lay at her feet and the lantern went out and the darkness of the supreme mystery enveloped her. For many minutes thereafter she did not stir from the place. The horrible apparition hovered about her still. She believed that she heard the dead man breathing; once she thought that the body trembled convulsively; but she did not dare to stoop and touch it with her hands. When reaction came, it overwhelped her as with a freshet of fear. She had the idea to escape the room at any cost, to fly from it and to give the alarm. The breaking bud of the flame declared her road and showed her everything as in some ghastly



silhouette—the broken lantern, the table overturned, the shrouded face beneath.

She fled from the room and ran wildly down the stairs. If the unknown had passed out, what should forbid her? An iron-clamped door at the stairs foot mocked her confidence, and though she beat upon it with clenched hands and found her voice and cried hysterically for help, none answered her. The vain blows echoed vainly in the empty vault above. She sank upon a step, crouching as though afraid of that which must come after. Who watched in the darkness? she asked. Who had let the woman out? What friend had been her confederate?

Night passed and found her still hiding from the truth. She had lost the power to reason or to associate her own fortunes with this supreme tragedy. Distant bells chimed the watching hours, but none called to her prison. The lagging moments were as a chapter in her life. Impatience gave her a strange idea that the day would never come, and that she would be found dead where she sat. She shrank from the scene behind her as from a crime still being acted before her haunted eyes. Though liberty itself had been the reward, she would not have returned to the woful room. Nor did any sound come down from the cell above; the palace might have been deserted, the guard recalled.

It was bitterly cold upon the staircase, and when the reluctant dawn came straggling through the loopholed windows, she stood up with numbed limbs and bloodless fingers, saying that

day must bring release. Already a faint murmur of the city's wakening life sent its message even to that close retreat. She heard the *réveille* sounded in the distant barracks. Jangling bells summoned the peasantry to Mass; a sergeant's voice commanded the changing of the guard. For the second time she would have raised the alarm, and beating loudly upon the door she thought to make the sentries hear her; but none responded, none answered to her knock.

Esther remembered at this time the merry trooper, and how he had spoken of the mother Guanares and of her promise in the prison. It was her consolation to assure herself that the man would return to her cell at daybreak, bringing her chocolate and the gossip of the barrack-room. She counted the minutes until he should come, feverishly afraid even of the morning light and half believing that the dead man still lived. When she heard a voice at last, she believed that the trooper spoke and she staggered to her feet and responded like one snatched from a living tomb.

"Yes, yes—who is it?—I am here!"

The summons came, oddly enough, not from the courtyard before the Bartizan Tower, but from that room of shadows she had fled in such terror. For an instant a terrible suspicion almost stilled her heart. Was it Xavier who spoke, or another? She peered into the envelope of darkness, vainly trying to discern a face. A man was descending the narrow staircase with stealthy tread. His white bernouse took shape in the

straggling light; his long brown robe trailed upon the stairs. She knew that it was Yussuf, the Moor; the man who, unknown to her, had watched her as his own child since she set foot in Cadi; the man who loved her with the dogged, hopeless persistence of his race; and she stretched out her hands to him and bade him hasten.

"It is I—Esther—I am here! They have killed Doctor Xavier—please help me!"

The Moor caught the outstretched hand in an iron grip, and held up the fragile figure which fell swooning in his arms. He lifted it as a trivial burden and flung a cloak about its face. Keys at his girdle opened the heavy door and admitted him to the courtyard. None challenged him in the sunny court without. The sentry read his passport as the merest formality.

"So France has saved the little English woman!"

It was the man's only comment.

In a carriage driven swiftly away from the southern ramparts of Cadi, Esther opened her eyes when a quarter of an hour had passed and perceived that the sun was shining. A swarthy figure upon the seat before her regarded her with a woman's tender eyes. She did not know why the Moor sat there or recollect the circumstance of her deliverance.

"Señora!" he said, "look up—it is the day!"

She sat up and pressed her fingers to her burning forehead. Memory deceived her, and shut out the intervening hours of tragedy. She

went back to the moment of the dread document and the writing on the page.

"Where am I?" she asked wildly. "What is it, Yussuf, what has happened?"

The changeless face betrayed none of its emotions. The Moor looked out of the window like one drawing near a destination.

"Señora," he said quietly, "much has happened. A man is dead who deserved to die. I know his life; he deserved to die. You—you know nothing; you were not as the others!"

