

A Secret Inheritance

Volume 2

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Freeeditorial 

A SECRET INHERITANCE.
BOOK THE FIRST (Continued).
THE RECORD OF GABRIEL CAREW.
CHAPTER XIV.

"I travelled for many months alone. I made acquaintances which never ripened into friendships, and seldom did twenty-four hours pass without my thoughts wandering to Silvain. Thinking it not unlikely that one or both of the brothers had returned to their home in Germany, I wrote several letters to them there, without receiving an answer. This portentous silence increased rather than diminished my interest in the man I loved as a brother. In speaking of him in these terms I am but giving faithful expression to the feelings I entertained for him; up to that time I had never met a human being, man or woman, who had so entirely won my affectionate regard.

"Family circumstances rendered me more than ever my own master; I was free to go whithersoever my inclination led me, and certainly my inclination pointed clearly to that part of the world where I should be most likely to find my dear friend. But I had no clue to guide me; to turn east, west, north, or south, in search of him would have been a hap-hazard proceeding, and to hope for success in so unintelligent a search would have been the hope of a madman. My anxiety with respect to the fate of Silvain and Kristel never deserted me, but it was many years before I was enabled to take up the links in the chain.

"During those years a great and happy change occurred in my own life. I interrupt the course of my narrative here to remark that it is singular I should be relating this history fully, for the first time, within a comparatively short distance of places in which the most pregnant--and indeed terrible--incidents in the career of the twin brothers were brought to my knowledge. My wife is acquainted with some portions of this history, but not with all. The lighthouse in which Avicia was born is within a hundred miles of this spot. Indirectly it led me to the acquaintance of the

lady who became my wife, and to as great a happiness as any man can hope to enjoy.

"Nerac is not my birthplace, and it was in passing through the lovely village on one of my visits to the village by the sea--visits made in the vain hope of obtaining intelligence of Silvain--that I was introduced to her. I pass over the records of a time which lives in my remembrance as a heavenly summer. Happy is the man who has enjoyed such a season. Happier is the man to whom such a season is the harbinger of such home joys as have fallen to my lot.

"When I first made the acquaintance of my wife, and for some years afterwards, her parents were alive, and I saw that it would be cruel to ask her to leave them. I did not put her love to such a test. I settled in Nerac, and married there.

"It is a solemnly strange reflection by what chance threads we are led to our destiny--a destiny which may be one of honour or shame, and which may bring a blessing or a curse into the lives of others whom, but for the most accidental circumstance, we should never have seen. The doctrine of responsibility is but little understood. Thus, had it not been for my chance meeting with Silvain in London, I should never have known my wife, and it seems to me impossible that I should have been a happy or a good man without her. Such women as she keep men pure.

"Midway between Nerac and the village by the sea to which Kristel led his brother in his pursuit of the girl who was to bring them to their doom lies a forest of great extent, and it was in this forest, after a lapse of four years, that I came once more into association with Silvain and Avicia. I was called in that direction upon important business; at that period of my life I was an ardent pedestrian, and if the opportunity offered, was glad to make my way on foot, without respect to distance. I may confide to you that I was in the habit of taking a great deal of exercise because I was afraid of growing fat.

"I was unacquainted with the locality, and I took a short cut, which proved a long one. When darkness fell I found myself entrapped in the forest

amidst a wilderness of trees. Never shall I forget the night and the day that followed. It was such a night as that upon which you, my friend, were lying helpless in the woods near Nerac. Not relishing the idea of passing a number of lonely hours in such a place and under such circumstances, I made a vigorous effort to escape from the gloomy labyrinth. I did not succeed, and it was one o'clock in the morning by my watch before I made up my mind like a sensible person to rest till daylight. So I sat me down upon the trunk of a tree, and made the best of matters. Fatigued with my exertions I dozed for a few moments, then started up with a vague feeling of alarm, for which there was no cause, then dozed again and again, with repetitions of similar uneasiness; and finally I fell fast asleep.

"It was full daylight when I awoke. I arose refreshed, and gazed around with smiles and a light heart, despite that I was hungry and that there was no water in sight. I had no doubt that I should soon find myself in some place where I could obtain food. Resolving upon my course I set forward in the direction of rising ground, from the summit of which I should be able to overlook the country. In one part of the forest I was traversing the trees were very thickly clustered, and it was here I chanced upon the forms of a man and a woman lying on the ground asleep. The circumstance was strange, and I leant over the sleeping persons to see their faces. I could scarcely repress a cry of astonishment at the discovery that the man was Silvain and the woman Avicia. It was from an impulsive desire not to disturb them that I uttered no sound, for truly their appearance was such as to excite my deep compassion.

"Avicia's head was pillowed upon Silvain's right arm, and his left hand was clasped in hers. In complete ignorance of what had brought them to this miserable position, there was, to my mind, in this close clasping of his hand in hers, a kind of protection, as though she were making an instinctive effort to shield him from a hidden danger. The faces of both were wan with suffering, and their clothes were poor and ragged. I trembled to think that they might be in want of food.

"As I gazed in pity and apprehension Silvain moved. A spasm of fear passed across his face, and he exclaimed in terror, 'Avicia! Avicia! He is coming nearer--nearer! We must fly!'

"Before the words were uttered she was awake and on her feet. She saw me without recognising me, and she sank to the ground again, with a piercing scream which curdled through my veins, so much of fear and terror did it express. Dazed, and not yet fully awakened, Silvain threw himself before her in an attitude of protection.

"'Silvain!' I cried; 'do you not know me?'

"He looked up with a shudder, and passed his hand across his eyes. It was like the look of an intelligent animal who is being hunted to his death. But a softer expression came slowly into them as he gazed upon me and saw that it was a friend and not an enemy who stood before him. I spoke no further word at the moment, for the tears were running down his haggard face; his overcharged heart had found relief, and I turned from him.

"Presently I felt his hand upon my arm.

"'It is really you?' he said in a broken voice.

"'No doubt of that, Silvain,' I said in a cheerful tone, purposely assumed to put him at his ease, 'unless life is a delusion.'

"'Would it were!' he muttered, 'would it were!' And then, suspiciously, 'Did you come to seek me?'

"'No, Silvain; it is pure accident, if there be such a thing as accident.'

"'There is not,' he said; 'all is ordained.'

"'One of our old arguments, Silvain,' I said, still with a cheerful air; I would not humour his gloomy mood.

"'Do not mock me;' and he spread his hands, with upturned palms. 'Can you not see?'

"'I can see that you are in bad trim, which can easily be set right. Silvain,' I said reproachfully, 'this is not as we used to meet. I come to you with open arms, and you receive me with doubt and suspicion. Are we not, as we

always were and always shall be, friends staunch and true? You are the same Silvain; I am the same Louis; unchanged, as you will find me if you care to prove me.'

"Avicia had risen and crept close to my side.

"Friends staunch and true,' she said, echoing my words. 'You are not mocking him?'

"Indeed, no.'

"Then give us food,' she said.

"At this appeal I felt my pretended cheerfulness deserting me, but I caught the would-be runaway, and held it fast.

"Food!' I exclaimed, rattling some money in my pocket. 'Would that I knew where to obtain it! Here am I, starving, lost in the woods last night, and with not an idea now how to get out of them. Can you show me the way?'

"Yes,' she replied eagerly.

"Then I am fortunate, indeed, in lighting on you, and I bless the chance. Ah, Silvain, how I searched for you! To leave me, without ever a word--I would not have believed it of you. It was as though you doubted my friendship, which,' I added, 'is as sincere at this moment as ever it was in the years gone by.' Here there was a little choking in my throat because of the tears which again flowed from his eyes. 'I went to the village three times to get news of you, and had to come away unsatisfied. I wrote to your home in Germany, and received no reply. We have much to tell each other. But I am forgetting. You are faint and weary, and so am I. Can you take us to an inn where we can put some cheerful life into our bodies?'

"I addressed this last question to Avicia, and she answered 'Yes,' and was about to lead the way when Silvain stopped her.

"Is it on our road?' he asked.

"Yes,' she answered, 'it is on our road.'

"He motioned to her to proceed, and she stepped forward, Silvain and I walking side by side in the rear. This companionship was of my

prompting, for had I not detained him he would have joined Avicia. I was burning with curiosity to learn what had befallen my friend during the last few years, but I restrained myself from asking questions which I felt he was not in the proper frame of mind at present to answer. Therefore as we walked onwards it was chiefly I who had to beguile the way. I told him all that had passed since we last met, narrated adventures which in former times would have interested him, and spoke freely of my settlement in life and of the happiness of my home. He acknowledged my efforts in monosyllables, but volunteered nothing of himself or Avicia. At the end of about an hour's walk we arrived at a village, in which there was one poor inn, and there we halted. Before we entered Silvain said,

"A word first. I have been seemingly churlish and ungrateful, but I am not so. My heart is overflowing with thankfulness; presently, perhaps, I may have courage to unbosom myself. You are as you were; life is fair and sweet to you."

"It was only because he paused here that I spoke: 'And will be to you, Silvain.'"

"Never again," he said. "I am followed by a relentless spirit; I have been pursued for years by one who was heart of my heart, soul of my soul, but who now, from feelings of revenge, and as he believes of justice, is my bitter enemy."

"Dare I mention his name, Silvain?"

"I will do so. My brother Kristel. It is of him I wish to say a word to you before I partake of your charity."

"Silvain!" I cried, in remonstrance.

"Forgive me. I am tormented because of my condition, because of Avicia's misery. Answer me honestly. Is it really true that you came upon us by chance in the woods?"

"It is really true."

"Kristel did not send you?"

"I have not seen Kristel since you and I last met."

"Nor heard from him?"

"Nor heard from him."

"He took the hand I held out to him, and we followed Avicia into the inn, where, very soon, we were seated at a table with a modest meal before us. The food was poor enough, the wine was thin and common, but we could scarcely have enjoyed a grand banquet more. I speak not alone for myself, but for Silvain and Avicia; it was evident to me that they had not had many full meals lately. Avicia especially ate ravenously, and with a perfect sense of animal enjoyment, and it was only when she had finished that a certain terror, which I had observed in both her and Silvain, again asserted itself.

"Remain here a while, Avicia," said Silvain, at the end of the meal; "I wish to speak to our friend alone."

"Are we safe?" she asked.

"I think so; I hope so. Sleep; it will do you good."

"Thank you, Silvain."

"She was seated on a hard bench, not conducive to repose; nevertheless she closed her eyes, and was almost immediately asleep.

"Poor girl!" said Silvain, with a sigh, "she has suffered much--and in a few weeks will become a mother."

"We strolled up and down outside the inn and conversed.

"You have behaved to us with true friendship," he said; "and yet you can see we are beggars. Are you prospering?"

"I am not rich," I replied, "but I can spare to a friend."

"We are making our way to Avicia's home, to the lighthouse upon which I saw her for the first time otherwise than in my dreams. I doubt whether you can turn aside the finger of Fate as I behold it, pointing downwards to a grave, but you can perhaps help us to cheat it for a short time."

"You speak strangely, Silvain; the ominous fears which oppress you may be bred by a disordered fancy."

"In our former intercourse,' was his reply, 'was my fancy ever disordered? I advanced nothing that was not afterwards proved; I made no pretence of accounting for the warnings I received; I make none now. I shudder to think of the future, not so much for my own sake as for Avicia's. Helpless, penniless, without a friend----'

"You are forgetting me, Silvain?"

"Ah, yes, my friend, as you still declare yourself to be; I cannot but believe you. But Avicia----'

"I am her friend as well as yours.'

"For God's sake, do not speak lightly! You do not know to what a pass I am driven.'

"You shall enlighten me, and I maybe able to counsel you. Do not think I am speaking lightly, As I am your friend, so am I Avicia's. As I will stand by you, so will I stand by her.'

"In perfect faith, Louis?"

"It was the first time he had uttered my name, and I held it as a sign that I had dispelled his distrust. I replied, 'In perfect faith, Silvain.'

"I accept it so. When I am gone, she will not be quite alone in the world. And now, will you give me a little money? I do not ask you to lend it to me, for I have no expectation of being able to repay you. I will briefly explain the necessity for it. We are bound for the lighthouse. It is our only refuge, and there our child will be born. May it prove a comfort to the mother! We have fifty miles to go, and Avicia is not strong enough to walk----'

"Say no more,' I interrupted, 'of the necessity for such a trifle; I can spare you more than sufficient for your purpose.'

"I took from my purse what was requisite for my immediate needs, and pressed the purse with the coins that remained into his hand. He took it in silence, and his emaciated form shook with gratitude.

"You ask no questions about these,' he said, pointing to his rags.

"Why should I?" I asked in return. 'But there are one or two points upon which you might satisfy me.'

"I cannot go into my history, Louis. If you will give me your address I will send it to you before the week is out. Indeed, after your noble promise with respect to Avicia, it is yours by right. It will not only enlighten, it will guide you.'

"I will wait for it, and will make an opportunity of seeing you soon after I have read it. The points I wish to mention are these: While you and Avicia were sleeping in the forest, and I stood looking down upon you, you cried--not because of my presence, of which you were ignorant, but because of some disturbing dream--"He is coming nearer--nearer! We must fly!" To whom did you refer?

"To my brother Kristel. He is pursuing us.'

"To your hurt?"

"To my destruction.'

"Then you have seen him?"

"I have not seen him. I know it through my dreams, as of old. You could not doubt their truth when we travelled together--ah, those happy days!--you cannot doubt it now.'

"Then, what was love between you has turned to hate?" The words escaped me unaware; I repented of them the moment they were spoken.

"Yes,' said Silvain, in a tone of deepest sadness, 'what was love between us is turned to hate. Ask me no more questions--in pity!'

"But one, Silvain. Have you any children?"

"None. The babe that Avicia will soon press to her breast will be our first-born.'

"To matters upon which I saw he was then unwilling to converse, I made no further reference. He engaged a light cart and horse, and a man to drive them to the village by the sea. Then he woke Avicia, and I said farewell to them, and gazed after them till they were out of sight.

"As he had promised, I received from him before the end of the week a statement of his adventures. It is now among my papers in Nerac, and I remember perfectly all the salient particulars necessary to my story, which is now drawing to a conclusion. I will narrate them in my own way, asking you to recall the day upon which the brothers were last seen in the village by the sea."

XV.

"Silvain, Kristel, and Avicia, accompanied by her father, rowed from the lighthouse to the shore. The villagers saw but little of them; they passed out of the village, and Avicia's father returned alone to the lighthouse. Kristel loved Avicia with all the passion of a hot, imperious, and intense nature. He looked upon her as his, and had he suspected that Silvain would have fallen in love with her, it can readily be understood that he would have been the last man to bring them into association with each other. But so it happened.

"When Kristel and Avicia met in the Tyrol, Kristel was buoyed up with hopes that she reciprocated the love she had inspired in his breast. He had some reason for this hope, for at his request, when he asked her to become his wife and said that he could not marry without his father's consent, she had written home to her father with respect to the young gentleman's proposal, thereby leading him to believe that she was ready to accept him. It appeared, however, that there was no real depth in her feelings for him; and, indeed, it may be pardoned her if she supposed that his fervid protestations were prompted by feelings as light and as little genuine as her own. Unsophisticated as she was in the ways of the world, the fact of his making the honourable accomplishment of his love for her dependent upon the fiat of another person could not but have lessened the value of his declarations--more especially when she had not truly given him her heart. It was given to Silvain upon the occasion of their first meeting, and it was not long before they found the opportunity to exchange vows of affection--a circumstance of which I and every person but themselves were entirely ignorant. But love is cunning.

"It was because of Avicia's fear of her father that this love was kept secret; he held her completely in control, and--first favouring Kristel and then Silvain, playing them against each other, as it were, to his own advantage in the way of gifts--filled her with apprehension.

"'Looking back,' Silvain said in his statement to me, 'upon the history of those days of happiness and torture, I can see now that I was wrong in not endeavouring to arrive at a frank understanding with my brother; but

indeed I had but one thought--Avicia. As Kristel believed her to be his, so did I believe her to be mine, and the idea of losing her was sufficient to make my life a life of despair. And after all, it was for Avicia to decide. Absorbing as was my love for her, I should have had no choice but to retire and pass my days in misery had she decided in favour of Kristel.'

"The base conduct of Avicia's father was to a great extent the cause of turning brotherly love to hate. Seeing their infatuation, he bargained with each secretly, saying, in effect, 'What will you give me if I give you my daughter's hand?--for she will not, and cannot, marry without my consent.'

"And to the other, 'What will you give me?'

"He bound them to secrecy by a solemn oath, and bound his daughter also in like manner, promising that she should have the one she loved. Silvain was the more liberal of the two, and signed papers, pledging himself to pay to the avaricious father a large sum of money within a certain time after his union with Avicia. So cunningly did the keeper of the lighthouse conduct these base negotiations, that, even on that last day when they all rowed together to the village, neither of the brothers knew that matters were to be brought then and there to an irrevocable end.

"The village by the sea lay behind them some six or eight miles. Then, upon a false pretext, Avicia's father got rid of Kristel, sending him on an errand for Avicia which would render necessary an absence of many hours. That done, he said to Silvain and Avicia, 'Everything is arranged. This day will see you man and wife. Come with me to the priest.'

"'But where is Kristel?' asked Silvain, his heart throbbing with joy. 'Does he not know?'

"'Yes, he knows,' replied Avicia's father, 'but, as you are aware, he had a sneaking regard himself for my daughter, and he thought he would feel more comfortable, and you and Avicia too, if he were not present at the ceremony. He bade me give you his blessing.'

"Satisfied with this--being, indeed, naturally only too willing to be satisfied--the marriage ceremony took place, and Silvain and Avicia became man and wife. They departed on their honeymoon, and instructed

the keeper of the lighthouse to inform Kristel of their route, in order that he might be able to join them at any point he pleased.

"Then came the interview between Avicia's father and Kristel, in which the young man was informed that he had lost Avicia. Kristel was dismayed and furious at what he believed to be the blackest treachery on the part of his brother. He swore to be revenged, and asked the road they had taken. Avicia's father sent him off in an entirely opposite direction, and he set out in pursuit. Needless to say that he soon found out how he had been tricked, and that it infuriated him the more. Not knowing where else to write to Silvain, he addressed a letter to him at their home in Germany; he himself did not proceed thither, judging that his best chance of meeting the married couple lay near the village by the sea, to which he felt convinced Silvain and Avicia would soon return. Therefore he lurked in the vicinity of the village, and watched by day and night the principal avenues by which it was to be approached. But his judgment was at fault; they did not return.

"In the meantime the lovers were enjoying their honeymoon. In order to keep faith with Avicia's father in the bargain made between him and Silvain--which rendered necessary the payment of a substantial sum of money by a given time--it was imperative that Silvain should visit his boyhood's home, to obtain his share of the inheritance left to him and Kristel by their father. The happy couple dallied by the way, and it was not until three months after their marriage that they arrived at Silvain's birthplace.

"'Perhaps we shall meet Kristel there,' said Silvain.

"Instead of meeting his brother, Silvain received the letter which Kristel had written to him. It breathed the deepest hate, and Silvain had the unhappiness of reading the outpourings of a relentless, vindictive spirit, driven to despair by disappointed love.

"'You have robbed me,' the letter said; 'hour by hour, day by day, have you set yourself deliberately to ensnare me and to fill my life with black despair. Had I suspected it at the time I would have strangled you. But your fate is only postponed; revenge is mine, and I hold it in my soul as a

sacred trust which I shall fulfil. You shall die by my hands. Never in this world or in the next will I forgive you! My relentless hate shall haunt and pursue you, and you shall not escape it!"

"And then the writer recorded an awful oath that, while life remained within him, his one sole aim should be to compass his revenge. It was a lengthy letter, and strong as is my description of it, it falls short of the intense malignity which pervaded every line. Kristel launched a curse so terrible against his brother that Silvain's hair rose up in horror and fear as he read it. These are Silvain's own words to me:

"After reading Kristel's letter,' he said, 'I felt that I was accursed, and that it was destined that he should kill me.'

"How to escape the terrible doom--though he had scarcely a hope of averting it--how to prevent the crime of blood-guiltiness lying upon Kristel's soul: this was thereafter the object of Silvain's life. It afforded him no consolation to know that for the intense hate with which Kristel's heart was filled Avicia's father was partly responsible.

"In its delineation of the trickery by which Kristel had been robbed of Avicia the letter was not truthful, for there had occurred between the brothers a conversation in which Silvain had revealed his love for her. Kristel's over-wrought feelings probably caused him to forget this--or it may have been a perversion of fact adopted to give sanction to hate.