She did not understand him; her thoughts were inconsequent and capricious. The present compelled her questions. What had happened? How had she escaped the cell?

"You must tell me everything," was her passionate command; "I have the right to know. Where is my husband—where are you taking me?"

"To him, Señora, in my own time. Listen: the French have forbidden his death, but the people may demand it. I do not know; the day will tell us. Yussuf is your friend—he has been your friend many months. Obey him and he will be your servant. Here is the inn—we shall breakfast, Señora."

The carriage stopped as he spoke before the door of an inn which lay a mile to the south of the city's ramparts. The road had carried them upward toward the pine forests and the pass. Countless white tents of the regiments, called in to quell the tumults, dotted the grassland; and troopers moved briskly from door to door, their

blue uniforms looking brighter in the sunshine. The city itself lay wreathed still in the morning mists; bells chimed the Angelus, muffled and indistinctly. A wind of day sweeping down from the snowfields invigorated Esther as with a breath of life itself. Hope, unjustified, possessed her heart anew. It seemed as though some one led her out of the shadows and she looked up to the golden East and dared to believe that this was the fateful hour.

Her obedience to the Moor was unquestioning. Odd, indeed, that of all the friends whom fortune had sent, this man alone remained to befriend her. Her faith in him was absolute. She believed that he would take her to her husband.

"We need all our strength," he said, as one who loved a mystery. "We shall breakfast at this inn, Señora. The hours are few—they must find us faithful!"

A Spanish girl came out of the inn and set a little table prettily with snowdrops and violets gathered in the glens, and crisp new bread and flasks of Spanish wine and luscious fruit with the bloom upon it. She chattered incessantly of the soldiers in the camp; they were there to protect the city—ah, what dreadful things were happening! And some said that the Prince must die. She did not believe it—no, no! he was too good for that! Her solicitude for Esther was touching and generous. Everything that might tempt she brought from their store. The Moor stood like a statue behind the wicker chair. He watched the valley closely, and appeared to be waiting

some signal from the walls. When his charge had breakfasted, he touched her upon the shoulder and asked her if she would follow him.

"Señora," he said, "let your courage help you. I take you to your husband. Come, we are already late. It is fixed for nine o'clock. God help us to be in time, Señora!"

She paled at his words, and stood up at once. She knew of what he spoke. The word recalled instantly the threat of yesternight, the trial, the document.

"Take me to him—now!" she exclaimed.

His eyes lighted with a certain pleasure at her impatience.

"We must not go alone; the air is keen, Señora. Please wrap your cloak about you—closer—closer. Let me see how well you look in it—ah, the cheeks are bright now, the eyes speak again. Rise up, Señora—the hour has come!"

She understood but little of that which he did. The bright blue cloak in which he had wrapped her was familiar and recalled an impression of the past. She had worn it before—but where, she asked. Memory, gathering strength of her impatience, told her at last; she had worn it in Francisco Xavier's house on the night when Arthur came! She remembered how he had called her Inez of Cadi, and had watched her amid the roses. And now the same cloak served her in this remote place! Its hood was drawn over her head, its ample folds fell upon the ground at her feet.

The Moor regarded her approvingly . . . the black eyes expressed pleasure.

"Señora," he said, "here is your horse. It is time for us to show ourselves to the people."

A man brought a white horse from a stable near by, and a pillion being already upon its back, Esther was lifted there and took the reins between her nerveless fingers. She knew nothing of that which they would do, nor had she any hope other than that which would carry her speedily to Arthur's side. When they began to go very carefully down the hillside toward the white tents below she believed that the road lay to the city and the prison. In the camp itself, a new activity drew the troopers from their tents and sent the officers pell-mell for arms and horses. News of the Spaniard's death had but just come to these outposts, and it passed as tidings of a visitation which would re-write their nation's story. The autocrat was dead, then! Vengeance had struck him down; his enemies had triumphed; his voice had been heard in the city's councils for the last time. Prophets predicted that reaction would be swift to come. Others, who were no prophets, allowed the magnitude of the blow and its possible consequences. "It will help the Prince," they said; "it may give him all!" The more timid reminded themselves that Arthur of Cadiz was to be shot at nine o'clock; they heard the cathedral bell summoning the city to hear his last Mass. And by these the figure of the woman was first perceived. They touched each other