"Kristel's letter was not the only despairing greeting which awaited Silvain in the home of his boyhood. By some unhappy means the inheritance left by his father had melted away, and he found himself a beggar. Thus he was unable to carry out the terms of the bargain Avicia's father had made with him. This part of his misfortune did not greatly trouble him; it was but a just punishment to a grasping, avaricious man; but with beggary staring him in the face, and his brother's curse and awful design weighing upon him, his situation was most dreadful and pitiable.

"It was his intention to keep Kristel's letter from the knowledge of Avicia, but she secretly obtained possession of it, and it filled her soul with an

agonising fear. They decided that it was impossible to return to the village by sea.

"It is there my brother waits for us,' said Silvain.

"So from that time they commenced a wandering life, with the one dominant desire to escape from Kristel.

"I cannot enter now into a description of the years that followed. They crept from place to place, picking up a precarious existence, and enduring great privations. One morning Silvain awoke, trembling and afraid. 'I have seen Kristel,' he said.

"She did not ask him how and under what circumstances he had seen his brother.

"He has discovered that we are here, and is in pursuit of us,' Silvain continued. 'We must fly without delay.'

"This was an added grief to Avicia. The place in which Silvain's dream of his brother had been dreamt had afforded them shelter and security for many weeks, and she had begun to indulge in the hope that they were safe. Vain hope! They must commence their wanderings again. From that period, at various times, Silvain was visited by dreams in which he was made acquainted with Kristel's movements in so far as they affected him and Avicia and the mission of vengeance upon which Kristel was relentlessly bent. They made their way to foreign countries, and even there Kristel pursued them. And so through the days and years continued the pitiful flight and the merciless pursuit. In darkness they wandered often, the shadow of fate at their heels, in Avicia's imagination lurking in the solitudes through which they passed, amidst thickets of trees, in hollows and ravines, waiting, waiting, waiting to fall upon and destroy them! An appalling life, the full terrors of which the mind can scarcely grasp.

"At length, when worldly circumstances pressed so heavily upon them that they hardly knew where to look for the next day's food, Avicia whispered to her husband that she expected to become a mother, and that she was possessed by an inexpressible longing that her child should be born where she herself first drew breath. After the lapse of so many years it appeared

to Silvain that the lighthouse would be the likeliest place of safety, and, besides, it was Avicia's earnest wish. They were on the road thither when I chanced upon them in the forest."

XVI.

"After reading Silvain's letter I lost as little time as possible in paying a visit to the village by the sea. I took with me some presents for the villagers, who were unaffectedly glad to see me, and not because of the gifts I brought for them. There I heard what news they could impart of the history of the lighthouse since I last visited them. The disappointment with respect to the money he expected from Silvain had rendered the keeper more savage and morose than ever. For years after the marriage of his daughter he lived alone on the lighthouse, but within the last twelve months he had sent for a young man who was related to him distantly, and who was now looking after the lights. This young man was deaf and dumb. What kind of comfort the companionship of a man so afflicted could be in such a home it is difficult to say, but the new arrival came in good time, for two months afterwards Avicia's father slipped over some rocks in the vicinity of the lighthouse, and so injured himself that he could not rise from his bed. Thus, when Silvain and Avicia presented themselves he could make no practical resistance to their taking up their abode with him. However it was, there they were upon my present visit, and I went at once to see them.

"They received me with a genuine demonstration of feeling, and I was pleased to see that they were looking better. Regular food, and the secure shelter of a roof from which they were not likely to be turned away at a moment's notice, doubtless contributed to this improvement. The pressure of a dark terror was, however, still visible in their faces, and during my visit I observed Silvain go to the outer gallery at least three or four times, and scan the surrounding sea with anxious eyes. To confirm or dispel the impression I gathered from this anxious outlook I questioned Silvain.

"'I am watching for Kristel,' he said.

"'It is scarcely likely he will come to you here,' I said.

"'He is certain to come to me here,' said Silvain; 'he is now on the road.'

"'You know this from your dreams?'

"Yes, my dreams assure me of it. What wonder that I dream of the spirit which has been hunting me for years in the person of Kristel. I think of nothing else. Waking or sleeping, he is ever before me.'

"Should he come, what will you do, Silvain?"

"I hardly know; but at all hazards he must, if possible, be prevented from effecting an entrance into the lighthouse. It would be the death of Avicia.'

"He pronounced the words 'if possible' with so much emphasis that I said:

"Surely that can be prevented.'

"I cannot be on the alert by night as well as by day,' said Silvain. 'My dread is that at a time when I am sleeping he will take me unaware. Hush! Avicia is coming up the stairs; do not let her hear us conversing upon a subject which has been the terror of her life. She does not know that I am constantly on the watch.'

"In this belief he was labouring under a delusion, for Avicia spoke to me privately about it; she was aware of the anxiety which, she said, she was afraid was wearing him away; and indeed, as she made this allusion, and I glanced at Silvain, who was standing in another part of the lighthouse, I observed what had hitherto escaped me, that his features were thinner, and that there was a hectic flush upon them which, in the light of his tragic story, too surely told a tale of an inward fretting likely to prove fatal. She told me that often in the night when Silvain was sleeping she would rise softly and go to the gallery, in fear that Kristel was stealthily approaching them.

"I saw her father. He gazed at me, and did not speak--not that he was unable, but because it was part of the cunning of his nature. Silvain informed me that Avicia expected her baby in three weeks from that day. I had not come empty-handed, and I left behind me welcome remembrances, promising to come again the following week.

"I kept my promise. Upon seeing me, a woman of the village ran towards me, and whispered:

"Kristel is here.'

"I followed the direction of her gaze, which was simply one of curiosity, and saw a man standing on the beach, facing the lighthouse. I walked straight up to him, and touched him with my hand. He turned, and I recognised Kristel.

"I recognised him--yes; but not from any resemblance he bore to the Kristel of former days. Had I met him under ordinary circumstances I should not have known him. His thin face was covered with hair; his eyes were sunken and wild; his bony wrists, his long fingers, seemed to be fleshless. I spoke to him, and mentioned my name. He heard me, but did not reply. I begged him to speak, and he remained silent. After his first look at me he turned from me, and stood with his eyes in the direction of the lighthouse. I would not accept his reception of me; I continued to address him; I asked him upon what errand he had come, and why he kept his eyes so fixedly upon the lighthouse. I gave him information of myself, and said I should be pleased to see him in my home--with a vague and foolish hope that he would accept the invitation, and that I might be able to work upon his better nature. And still no word came from him. I did not dare to utter the name of either Silvain or Avicia, fearing that I should awake the demon that had taken possession of his soul.

"By the time that I had exhausted what I thought it wise and good to say, I found myself falling into a kind of fascination, produced by his motionless attitude, and the fixed gaze in his unnaturally brilliant eyes. It was a bright day, and I knew that my imagination was playing me a trick, but I saw clearly with my mind's eye, the outer gallery of the lighthouse, and the figure of Avicia standing thereon, with her hair hanging loose, and a scarlet covering on her head. Was it a spiritual reflection of what this silent, motionless man was gazing upon? I shuddered, and passed my hand across my eyes; the vision was gone--but he gazed upon it still.

"I was compelled at length to leave him standing there upon the beach, and he took no notice of my departure.

"Others were observing him as well as I, and had watched me with curiosity during the time I stood by his side. When I was among them they asked if he had spoken to me.

"No,' I replied, 'I could get no word from him.'

"Neither has he spoken to us,' they said. 'Not a sound has passed his lips since his arrival.'

"When did he arrive?' I inquired.

"Yesterday,' they answered, 'and our first thought was that he would want a boat to row to the lighthouse, but he did not ask for it. Surely he must wish to see his brother! There is something strange about him, do you not think so? One of our women here insists that he is dumb.'

"He must be dumb,' said the woman; 'else why should he not speak?'

"There was a jealousy between him and his brother,' said an elderly woman, 'about Avicia.'

"What has that to do with it?' exclaimed the woman who pronounced him dumb. 'Jealousy, like love, does not last for ever. She is not the only woman in the world, and men have eyes. They must have made up their quarrel long ago. Besides, if he was jealous still, which isn't in the least likely, that would not make him dumb! His tongue would be all the looser for it.'

"More terrible,' thought I, 'is the dread silence of that motionless man than all the storms of wrath his tongue could utter.'

"From what the villagers said, I knew that they were in ignorance of the hatred which filled Kristel's heart, and I debated within myself what it was best to do. That the simple men of the village would not voluntarily make themselves parties to any scheme of blind vengeance on the part of one brother against another I was certain, but I was not satisfied that it would be right to give them my whole confidence, and tell them all I knew. At the same time it would not be right to allow them to remain in complete ignorance, for by so doing they might be made unwittingly to further Kristel's designs upon his brother's life. There was a priest in the village, and I went to him, and under the seal of secrecy revealed something, but not all, of the meaning of Kristel's appearance.

"Come with me,' he said.

"I accompanied him, and once more stood by the side of Kristel. The priest addressed him, counselled him, exhorted him, and, like myself, could obtain no word from him. Kindlier speech I never heard, but it made no impression upon Kristel.

"He must be dumb,' said the priest as we moved away.

"Not so,' I said earnestly; 'were he dumb, and unable to hear what is said to him, he would certainly indicate by some kind of sign that speech addressed to him was falling upon ears that were deaf. He is possessed by a demoniac obduracy, and his apparent indifference is but a part of a fell design to which I should be afraid to give a name.'

"The priest was impressed by this view of the matter, which could not but appeal successfully to a man's calm reason.

"What can I do?' he asked. 'If a man is determined not to speak, I have no power to compel him.'

"It is in your power,' I said, 'to prevent bloodshed.'

"Bloodshed!" he echoed, in a startled tone.

"Nothing less, I fear,' I said. 'Lay an injunction upon the villagers not to lend that man a boat, and not, under any pretext, to row him to the lighthouse.'

"What dreadful thoughts do your words suggest!" exclaimed the priest. 'They alarm and bewilder me.'

"I am not at liberty to say more at the present moment,' I said. 'I shall not leave the village to-day. I myself will see that man's brother, and will obtain permission from him to reveal all I know. Meanwhile give not that soul-tossed wretch the opportunity of carrying out a scheme of ruthless vengeance which he has harboured for years.'

"Tell me explicitly what you wish me to do.'

"I have already told you. That man, with the connivance or assistance of any person in this village, must not be enabled to get to the lighthouse.'

"He shall not,' said the priest.

"And he mixed with the villagers, men and women, and laid upon them the injunction I desired. With my mind thus set at ease for at least a few hours, I engaged a couple of boatmen to row me to Silvain. I half expected that Kristel would come forward with a request, made if not in speech in dumb show, to be allowed to accompany me, and I had resolved what action to take; but he made no step towards me. He gave no indication even of a knowledge of what was taking place within a dozen yards of him, although it was not possible that the putting off of the boat from the shore could have escaped his observation.

"If he is not deaf and dumb,' said one of the rowers, 'he must have gone clean out of his senses.'

"Neither one nor the other,' thought I; 'he is nursing his vengeance, and has decided upon some plan of action.'

"Silvain and Avicia were on the outer gallery, and when I joined them Silvain drew me aside.

"You have news of Kristel,' he said. I nodded, and he continued: 'I know without the telling. He is in the village.'

"Who informed you?' I asked.

"No human,' he replied, with a sad smile. 'I see him standing upon the beach, looking towards us.'

"In truth that was a physical impossibility, but I needed no further proof of the mysterious insight with which Silvain was gifted. I related to him all that had passed between me and Kristel and the priest, and of the precautions taken to keep from Kristel the means of reaching the lighthouse.

"That will not prevent him from coming, said Silvain; 'he is a fine swimmer. I myself, were I desperately pushed to it, would undertake to swim to the village. You hold to your promise. You hold to your promise, Louis, with respect to Avicia?'

"It is binding upon me,' I replied; 'my word is given.'

"Faithful friend! Neither will my child be left without a counsellor. Louis, I shall never see the face of my child--I shall never feel his little hands about my neck!"

"Were it not for the tender sympathy I have for you,' I said in a tone of reproof, 'I should feel inclined to be angry. Did you not confess to me in former days that you could not see into the future? And here you are, raising up ghosts to make the present more bitter than it is. No, no, Silvain. Black as things appear, there are bright years yet in store for you.'

"I cannot help my forebodings, Louis. True, I cannot, nor can any man, see into the future, but what can I do to turn my brother's hate from me?' It was a cry of anguish wrung from his suffering heart. 'I think of the days of our childhood, when we strolled in the woods with our arms round each other's necks, I think of the dreams we mapped of the future. Running water by the side of which we sat, bending over to see our faces, and making our lips meet in a shadowed kiss, flowers we picked in field and meadow, errands of mercy we went upon together, twilight communings, the little sweethearts we had--all these innocent ways of childhood rise before me, and fill me with anguish. What can I do?--what can I do to bring him back to me in brotherly love? Louis, I have a fear that I have never whispered to living soul. It is that Avicia may have twin children, as Kristel and I are, and they should grow up to be as we are now! Would it not be better that they should be born dead, or die young, when their souls are not stained with hatred of each other and with evil thoughts that render existence a curse?"

"We were alone when he gave expression to his agonised feelings; Avicia had left us to attend to domestic duties. I could say nothing to comfort him; to harp upon one string of intended consolation to a man who is in no mood to accept it becomes, after a time, an oppression. He paced up and down, twining his fingers convulsively, and presently said,

"It would be too much, Louis, to ask you to remain with me a little while?"

"No,' I replied, 'it would not. Indeed, it was partly in my mind to suggest it. The crisis you have dreaded for many years has come, and if you wish

me to stop with you a day or two I will willingly do so. It may be--I do not know how--that I can be of service to you. The boatmen are waiting in the boat below. I will write a letter to my wife, and they shall post it, informing her that I shall be absent from home perhaps until the end of the week, by which time I hope the cloud will have passed away. No thanks, Silvain; friendship would be a poor and valueless thing if one shrunk from a sacrifice so slight.'

"I wrote my letter, and despatched it by the boatmen. Then we waited for events; it was all that it was in our power to do.

"Avicia was very glad when she heard of my intention to remain with them a while.

"'Your companionship will do him good,' she said. 'He has no one but me to talk to, and he speaks of but one subject. If this continues long he will lose his reason.'

"The day passed, and night came on. There was but scanty living accommodation in the lighthouse, but a mattress was spread for me upon the floor of the tiny kitchen; and there I was to sleep. Avicia and Silvain wished me to occupy their bed, but I would not have it so. Before retiring to rest, Silvain and I passed two or three hours in converse; I purposely led the conversation into foreign channels, and when I wished him good-night I was rejoiced to perceive that I had succeeded for a brief space in diverting his mind from the fears which weighed so heavily upon him.

"Nothing occurred during the night to disturb us; I awoke early, and lay waiting for sunrise; but no light came, and when, aroused by Silvain, I left my bed and went to the outer gallery, I was surprised to see that all surrounding space was wrapt in a thick mist.

"'A great storm will soon be upon us,' said Silvain.

"He was right; before noon the storm burst, and the sea was lashed into fury. It was a relief to see the play of lightning upon the angry waters, but it was terrible too, and I thought how awful and joyless a lone life must be when spent in such a home. This second day seemed as if it would never end, and it was only by my watch that I knew of the approach of night.

With the sounds of the storm in my ears I lay down upon my mattress and fell asleep.

"I know not at what time of the night I awoke, but with black darkness upon and around me, I found myself sitting up, listening to sounds without which did not proceed from the conflict of the elements. At first I could not decide whether they were real or but the refrain of a dream by which I had been disturbed; soon, however, I received indisputable evidence that they were not the creations of my fancy.

"'Kristel! For God's sake, listen to me!'

"The voice was Silvain's, and the words were uttered in outer space. When I retired to rest I had lain down in my clothes, removing only my coat, and using it as a covering. I quickly put it on, and lit a lamp, to which a chain was attached, by which means it could be held over the walls of the lighthouse. The lamp was scarcely lighted, when Avicia, but half dressed, rushed into the little room.

"'Silvain!' she cried. 'Where is Silvain?'

"Her eyes wandered round the room, seeking him. At that moment the voice from without pierced the air.

"'Kristel! Oh, my brother, listen to me!'

"I threw my arms round Avicia, and held her fast.

"'Why do you hold me?' she screamed. 'Are you, too, leagued against us? Silvain! Silvain!'

"It needed all my strength to restrain her from rushing out in her wild delirium, perhaps to her destruction. I whispered to her hurriedly that I intended to go to the outer gallery, and that she should accompany me; and also that if she truly wished to be of assistance to her husband she must be calm. She ceased instantly to struggle, and said in a tone of suppressed excitement,

"'Come, then.'

"I did not quit my hold of her, but I used now only one hand, which I clasped firmly round her wrist, my other being required for the lantern.

The next moment we were standing upon the gallery, bending over. It was pitch dark, and we could see nothing; even the white spray of the waves, as they dashed against the stone walls, was not visible to us; but we heard Silvain's voice, at intervals, appealing in frenzied tones to Kristel, who, it needed not the evidence of sight to know, was holding on to the chains and struggling with his brother. How the two came into that awful position was never discovered, and I could only judge by inference that Kristel, in the dead of this deadly night, had made his way by some means to the lighthouse, and was endeavouring to effect an entrance, when Silvain, awakened by his attempts, had gone out to him, and was instantly seized and dragged down.

"So fearful and confused were the minutes that immediately followed that I have but an indistinct impression of the occurrences of the time, which will live ever within me as the most awful in my life. I know that I never lost my grasp of Avicia, and that but for me she would have flung herself over the walls; I know that the brothers were engaged in a struggle for life and death, and that Silvain continued to make the most pathetic appeals to Kristel to listen to him, and not to stain his soul with blood; I know that in those appeals there were the tenderest references to their boyhood's days, to the love which had existed between them, each for the other, to trivial incidents in their childhood, to their mother who worshipped them and was now looking down upon them, to the hopes in which they had indulged of a life of harmony and affection; I know that it struck me then as most terrible that during the whole of the struggle no word issued from Kristel's lips; I know that there were heartrending appeals from Avicia to Kristel to spare her husband, and that there were tender cries from her to Silvain, and from Silvain to her; I know that, finding a loose chain on the gallery, I lowered it to the combatants, and called out to Silvain--foolishly enough, in so far as he could avail himself of it--to release himself from his brother's arms and seize it, and that I and Avicia would draw him up to safety; I know that in one vivid flash of lightning I saw the struggling forms and the beautiful white spray of the waves; I know that Silvain's voice grew fainter and fainter until it was heard no more; I know that there was the sound of a heavy body or bodies falling into the sea, that a shriek

of woe and despair clove my heart like a knife, and that Avicia lay in my arms moaning and trembling. I bore her tenderly into her room, and laid her on her bed.

"The storm ceased; no sound was heard without. The rising sun filled the eastern horizon with loveliest hues of saffron and crimson. The sea was calm; there was no trace of tempest and human agony. By that time Avicia was a mother, and lay with her babes pressed to her bosom. Silvain's fear was realised: he was the dead father of twin brothers.

"The assistant whom Avicia's father had engaged rowed me to the village, and there I enlisted the services of a woman, who accompanied me back to the lighthouse, and attended to Avicia. The mother lived but two days after the birth of her babes. Until her last hour she was delirious, but then she recovered her senses and recognised me.

"My dear Silvain told me,' she said, in a weak, faint voice, 'that you would be a friend to our children. Bless the few moments remaining to me by assuring me that you will not desert them.'

"I gave her the assurance for which she yearned, and she desired me to call them by the names of Eric and Emilius. It rejoiced me that she passed away in peace; strange as it may seem, it was an inexpressible relief to her bruised heart that the long agony was over. Her last words were,

"I trust you. God will reward you!"

"And so, with her nerveless hand in mine, her spirit went out to her lover and husband.

"We buried her in the village churchyard, and the day was observed as a day of mourning in that village by the sea.

"I thought I could not do better than leave the twin babes for a time in the charge of the woman I had engaged, and it occurred to me that it might not be unprofitable to have some inquiries and investigation made with respect to the inheritance left by their grandfather to his sons Kristel and Silvain. I placed the matter in the hands of a shrewd lawyer, and he was enabled to recover a portion of what was due to their father. This was a great satisfaction to me, as it to some extent provided for the future of Eric and

Emilius, and supplied the wherewithal for their education. It was my intention, when they arrived at a certain age, to bring them to my home in Nerac, and treat them as children of my own, but a difficulty cropped up for which I was not prepared and which I could not surmount. Avicia's father, learning that I had recovered a portion of Silvain's inheritance, demanded from me an account of it, and asserted his rights as the natural guardian of his grandchildren. There was no gainsaying the demand, and I was compelled reluctantly to leave Eric and Emilius in his charge. I succeeded, however, in prevailing upon him to allow them to pay me regular visits of long duration, so that a close intimacy of affectionate friendship has been established between them and the members of my family. Here ends my story--a strange and eventful one, you will admit. I often think of it in wonder, and this is the first time a full recital of it has passed my lips."

XVII.

Such a story, which Doctor Louis truly described as strange and eventful, could not have failed to leave a deep impression upon me. During its recital I had, as it were, been charmed out of myself. My instinctive distrust of the twin brothers Eric and Emilius, the growth of a groundless jealousy, was for a while forgotten, and at the conclusion of the recital I was lost in the contemplation of the tragic pictures which had been presented to my mind's eye. Singularly enough, the most startling bit of colour in these pictures, that of the two brothers in their life and death struggle on the outer walls of the lighthouse, was not to me the dominant feature of the remarkable story. The awful, unnatural contest, Avicias agony, Silvain's soul-moving appeals, and the dread silence of Kristel--all this was as nought in comparison with the figure of a solitary man standing on the seashore, gazing in the direction of his lost happiness. I traced his life back through the years during which he was engaged in his relentless pursuit of the brother who had brought desolation into his life. In him, and in him alone, was centred the true pathos of the story; it was he who had been robbed, it was he who had been wronged. No deliberate act of treachery lay at his door; he loved, and had been deceived. Those in whom he placed his trust had deliberately betrayed him. The vengeance he sought and consummated was just.

I did not make Doctor Louis acquainted with my views on the subject, knowing that he would not agree with me, and that all his sympathies were bestowed upon Silvain. There was something of cowardice in this concealment of my feelings, but although I experienced twinges of conscience for my want of courage, it was not difficult for me to justify myself in my own eyes. Doctor Louis was the father of the woman I loved, and in his hands lay my happiness. On no account must I instil doubt into his mind; he was a man of decided opinions, dogmatic, and strong-willed. No act or word of mine must cause him to have the least distrust of me. Therefore I played the cunning part, and was silent with respect to those threads in the story which possessed the firmest hold upon his affections.

This enforced silence accentuated and strengthened my view. Silvain and Avicia were weak, feeble creatures. The man of great heart and resolute will, the man whose sufferings and wrongs made him a martyr, was Kristel. Faithful in love, faithful in hate. Trustful, heroic, unflinching. In a word, a man. But he and his brother, and the woman who had been the instrument of their fate, belonged to the past. They were dead and gone, and in the presence of Doctor Louis I put them aside a while. Time enough to think of them when I was alone. Meanwhile Eric and Emilius remained. They lived, and between their lives and mine there was a link. Of this I entertained no doubt, nor did I doubt that, in this connection, the future would not be colourless for us. To be prepared for the course which events might take: this was now my task and my duty. The thought was constantly in my mind. "As Kristel acted, so would I act, in love and hate."

I observed Doctor Louis's eyes fixed earnestly upon my face.

"You are agitated," he said.

"Is not such a story," I said evasively, "enough to agitate one? Its movements are as the movements of a sublime tragedy."

"True," mused Doctor Louis; "even in obscure lives may be found such elements."

"You have told me little," I said, "of Eric and Emilius. Do they reside permanently in the lighthouse in which their mother died?"

"They have a house in the village by the sea," replied Doctor Louis, "and they are in a certain sense fishermen on a large scale. The place has possessed for them a fascination, and it seemed as if they would never be able to tear themselves away from it. But their intimate association with it will soon be at an end."

"In what way?"

"They have sold their house and boats, and are coming to reside in Nerac for a time."

I started and turned aside, for I did not wish Doctor Louis to see the cloud upon my face.

"Only for a time?" I inquired.

"It depends upon circumstances," said Doctor Louis. "If they are happy and contented in the present and in their prospects in the future, they will remain. Otherwise, they will seek a larger sphere."

"Is this their idea?"

"Not theirs alone. I am partly responsible. We have talked of it often, and I have urged them not to waste their lives in a village so small and primitive as that in which they were born."

"Somewhat destructive of your own theories of happiness, doctor," I observed. "Yourself, for instance, wasting your life in a small place like Nerac, when by your gifts you are so well fitted to play your part in a large city."

"I am selfish, I am afraid," he said with a deprecatory smile, "and am too much wrapped up in my own ease and comfort. At the same time you must bear in mind that mine is an exceptional case. It is a regretful thing to be compelled to say that the majority of lives and homes are less happy than my own. Often there is love, and poverty stands at the bright door which opens but on a scene of privation and ill-requited toil. Often there is wealth, in the use of which there has been an endeavour to purchase love, which, my friend, is not a marketable commodity. Often there are sorrow and sickness, and neither faith nor patience to lighten the load. It is my good fortune to have none of these ills. We have love and good health, and a sufficient share of worldly prosperity to provide for our days. Therefore I will leave myself out of the question. What!" he cried, interrupting himself in a tone at once light and earnest; "am I entirely useless in Nerac? Do I do no good whatever?"

"You do much," I said, "and also do Eric and Emilius in their village. You have admitted that they are fishermen on a large scale, and possess boats. Consequently they employ labour, and the wages they pay support the homes of those who serve them."

"With some young men," said Doctor Louis, with a good-humoured laugh, "there is no arguing. They are so keen in defence that they have a

formidable parry for every thrust. To the point, then, without argument. Eric and Emilius have in them certain qualities which render me doubtful whether, as middle-aged men, they would be in their proper sphere in their village by the sea. The maidens there find no serious favour in their eyes."

"Do they look," I asked, with a torturing pang of jealousy, "with a more appreciative eye upon the maidens in Nerac?"

"Tush, tush," said Doctor Louis, in a kind tone, laying his hand upon my shoulder; "vex not yourself unnecessarily. Youth's hot blood is a torrent, restless by day and night, never satisfied, never content, for ever seeking cause to fret and fume. You have given evidence of wisdom, Gabriel--exercise it when it is most needed. You are still disturbed. Well, question me."

"Of all the maidens in Nerac," I said, striving to speak with calmness, "Lauretta is the fairest and sweetest."

"Go on, my friend. I, her father, will not gainsay you."

"Is it because she is fairer and sweeter than any Eric and Emilius have seen in the village by the sea that they quit their home there, and come to live in Nerac?"

"A plain question. Were I simply an ordinary friend of yours, and not Lauretta's father, I might feel inclined to play with you; but as it is, my happiness here is too largely at stake. Do not fall into error, Gabriel. Viewing with a selfish eye--a human failing, common enough--your own immediate affairs, forget not that I, Lauretta's father, am as deeply concerned in them as yourself. Never would I be guilty of the crime of forcing my child's affections. Do you think I love her less than you do? If it should be your happy fate to be a father, you will learn how much purer and higher is the love of a father than that which a young man, after an hour's acquaintance, bears for the maiden whom he would wed."

"After an hour's acquaintance!" I exclaimed, somewhat hotly.

"It cannot be said to be more," responded Doctor Louis gravely, "compared with my knowledge of my child."

The retort was well-merited, and I murmured, "Forgive me!" The consistently sweet accents of Doctor Louis's voice produced in me, at this moment, a feeling of self-reproach, and a true sense of my petulance and imperiousness forced itself upon me.

"There is little need to ask forgiveness," said Doctor Louis; "I can make full allowance for the impetuous passions of youth, and if I wish you to place a curb upon them it is for your welfare and that of my child. Indulgence in such extravagances leads to injustice. Gabriel, I will be entirely frank with you. Before your arrival in Nerac I had a slight suspicion that one of the brothers--towards both of whom I feel as a father--had an affection for Lauretta which might have ripened into love. It is in the nature of things that a beautiful girl should inspire a sentiment in the breasts of more than one man, but she can belong only to one, to him to whom her heart is drawn. What passed between us when you spoke to me as a lover of my daughter was honest and outspoken. The encouragement you received from me would have been withheld had it not been that I saw you occupied a place in Lauretta's heart, and that the one end and aim I have in view is her happiness."

"Is it too much to ask," I said, "to which of the brothers you referred?"

"Altogether too much," replied Doctor Louis. "It is an unrevealed secret, and the right is not mine to say more than I have said."

I did not speak for a little while; I was the slave of conflicting passions. One moment I believed entirely in Doctor Louis; another moment I doubted him; and through all I was oppressed by a consciousness that I was doing him an injustice.

"Anything more, Gabriel?" he asked. "Nothing special, sir," was my reply, "but in a general way."

"Well?"

"Born under such singular circumstances, and of such a father as Silvain, it would not be unnatural to suppose that they might inherit some touch of his strangely sympathetic nature."

"They have inherited it," said Doctor Louis; "there exists between them a sympathy as strange as that which existed in Silvain. I am at liberty to say nothing more."

He spoke in a firm tone, and I did not question him further. As I accompanied him home we conversed upon general subjects, and I took pains to convey to him an assurance that there was nothing really serious in the ungracious temper I had displayed. He was relieved at this, and we fell into our old confidential manner with each other.

I passed the evening, as usual, in the society of his wife and Lauretta. Peace descended upon me, and in the sweet presence of these pure women I was tranquil and happy. How lovely, how beautiful was this home of love and tender thought! The wild storms of life died away, and strains of soft, angelic music melted the heart, and made themselves heard even in the midst of the silences. Doctor Louis's gaiety returned to him; he smiled upon me, and indulged in many a harmless jest. I was charmed out of my moody humour, and contributed to the innocent enjoyment of the home circle. The hours passed till it was near bed-time, and then it was that a change came over me. Sitting by Lauretta's side, turning the pages of an illustrated book of travel, I heard the names of Eric and Emilius spoken by Doctor Louis. He was telling his wife of the impending change in their mode of life, and there was an affectionate note in his voice, and also in hers, which jarred upon me. I started to my feet, and they all turned to me in surprise. I recovered myself in a moment, and explained that I had suddenly thought of something which rendered it necessary that I should go at once to the house I had taken, and of which Martin Hartog was at present the sole custodian.

"But you were not to leave us till the end of the week," expostulated Lauretta's mother. "Is it so very important?"

"Indeed it is," I replied, "and should have been attended to earlier."

"You will return?" she asked.

"Not to-night. You need have no anxiety; everything is prepared, and I shall be quite comfortable."

"My wife is thinking of the sheets," observed Doctor Louis jocosely; "whether they are properly aired."

"I have seen to that," she said, "and there is a fire in every room."

"Then we can safely let him go," rejoined Doctor Louis. "He is old enough to take care of himself, and, besides, he is now a householder, and has duties. We shall see you to-morrow, Gabriel?"

"Yes, I shall be here in the morning."

So I wished them good-night, and presently was out in the open, walking through dark shadows.

XVIII.

In solitude I reviewed with amazement the occurrences of the last few moments. It seemed to me that I had been impelled to do what I had done by an occult agency outside myself. Not that I did not approve of it. It was in accordance with my intense wish and desire--which had lain dormant in the sweet society of Lauretta--to be alone, in order that I might, without interruption, think over the story I had heard from Doctor Louis's lips. And now that this wish and desire were gratified, the one figure which still rose vividly before me was the figure of Kristel. As I walked onward I followed the hapless man mentally in his just pursuit of the brother who had snatched the cup of happiness from his lips. Yes, it was just and right, and what he did I would have done under similar circumstances. Of all who had taken part in the tragic drama he, and he alone, commanded my sympathy.

The distance from Doctor Louis's house to mine was under two miles, but I prolonged it by a *détour* which brought me, without premeditation, to the inn known as the Three Black Crows. I had no intention of going there or of entering the inn, and yet, finding myself at the door, I pushed it open, and walked into the room in which the customers took their wine. This room was furnished with rough tables and benches, and I seated myself, and in response to the landlord's inquiry, ordered a bottle of his best, and invited him to share it with me. He, nothing loth, accepted the invitation, and sat at the table, emptying his glass, which I continued to fill for him, while my own remained untasted. I had been inside the Three Black Crows on only one occasion, in the company of Doctor Louis, and the landlord now expressed his gratitude for the honour I did him by paying him another visit. It was only the sense of his words which reached my ears, my attention being almost entirely drawn to two men who were seated at a table at the end of the room, drinking bad wine and whispering to each other. Observing my eyes upon them, the landlord said in a low tone, "Strangers."

"You do not know them?" I asked.

"Never saw them before," he replied.

Their backs were towards me, and I could not see their faces, but I noticed that one was humpbacked, and that, to judge from their attire, they were poor peasants.

"I asked them," said the landlord, "whether they wanted a bed, and they answered no, that they were going further. If they had stopped here the night I should have kept watch on them!"

"Why?"

"I don't like their looks, and my wife's a timorous creature. Then there's the children--you've seen my little ones, I think, sir?"

"Yes, I have seen them. Surely those men would do them no harm!"

"Perhaps not, sir; but a man, loving those near to him, thinks of the possibilities of things. I've got a bit of money in the house, to pay my rent that's due to-morrow, and one or two other accounts. They may have got scent of it."

"Do you think they have come to Nerac on a robbing expedition?"

"There's no telling. Roguery has a plain face, and the signs are in theirs, or my name's not what it is. When they said they were going further on I asked them where, and they said it was no business of mine. They gave me the same answer when I asked them where they came from. They're up to no good, that's certain, and the sooner they're out of the village the better for all of us."

The more the worthy landlord talked the more settled became his instinctive conviction that the strangers were rogues.

"If robbery is their errand," I said thoughtfully, "there are houses in Nerac which would yield them a better harvest than yours."

"Of course there is," was his response. "Doctor Louis's, for one. He has generally some money about him, and his silver plate would be a prize. Are you going back there to-night, sir?"

"No; I am on my road to my own house, and I came out of the way a little for the sake of the walk."

"That's my profit, sir," said the landlord cheerfully. "I would offer to keep you company if it were not that I don't like to leave my place."

"There's nothing to fear," I said; "if they molest me I shall be a match for them."

"Still," urged the landlord, "I should leave before they do. It's as well to avoid a difficulty when we have the opportunity."

I took the hint, and paid my score. To all appearance there was no reason for alarm on my part; during the time the landlord and I were conversing the strangers had not turned in our direction, and as we spoke in low tones they could not have heard what we said. They remained in the same position, with their backs towards us, now drinking in silence, now speaking in whispers to each other.

Outside the Three Black Crows I walked slowly on, but I had not gone fifty yards before I stopped. What was in my mind was the reference made by the landlord to Doctor Louis's house and to its being worth the plundering. The doctor's house contained what was dearer to me than life or fortune. Laretta was there. Should I leave her at the mercy of these scoundrels who might possibly have planned a robbery of the doctor's money and plate? In that case Laretta would be in danger. My mind was instantly made up. I would return to the Three Black Crows, and look through the window of the room in which I had left the men, to ascertain whether they were still there. If they were, I would wait for them till they left the inn, and then would set a watch upon their movements. If they were gone I would hasten to the doctor's house, to render assistance, should any be needed. I had no weapon, with the exception of a small knife; could I not provide myself with something more formidable? A few paces from where I stood were some trees with stout branches. I detached one of these branches, and with my small knife fashioned it into a weapon which would serve my purpose. It was about four feet in length, thick at the striking end and tapering towards the other, so that it could be held with ease and used to good purpose. I tried it on the air, swinging it round and bringing it down with sufficient force to kill a man, or with certainty to knock the senses out of him in one blow. Then I returned to the inn, and looked through the

window. In the settlement of my proceedings I had remembered there was a red blind over the window which did not entirely cover it, and through the uncovered space I now saw the strangers sitting at the table as I had left them.

Taking care to make no noise I stepped away from the window, and took up a position from which I could see the door of the inn, which was closed. I myself was in complete darkness, and there was no moon to betray me; all that was needed from me was caution.

I watched fully half an hour before the door of the inn was opened. No person had entered during my watch, the inhabitants of Nerac being early folk for rest and work. The two strangers lingered for a moment upon the threshold, peering out into the night; behind them was the landlord, with a candle in his hand. I did not observe that any words passed between them and the landlord; they stepped into the road, and the door was closed upon them. Then came the sounds of locking and bolting doors and windows. Then, silence.

I saw the faces of the men as they stood upon the threshold; they were evil-looking fellows enough, and their clothes were of the commonest.

For two or three minutes they did not stir; there had been nothing in their manner to arouse suspicion, and the fact of their lingering on the roadway seemed to denote that they were uncertain of the route they should take. That they raised their faces to the sky was not against them; it was a natural seeking for light to guide them.

To the left lay the little nest of buildings amongst which were Father Daniel's chapel and modest house, and the more pretentious dwelling of Doctor Louis; to the right were the woods, at the entrance of which my own house was situated. Which road would the strangers take? The left, and it was part evidence of a guilty design. The right, and it would be part proof that the landlord's suspicions were baseless.

They exchanged a few words which did not reach my ears. Then they moved onwards to the left. I grasped my weapon, and crept after them.

But they walked only a dozen steps, and paused. I, also. In my mind was the thought, "Continue the route you have commenced, and you are dead men. Turn from it, and you are safe."

The direction of the village was the more tempting to men who had no roof to shelter them, for the reason that in Father Daniel's chapel--which, built on an eminence, overlooked the village--lights were visible from the spot upon which I and they were standing. There was the chance of a straw bed and charity's helping hand, never withheld by the good priest from the poor and wretched. On their right was dense darkness; not a glimmer of light.

Nevertheless, after the exchange of a few more words which, like the others, were unheard by me, they seemed to resolve to seek the gloomier way. They turned from the village, and facing me, walked past me in the direction of the woods.

I breathed more freely, and fell into a curious mental consideration of the relief I experienced. Was it because, walking as they were from the village in which Lauretta was sleeping, I was spared the taking of these men's lives? No. It was because of the indication they afforded me that Lauretta was not in peril. In her defence I could have justified the taking of a hundred lives. No feeling of guilt would have haunted me; there would have been not only no remorse but no pity in my soul. The violation of the most sacred of human laws would be justified where Lauretta was concerned. She was mine, to cherish, to protect, to love--mine, inalienably. She belonged to no other man, and none should step between her and me--neither he whose ruffianly design threatened her with possible harm, nor he, in a higher and more polished grade, who strove to win her affections and wrest them from me. In an equal way both were equally my enemies, and I should be justified in acting by them as Kristel had acted to Silvain.

Ah, but he had left it too late. Not so would I. Let but the faintest breath of certainty wait upon suspicion, and I would scotch it effectually for once and all. Had Kristel possessed the strange power in his hours of dreaming which Silvain possessed, he would not have been robbed of the happiness which was his by right. He would have been forewarned, and Avicia

would have been his wife. In every step in life he took there would have been the fragrance of flowers around him, and a heavenly light. Thus, with me, and for me.

Did I, then, admit that there was any resemblance in the characters of Avicia and Lauretta? No; one was a weed, the other a rose. Here coarseness, there refinement. Here low desire and cunning; there angelic purity and goodness. But immeasurably beneath Lauretta as Avicia was, Kristel's love for the girl would have made her radiant and spotless.

All this time I was stealthily following the strangers to the woods. Once I tripped. The sound arrested them; they clutched each other in fear.

"What was that?" one said hoarsely. "Are we being followed?"

I stood motionless, and they stood without movement for many moments. Then they simultaneously emitted a deep-drawn sigh.

"It was the wind," said the man who had already spoken.

I smiled in contempt; not a breath of wind was stirring; there was not the flutter of a leaf, not the waving of the lightest branch. All was still and quiet.

They resumed their course, and I crept after them noiselessly. They entered the wood; the trees grew more thickly clustered.

"This will do," I heard one say; and upon the words they threw themselves to the ground, and fell into slumber.

Sleep came to them instantaneously. I bent over them and was satisfied. The landlord of the Three Black Crows was mistaken. I moved softly away, and when I was at a safe distance from them I lit a match and looked at my watch; it was twenty minutes to eleven, and before the minute-hand had passed the hour I arrived at my house. The door was fast, but I saw a light in the lower room of the gardener's cottage, which I had given to Martin Hartog as a residence for him and his daughter.

"Hartog is awake," I thought; "expecting me perhaps."

I knocked at the door of the cottage, and received no answer; I knocked again with the same result.

"Hartog! Hartog!" I called; and still no answer came.

The door had fastenings of lock and latch. I put my hand to the latch, and finding that the key had not been turned in the lock, opened the door and entered. Martin Hartog was not there.

The room, however, was not without an occupant. At the table sat a young girl, the gardener's daughter, asleep. She lay back in her chair, and the light shone upon her face. I had seen her when she was awake, and knew that she was beautiful, but as I gazed now upon her sleeping form I was surprised to discover that she was even fairer than I had supposed. She had hair of dark brown, which curled most gracefully about her brow and head; her face, in its repose, was sweet to look upon; she was not dressed as the daughter of a labouring man, but with a certain daintiness and taste which deepened my surprise; there was lace at her sleeves and around her white neck. Had I not known her station I should have taken her for a lady. She was young, not more than eighteen or nineteen I judged, and life's springtime lay sweetly upon her. There was a smile of wistful tenderness on her lips.