upon the arm, crying, "Look yonder!" A white horse upon the hillside, a blue robe, a fragile figure, a face of surpassing sweetness—there was nothing here to command alarm; nevertheless the curious pressed about the travellers and crossed themselves in awe. Fanatics exclaimed, "It is Inez of Cadi, a miracle, a miracle!" A priest fell upon his knees and touched the earth with his forehead. The doubting had the will to laugh, but held their tongues notwithstanding. To all of whom the Moor answered nothing, nor would he open his lips to any man. His way lay to the colonel's tent. Esther herself but vaguely understood what legend awed the troopers or why they crossed themselves at her coming. Moment by moment the buzz of wonder and surprise lifted a stronger voice and became a violent clamour. Men stretched out their hands to touch the hem of her garment. Many tried to run at the horse's head and to lead him; but the Moor beat them back. When he spoke they heard him with wonder.

"I bring you the wife of your Prince," he said.

They answered, "Viva, Viva!" All the teaching of their race predisposed them to belief. The more ignorant prostrated themselves before that which they deemed a miracle. The wiser, hearing the name, believed it was an omen. A thousand excited men clamoured about the horse when the Moor demanded admittance to the colonel's tent. Like news of a triumph the word went from ear to ear, "Inez of Cadi rides down



from the mountains ! ” Salvoes of welcome were heard on the distant ramparts ; the guard beat the mob back with the butts of their muskets.

“ I must see your colonel,” the Moor said with the lofty utterance of one who has a mandate. “ Let him know that I am here.”

They called the colonel out, and Esther looked up quickly when she heard his voice. Varez stood before her—Varez, the silent, the masterful. He carried papers in his hand ; his head was bare. News of Xavier’s death had just come to him ; his sword lay in the balance ; and he cast it from scale to scale like a man doubtful of the issues. For he knew that the night had changed all, and that it might yet save the Prince. When he perceived the figure upon the horse, the blue robe and the golden stars, the faith of his youth brought the blood to his cheeks and sent a nervous hand to the hilt of his sword. For the moment even he could not read the riddle.

“ Speak ! ” he cried ; “ what does this woman do here ? ”

A thousand voices lifted the cry, “ Viva, Inez ! ”

He looked about him at the wonderstruck faces, the kneeling fanatics, and the old priest’s uplifted arms. So he understood.

“ Madame,” he said in a low voice, “ what do you ask of me ? ”

Esther pushed back her hood and regarded him with ardent eyes.

“ My husband’s life ! ” she said.

He cast down his eyes and stood irresolute.

His troops caught the saying, and repeated it from man to man.

"She is the Prince's wife—an omen, friends! Heard you that? She asks his life!" Anon they shouted altogether, "Grace, grace! lead us down!"

The stern face wore a more kindly look when next it was lifted to Esther's.

"Madame," he said, "how shall I answer these men?"

"As a faithful friend to one who will remember!"

"You shall lead them!" he said.

He turned to the troops and repeated her saying,—

"Here is one who will lead you to your Prince; how shall it be, my men—will you follow her?"

A mighty shout justified him.

"Viva, Inez!" they cried, "we follow—we follow!"

The troops entered the city at eight o'clock. Rumours of the miracle heralded their approach, and brought anxious faces to every window. The doors of the churches stood open now, and priests there awaited confirmation of the wonder. The very poor accepted the story without question, saying that Inez of Cadi had come down from the mountains to save their Prince's life! Beggars bared their sores, cripples dragged themselves to the pavement's edge and lay there blinking in the sunshine. For the

strife of parties ceased at the momentous news of Xavier's death ; and the temper of reaction began to make itself felt. A *volte-face* worthy of a Southern race alarmed the partisan and encouraged the loyal. Men said that no ministry would dare to go on until events shaped more clearly and the ground of opinion was proved. The people were dazed before this sequence of alarms. Some said that Xavier's party would stake all upon the throw, and hurrying the condemned to execution would profit by his death. Others hoped in France and had rumour at their back. Day found a waking city agape for the tides of fate. Almost with the dawn a considerable throng pressed about the cathedral doors and waited for that solemn moment when the man they had sworn to serve should hear the holy office for the last time. The market-place, the park, the piazza swarmed with troops looking for an *émeute*. Bells tolled dismally ; the crowd spoke in timid whispers. The cafés were shuttered, the shops all closed.