Her left arm was extended over the table, and her hand rested upon the portrait of a man, almost concealing the features. Her right hand, which was on her lap, enfolded a letter, and that and the portrait--which, without curious prying, I saw was not that of her father--doubtless were the motive of a pleasant dream.

I took in all this in a momentary glance, and quickly left the room, closing the door behind me. Then I knocked loudly and roughly, and heard the hurried movements of a sudden awaking. She came to the door and cried softly, "Is that you, father? The door is unlocked."

"It is I," I said. "Is your father not at home then?"

She opened the door, and fell back a step in confusion.

"I should have let your father know," I said, "that I intended to sleep here to-night--but indeed it was a hasty decision. I hope I have not alarmed you."

"Oh, no, sir," she said. "We did not expect you. Father is away on business; I expected him home earlier, and waiting for him I fell asleep. The servants are not coming till to-morrow morning."

"I know. Have you the keys?"

She gave them to me, and asked if she could do anything for me. I answered no, that there was nothing required. As I wished her good-night a man's firm steps were heard, and Martin Hartog appeared. He cast swift glances at his daughter and me, and it struck me that they were not devoid of suspicion. I explained matters, and he appeared contented with my explanation; then bidding his daughter go indoors he accompanied me to the house.

There was a fire in my bedroom, almost burnt out, and the handiwork of an affectionate and capable housewife was everywhere apparent. Martin Hartog showed an inclination then and there to enter into particulars of the work he had done in the grounds during my absence, but I told him I was tired, and dismissed him. I listened to his retreating footsteps, and when I heard the front door closed I blew out the candle and sat before the dying embers in the grate. Darkness was best suited to my mood, and I sat and mused upon the events of the last forty-eight hours. Gradually my thoughts became fixed upon the figures of the two strangers I had left sleeping in the woods, in connection with the suspicion of their designs which the landlord had imparted to me. So concentrated was my attention that I re-enacted all the incidents of which they were the inspirers--the fashioning of the branch into a weapon, the watch I had set upon them, their issuing from the inn, the landlord standing behind with the candle in his hand, their lingering in the road, the first steps they took towards the village, their turning back, and my stealthy pursuit after them--not the smallest detail was omitted. I do not remember undressing and going to bed. Encompassed by silence and darkness I was only spiritually awake.

XIX.

I was aroused at about eight o'clock in the morning by the arrival of the servants of the household whom Lauretta's mother had engaged for me. They comprised a housekeeper, who was to cook and generally superintend, and two stout wenches to do the rougher work. In such a village as Nerac these, in addition to Martin Hartog, constituted an establishment of importance.

They had been so well schooled by Lauretta's mother before commencing the active duties of their service, that when I rose I found the breakfast-table spread, and the housekeeper in attendance to receive my orders. This augured well, and I experienced a feeling of satisfaction at the prospect of the happy life before me. Like mother, like daughter. Lauretta would be not only a sweet and loving companion, but the same order and regularity would reign in our home as in the home of her childhood. I blessed the chance, if chance it was, which had led me to Nerac, and as I paced the room and thought of Lauretta, I said audibly, "Thank God!"

Breakfast over, I strolled into the grounds, and made a careful inspection of the work which Martin Hartog had performed. The conspicuous conscientiousness of his labours added to my satisfaction, and I gave expression to it. He received my approval in manly fashion, and said he would be glad if I always spoke my mind, "as I always speak mine," he added. It pleased me that he was not subservient; in all conditions of life a man owes it to himself to maintain, within proper bounds, a spirit of independence. While he was pointing out to me this and that, and urging me to make any suggestions which occurred to me, his daughter came up to us and said that a man wished to speak to me. I asked who the man was, and she replied, "The landlord of the Three Black Crows." Curious as to his purpose in making so early a call, and settling it with myself that his errand was on business, in connection, perhaps, with some wine he wished to dispose of, I told the young woman to send him to me, and presently he appeared. There was an expression of awkwardness, I thought, in his face as he stood before me, cap in hand.

"Well, landlord," I said smiling; "you wish to see me?"

"Yes, sir." And there he stopped.

"Go on," I said, wondering somewhat at his hesitation.

"Can I speak to you alone, sir?"

"Certainly. Hartog, I will see you again presently."

Martin Hartog took the hint, and left us together.

"Now, landlord," I said.

"It's about those two men, sir, you saw in my place last night."

"Those two men?" I said, pondering, and then a light broke upon me, and I thought it singular--as indeed it was--that no recollection, either of the men or the incidents in association with them should have occurred to me since my awaking. "Yes?"

"You are quite safe, sir," said the landlord, "I am glad to find."

"Quite safe, landlord; but why should you be so specially glad?"

"Nothing's happened here then, sir?"

"Nothing."

"That's what brought me round so early this morning, for one thing; I was afraid something might have happened."

"Kindly explain yourself," I said, not at all impatient, but amused rather.

"What might have happened?"

"Well, sir, they might have found out, somehow or other, that you were sleeping in the house alone last night"--and here he broke off and asked, "You did sleep here alone last night?"

"Certainly I did, and a capital night's rest I had."

"Glad to hear that, sir. As I was saying, if they had found out that you were sleeping here alone, they might have taken it into their heads to trouble you."

"They might, landlord, but facts are stubborn things. They did not, evidently."

"I understand that now, sir, but I had my fears, and that's what brought me round for one thing."

"An expression you have used once before, landlord. 'For one thing.' I infer there must be another thing in your mind."

"There is, sir. You haven't heard then?"

"As yet I have heard nothing but a number of very enigmatical observations from you with respect to those men. Ah, yes, I remember; you had your doubts of them when I visited you on my road home?"

"I had sir; I told you I didn't like the looks of them, and that I was not easy in my mind about my own family, and the bit of money I had in my place to pay my rent with, and one or two other accounts."

"That is so; you are bringing the whole affair back to me. I saw the men after I left the Three Black Crows."

"You did, sir! When? Where?"

"To tell you would be to interrupt what you have come here to say. No more roundabouts, landlord. Say what you have to say right on."

"Well, sir, this is the way of it. I suspected them from the first, and you will bear witness of it before the magistrate. They were strangers in Nerac, but that is no reason why I should have refused to sell them a bottle of red wine when they asked for it. It's my trade to supply customers, and the wine was the worst I had, consequently the cheapest. I had no right to ask their business, and if they chose to answer me uncivilly, it was their affair. I wouldn't tell everybody mine on the asking. They paid for the wine, and there was an end of it. They called for another bottle, and when I brought it I did not draw the cork till I had the money for it, and as they wouldn't pay the price--not having it about 'em--the cork wasn't drawn, and the bottle went back. I had trouble to get rid of them, but they stumbled out at last, and I saw no more of them. Now, sir, you will remember that when we were speaking of them Doctor Louis's house was mentioned as a likely house for rogues to break into and rob."

"A moment," I interrupted in agitation. "Doctor Louis is safe?"

"Quite safe, sir."

"And his wife and daughter?"

"Quite safe, sir."

"Go on."

"The villains couldn't hear what we said, no more than we could hear what they were whispering about. But they had laid their plans, and tried to hatch them--worse luck for one, if not for both the scoundrels; but the other will be caught and made to pay for it. What they did between the time they left the Three Black Crows and the time they made an attempt to break into Doctor Louis's is at present a mystery. Don't be alarmed, sir; I see that my news has stirred you, but they have only done harm to themselves. No one else is a bit the worse for their roguery. Doctor Louis and his good wife and daughter slept through the night undisturbed; nothing occurred to rouse or alarm them. They got up as usual, the doctor being the first--he is known as an early riser. As it happened, it was fortunate that he was outside his house before his lady, for although we in Nerac have an idea that she is as brave as she is good, a woman, after all, is only a woman, and the sight of blood is what few of them can stand."

"The sight of blood!" I exclaimed. But that I was assured that Lauretta was safe and well, I should not have wasted a moment on the landlord, eager as I was to learn what he had come to tell. My mind, however, was quite at ease with respect to my dear girl, and the next few minutes were not so precious that I could not spare them to hear the landlord's strange story.

"That," he resumed, "is what the doctor saw when he went to the back of his house. Blood on the ground--and what is more, what would have given the ladies a greater shock, there before him was the body of a man--dead."

"What man?" I asked.

"That I can't for a certainty say, sir, because I haven't seen him as yet. I'm telling the story second-hand, as it was told to me a while ago by one who had come straight from the doctor's house. There was the blood, and there the man; and from the description I should say it was one of the men who were drinking in my place last night. It is not ascertained at what time of

the night he and his mate tried to break into the doctor's house, but the attempt was made. There is the evidence of it. They commenced to bore a hole in one of the shutters at the back; the hole made, it would have been easy to enlarge it, and so to draw the fastenings. However, they did not get so far as that. They could scarcely have been at their scoundrelly work a minute or two before it came to an end."

"How and by whom were they interrupted, landlord? That, of course, is known?"

"It is not known, sir, and it's just at this point that the mystery commences. There they are at their work, and likely to be successful. A dark night, and not a watchman in the village. Never a need for one, sir. Plenty of time before them, and desperate men they. Only one man in the house, the good doctor; all the others women, easily dealt with. Robbery first--if interfered with, murder afterwards. They wouldn't have stuck at it, not they! But there it was, sir, as God willed. Not a minute at work, and something occurs. The question is, what? The man lies dead on the ground, with a gimlet in his hand, and Doctor Louis, in full sunlight, stands looking down on the strange sight."

"The man lies dead on the ground," I said, repeating the landlord's words; "but there were two."

"No sign of the other, sir; he's a vanished body. People are out searching for him."

"He will be found," I said----

"It's to be hoped," interrupted the landlord.

"And then what you call a mystery will be solved."

"It's beyond me, sir," said the landlord, with a puzzled air.

"It is easy enough. These two scoundrels, would-be murderers, plan a robbery, and proceed to execute it. They are ill-conditioned creatures, no better than savages, swayed by their passions, in which there is no show of reason. They quarrel, perhaps, about the share of the spoil which each shall take, and are not wise enough to put aside their quarrel till they are in

possession of the booty. They continue their dispute, and in such savages their brutal passions once roused, swell and grow to a fitting climax of violence. So with these. Probably the disagreement commenced on their way to the house, and had reached an angry point when one began to bore a hole in the shutter. This one it was who was found dead. The proof was in his hand--the gimlet with which he was working."

"Well conceived, sir," said the landlord, following with approval my speculative explanation.

"This man's face," I continued, "would be turned toward the shutter, his back to his comrade. Into this comrade's mind darts, like a lightning flash, the idea of committing the robbery alone, and so becoming the sole possessor of the treasure."

"Good, sir, good," said the landlord, rubbing his hands.

"No sooner conceived than executed. Out comes his knife, or perhaps he has it ready in his hand, opened."

"Why opened, sir? Would it not be a fixed blade?"

"No; such men carry clasp-knives. They are safest, and never attract notice."

"You miss nothing, sir," said the landlord admiringly. "What a magistrate you would have made!"

"He plunges it into his fellow-scoundrel's back, who falls dead, with the gimlet in his hand. The murder is explained."

The landlord nodded excitedly, and continued to rub his hands; then suddenly stood quite still, with an incredulous expression on his face.

"But the robbery is not committed," he exclaimed; "the house is not broken into, and the scoundrel gets nothing for his pains."

With superior wisdom I laid a patronising hand upon his shoulder.

"The deed done," I said, "the murderer, gazing upon his dead comrade, is overcome with fear. He has been rash--he may be caught red-handed; the execution of the robbery will take time. He is not familiar with the habits of the village, and does not know it has no guardians of the night. One may

stroll that way and make discovery. Fool that he was! He has not only committed murder, he has robbed himself. Better to have waited till they had possession of the treasure; but this kind of logic always comes afterwards to ill-regulated minds. Under the influence of his newly-born fears he recognises that every moment is precious; he dare not linger; he dare not carry out the scheme. Shuddering, he flies from the spot, with rage and despair in his heart. Unhappy wretch! The curse of Cain is upon him."

XX.

The landlord, who was profuse in the expressions of his admiration at the light I had thrown upon the case, so far as it was known to us, accompanied me to the house of Doctor Louis. It was natural that I should find Laretta and her mother in a state of agitation, and it was sweet to me to learn that it was partly caused by their anxieties for my safety. Doctor Louis was not at home, but had sent a messenger to my house to inquire after me, and to give me some brief account of the occurrences of the night. We did not meet this messenger on our way to the doctor's; he must have taken a different route from ours.

"You did wrong to leave us last night," said Laretta's mother chidingly.

I shook my head, and answered that it was but anticipating the date of my removal by a few days, and that my presence in her house would not have altered matters.

"Everything was right at home," I said. Home! What inexpressible sweetness there was in the word! "Martin Hartog showed me to my room, and the servants you engaged came early this morning, and attended to me as though they had known my ways and tastes for years."

"You slept well?" she asked.

"A dreamless night," I replied; "but had I suspected what was going on here, I should not have been able to rest."

"I am glad you had no suspicion, Gabriel; you would have been in danger. Dreadful as it all is, it is a comfort to know that the misguided men do not belong to our village."

Her merciful heart could find no harsher term than this to apply to the monsters, and it pained her to hear me say, "One has met his deserved fate; it is a pity the other has escaped." But I could not keep back the words.

Doctor Louis had left a message for me to follow him to the office of the village magistrate, where the affair was being investigated, but previous to going thither, I went to the back of the premises to make an inspection. The village boasted of one constable, and he was now on duty, in a state of

stupefaction. His orders were to allow nothing to be disturbed, but his bewilderment was such that it would have been easy for an interested person to do as he pleased in the way of alteration. A stupid lout, with as much intelligence as a vegetable. However, I saw at once that nothing had been disturbed. The shutter in which a hole had been bored was closed; there were blood stains on the stones, and I was surprised that they were so few; the gate by which the villains had effected an entrance into the garden was open; I observed some particles of sawdust on the window-ledge just below where the hole had been bored. All that had been removed was the body of the man who had been murdered by his comrade.

I put two or three questions to the constable, and he managed to answer in monosyllables, yes and no, at random. "A valuable assistant," I thought, "in unravelling a mysterious case!" And then I reproached myself for the sneer. Happy was a village like Nerac in which crime was so rare, and in which an official so stupid was sufficient for the execution of the law.

The first few stains of blood I noticed were close to the window, and the stones thereabout had been disturbed, as though by the falling of a heavy body.

"Was the man's body," I inquired of the constable, "lifted from this spot?"

He looked down vacantly and said, "Yes."

"You are sure?" I asked.

"Sure," he said after a pause, but whether the word was spoken in reply to my question, or as a question he put to himself, I could not determine.

I continued my examination of the grounds. From the open gate to the window was a distance of forty-eight yards; I stepped exactly a yard, and I counted my steps. The path from gate to window was shaped like the letter S, and was for the most part defined by tall shrubs on either side, of a height varying from six to nine feet. Through this path the villains had made their way to the window; through this path the murderer, leaving his comrade dead, had made his escape. Their operations, for their own safety's sake, must undoubtedly have been conducted while the night was

still dark. Reasonable also to conclude that, being strangers in the village (although by some means they must have known beforehand that Doctor Louis's house was worth the plundering), they could not have been acquainted with the devious turns in the path from the gate to the window. Therefore they must have felt their way through, touching the shrubs with their hands, most likely breaking some of the slender stalks, until they arrived at the open space at the back of the building.

These reflections impelled me to make a careful inspection of the shrubs, and I was very soon startled by a discovery. Here and there some stalks were broken and torn away, and here and there were indisputable evidences that the shrubs had been grasped by human hands. It was not this that startled me, for it was in accordance with my own train of reasoning, but it was that there were stains of blood on the broken stalks, especially upon those which had been roughly torn from the parent tree. I seemed to see a man, with blood about him, staggering blindly through the path, snatching at the shrubs both for support and guidance, and the loose stalks falling from his hands as he went. Two men entered the grounds, only one left--that one, the murderer. The blood stains indicated a struggle. Between whom? Between the victim and the perpetrator of the deed? In that case, what became of the theory of action I had so elaborately described to the landlord of the Three Black Crows? I had imagined an instantaneous impulse of crime and its instantaneous execution. I had imagined a death as sudden as it was violent, a deed from which the murderer had escaped without the least injury to himself; and here, on both sides of me, were the clearest proofs that the man who had fled must have been grievously wounded. My ingenuity was at fault in the endeavour to bring these signs into harmony with the course of events I had invented in my interview with the landlord.

I went straight to the office of the magistrate, a small building of four rooms on the ground floor, the two in front being used as the magistrate's private room and court, the two in the rear as cells, not at all uncomfortable, for aggressors of the law. It was but rarely that they were occupied. At the door of the court I encountered Father Daniel. He was

pale, and much shaken. During his lifetime no such crime had been perpetrated in the village, and his only comfort was that the actors in it were strangers. But that did not lessen his horror of the deed, and his large heart overflowed with pity both for the guilty man and the victim.

"So sudden a death!" he said, in a voice broken by tears. "No time for repentance! Thrust before the Eternal Presence weighed down by sin! I have been praying by his side for mercy, and for mercy upon his murderer. Poor sinners! poor sinners!"

I could not sympathise with his sentiments, and I told him so sternly. He made no attempt to convert me to his views, but simply said, "All men should pray that they may never be tempted."

And so he left me, and turned in the direction of his little chapel to offer up prayers for the dead and the living sinners.

Doctor Louis was with the magistrate; they had been discussing theories, and had heard from the landlord of the Three Black Crows my own ideas of the movements of the strangers on the previous night.

"In certain respects you may be right in your speculations," the magistrate said; "but on one important point you are in error."

"I have already discovered," I said, "that my theory is wrong, and not in accordance with fact; but we will speak of that presently. What is the point you refer to?"

"As to the weapon with which the murder was done," replied the magistrate, a shrewd man, whose judicial perceptions fitted him for a larger sphere of duties than he was called upon to perform in Nerac. "No knife was used."

"What, then, was the weapon?" I asked.

"A club of some sort," said the magistrate, "with which the dead man was suddenly attacked from behind."

"Has it been found?"

"No, but a search is being made for it and also for the murderer."

"On that point we are agreed. There is no shadow of doubt that the missing man is guilty."

"There can be none," said the magistrate.

"And yet," urged Doctor Louis, in a gentle tone, "to condemn a man unheard is repugnant to justice."

"There are circumstances," said the magistrate, "which point so surely to guilt that it would be inimical to justice to dispute them. By the way," he continued, addressing me, "did not the landlord of the Three Black Crows mention something to the effect that you were at his inn last night after you left Dr. Louis's house, and that you and he had a conversation respecting the strangers, who were at that time in the same room as yourselves?"

"If he did," I said, "he stated what is correct. I was there, and saw the strangers, of whom the landlord entertained suspicions which have been proved to be well founded."

"Then you will be able to identify the body, already," added the magistrate, "identified by the landlord. Confirmatory evidence strengthens a case."

"I shall be able to identify it," I said.

We went to the inner room, and I saw at a glance that it was one of the strangers who had spent the evening at the Three Black Crows, and whom I had afterwards watched and followed.

"The man who has escaped," I observed, "was hump backed."

"That tallies with the landlord's statement," said the magistrate.

"I have something to relate," I said, upon our return to the court, "of my own movements last night after I quitted the inn."

I then gave the magistrate and Doctor Louis a circumstantial account of my movements, without, however, entering into a description of my thoughts, only in so far as they affected my determination to protect the doctor and his family from evil designs.

They listened with great interest, and Doctor Louis pressed my hand. He understood and approved of the solicitude I had experienced for the safety

of his household; it was a guarantee that I would watch over his daughter with love and firmness and protect her from harm.

"But you ran a great risk, Gabriel," he said affectionately.

"I did not consider that," I said.

The magistrate looked on and smiled; a father himself, he divined the undivulged ties by which I and Doctor Louis were bound.

"At what time," he asked, "do you say you left the rogues asleep in the woods?"

"It was twenty minutes to eleven," I replied, "and at eleven o'clock I reached my house, and was received by Martin Hartog's daughter. Hartog was absent, on business his daughter said, and while we were talking, and I was taking the keys from her hands, Hartog came home, and accompanied me to my bedroom."

"Were you at all disturbed in your mind for the safety of your friends in consequence of what had passed?"

"Not in the least. The men I left slumbering in the woods appeared to me to be but ordinary tramps, without any special evil intent, and I was satisfied and relieved. I could not have slept else; it is seldom that I have enjoyed a better night."

"Cunning rascals! May not their slumbers have been feigned?"

"I think not. They were in a profound sleep; I made sure of that. No, I could not have been mistaken."

"It is strange," mused Doctor Louis, "how guilt can sleep, and can forget the present and the future!"

I then entered into an account of the inspection I had made of the path from the gate to the window; it was the magistrate's opinion, from the position in which the body was found, that there had been no struggle between the two men, and here he and I were in agreement. What I now narrated materially weakened his opinion, as it had materially weakened mine, and he was greatly perplexed. He was annoyed also that the signs I had discovered, which confirmed the notion that a struggle must have

taken place, had escaped the attention of his assistants. He himself had made but a cursory examination of the grounds, his presence being necessary in the court to take the evidence of witnesses, to receive reports, and to issue instructions.

"There are so many things to be considered," said Doctor Louis, "in a case like this, resting as it does at present entirely upon circumstantial evidence, that it is scarcely possible some should not be lost sight of. Often those that are omitted are of greater weight than those which are argued out laboriously and with infinite patience. Justice is blind, but the law must be Argus-eyed. You believe, Gabriel, that there must have been a struggle in my garden?"

"Such is now my belief," I replied.

"Such signs as you have brought before our notice," continued the doctor, "are to you an indication that the man who escaped must have met with severe treatment?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Therefore, that the struggle was a violent one?"

"Yes."

"And prolonged?"

"That is the feasible conclusion."

"Such a struggle could not have taken place without considerable disarrangement about the spot in which it occurred. On an even pavement you would not look for any displacement of the stones; the utmost you could hope to discover would be the scratches made by iron heels. But the path from the gate of my house to the back garden, and all the walking spaces in the garden itself, are formed of loose stones and gravel. No such struggle could take place there without conspicuous displacement of the materials of which the ground is composed. If it took place amongst the flowers, the beds would bear evidence. I observed no disorder in the flower beds. Did you?"

"No."

"Then did you observe such a disarrangement of the stones and gravel as I consider would be necessary evidence of the struggle in which you suppose these men to have been engaged?"

I was compelled to admit--but I admitted it grudgingly and reluctantly--that such a disarrangement had not come within my observation.

"That is partially destructive of your theory," pursued the doctor. "There is still something further of moment which I consider it my duty to say. You are a sound sleeper ordinarily, and last night you slept more soundly than usual. I, unfortunately, am a light sleeper, and it is really a fact that last night I slept more lightly than usual. I think, Gabriel, you were to some extent the cause of this. I am affected by changes in my domestic arrangements; during many pleasant weeks you have resided in our house, and last night was the first, for a long time past, that you slept away from us. It had an influence upon me; then, apart from your absence, I was thinking a great deal of you." (Here I observed the magistrate smile again, a fatherly benignant smile.) "As a rule I am awakened by the least noise--the dripping of water, the fall of an inconsiderable object, the mewing of a cat, the barking of a dog. Now, last night I was not disturbed, unusually wakeful as I was. The wonder is that I was not aroused by the boring of the hole in the shutter; the unfortunate wretch must have used his gimlet very softly and warily, and under any circumstances the sound produced by such a tool is of a light nature. But had any desperate struggle taken place in the garden it would have aroused me to a certainty, and I should have hastened down to ascertain the cause. Gabriel, no such struggle occurred."

"Then," said the magistrate, "how do you account for the injuries the man who escaped must have undoubtedly received?"

The words were barely uttered when we all started to our feet. There was a great scuffling outside, and cries and loud voices. The door was pushed open and half-a-dozen men rushed into the room, guarding one whose arms were bound by ropes. He was in a dreadful condition, and so weak that, without support, he could not have kept his feet. I recognised him instantly; he was the hump backed man I had seen in the Three Black Crows.

He lifted his eyes and they fell on the magistrate; from him they wandered to Doctor Louis; from him they wandered to me. I was gazing steadfastly and sternly upon him, and as his eyes met mine his head drooped to his breast and hung there, while a strong shuddering ran through him.

XXI.

The examination of the prisoner by the magistrate lasted but a very short time, for the reason that no replies of any kind could be obtained to the questions put to him. He maintained a dogged silence, and although the magistrate impressed upon him that this silence was in itself a strong proof of his guilt, and that if he had anything to say in his defence it would be to his advantage to say it at once, not a word could be extracted from him, and he was taken to his cell, instructions being given that he should not be unbound and that a strict watch should be kept over him. While the unsuccessful examination was proceeding I observed the man two or three times raise his eyes furtively to mine, or rather endeavour to raise them, for he could not, for the hundredth part of a second, meet my stern gaze, and each time he made the attempt it ended in his drooping his head with a shudder. On other occasions I observed his eyes wandering round the room in a wild, disordered way, and these proceedings, which to my mind were the result of a low, premeditated cunning, led me to the conclusion that he wished to convey the impression that he was not in his right senses, and therefore not entirely responsible for his crime. When the monster was taken away I spoke of this, and the magistrate fell in with my views, and said that the assumption of pretended insanity was not an uncommon trick on the part of criminals. I then asked him and Doctor Louis whether they would accompany me in a search for the weapon with which the dreadful deed was committed (for none had been found on the prisoner), and in a further examination of the ground the man had traversed after he had killed his comrade in guilt. Doctor Louis expressed his willingness, but the magistrate said he had certain duties to attend to which would occupy him half an hour or so, and that he would join us later on. So Doctor Louis and I departed alone to continue the investigation I had already commenced.

We began at the window at the back of the doctor's house, and I again propounded to Doctor Louis my theory of the course of events, to which he listened attentively, but was no more convinced than he had been before that a struggle had taken place.

"But," he said, "whether a struggle for life did or did not take place there is not the slightest doubt of the man's guilt, I have always viewed circumstantial evidence with the greatest suspicion, but in this instance I should have no hesitation, were I the monster's judge, to mete out to him the punishment for his crime."

Shortly afterwards we were joined by the magistrate who had news to communicate to us.

"I have had," he said, "another interview with the prisoner, and have succeeded in unlocking his tongue. I went to his cell, unaccompanied, and again questioned him. To my surprise he asked me if I was alone. I moved back a pace or two, having the idea that he had managed to loosen the ropes by which he was bound, and that he wished to know if I was alone for the purpose of attacking me. In a moment, however, the fear was dispelled, for I saw that his arms were tightly and closely bound to his side, and that it was out of his power to injure me. He repeated his question, and I answered that I was quite alone, and that his question was a foolish one, for he had the evidence of his senses to convince him. He shook his head at this, and said in a strange voice that the evidence of his senses was sufficient in the case of men and women, but not in the case of spirits and demons. I smiled inwardly at this--for it does not do for a magistrate to allow a prisoner from whom he wishes to extract evidence to detect any signs of levity in his judge--and I thought of the view you had presented to me that the man wished to convey an impression that he was a madman, in order to escape to some extent the consequences of the crime he had committed. 'Put spirits and demons,' I said to him, 'out of the question. If you have anything to say or confess, speak at once; and if you wish to convince yourself that there are no witnesses either in this cell--though that is plainly evident--or outside, here is the proof.' I threw open the door, and showed him that no one was listening to our speech. 'I cannot put spirits or demons out of the question,' he said, 'because I am haunted by one, who has brought me to this.' He looked down at his ropes and imprisoned limbs. 'Are you guilty or not guilty?' I asked. 'I am not guilty,' he replied; 'I did not kill him.' 'But he is murdered,' I said. 'Yes,' he replied, 'he is

murdered.' 'If you did not kill him,' I continued, 'who did?' What do you think he answered? 'A demon killed him,' he said, 'and would have killed me, if I had not fled and played him a trick.' I gazed at him in thought, wondering whether he had the slightest hope that he was imposing upon me by his lame attempt at being out of his senses. 'A demon?' I said questioningly. 'Yes, a demon,' he replied. 'But,' I said, and I admit that my tone was somewhat bantering, 'demons are more powerful than mortals.' 'That is where it is,' he said; 'that is why I am here.' 'You are a clumsy scoundrel,' I said, 'and I will prove it to you; then you may be induced to speak the truth--in which,' I added, 'lies your only hope of a mitigation of punishment. Not that I hold out to you any such hope; but if you can establish, when you are ready to confess, that what you did was done in self-defence, it will be a point in your favour.' 'I cannot confess,' he said, 'to a crime which I did not commit. I am a clumsy scoundrel perhaps, but not in the way you mean. Prove it to me if you can.' 'You say,' I began, 'that a demon killed your comrade.' 'He did,' persisted the prisoner. 'And,' I continued, 'that he would have killed you if you had not fled from him.' 'He would,' said the prisoner. 'But,' I said, 'demons are more powerful than men. Of what avail would have been your flight? Men can only walk or run; demons can fly. The demon you have invented could have easily overtaken you and finished you as you say he finished the man you murdered.' He was a little staggered at this, and I saw him pondering over it. 'It isn't for me,' he said presently, 'to pretend to know why he did not suspect the trick I played him; he could have killed me if he wanted. I have spoken the truth. I heard him pursuing me.' 'There again,' I said, wondering that there should be in the world men with such a low order of intelligence, 'you heard him pursuing you. Demons glide noiselessly along. It is impossible you could have heard this one. You will have to invent another story.' 'I have invented none,' he persisted doggedly, and repeated, 'I have spoken the truth.' As I could get nothing further out of him than a determined adherence to his ridiculous defence, I left him."

"Do you think," asked Doctor Louis, "that he has any, even the remotest belief in the story? Men sometimes delude themselves."

"I cannot believe it," replied the magistrate, "and yet I confess to being slightly puzzled. There was an air of sincerity about him which might be to his advantage had he to deal with judges who were ignorant of the cunning of criminals."

"Which means," said Doctor Louis, "that it is really not impossible that the man's mind is diseased."

"No," said the magistrate, in a positive tone, "I cannot for a moment admit it. A tale in which a spirit or a demon is the principal actor! In this age it is too absurd!"

At that moment I made a discovery; I drew from the midst of a bush a stick, one end of which was stained with blood. From its position it seemed as if it had been thrown hastily away; there had certainly been no attempt at concealment.

"Here is the weapon," I cried, "with which the deed was done!"

The magistrate took it immediately from my hand, and examined it.

"Here," I said, pointing downwards, "is the direct line of flight taken by the prisoner, and he must have flung the stick away in terror as he ran."

"It is an improvised weapon," said the magistrate, "cut but lately from a tree, and fashioned so as to fit the hand and be used with effect."

I, in my turn, then examined the weapon, and was struck by its resemblance to the branch I had myself cut the previous night during the watch I kept upon the ruffians. I spoke of the resemblance, and said that it looked to me as if it were the self-same stick I had shaped with my knife.

"Do you remember," asked the magistrate, "what you did with it after your suspicions were allayed?"

"No," I replied, "I have not the slightest remembrance what I did with it. I could not have carried it home with me, or I should have seen it this morning before I left my house. I have no doubt that, after my mind was at ease as to the intentions of the ruffians, I flung it aside into the woods, having no further use for it. When the men set out to perpetrate the robbery they must have stumbled upon the branch, and, appreciating the

pains I had bestowed upon it, took it with them. There appears to be no other solution to their possession of it."

"It is the only solution," said the magistrate.

"So that," I said with a sudden thrill of horror, "I am indirectly responsible for the direction of the tragedy, and should have been responsible had they used the weapon against those I love! It is terrible to think of."

Doctor Louis pressed my hand. "We have all happily been spared, Gabriel," he said. "It is only the guilty who have suffered."

We continued our search for some time, without meeting with any further evidence, and I spent the evening with Doctor Louis's family, and was deeply grateful that Providence had frustrated the villainous schemes of the wretches who had conspired against them. On this evening Lauretta and I seemed to be drawn closer to each other, and once, when I held her hand in mine for a moment or two (it was done unconsciously), and her father's eyes were upon us, I was satisfied that he did not deem it a breach of the obligation into which we had entered with respect to my love for his daughter. Indeed it was not possible that all manifestations of a love so profound and absorbing as mine should be successfully kept out of sight; it would have been contrary to nature.

I slept that night in Doctor Louis's house, and the next morning Lauretta and Lauretta's mother said that they had experienced a feeling of security because of my presence.

At noon I was on my way to the magistrate's office.

XXII.

My purpose was to obtain, by the magistrate's permission, an interview with the prisoner. His account of the man's sincere or pretended belief in spirits and demons had deeply interested me, and I wished to have some conversation with him respecting this particular adventure which had ended in murder. I obtained without difficulty the permission I sought. I asked if the prisoner had made any further admissions or confession, and the magistrate answered no, and that the man persisted in a sullen adherence to the tale he had invented in his own defence.

"I saw him this morning," the magistrate said, "and interrogated him with severity, to no effect. He continues to declare himself to be innocent, and reiterates his fable of the demon."

"Have you asked him," I inquired, "to give you an account of all that transpired within his knowledge from the moment he entered Nerac until the moment he was arrested?"

"No," said the magistrate, "it did not occur to me to demand of him so close a description of his movements; and I doubt whether I should have been able to drag it from him. The truth he will not tell, and his invention is not strong enough to go into minute details. He is conscious of this, conscious that I should trip him up again and again on minor points which would be fatal to him, and his cunning nature warns him not to thrust his head into the trap. He belongs to the lowest order of criminals."

My idea was to obtain from the prisoner just such a circumstantial account of his movements as I thought it likely the magistrate would have extracted from him; and I felt that I had the power to succeed where the magistrate had failed. This power I determined to use.

I was taken into the man's cell, and left there without a word. He was still bound; his brute face was even more brute and haggard than before, his hair was matted, his eyes had a look in them of mingled terror and ferocity. He spoke no word, but he raised his head and lowered it again when the door of the cell was closed behind me.

"What is your name?" I asked. But I had to repeat the question twice before he answered me.

"Pierre," he said.

"Why did you not reply to me at once?" But to this question, although I repeated it also twice, he made no response.

"It is useless," I said sternly, "to attempt evasion with me, or to think that I will be content with silence. I have come here to obtain a confession from you--a true confession, Pierre--and I will force it from you, if you do not give it willingly. Do you understand me? I will force it from you."

"I understand you," he said, keeping his face averted from me, "but I will not speak."

"Why?" I demanded.

"Because you know all; because you are only playing with me; because you have a design against me."

His words astonished me, and made me more determined to carry out my intention. He had made it clear to me that there was something hidden in his mind, and I was resolved to get at it.

"What design can I have against you," I said, "of which you need be afraid? You are in sufficient peril already, and there is no hope for you. Your life is forfeit. What worse danger can befall you? Soon you will be as dead as the man you murdered."

"I did not murder him," was the strange reply, "and you know it."

"Fool!" I exclaimed. "You are playing the same trick upon me that you played upon your judge. It was unsuccessful with him; it will be as unsuccessful with me. Answer me. What further danger can threaten you than the danger, the certain, positive danger, in which you now stand? You are doomed, Pierre."

"My body is, perhaps," he muttered, "but not my soul."

"Oh," I said, in a tone of contempt, "you believe in a soul."

"Yes," he replied, "do not you?"

"I? Yes. With reason, with intelligence. Not out of my fears, but out of my hopes."

"I have no hopes and no fears," he said. "I have done wrong, but not the wrong with which I am charged."

"Look at me, Pierre."

His response to this was to hide his head closer on his breast, to make an even stronger endeavour to avoid my glance.

"When I next command you," I said, "you will obey. About your soul? Believing that you possess one, what worse peril can threaten it than the pass to which you have brought it by your crime."

And still he doggedly repeated, "I have committed no crime."

"You fear me?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because you are here to tempt me, to ensnare me. I will not look at you."

I strode to his side, and with my strong hand on his shoulder, forced him to raise his head, forced him to look me straight in the face. His eyes wavered for a few moments, shifted as though they would escape my compelling power, and finally became fixed on mine. He had no power to resist me. The will in me was strong, and produced its effects on the weaker mind. Gradually what brilliancy there was in his eyes became dimmed, and drew but a reflected, shadowy light from mine. Thus we remained face to face for four or five minutes, and then I spoke.

"Relate to me," I said, "all that you know from the time you and the man who is dead conceived the idea of coming to Nerac up to the present moment. Conceal nothing. The truth, the bare, naked truth!"

"We were poor, both of us," Pierre commenced, "and had been poor all our lives. That would not have mattered had we been able to obtain meat and wine. But we could not. We were neither of us honest, and had been in prison more than once for theft. We were never innocent when we were

convicted, although we swore we were. I got tired of it; starvation is a poor game. I would have been contented with a little, and so would he, but we could not make sure of that little. Nothing else was left to us but to take what we wanted. The wild beasts do; why should not we? But we were too well known in our village, some sixty miles from Nerac, so, talking it over, we said we would come here and try our luck. We had heard of Doctor Louis, and that he was a rich man. He can spare what we want, we said; we will go and take. We had no idea of blood; we only wanted money, to buy meat and wine with. So we started, with nothing in our pockets. On the first day we had a slice of luck. We met a man and waylaid him, and took from him all the money he had in his pockets. It was not much, but enough to carry us to Nerac. No more; but we were satisfied. We did not hurt the man; a knock on the head did not take his senses from him, but brought him to them; so, being convinced, he gave us what he had, and we departed on our way. We were not fast walkers, and, besides, we did not know the straightest road to Nerac, so we were four days on the journey. When we entered the inn of the Three Black Crows we had just enough money left to pay for a bottle of red wine. We called for it, and sat drinking. While we were there a spirit entered in the shape of a man. This spirit, whom I did not then know to be a demon, sat talking with the landlord of the Three Black Crows. He looked towards the place where we were sitting, and I wondered whether he and the landlord were talking of us; I could not tell, because what they said did not reach my ears. He went away, and we went away, too, some time afterwards. We wanted another bottle of red wine, but the landlord would not give it to us without our paying for it, and we had no money; our pockets were bare. So out we went into the night. It was very dark. We had settled our plan. Before we entered the Three Black Crows we had found out Doctor Louis's house, and knew exactly how it was situated; there would be no difficulty in finding it later on, despite the darkness. We had decided not to make the attempt until at least two hours past midnight, but, for all that, when we left the inn we walked in the direction of the doctor's house. I do not know if we should have continued our way, because, although I saw nothing and heard nothing, I had a fancy that we were being followed; I couldn't say by

what, but the idea was in my mind. So, talking quietly together, he and I determined to turn back to some woods on the outskirts of Nerac which we had passed through before we reached the village, and there to sleep an hour or two till the time arrived to put our plan into execution. Back we turned, and as we went there came a sign to me. I don't know how; it was through the senses, for I don't remember hearing anything that I could not put down to the wind. My mate heard it too, and we stopped in fear. 'What was that?' my mate said. 'Are we being followed?' I said nothing. We stood quiet a long while, and heard nothing. Then my mate said, 'It was the wind;' and we went on till we came to the woods, which we entered. Down upon the ground we threw ourselves, and in a minute my mate was asleep. Not so I; but I pretended to be. Then came a Shadow that bent over us. I did not move; I even breathed regularly to put it off the scent. Presently it departed, and I opened my eyes; nothing was near us. Then, being tired with the long day's walk, and knowing that there was work before us which would be better done after a little rest, I fell asleep myself. We both slept, I can't say how long, but from the appearance of the night I judged till about the time we had resolved to do our work. I woke first, and awoke my mate, and off we set to the doctor's house. We reached it in less than an hour, and nothing disturbed us on the way. That made me think that I had been deceived, and that my senses had been playing tricks with me. I told my mate of my fears, and he laughed at me, and I laughed, too, glad to be relieved. We walked round the doctor's house, to decide where we should commence. The front of it faces the road, and we thought that too dangerous, so we made our way to the back, and, talking in whispers, settled to bore a hole through the shutters there. We were very quiet; no fear of our being heard. The hole being bored, it was easy to cut away wood enough to enable us to open the window and make our way into the house. We did not intend violence, that is, not more than was necessary for our safety. We had talked it over, and had decided that no blood was to be shed. Robbers we were, but not murderers. Our plan was to gag and tie up any one who interfered with us. My mate and I had had no quarrel; we were faithful partners; and I had no other thought than to remain true to him as he had no other thought than to remain true to me. Share and share

alike--that was what we both intended. So he worked away at the shutter, while I looked on. Suddenly, crack! A blow came, from the air it seemed, and down fell my mate, struck dead! He did not move; he did not speak; he died, unshriven. I looked down, dazed, when I heard a swishing sound in the air behind me, as though a great club was making a circle and about to fall upon my head. It was all in a minute, and I turned and saw the demon. Dark as it was, I saw him. I slanted my body aside, and the club, instead of falling upon my head, fell upon my shoulder. I ran for my life, and down came another blow, on my head this time, but it did not kill me. I raced like a madman, tearing at the bushes, and the demon after me. I was struck again and again, but not killed. Wounded and bleeding, I continued my flight, till flat I fell like a log. Not because all my strength was gone; no, there was still a little left; but I showed myself more cunning than the demon, for down I went as if I was dead, and he left me, thinking me so. Then, when he was gone, I opened my eyes, and managed to drag myself away to the place where I was found yesterday more dead than alive. I did not kill my mate; I never raised my hand against him. What I have said is the truth, as I hope for mercy in the next world, if I don't get it in this!"