To this city, careworn and resolute, the messengers came down at the zenith of the hour. "Inez of Cadi rides in at the head of two thousand!" they said. The news went as a voice of winds. Born in superstition, the ignorant prostrated themselves before the omen and ran fanatically to greet it. The wiser shook their heads and knew not what the saying might mean. Priests called for their robes and bade the faithful be patient. Unrest and expectancy were everywhere ; little groups gathered at all the corners,

and were moved on by a stern soldiery. Many a roof was black with people; the great piazza before the cathedral could not contain the multitude.

For a full hour the burning curiosity of these throngs went unsatisfied. Some denied the messengers, some scoffed, a very few were indifferent. Doubt had wrestled with desire and won the throw . . . but upon this the distant rolling of drums was heard, and a low volley of human voices welcomed the figure of the miracle. From street to street in one splendid crescendo of applause the salvo of greeting was rolled. Men upon the watch-towers gave to those below the story of the pilgrimage.

"Varez rides in!" they said, and then, "It is not Varez, but another!"

Soon the pageant shaped itself; the sunlight fell upon the silver lances, the silver and gold of that shining caparison. Those above who had said that Varez was at the head of the troop recalled their words, and named another for the leader.

"It is a woman!" they exclaimed. And then louder, "It is Inez of Cadi!"

A roar of sounds hailed the truth and confessed the legend. Many knelt and were half crushed with the press; priests raised their hands in blessing; strong men were silent and awed. Minute by minute the cavalcade drew nearer, the music of the bands swelled out in cadences more solemn, the pennons fluttered on the breeze in increasing numbers. The moments of waiting

were intolerable by this time. Who came then? What story was this? A young girl riding upon a white horse. What did she there? With one resounding note the people named her. "Inez of Cadi!" they wailed, "it is Inez of Cadi!" The salvoes followed her to the cathedral door. She entered there like one whom all would worship.

Esther has confessed that her memory of this last great scene is but fitful and unsure. From the moment when Yussuf, the Moor, carried her from the prison, she was scarcely the mistress of her own actions, and she heard and saw all things as in a picture of her sleep. Even the words she spoke were forgotten. She could recollect nothing of her appeal to Colonel Varez, or the act which had placed her at the head of his troops. Thereafter she lived for an hour in wonderland. The madness of worship sounded in her ears like the murmur of a distant sea. She beheld countless faces, and carried the image of some of them—the faces of loving women, of beggars by the wayside, of old priests at their church doors. Elsewhere the panorama changed too quickly for her to recollect it. Street succeeded to street, throng to throng; she perceived the multitudes above; the multitudes below; she heard the swelling music, the clatter of the hoofs. But her thoughts were always carrying her forward, over the throngs as upon the wings of impatience to the great churchyard and its golden altars. They told her afterwards that men would have lifted her from her horse at the church door, but that she denied

their right; and, riding in, entered without question, as one whose journey was not yet done. In the cathedral itself twenty thousand worshippers heard the ringing hoofs upon the marble flags and bent their heads before the vision. Blue-robed priests at the altar stayed their ministrations and turned to see who came. One man alone awaited the messenger with confidence; his sword trailed upon the marble floor, beams of the radiant light fell through the crimson glass and struck down upon his gold cuirass; his face was flushed, his arms outstretched to the figure of his salvation. He it was who lifted the figure from the horse, he who held the trembling girl in his strong arms and cried—

“My wife! my wife!”

They knelt together before the altar, and the old priest blessed them. Sunshine was upon their faces, joy in their hearts. To the God of their destinies they offered their hearts and their lives. But the people still cried, “A miracle!”

## CHAPTER XXII

THE story of Esther Venn and of her relations with the kingdom of Cadi is too recent in its more public phase that we should carry it any further in these pages. Standing with her husband before the altar of the cathedral of St. Ignatius, she herself has answered those evil tongues which a woman's victory must ever loosen. Henceforth her life is to be lived in that old-world palace, wherefrom for a thousand years the princes of her city have ruled a willing people. By faith she conquered, by love will she be justified. She was a woman, and her womanhood led her through the valley of the shadows. Europe has listened to her story and judged her character wisely. The aftermath is her own, to be reaped by her affections.