This was the incredible story related to me by the villain who had threatened the life of the woman I loved; for he did not deceive me; murder was in his heart, and his low cunning only served to show him in a blacker light. However, I did not leave him immediately. I released him from the spell I had cast upon him, and he stood before me, shaking and trembling, with a look in his eyes as though he had just been awakened from sleep.

"What have I said?" he muttered.

"You have confessed all," I said, meeting cunning with cunning.

"All!" he muttered. "What do you mean?"

Then I told him that he had made a full confession of his crime, and in the telling expounded my own theory, as if it had come from his lips, of the thoughts which led to it, and of its final committal--my hope being that he would even now admit that he was the murderer. But he vehemently defended himself.

"If I have said as much," he said, "it is you who have driven me to it, and it is you who have come here to set a snare for my destruction. But it is not possible, because what you have told me is false from beginning to end."

So I left him, amazed at his dogged, determined obstinacy, which I knew would not avail him. He was doomed, and justly doomed.

XXIII.

I have been reading over the record I have written of my life, which has been made with care and a strict adherence to the truth. I am at the present hour sitting alone in the house I have taken and furnished, and to which I hope shortly to bring my beloved Lauretta as my wife. The writing of this record from time to time has grown into a kind of habit with me, and there are occasions in which I have been greatly interested in it myself. Never until this night have I read the record from beginning to end, and I have come to a resolution to discontinue it. My reason is a sufficient one, and as it concerns no man else, no man can dispute my right to make it.

My resolution is, after to-morrow, to allow my new life, soon to commence, to flow on uninterruptedly without burdening myself with the labour of putting into writing the happy experiences awaiting me. I shall be no longer alone; Lauretta will be by my side; I should begrudge the hours which deprived me of her society.

Another thing. I must have no secrets from her; and much that here is recorded should properly be read by no eye than mine. Lauretta's nature is so gentle, her soul so pure, that it would distress her to read these pages. This shall not be. I recognise a certain morbid vein in myself which the continuing of this record might magnify into a disease. It presents itself to me in the light of guarding myself against myself, by adopting wise measures to foster cheerfulness. That my nature is more melancholy than cheerful is doubtless to be ascribed to the circumstances of my child-life, which was entirely devoid of light and gaiety. This must not be in the future; I have a battle to fight, and I shall conquer because Lauretta's happiness is on the issue.

It will, however, be as well to make the record complete in a certain sense, and I shall therefore take note of certain things which have occurred since my conversation with Pierre in his cell. That done, I shall put these papers aside in a secret place, and shall endeavour to forget them. My first thought was to destroy the record, but I was influenced in the contrary direction by the fact that my first meeting with Lauretta and the growth of my love for her are described in it. First impressions jotted down at the time of their

occurrence have a freshness about them which can never be imparted by the aid of memory, and it may afford me pleasure in the future to live over again, through these pages, the sweet days of my early intimacy with my beloved girl. Then there is the strange story of Kristel and Silvain, which undoubtedly is worth preserving.

First, to get rid of the miserable affair of the attempt to rob Doctor Louis's house. Pierre was tried and convicted, and has paid the penalty of his crime. His belief in the possession of a soul could not, after all, have had in it the spirit of sincerity; it must have been vaunted merely in pursuance of his cunning endeavours to escape his just punishment; otherwise he would have confessed before he died. Father Daniel, the good priest, did all he could to bring the man to repentance, but to the last he insisted that he was innocent. It was strange to me to hear Father Daniel express himself sympathetically towards the criminal.

"He laboured, up to the supreme moment," said the good priest, in a compassionate tone, "under the singular hallucination that he was going before his Maker guiltless of the shedding of blood. So fervent and apparently sincere were his protestations that I could not help being shaken in my belief that he was guilty."

"Then you believe in demons?" I remarked, amazed at this weakness.

"Not in the sense," said Father Daniel, "that the unhappy man would have had me believe. Reason rejects his story as something altogether too incredulous; and yet I pity him."

I did not prolong the discussion with the good priest; it would have been useless, and, to Father Daniel, painful. We looked at the matter from widely different standpoints. Intolerance warps the judgment; no less does such a life as Father Daniel has lived, for ever seeking to find excuses for error and crime, for ever seeking to palliate a man's misdeeds. Sweetness of disposition, carried to extremes, may degenerate into positive mental feebleness; to my mind this is the case with Father Daniel. He is not the kind who, in serious matters, can be depended upon for a just estimate of human affairs.

Eric and Emilius, after a longer delay than Doctor Louis anticipated, have taken up their residence in Nerac. They paid two short visits to the village, and I was in hopes each time upon their departure that they had relinquished their intention of living in Nerac. I did not give expression to my wish, for I knew it was not shared by any member of Doctor Louis's family.

It is useless to disguise that I dislike them, and that there exists between us a certain antipathy. To be just, this appears to be more on my side than on theirs, and it is not in my disfavour that the feelings I entertain are nearer the surface. Doctor Louis and the ladies entertain a high opinion of them; I do not; and I have already some reason for looking upon them with a suspicious eye. This reason I will presently explain.

When we were first introduced it was natural that I should regard them with interest, an interest which sprang from the story of their father's fateful life. They bear a wonderful resemblance to each other they are both fair, with tawny beards, which it appears to me they take a pride in shaping and trimming alike; their eyes are blue, and they are of exactly the same height. Undoubtedly handsome men, having in that respect the advantage of me, who, in point of attractive looks, cannot compare with them. They seem to be devotedly attached to each other, but this may or may not be. So were Silvain and Kristel until a woman stepped between them and changed their love to hate. Before I came into personal relationship with Eric and Emilius I made up my mind to distrust appearances and to seek for evidence upon which to form an independent judgment. Some such evidence has already come to me, and I shall secretly follow it up.

They are on terms of the most affectionate intimacy with Doctor Louis and his family, and both Laurretta and Laurretta's mother take pleasure in their society; Doctor Louis, also, in a lesser degree. Women are always more effusive than men.

They are not aware of the relations which bind me to the village. That they may have some suspicion of my feelings for Laurretta is more than probable, for I have seen them look from her to me and then at each other,

and I have interpreted these looks. It is as if they said, "Why is this stranger here? He is usurping our place." I have begged Doctor Louis to allow me to speak openly to Lauretta, and he has consented to shorten the period of silence to which I was pledged. I have his permission to declare my love to his daughter to-morrow. There are no doubts in my mind that she will accept me; but there are doubts that if I left it too late there would be danger that her love for me would be weakened. Yes, although it is torture to me to admit it I cannot rid myself of this impression. How would this be effected and by whom? By these brothers, Eric and Emilius, and by means of misrepresentations to my injury. I have no positive data to go upon, but I am convinced that they have an aversion towards me, and that they are in their hearts jealous of me. The doctor is blind to their true character; he believes them to be generous and noble-minded, men of rectitude and high principle. They are not so. I have the evidence of my senses in proof of it.

So much have I been disturbed and unhinged by my feelings towards these brothers--feelings which I have but imperfectly expressed--that latterly I have frequently been unable to sleep. Impossible to lie abed and toss about for hours in an agony of unrest; therefore I chose the lesser evil, and resumed the nocturnal wanderings which was my habit in Rosemullion before the death of my parents. These nightly rambles have been taken in secret, as in the days of my boyhood, and I mused and spoke aloud as was my custom during that period of my life. But I had new objects to occupy me now--the home in which I hoped to enjoy a heaven of happiness, with Lauretta its guiding star, and all the bright anticipations of the future. I strove to confine myself to these dreams, which filled my soul with joy, but there came to me always the figures of Eric and Emilius, dark shadows to threaten my promised happiness.

Last week it was, on a night in which I felt that sleep would not be mine if I sought my couch; therefore, earlier than usual--it was barely eleven o'clock--I left the house, and went into the woods. Martin Hartog and his fair daughter were in the habit of retiring early and rising with the sun, and I stole quietly away unobserved. At twelve o'clock I turned homewards, and when I was about a hundred yards from my house I was surprised to hear

a low murmur of voices within a short distance of me. Since the night on which I visited the Three Black Crows and saw the two strangers there who had come to Nerac with evil intent, I had become very watchful, and now these voices speaking at such an untimely hour thoroughly aroused me. I stepped quietly in their direction, so quietly that I knew I could not be heard, and presently I saw standing at a distance of ten or twelve yards the figures of a man and a woman. The man was Emilius, the woman Martin Hartog's daughter.

Although I had heard their voices before I reached the spot upon which I stood when I recognised their forms, I could not even now determine what they said, they spoke in such low tones. So I stood still and watched them and kept myself from their sight. I may say honestly that I should not have been guilty of the meanness had it not been that I entertain an unconquerable aversion against Eric and Emilius. I was sorry to see Martin Hartog's daughter holding a secret interview with a man at midnight, for the girl had inspired me with a respect of which I now knew she was unworthy; but I cannot aver that I was sorry to see Emilius in such a position, for it was an index to his character and a justification of the unfavourable opinion I had formed of him and Eric. Alike as they were in physical presentment, I had no doubt that their moral natures bore the same kind of resemblance. Libertines both of them, ready for any low intrigue, and holding in light regard a woman's good name and fame. Truly the picture before me showed clearly the stuff of which these brothers are made. If they hold one woman's good name so lightly, they hold all women so. Fit associates, indeed, for a family so pure and stainless as Doctor Louis's!

This was no chance meeting--how was that possible at such an hour? It was premeditated. Theirs was no new acquaintanceship; it must have lasted already some time. The very secrecy of the interview was in itself a condemnation.

Should I make Doctor Louis acquainted with the true character of the brothers who held so high a place in his esteem? This was the question that occurred to me as I gazed upon Emilius and Martin Hartog's daughter, and

I soon answered it in the negative. Doctor Louis was a man of settled convictions, hard to convince, hard to turn. His first impulse, upon which he would act, would be to go straight to Emilius, and enlighten him upon the discovery I had made. And then? Why, then, Emilius would invent some tale which it would not be hard to believe, and make light of a matter I deemed so serious. I should be placed in the position of an eavesdropper, as a man setting sly watches upon others to whom, from causeless grounds, I had taken a dislike. I should be at a disadvantage. Whatever the result one thing was certain--that I was a person capable not only of unreasonable antipathies but of small meannesses to which a gentleman would not descend. The love which Doctor Louis bore to Silvain, and which he had transferred to Silvain's children, was not to be easily turned; and at the best I should be introducing doubts into his mind which would reflect upon myself because of the part of spy I had played. No; I decided for the present at least, to keep the knowledge to myself.

As to Martin Hartog, though I could not help feeling pity for him, it was for him, not me, to look after his daughter. From a general point of view these affairs were common enough.

I seemed to see now in a clearer light the kind of man Silvain was--one who would set himself deliberately to deceive where most he was trusted. Honour, fair dealing, brotherly love, were as nought in his eyes where a woman was concerned, and he had transmitted these qualities to Eric and Emilius. My sympathy for Kristel was deepened by what I was gazing on; more than ever was I convinced of the justice of the revenge he took upon the brother who had betrayed him.

These were the thoughts which passed through my mind while Emilius and Martin Hartog's daughter stood conversing. Presently they strolled towards me, and I shrank back in fear of being discovered. This involuntary action on my part, being an accentuation of the meanness of which I was guilty, confirmed me in the resolution at which I had arrived to say nothing of my discovery to Doctor Louis.

They passed me in silence, walking in the direction of my house. I did not follow them, and did not return home for another hour.

XXIV.

How shall I describe the occurrences of this day, the most memorable and eventful in my life? A new life is opening for me. I am overwhelmed at the happiness which is within my grasp. As I walked home from Doctor Louis's house through the darkness a spirit walked by my side, illumining the gloom and filling my heart with gladness.

At one o'clock I presented myself at Doctor Louis's house. He met me at the door, expecting me, and asked me to come with him to a little room he uses as a study. I followed him in silence. His face was grave, and but for its kindly expression I should have feared it was his intention to revoke the permission he had given me to speak to his daughter on this day of the deep, the inextinguishable love I bear for her. He motioned me to a chair, and I seated myself and waited for him to speak.

"This hour," he said, "is to me most solemn."

"And to me, sir," I responded.

"It should be," he said, "to you perhaps, more than to me; but we are inclined ever to take the selfish view. I have been awake very nearly the whole of the night, and so has my wife. Our conversation--well, you can guess the object of it."

"Lauretta, sir."

"Yes, Lauretta, our only child, whom you are about to take from us." I trembled with joy, his words betokening a certainty that Lauretta loved me, an assurance I had yet to receive from her own sweet lips. "My wife and I," he continued, "have been living over again the life of our dear one, and the perfect happiness we have drawn from her. I am not ashamed to say that we have committed some weaknesses during these last few hours, weaknesses springing from our affection for our Home Rose. In the future some such experience may be yours, and then you will know--which now is hidden from you--what parents feel who are asked to give their one ewe lamb into the care of a stranger." I started. "There is no reason for alarm, Gabriel," he said, "because I have used a true word. Until a few short months ago you were really a stranger to us."

"That has not been against me, sir," I said, "and is not, I trust."

"There is no such thought in my mind, Gabriel. There is nothing against you except--except," he repeated, with a little pitiful smile, "that you are about to take from us our most precious possession. Until to-day our dear child was wholly and solely ours; and not only herself, but her past was ours, her past, which has been to us a garden of joy. Henceforth her heart will be divided, and you will have the larger share. That is a great deal to think of, and we have thought of it, my wife and I, and talked of it nearly all the night. Certain treasures," he said, and again the pitiful smile came on his lips, "which in the eyes of other men and women are valueless, still are ours." He opened a drawer, and gazed with loving eyes upon its contents. "Such as a little pair of shoes, a flower or two, a lock of her bright hair."

"May I see it, sir?" I asked, profoundly touched by the loving accents of his voice.

"Surely," he replied, and he passed over to me a lock of golden hair, which I pressed to my lips. "The little head was once covered with these golden curls, and to us, her parents, they were as holy as they would have been on the head of an angel. She was all that to us, Gabriel. It is within the scope of human love to lift one's thoughts to heaven and God; it is within its scope to make one truly fit for the life to come. All things are not of the world worldly; it is a grievous error to think so, and only sceptics can so believe. In the kiss of baby lips, in the touch of little hands, in the myriad sweet ways of childhood, lie the breath of a pure religion which God receives because of its power to sanctify the lowest as well as the highest of human lives. It is good to think of that, and to feel that, in the holiest forms of humanity, the poor stand as high as the rich." He paused a while before he continued. "Gabriel, it is an idle phrase for a father holding the position towards you which I do at the present moment, to say he has no fears for the happiness of his only child."

"If you have any, sir," I said, "question me, and let me endeavour to set your mind at ease. In one respect I can do so with solemn earnestness. If it be my happy lot to win your daughter, her welfare, her honour, her peace of mind, shall be the care of my life. These assured, happiness should

follow. I love Laretta with a pure heart; no other woman has ever possessed my love; to no other woman have I been drawn; nor is it possible that I could be. She is to me part of my spiritual life. I am not as other men, in the ordinary acceptation. In my childhood's life there was but little joy, and the common pleasures of childhood were not mine. From almost my earliest remembrances there was but little light in my parents' house, and in looking back upon it I can scarcely call it a home. The fault was not mine, as you will admit. May I claim some small merit--not of my own purposed earning, but because it was in me, for which I may have reason to be grateful--from the fact that the circumstances of my early life did not corrupt me, did not drive me to a searching for low pleasures, and did not debase me? It seemed to me, sir, that I was ever seeking for something in the heights and not in the depths. Books and study were my comforters, and I derived real pleasures from them. They served to satisfy a want, and, although I contracted a melancholy mood, I was not unhappy. I know that this mood is in me, but when I think of Laretta it is dispelled. I seem to hear the singing of birds, to see flowers around me, to bathe in sunshine. Perhaps it springs from the fervour of my love for her; but a kind of belief is mine that I have been drawn hither to her, that my way of life was measured to her heart. What more can I say, sir?"

"You have said much," said Doctor Louis, "to comfort and assure me, and have, without being asked, answered questions which were in my mind. Do you remember a conversation you had with my wife in the first days of your convalescence, commenced I think by you in saying that the happiest dream of your life was drawing to a close?"

"I was thinking of Laretta. Even in those early days I felt that I loved her."

"I understand that now," said Doctor Louis. "My wife replied that life must not be dreamt away, that it has duties."

"I remember the conversation well, sir."

"My wife said that one's ease and pleasures are rewards, only enjoyable when they have been worthily earned; and when you asked, 'Earned in what way?' she answered, 'In accomplishing one's work in the world.'"

"Yes, sir, her words come back to me."

"There is something more," said Doctor Louis, with sad sweetness, "which I should not recall did I not hold duty before me as my chief beacon. Inclination and selfish desire must often be sacrificed for it. You will understand how sadly significant this is to me when I recall what followed. Though, to be sure," he added, in a slightly gayer tone, "we could visit you and our daughter, wherever your abode happened to be. Continuing your conversation with my wife, you said, 'How to discover what one's work really is, and where it should be properly performed?' My wife answered, 'In one's native land.'"

"Those were the words we spoke to one another, sir."

"It was my wife who recalled them to me, and I wish you--in the event of your hopes being realised--to bear them in mind. It would be painful to me to see you lead an idle life, and it would be injurious to you. This quiet village opens out no opportunities to you; it is too narrow, too confined. I have found my place here as an active worker, but I doubt if you would do so."

"There is time to think of it, sir."

"Plenty of time. And now, if you like, we will join my wife and daughter."

"Have you said anything to Lauretta, sir?"

"No. I thought it best, and so did her mother, that her heart should be left to speak for itself."

Lauretta's mother received me with tender, wistful solicitude, and I observed nothing in Lauretta to denote that she had been prepared for the declaration I had come to make. After lunch I proposed to Lauretta to go out into the garden, and she turned to her mother and asked if she would accompany us.

"No, my child," said the mother, "I have things in the house to attend to."

So Lauretta and I went out alone.

It was a lovely day, and Lauretta had thrown a light lace scarf over her head. She was in gay spirits, not boisterous, for she is ever gentle, and she

endeavoured to entertain me with innocent prattle, to which I found it difficult to respond. In a little while this forced itself upon her observation, and she asked me if I was not well.

"I am quite well, Laretta," I replied.

"Then something has annoyed you," she said.

No, I answered, nothing had annoyed me.

"But there is something," she said.

"Yes," I said, "there is something."

"Tell me," she said.

We were standing by a rosebush, and I plucked one absently, and absently plucked the leaves. She looked at me in silence for a moment or two and said, "This is the first time I have ever seen you destroy a flower."

"I was not thinking of it," I said; and was about to throw it away when an impulse, born purely of love for what was graceful and sweet, restrained me, and I put it into my pocket. In this the most impressive epoch in my life no sentiment but that of tenderness could hold a place in my heart and mind.

"Well?" she said, still not suspecting. "Tell me."

"Laretta," I said, taking her hand, which she left willingly in mine, "will you listen to the story of my life?"

"You have already told me much," she said.

"You have heard only a part," I said, and I gently urged her to a seat. "I wish you to know all; I wish you to know me as I really am."

"I know you as you really are," she said, and then a faint colour came to her cheeks, and she trembled slightly, seeing a new meaning in my earnest glances.

"May I tell you? May I sit beside you?"

"Yes," she said, and gently withdrew her hand from mine.

I told her all, withholding only from her those mysterious promptings of my lonely hours which I knew would distress her, and to which I was convinced, with her as my companion through life, there would be for ever an end. Of even those promptings I gave her some insight, but so toned down--for her sweet sake, not for mine--as to excite only her sympathy. Apart from this, I was at sincere pains that she should see my life as it had really been, a life stripped of the joys of childhood; a life stripped of the light of home; a life dependent upon itself for comfort and support. Then, unconsciously, and out of the suffering of my soul--for as I spoke it seemed to me that a cruel wrong had been perpetrated upon me in the past--I contrasted the young life I had been condemned to live with that of a child who was blessed with parents whose hearts were animated by a love the evidences of which would endure all through his after life as a sweet and purifying influence. The tears ran down her cheeks as I dwelt upon this part of my story. Then I spoke of the happy chance which had conducted me to her home, and of the happiness I had experienced in my association with her and hers.