We say that by her own act in the cathedral of St. Ignatius she saved her husband's life, and this claim the years have justified. Though she knew it not, a straw had turned the people's temper upon the day of his miraculous deliverance. Francisco Xavier's tragic end found a ministry unready and a senate bewildered. While the timid would have abandoned all, shielding them-

selves behind the law, the more resolute planned a *tour de force* which knew no rule but that of might. Thus it befel that while one party would annul the judgment and open the prison gates, the other stood resolutely to its purpose and demanded that the law should take its course. It is true that the French Government had already determined to depart from its accepted practice, and to interfere for the first time in twenty years in the affairs of this little kingdom. But diplomacy is slow and riot speedy. At the best the mandate of France would have saved Prince Arthur from the scaffold if it had saved him at all. His life hung upon a thread. The French secretary, Alfonse Manin, has admitted in a letter to the Minister in Paris that the thread had snapped but for a woman's courage and the faithful friendship which served in that hour of need.

"Colonel Varez has saved the day," the secretary wrote. "The allies he found could exist nowhere but in this city of legends. It is early yet to estimate precisely the extent to which the people have acted upon their superstitions and the part which common-sense has played in their decision. Esther Venn, whose marriage must now be recognised by Europe, appealed successfully to a people long taught to admire her race and to imitate it. She is clever, quick, undoubtedly courageous, and her beauty will become a tradition. I count it not a little remarkable that a pupil of the dead man, Xavier de Mon'alvan, should be the agent of his undoing. It will be



known to Your Excellency that this man's story is largely one of those intrigues which blackened an extraordinary character and prostrated genius at the footstool of infamy. That he was the possessor of a vast intellect, I do not deny ; that he was the enemy of woman is equally true. For years his leisure appears to have been devoted to effeminate studies which, by their very nature, unfitted him for the healthier tasks. It is clear that when first he met the English girl he had no other objects than those which must have been apparent to all the world ; but the arrival of Prince Arthur at his house, and the interest which was awakened by a very beautiful *protégé* diverted his aims and furthered this conspiracy. I have no doubt that he believed the Prince's ruin would be consummated by marriage. It was his object to keep His Highness permanently away from Cadi. When he found that prudence guided his master less than inclination, and that he would return here in spite of all, then, and not until then, he resolved upon his trial, and it may be, his death. I have already informed Your Excellency of the circumstances which have conspired to defeat him. That he should fall by a woman's hand is a just Nemesis with which none will quarrel. I believe him to have been the enemy of French interests and the paid servant of Spain. Now that he is dead none regrets him. The city has been drugged for many months past by smooth-tongued agitators, who applauded bondage and cried Heaven to witness that a dictator would save the State. . . . Their

influence being removed, the spontaneous loyalty of a servile race is very ready to assert itself. Writing to-night in my room overlooking the Church of St. Ignatius, I must turn to a dead age to recall a scene of national rejoicing so abandoned and so picturesque. Modernity has lost its enthusiasms. We can wave a flag and ring a bell, perhaps dine over well at the *Café Anglais* or sup with a becoming air of dissipation at any restaurant which robbery has made famous. But this abandonment of joy, this surrender to the primitive instincts is found only amongst half-civilised people. Here in the streets before my eyes are hill-men dressed as their forefathers were in the days of the Crusaders. Women dance about the beacon-fires, and their jet-black hair streams out like bannerets upon the wind. The fountains are running wine—so at least the reeling figures lead me to believe. I count a hundred torches in a space of as many yards. The sky above glows crimson with the flaming lights. Every café is open, every table crowded; men embrace for joy; young girls rave hysterically; soldiers, priests, rich and poor, noble and peasant swarm together in this frenzy of the night. The palace is a blaze of light from end to end; throngs press to its doors to hail the Prince, and when their torches fail them are replaced by others no less delirious. Bands blare in every public place. The confines of the city are too narrow for this pageant of a nation's madness. I see the beacons on the distant hills like crimson stars upon a far horizon, and they link up a mighty girdle em-

bracing height and chasm, lighting the silvered ice-fields or showing the heart of sleeping woods. From gorge to gorge and pass to pass the tidings go, 'Long live the Prince!' They join a name to his and utter it as one endeared to them—yes, the little English girl has won all hearts. I salute her; she is worthy of the tribute!"

. . . . .

He sealed his letter and sent it to France to be her witness. If he would have added aught, it had been that the dawn broke upon a sleepless city, and that the voice of the multitude was Esther's lullaby. The sunshine fell upon her tired face and found her dreaming. She slept upon her lover's heart.

THE END.

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