"Whatever fate may be mine," I said, "I shall never reflect upon these experiences, I shall never think of your dear parents, without gratitude and affection. Laretta, it is with their permission I am here now by your side. It is with their permission that I am opening my heart to you. They know we are here together. I love you, Laretta, and if you will bless me with your love, and place your hand in mine, all my life shall be devoted to your happiness. You can bring a blessing into my days; I will strive to bring a blessing into yours."

My arm stole round her waist; her head drooped to my shoulder, so that her face was hidden from my ardent gaze; the hand I clasped was not withdrawn.

"Laretta," I whispered, "say 'I love you, Gabriel.'"

"I love you, Gabriel," she whispered; and heaven itself opened out to me.

Half an hour later we went in to her mother, and the noble woman held out her arms to her daughter. As the maiden nestled to her breast, she said,

holding out a hand to me, which I reverently kissed, "God in His mercy keep guard over you! His blessing be upon you both!"

These are my last written words in the record I have kept. From this day I commence a new life.

BOOK THE SECOND.

IN WHICH THE SECRET OF THE INHERITANCE TRANSMITTED TO GABRIEL CAREW IS REVEALED IN A SERIES OF LETTERS FROM ABRAHAM SANDIVAL, ESQ., ENGLAND, TO HIS FRIEND, MAXIMILIAN GALLENGA, ESQ., CONTRA COSTA CO., CALIFORNIA.

I.

My Dear Max,--For many months past you have complained that I have been extremely reticent upon domestic matters, and that I have said little or nothing concerning my son Reginald, who, since you quitted the centres of European civilisation to bury yourself in a sparsely populated Paradise, has grown from childhood to manhood. A ripe manhood, my dear Max, such as I, his father, approve of, and to the future development of which, now that a grave and strange crisis in his life has come to a happy ending, I look forward with loving interest. It is, I know, your affection for Reginald that causes you to be anxious for news of him. Well do I remember when you informed me of your fixed resolution to seek not only new scenes but new modes of life, how earnestly you strove to prevail upon me to allow him to accompany you.

"He is young and plastic," you said, "and I can train him to happiness. The fewer the wants, the more contented the lot of man."

You wished to educate Reginald according to the primitive views to which you had become so strongly wedded, and you did your best to convert me to them, saying, I remember, that I should doubtless suffer in parting with Reginald, but that it was a father's duty to make sacrifices for his children. You did not succeed. My belief was, and is, that man is born to progress, and that to go back into primitiveness, to commence again, as it were, the history of the world and mankind, as though we had been living in error through all the centuries, is a folly. I did not apply this criticism to you; I regarded your new departure not as a folly, but as a mistake. I doubt even now whether it has made you happier than you were, and I fancy I detect here and there in your letters a touch of sadness and regret--of which perhaps you are unconscious--that you should have cut yourself away

from the busy life of multitudes of people. However, it is not my purpose now to enlarge upon this theme. The history I am about to relate is personal to myself and to Reginald, whose destiny it has been to come into close contact with a family, the head of which, Gabriel Carew, affords a psychological study as strange probably as was ever presented to the judgment of mankind.

There are various reasons for my undertaking a task which will occupy a great deal of time and entail considerable labour. The labour will be interesting to me, and its products no less interesting to you, who were always fond of the mystical. I have leisure to apply myself to it. Reginald is not at present with me; he has left me for a few weeks upon a mission of sunshine. This will sound enigmatical to you, but you must content yourself with the gradual and intelligible unfolding of the wonderful story I am about to narrate. Like a skilful narrator I shall not weaken the interest by giving information and presenting pictures to you in the wrong places. The history is one which it is my opinion should not be lost to the world; its phases are so remarkable that it will open up a field of inquiry which may not be without profitable results to those who study psychological mysteries. A few years hence I should not be able to recall events in their logical order; I therefore do so while I possess the power and while my memory is clear with respect to them.

You will soon discover that neither I nor Reginald is the principal character in this drama of life. That position is occupied by Mr. Gabriel Carew, the owner of an estate in the county of Kent, known as Rosemullion.

My labours will be thrown away unless you are prepared to read what I shall write with unquestioning faith. I shall set down nothing but the truth, and you must accept it without a thought of casting doubt upon it. That you will wonder and be amazed is certain; it would, indeed, be strange otherwise; for in all your varied experiences (you led a busy and eventful life before you left us) you met with none so singular and weird as the events which I am about to bring to your knowledge. You must accept also--as the best and most suitable form through which you will be made familiar not only with the personality of Gabriel Carew, but with the

mysterious incidents of his life--the methods I shall adopt in the unfolding of my narrative. They are such as are frequently adopted with success by writers of fiction, and as my material is fact, I am justified in pressing it into my service. I am aware that objection may be taken to it on the ground that I shall be presenting you with conversations between persons of which I was not a witness, but I do not see in what other way I could offer you an intelligent and intelligible account of the circumstances of the story. All that I can therefore do is to promise that I will keep a strict curb upon my imagination and will not allow it to encroach upon the domains of truth. With this necessary prelude I devote myself to my task.

II.

Before, however, myself commencing the work there is something essential for you to do. Accompanying my own manuscript is a packet, carefully sealed and secured, on the outer sheet of which is written, "Not to be disturbed or opened until instructions to do so are given by Abraham Sandival to his friend Maximilian Gallenofa." The precaution is sufficient to whet any man's curiosity, but is not taken to that end. It is simply in pursuance of the plan I have designed, by which you will become possessed of all the details and particulars for the proper understanding of what I shall impart to you. The packet, my dear Max, is neither more nor less than a life record made by Gabriel Carew himself up to within a few months of his marriage, which took place twenty years ago in the village of Nerac. The lady Gabriel Carew married was the daughter of Doctor Louis, a gentleman of rare acquirements, and distinguished both for his learning and benevolence. There is no evidence in the record as to whether its recital was spread over a number of years, or was begun and finished within a few months; but that matters little. It bears the impress of absolute truth and candour, and apart from its startling revelations you will recognise in it a picturesqueness of description hardly to be expected from one who had not made a study of literature. Its perusal will perplexedly stir your mind, and in the feelings it will excite towards Gabriel Carew there will most likely be an element of pity, the reason for which you will find it difficult to explain. "Season your admiration for a while;" before I am at the end of my task the riddle will be solved.

As I pen these words I can realise your perplexity during your perusal of the record as to the manner in which my son Reginald came be associated with so strange a man as the writer. But this is a world of mystery, and we can never hope to find a key to its spiritual workings. With respect to this particular mystery nothing shall be hidden from you. You will learn how I came to be mixed up in it; you will learn how vitally interwoven it threatened to be in Reginald's life; you will learn how Gabriel Carew's manuscript fell into my hands; and the mystery of his life will be revealed to you.

Now, my dear Max, you can unfasten the packet, and read the record.

III.

I assume that you are now familiar with the story of Gabriel Carew's life up to the point, or within a few months, of his marriage with Lauretta, and that you have formed some opinion of the different persons with whom he came in contact in Nerac. Outside Nerac there was only one person who can be said to have been interested in his fate; this was his mother's nurse, Mrs. Fortress, and you must be deeply impressed by the part she played in the youthful life of Gabriel Carew. Of her I shall have to speak in due course.

I transport you in fancy to Nerac, my dear Max, where I have been not very long ago, and where I conversed with old people who to this day remember Gabriel Carew and his sweet wife Lauretta, whom he brought with him to England some little time after their marriage. It is not likely that the incidents in connection with Gabriel Carew and his wife will be forgotten during this generation or the next in that loveliest of villages.

When you laid aside Carew's manuscript he had received the sanction of Lauretta's mother to his engagement with the sweet maid, and the good woman had given her children her blessing. Thereafter Gabriel Carew wrote: "These are my last written words in the record I have kept. From this day I commence a new life." He kept his word with respect to his resolve not to add another word to the record. He sealed it up and deposited it in his desk; and it is my belief that from that day he never read a line of its contents.

We are, then, my dear Max, in Nerac, you and I in spirit, in the holiday time of the open courtship of Gabriel Carew and Lauretta. Carew is occupying the house of which it was his intention to make Lauretta the mistress, and there are residing in it, besides the ordinary servants, Martin Hartog, the gardener, and his daughter, with whom, from Carew's record, Emilius was supposed to be carrying on an intrigue of a secret and discreditable nature. It is evident, from the manner in which Carew referred to it, that he considered it dishonourable. The name of this girl was Patricia.

There remain to be mentioned, as characters in the drama then being played, Doctor Louis, Eric, and Father Daniel.

The crimes of the two ruffians who had attempted to enter Doctor Louis's house remained for long fresh in the memories of the villagers. They were both dead, one murdered, the other executed for a deed of which only one person in Nerac had an uneasy sense of his innocence--Father Daniel. The good priest, having received from the unfortunate man a full account of his life from childhood, journeyed shortly afterwards to the village in which he had been born and was best known, for the purpose of making inquiries into its truth. He found it verified in every particular, and he learnt, moreover, that although the hunchback had been frequently in trouble, it was rather from sheer wretchedness and poverty than from any natural brutality of disposition that he had drifted into crime. It stood to his credit that Father Daniel could trace to him no acts of cruel violence; indeed, the priest succeeded in bringing to light two or three circumstances in the hunchback's career which spoke well for his humanity, one of them being that he was kind to his bedridden mother. Father Daniel returned to Nerac much shaken by the reflection that in this man's case justice had been in error. But if this were so, if the hunchback were innocent, upon whom to fix the guilt? A sadness weighed upon the good priest's heart as he went about his daily duties, and gazed upon his flock with an awful suspicion in his mind that there was a murderer among them, for whose crime an innocent man had been executed.

Gabriel Carew was happy. The gloom of his early life, which threatened to cast dark shadows over all his days, seemed banished for ever. He was liked and respected in the village in which he had found his happiness; his charities caused men and women to hold him in something like affectionate regard; he was Father Daniel's friend, and no case of suffering or poverty was mentioned to him which he was not ready to relieve; in Doctor Louis's home he held an honoured place; and he was loved by a good and pure woman, who had consented to link her fate with his. Surely in this prospect there was nothing that could be productive of aught but good.

The sweetness and harmony of the time, however, were soon to be disturbed. After a few weeks of happiness, Gabriel Carew began to be troubled. In his heart he had no love for the twin brothers, Eric and Emilius; he believed them to be light-minded and unscrupulous, nay, more, he believed them to be treacherous in their dealings with both men and women. These evil qualities, he had decided with himself, they had inherited from their father, Silvain, whose conduct towards his unhappy brother Kristel had excited Gabriel Carew's strong abhorrence. As is shown in the comments he makes in his record, all his sympathy was with Kristel, and he had contracted a passionate antipathy against Silvain, whom he believed to be guilty of the blackest treachery in his dealings with Avicia. This antipathy he now transferred to Silvain's sons, Eric and Emilius, and they needed to be angels, not men, to overcome it.

Not that they tried to win Carew's good opinion. Although his feelings for them were not openly expressed, they made themselves felt in the consciousness of these twin brothers, who instinctively recognised that Gabriel Carew was their enemy. Therefore they held off from him, and repaid him quietly in kind. But this was a matter solely and entirely between themselves and known only to themselves. The three men knew what deep pain and grief it would cause not only Doctor Louis and his wife, but the gentle Lauretta, to learn that they were in enmity with each other, and one and all were animated by the same desire to keep this antagonism from the knowledge of the family. This was, indeed, a tacit understanding between them, and it was so thoroughly carried out that no member of Doctor Louis's family suspected it; and neither was it suspected in the village. To all outward appearance Gabriel Carew and Eric and Emilius were friends.

It was not the brothers but Carew who, in the first instance, was to blame. He was the originator and the creator of the trouble, for it is scarcely to be doubted that had he held out the hand of a frank friendship to them, they would have accepted it, even though their acceptance needed some sacrifice on their parts. The reason for this qualification will be apparent to you later on in the story, and you will then also understand why I do not

reveal certain circumstances respecting the affection of Eric and Emilius for Martin Hartog's daughter, Patricia, and for the female members of the family of Doctor Louis. It would be anticipating events. I am relating the story in the order in which it progressed, and, so far as my knowledge of it goes, according to the sequence of time.

Certainly the dominant cause of Gabriel Carew's hatred for the brothers sprang from his jealousy of them with respect to Lauretta. They and she had been friends from childhood, and they were regarded by Doctor Louis and his wife as members of their family. This in itself was sufficient to inflame so exacting a lover as Carew. He interpreted every innocent little familiarity to their disadvantage, and magnified trifles inordinately. They saw his sufferings and were, perhaps, somewhat scornful of them. He had already shown them how deep was his hatred of them, and they not unnaturally resented it. After all, he was a stranger in Nerac, a come-by-chance visitor, who had usurped the place which might have been occupied by one of them had the winds been fair. Instead of being overbearing and arrogant he should have been gracious and conciliating. It was undoubtedly his duty to be courteous and mannerly from the first day of their acquaintance; instead of which he had, before he saw them, contracted a dislike for them which he had allowed to swell to monstrous and unjustifiable proportions.

Gabriel Carew, however, justified himself to himself, and it may be at once conceded that he had grounds for his feelings which were to him--and would likely have been to some other men--sufficient. These may now be set forth.

When a lover's suspicious and jealous nature is aroused it does not from that moment sleep. There is no rest, no repose for it. If it require opportunities for confirmation or for the infliction of self-suffering, it is never difficult to find them. Imagination steps in and supplies the place of fact. Every hour is a torture; every innocent look and smile is brooded over in secret. A most prolific, unreasonable, and cruel breeder of shadows is jealousy, and the evil of it is that it breeds in secret.

Gabriel Carew set himself to watch, and from the keen observance of a nature so thorough and intense as his nothing could escape. He was an unseen witness of other interviews between Patricia Hartog and Emilius; and not only of interviews between her and Emilius but between her and Eric. He formed his conclusions. The brothers were playing false to each other, and the girl was playing false with both. This was of little account; he had no more than a passing interest in Patricia, and although at one time he had some kind of intention of informing Martin Hartog of these secret interviews, and placing the father on his guard--for the gardener seemed to be quite unaware that an intrigue was going on--he relinquished the intention, saying that it was no affair of his. But it confirmed the impressions he had formed of the character of Eric and Emilius, and it strengthened him in his determination to allow no intercourse between them and the woman he loved.

An additional torture was in store for him, and it fell upon him like a thunderbolt. One day he saw Emilius and Lauretta walking in the woods, talking earnestly and confidentially together. His blood boiled; his heart beat so violently that he could scarcely distinguish surrounding objects. So violent was his agitation that it was many minutes before he recovered himself, and then Lauretta and Emilius had passed out of sight. He went home in a wild fury of despair.

He had not been near enough to hear one word of the conversation, but their attitude was to him confirmation of his jealous suspicion that the young man was endeavouring to supplant him in Lauretta's affections. In the evening he saw Lauretta in her home, and she noticed a change in him.

"Are you ill, Gabriel?" she asked.

"No," he replied, "I am quite well. What should make me otherwise?"

The bitterness in his voice surprised her, and she insisted that he should seek repose. "To get me out of the way," he thought; and then, gazing into her solicitous and innocent eyes, he mutely reproached himself for doubting her. No, it was not she who was to blame; she was still his, she was still true to him; but how easy was it for a friend so close to her as

Emilius to instil into her trustful heart evil reports against himself! "That is the first step," he thought. "What must follow is simple. These men, these villains, are capable of any treachery. Honour is a stranger to their scheming natures. How shall I act? To meet them openly, to accuse them openly, may be my ruin. They are too firmly fixed in the affections of Doctor Louis and his wife--they are too firmly fixed in the affections of even Laretta herself--for me to hope to expose them upon evidence so slender. Not slender to me, but to them. These treacherous brothers are conspiring secretly against me. I will meet them with their own weapons. Secrecy for secrecy. I will wait and watch till I have the strongest proof against them, and then I will expose their true characters to Doctor Louis and Laretta."

Having thus resolved, he was not the man to swerve from the plan he laid down. The nightly vigils he had kept in his young life served him now, and it seemed as if he could do without sleep. The stealthy meetings between Patricia and the brothers continued, and before long he saw Eric and Laretta in the woods together. In his espionage he was always careful not to approach near enough to bring discovery upon himself.

In an indirect manner, as though it was a matter which he deemed of slight importance, he questioned Laretta as to her walks in the woods with Eric and Emilius.

"Yes," she said artlessly, "we sometimes meet there."

"By accident?" asked Gabriel Carew.

"Not always by accident," replied Laretta. "Remember, Gabriel, Eric and Emilius are as my brothers, and if they have a secret----" And then she blushed, grew confused, and paused.

These signs were poisoned food indeed to Carew, but he did not betray himself.

"Have they a secret?" he asked, with assumed carelessness.

"It was wrong of me to speak," said Laretta, "after my promise to say nothing to a single soul in the village."

"And most especially," said Carew, hitting the mark, "to me."

She grew more confused. "Do not press me, Gabriel."

"Only," he continued, with slight persistence, "that it must be a heart secret."

She was silent, and he dropped the subject.

From the interchange of these few words he extracted the most exquisite torture. There was, then, between Laretta and the brothers a secret of the heart, known only to themselves, to be revealed to none, and to him, Gabriel Carew, to whom the young girl was affianced, least of all. It must be well understood, in this explanation of what was occurring in the lives of these young people at that momentous period, that Gabriel Carew never once suspected that Laretta was false to him. His great fear was that Eric and Emilius were working warily against him, and were cunningly fabricating some kind of evidence in his disfavour which would rob him of Laretta's love. They were conspiring to this end, to the destruction of his happiness, and they were waiting for the hour to strike the fatal blow. Well, it was for him to strike first. His love for Laretta was so all-absorbing that all other considerations--however serious the direct or indirect consequences of them--sank into utter insignificance by the side of it. He did not allow it to weigh against Laretta that she appeared to be in collusion with Eric and Emilius, and to be favouring their schemes. Her nature was so guileless and unsuspecting that she could be easily led and deceived by friends in whom she placed a trust. It was this that strengthened Carew in his resolve not to rudely make the attempt to open her eyes to the perfidy of Eric and Emilius. She would have been incredulous, and the arguments he should use against his enemies might be turned against himself. Therefore he adhered to the line of action he had marked out. He waited, and watched, and suffered. Meanwhile, the day appointed for his union with Laretta was approaching.

IV.

Within a fortnight of that day Gabriel Carew's passions were roused to an almost uncontrollable pitch.

It was evening, and he saw Eric and Emilius in the woods. They were conversing with more than ordinary animation, and appeared to be discussing some question upon which they did not agree. Carew saw signs which he could not interpret--appeals, implorings, evidences of strong feeling on one side and of humbleness on the other, despair from one, sorrow from the other; and then suddenly a phase which startled the watcher and filled him with a savage joy. Eric, in a paroxysm, laid hands furiously upon his brother, and it seemed for a moment as if a violent struggle were about to take place.

It was to the restraint and moderation of Emilius that this unbrotherly conflict was avoided. He did not meet violence with violence; after a pause he gently lifted Eric's hands from his shoulders, and with a sad look turned away, Eric gazing at his retreating figure in a kind of bewilderment. Presently Emilius was gone, and only Eric remained.

He was not long alone. From an opposite direction to that taken by Emilius the watcher saw approaching the form of the woman he loved, and to whom he was shortly to be wed. That her coming was not accidental, but in fulfilment of a promise was clear to Gabriel Carew. Eric expected her, and welcomed her without surprise. Then the two began to converse.

Carew's heart beat tumultuously; he would have given worlds to hear what was being said, but he was at too great a distance for a word to reach his ears. For a time Eric was the principal speaker, Lauretta, for the most part, listening, and uttering now and then merely a word or two. In her quiet way she appeared to be as deeply agitated as the young man who was addressing her in an attitude of despairing appeal. Again and again it seemed as if he had finished what he had to say, and again and again he resumed, without abatement of the excitement under which he was labouring. At length he ceased, and then Lauretta became the principal actor in the scene. She spoke long and forcibly, but always with that gentleness of manner which was one of her sweetest characteristics. In her

turn she seemed to be appealing to the young man, and to be endeavouring to impress upon him a sad and bitter truth which he was unwilling, and not in the mood, to recognise. For a long time she was unsuccessful; the young man walked impatiently a few steps from her, then returned, contrite and humble, but still with all the signs of great suffering upon him. At length her words had upon him the effect she desired; he wavered, he held out his hands helplessly, and presently covered his face with them and sank to the ground. Then, after a silence, during which Laretta gazed compassionately upon his convulsed form, she stooped and placed her hand upon his shoulder. He lifted his eyes, from which the tears were flowing, and raised himself from the earth. He stood before her with bowed head, and she continued to speak. The pitiful sweetness of her face almost drove Carew mad; it could not be mistaken that her heart was beating with sympathy for Eric's sufferings. A few minutes more passed, and then it seemed as if she had prevailed. Eric accepted the hand she held out to him, and pressed his lips upon it. Had he at that moment been within Gabriel Carew's reach, it would have fared ill with both these men, but Heaven alone knows whether it would have averted what was to follow before the setting of another sun, to the consternation and grief of the entire village. After pressing his lips to Laretta's hand, the pair separated, each going a different way, and Gabriel Carew ground his teeth as he observed that there were tears in Laretta's eyes as well as in Eric's. A darkness fell upon him as he walked homewards.

V.

The following morning Nerac and the neighbourhood around were agitated by news of a tragedy more thrilling and terrible than that in which the hunchback and his companion in crime were concerned. In attendance upon this tragedy, and preceding its discovery, was a circumstance stirring enough in its way in the usually quiet life of the simple villagers, but which, in the light of the mysterious tragedy, would have paled into insignificance had it not been that it appeared to have a direct bearing upon it. Martin Hartog's daughter, Patricia, had fled from her home, and was nowhere to be discovered.

This flight was made known to the villagers early in the morning by the appearance among them of Martin Hartog, demanding in which house his daughter had taken refuge. The man was distracted; his wild words and actions excited great alarm, and when he found that he could obtain no satisfaction from them, and that every man and woman in Nerac professed ignorance of his daughter's movements, he called down heaven's vengeance upon the man who had betrayed her, and left them to search the woods for Patricia.

The words he had uttered in his imprecations when he called upon a higher power for vengeance on a villain opened the villagers' eyes. Patricia had been betrayed. By whom? Who was the monster who had worked this evil?

While they were talking excitedly together they saw Gabriel Carew hurrying to the house of Father Daniel. He was admitted, and in the course of a few minutes emerged from it in the company of the good priest, whose troubled face denoted that he had heard the sad news of Patricia's flight from her father's home. The villagers held aloof from Father Daniel and Gabriel Carew, seeing that they were in earnest converse. Carew was imparting to the priest his suspicions of Eric and Emilius in connection with this event; he did not mention Lauretta's name, but related how on several occasions he had been an accidental witness of meetings between Patricia and one or other of the brothers.

"It was not for me to place a construction upon these meetings," said Carew, "nor did it appear to me that I was called upon to mention it to any one. It would have been natural for me to suppose that Martin Hartog was fully acquainted with his daughter's movements, and that, being of an independent nature, he would have resented any interference from me. He is Patricia's father, and it was believed by all that he guarded her well. Had he been my equal I might have incidentally asked whether there was anything serious between his daughter and these brothers, but I am his master, and therefore was precluded from inviting a confidence which can only exist between men occupying the same social condition. There is, besides, another reason for my silence which, if you care to hear, I will impart to you."

"Nothing should be concealed from me," said Father Daniel.

"Although," said Gabriel Carew, "I have been a resident here now for some time, I felt, and feel, that a larger knowledge of me is necessary to give due and just weight to the unfavourable opinion I have formed of two men with whom you have been acquainted from childhood, and who hold a place in your heart of which they are utterly unworthy. Not alone in your heart, but in the hearts of my dearest friends, Doctor Louis and his family.

"You refer to Eric and Emilius," said the priest.

"Yes, I refer to them."

"What you have already said concerning them has deeply pained me. I do not share your suspicions. Their meetings with Hartog's daughter were, I am convinced, innocent. They are incapable of an act of baseness; they are of noble natures, and it is impossible that they should ever have harboured a thought of treachery to a young maiden."

"I am more than justified," said Gabriel Carew, "by the expression of your opinion, in the course I took. You would have listened with impatience to me, and what I should have said would have recoiled on myself. Yet now I regret that I did not interfere; this calamity might have been avoided, and a woman's honour saved. Let us seek Martin Hartog; he may be in possession of information to guide us."

From the villagers they learnt that Hartog had gone to the woods, and they were about to proceed in that direction when another, who had just arrived, informed them that he had seen Hartog going to Gabriel Carew's house. Thither they proceeded, and found Hartog in his cottage. He was on his knees, when they entered, before a box in which his daughter kept her clothes. This he had forced open, and was searching. He looked wildly at Father Daniel and Carew, and immediately resumed his task, throwing the girl's clothes upon the floor after examining the pockets. In his haste and agitation he did not observe a portrait which he had cast aside, Carew picked it up and handed it to Father Daniel. It was the portrait of Emilius.

"Does this look like innocence?" inquired Carew. "Who is the more likely to be right in our estimate of these brothers, you or I?"

Father Daniel, overwhelmed by the evidence, did not reply. By this time Martin Hartog had found a letter which he was eagerly perusing.

"This is the villain," he cried. "If there is justice in heaven he has met with his deserts. If he still lives he shall die by my hands!"

"Hush, hush!" murmured Father Daniel. "Vengeance is not yours to deal out. Pray for comfort--pray for mercy."

"Pray for mercy!" cried Hartog with a bitter laugh. "I pray for vengeance! If the monster be not already smitten, Lord, give him into my hands! I will tear him limb from limb! But who, who is he? The cunning villain has not even signed his name!"

Father Daniel took the letter from his unresisting hand, and as his eyes fell upon the writing he started and trembled.

"Emilius's?" asked Gabriel Carew.

"Alas!" sighed the priest.

It was indeed the writing of Emilius. Martin Hartog had heard Carew's inquiry and the priest's reply.

"What!" he cried. "That viper!" And without another word he rushed from the cottage. Carew and the priest hastily followed him, but he outstripped them, and was soon out of sight.

"There will be a deed of violence done," said Father Daniel, "if the men meet. I must go immediately to the house of these unhappy brothers and warn them."

Carew accompanied him, but when they arrived at the house they were informed that nothing had been seen of Eric and Emilius since the previous night. Neither of them had been home nor slept in his bed. This seemed to complicate the mystery in Father Daniel's eyes, although it was no mystery to Carew, who was convinced that where Patricia was there would Emilius be found. Father Daniel's grief and horror were clearly depicted. He looked upon the inhabitants of Nerac as one family, and he regarded the dishonour of Martin Hartog's daughter as dishonour to all. Carew, being anxious to see Lauretta, left him to his inquiries. Dr. Louis and his family were already acquainted with the agitating news.

"Dark clouds hang over this once happy village," said Doctor Louis to Carew.

He was greatly shocked, but he had no hesitation in declaring that, although circumstances looked black against the twin brothers, his faith in them was undisturbed. Lauretta shared his belief, and Lauretta's mother also. Gabriel Carew did not combat with them; he held quietly to his views, convinced that in a short time they would think as he did. Lauretta was very pale, and out of consideration for her Gabriel Carew endeavoured to avoid the all-engrossing subject. That, however, was impossible. Nothing else could be thought or spoken of. Again and again it was indirectly referred to. Once Carew remarked to Lauretta, "You said that Eric and Emilius had a secret, and you gave me to understand that you were not ignorant of it. Has it any connection with what has occurred?"

"I must not answer you, Gabriel," she replied; "when we see Emilius again all will be explained."

Little did she suspect the awful import of those simple words. In Carew's mind the remembrance of the story of Kristel and Silvain was very vivid.

"Were Eric and Emilius true friends?" he asked.

Lauretta looked at him piteously; her lips quivered. "They are brothers," she said.

"You trust me, Lauretta?" he said.

"Indeed I do," she replied. "Thoroughly."

"You love me, Lauretta?"

"With my whole heart, Gabriel."

She gazed at him in tender surprise; for weeks past he had not been so happy. The trouble by which he had been haunted took flight.

"And yet," he could not help saying, "you have a secret, and you keep it from me!"

His voice was almost gay; there was no touch of reproach in it.

"The secret is not mine, Gabriel," she said, and she allowed him to pass his arm around her; her head sank upon his breast. "When you know all, you will approve," she murmured. "As I trust you, so must you trust me."

Their lips met; perfect confidence and faith were established between them, although on Lauretta's side there had been no shadow on the love she gave him.

It was late in the afternoon when Carew was informed that Father Daniel wished to speak to him privately. He kissed Lauretta and went out to the priest, in whose face he saw a new horror.

"I should be the first to tell them," said Father Daniel in a husky voice, "but I am not yet strong enough. They will learn soon enough without me. It is known only to a few."

"What is known?" asked Carew. "Is Emilius found?"

"No," replied the priest, "but Eric is. I would not have him removed until the magistrate, who is absent and has been sent for, arrives. Come with me."

In a state of wonder Carew accompanied Father Daniel out of Doctor Louis's house, and the priest led the way to the woods.

"Why in this direction?" inquired Gabriel Carew. "We have passed the house in which the brothers live."

"Wait," said Father Daniel solemnly. "They live there no longer."

The sun was setting, and the light was quivering on the tops of the distant trees. Father Daniel and Gabriel Carew plunged into the woods. There were scouts on the outskirts, to whom the priest said, "Has the magistrate arrived?"

"No, father," was the answer, "we expect him every moment."

Father Daniel nodded and passed on.

"What does all this mean?" asked Gabriel Carew.

And again the priest replied, "Wait."

From that moment until they arrived at the spot to which Father Daniel led him, Carew was silent. What had passed between him and Lauretta had so filled his soul with happiness that he bestowed but little thought upon a vulgar intrigue between a peasant girl and men whom he had long since condemned. They no longer troubled him; they had passed for ever out of his life, and his heart was at rest. Father Daniel and he walked some distance into the shadows of the forest and the night. Before him he saw lights in the hands of two villagers who had evidently been stationed there to keep guard.

"Father Daniel?" they cried in fearsome voices.

"Yes," he replied, "it is I."

He conducted Gabriel Carew to a spot, and pointed downwards with his finger; and there, prone and still upon the fallen leaves, lay the body of Eric stone dead, stabbed to the heart!

"Martin Hartog," said the priest, "is in custody on suspicion of this ruthless murder."

"Why?" asked Gabriel Carew. "What evidence is there to incriminate him?"

"When the body was first discovered," said the priest, "your gardener was standing by its side. Upon being questioned his answer was, 'If judgment

has not fallen upon the monster, it has overtaken his brother. The brood should be wiped off the face of the earth.' He spoke no further word."

VI.

Gabriel Carew was overwhelmed by the horror of this discovery. The meeting between the brothers, of which he had been a secret witness on the previous evening, and during which Eric had laid violent hands on Emilius, recurred to him. He had not spoken of it, nor did he mention it now. There was time enough. If Martin Hartog confessed his guilt the matter was settled; if he did not, the criminal must be sought elsewhere, and it would be his duty to supply evidence which would tend to fix the crime upon Emilius. He did not believe Martin Hartog to be guilty; he had already decided within himself that Emilius had murdered Eric, and that the tragedy of Kristel and Silvain had been repeated in the lives of Silvain's sons. There was a kind of retribution in this which struck Gabriel Carew with singular force. "Useless," he thought, "to fly from a fate which is preordained. When he recovered from the horror which had fallen on him upon beholding the body of Eric, he asked Father Daniel at what hour of the day the unhappy man had been killed.

"That," said Father Daniel, "has yet to be determined. No doctor has seen the body, but the presumption is that when Martin Hartog, animated by his burning craving for vengeance, of which we were both a witness, rushed from his cottage, he made his way to the woods, and that he here unhappily met the brother of the man whom he believed to be the betrayer of his daughter. What followed may be easily imagined."

The arrival of the magistrate put a stop to the conversation. He listened to what Father Daniel had to relate, and some portions of the priest's explanations were corroborated by Gabriel Carew. The magistrate then gave directions that the body of Eric should be conveyed to the courthouse; and he and the priest and Carew walked back to the village together.

"The village will become notorious," he remarked. "Is there an epidemic of murder amongst us that this one should follow so closely upon the heels of the other?" Then, after a pause, he asked Father Daniel whether he believed Martin Hartog to be guilty.

"I believe no man to be guilty," said the priest, "until he is proved so incontrovertibly. Human justice frequently errs."

"I bear in remembrance," said the magistrate, "that you would not subscribe to the general belief in the hunchback's guilt."

"Nor do I now," said Father Daniel.

"And you," said the magistrate, turning to Gabriel Carew, "do you believe Hartog to be guilty?"

"I do not," replied Carew.

"Do your suspicions point elsewhere?" asked the magistrate.

"This is not the time or place," said Carew, "for me to give expression to any suspicion I may entertain. The first thing to be settled is Hartog's complicity in this murder."

"True," said the magistrate.

"Father Daniel believes," continued Carew, "that Eric was murdered to-day, within the last hour or two. That is not my belief."

"The doctors will decide that," said the magistrate. "If the deed was not, in your opinion, perpetrated within the last few hours, when do you suppose it was done?"

"Last night," Carew replied.

"Have you any distinct grounds for the belief?"

"None. You have asked me a question which I have answered. There is no matter of absolute knowledge involved in it; if there were I should be able to speak more definitely. Until the doctors pronounce there is nothing more to be said. But I may say this: if Hartog is proved to be innocent, I may have something to reveal in the interests of justice."

The magistrate nodded and said, "By the way, where is Emilius, and what has he to say about it?"

"Neither Eric nor Emilius," replied Father Daniel, "slept at home last night, and since yesterday evening Emilius has not been seen."

The magistrate looked grave. "Is it known where he is? He should be instantly summoned."

"Nothing is known of him," said Father Daniel. "Inquiries have been made, but nothing satisfactory has been elicited."

The magistrate glanced at Carew, and for a little while was silent. Shortly after they reached the court-house the doctors presented their report. In their opinion Eric had been dead at least fourteen or fifteen hours, certainly for longer than twelve. This disposed of the theory that he had been killed in the afternoon. Their belief was that the crime was committed shortly after midnight. In that case Martin Hartog must be incontestably innocent. He was able to account for every hour of the previous day and night. He was out until near midnight; he was accompanied home, and a friend sat up with him till late, both keeping very quiet for fear of disturbing Patricia, who was supposed to be asleep in her room, but who before that time had most likely fled from her home. Moreover, it was proved that Martin Hartog rose in the morning at a certain time, and that it was only then that he became acquainted with the disappearance of his daughter. Father Daniel and Gabriel Carew were present when the magistrate questioned Hartog. The man seemed indifferent as to his fate, but he answered quite clearly the questions put to him. He had not left his cottage after going to bed on the previous night; he believed his daughter to be in her room, and only this morning discovered his mistake. After his interview with Father Daniel and Gabriel Carew he rushed from the cottage in the hope of meeting with Emilius, whom he intended to kill; he came upon the dead body of Eric in the woods, and his only regret was that it was Eric and not Emilius.

"If the villain who has dishonoured me were here at this moment," said Martin Hartog, "I would strangle him. No power should save him from my just revenge!"

The magistrate ordered him to be set at liberty, and he wandered out of the court-house a hopeless and despairing man. Then the magistrate turned to Carew, and asked him, now that Hartog was proved to be innocent, what he had to reveal that might throw light upon the crime. Carew, after some hesitation, related what he had seen the night before when Emilius and Eric were together in the forest.

"But," said the magistrate, "the brothers were known to be on the most loving terms."

"So," said Carew, "were their father, Silvain, and his brother Kristel until a woman stepped between them. Upon this matter, however, it is not for me to speak. Perhaps Doctor Louis can enlighten you."

"I have heard something of the story of these hapless brothers," said the magistrate, pondering, "but am not acquainted with all the particulars. I will send for Doctor Louis."

Carew then asked that he should be allowed to go for Doctor Louis, his object being to explain to the doctor, on their way to the magistrate, how it was that reference had been made to the story of Silvain and Kristel which he had heard from the doctor's lips. He also desired to hint to Doctor Louis that Lauretta might be in possession of information respecting Eric and Emilius which might be useful in clearing up the mystery.

"You have acted right," said Doctor Louis sadly to Gabriel Carew; "at all risks justice must be done. Ah! how the past comes back to me! And is this to be the end of that fated family? I cannot believe that Emilius can be guilty of a crime so horrible!"

His distress was so keen that Carew himself, now that he was freed from the jealousy by which he had been tortured with respect to Lauretta, hoped also that Emilius would be able to clear himself of the charge hanging over him. But when they arrived at the magistrate's court they were confronted by additional evidence which seemed to tell heavily against the absent brother. A witness had come forward who deposed that, being out on the previous night very late, and taking a short cut through the woods to his cottage, he heard voices of two men which he recognised as the voices of Emilius and Eric. They were raised in anger, and one--the witness could not say which--cried out,

"Well, kill me, for I do not wish to live!"

Upon being asked why he did not interpose, his answer was that he did not care to mix himself up with a desperate quarrel; and that as he had a family he thought the best thing he could do was to hasten home as quickly

as possible. Having told all he knew he was dismissed, and bade to hold himself in readiness to repeat his evidence on a future occasion.

Then the magistrate heard what Doctor Louis had to say, and summed up the whole matter thus:

"The reasonable presumption is, that the brothers quarrelled over some love affair with a person at present unknown; for although Martin Hartog's daughter has disappeared, there is nothing as yet to connect her directly with the affair. Whether premeditatedly, or in a fit of ungovernable passion, Emilius killed his brother and fled. If he does not present himself to-morrow morning in the village he must be sought for. Nothing more can be done to-night."

It was a melancholy night for all, to Carew in a lesser degree than to the others, for the crime which had thrown gloom over the whole village had brought ease to his heart. He saw now how unreasonable had been his jealousy of the brothers, and he was disposed to judge them more leniently.

On that night Doctor Louis held a private conference with Laretta, and received from her an account of the unhappy difference between the brothers. As Silvain and Kristel had both loved one woman, so had Eric and Emilius, but in the case of the sons there had been no supplanting of the affections. Emilius and Patricia had long loved each other, and had kept their love a secret, Eric himself not knowing it. When Emilius discovered that his brother loved Patricia his distress of mind was very great, and it was increased by the knowledge that was forced upon him that there was in Eric's passion for the girl something of the fierce quality which had distinguished Kristel's passion for Avicia. In his distress he had sought advice from Laretta, and she had undertaken to act as an intermediary, and to endeavour to bring Eric to reason. On two or three occasions she thought she had succeeded, but her influence over Eric lasted only as long as he was in her presence. He made promises which he found it impossible to keep, and he continued to hope against hope. Laretta did not know what had passed between the brothers on the previous evening, in the interview of which I was a witness, but earlier in the day she had seen Emilius, who had confided a secret to her keeping which placed Eric's love

for Patricia beyond the pale of hope. He was secretly married to Patricia, and had been so for some time. When Gabriel Carew heard this he recognised how unjust he had been towards Emilius and Patricia in the construction he had placed upon their secret interviews. Lauretta advised Emilius to make known his marriage to Eric, and offered to reveal the fact to the despairing lover, but Emilius would not consent to this being immediately done. He stipulated that a week should pass before the revelation was made; then, he said, it might be as well that all the world should know it--a fatal stipulation, against which Lauretta argued in vain. Thus it was that in the last interview between Eric and Lauretta, Eric was still in ignorance of the insurmountable bar to his hopes. As it subsequently transpired, Emilius had made preparations to remove Patricia from Nerac that very night. Up to that point, and at that time nothing more was known; but when Emilius was tried for the murder Lauretta's evidence did not help to clear him, because it established beyond doubt the fact of the existence of an animosity between the brothers.

On the day following the discovery of the murder, Emilius did not make his appearance in the village, and officers were sent in search of him. There was no clue as to the direction which he and Patricia had taken, and the officers, being slow-witted, were many days before they succeeded in finding him. Their statement, upon their return to Nerac with their prisoner, was, that upon informing him of the charge against him, he became violently agitated and endeavoured to escape. He denied that he made such an attempt, asserting that he was naturally agitated by the awful news, and that for a few minutes he scarcely knew what he was doing, but, being innocent, there was no reason why he should make a fruitless endeavour to avoid an inevitable inquiry into the circumstances of a most dreadful crime.

He was much broken down by his position. No brother, he declared, had ever been more fondly loved than Eric was by him, and he would have suffered a voluntary death rather than be guilty of an act of violence towards one for whom he entertained so profound an affection. In the preliminary investigations he gave the following explanation of all within

his knowledge. What Lauretta had stated was true in every particular; neither did he deny Carew's evidence nor the evidence of the villager who had deposed that, late on the night of the murder, high words had passed between him and Eric.

"The words," said Emilius, "'Well, kill me, for I do not wish to live!' were uttered by my poor brother when I told him that Patricia was my wife. For although I had not intended that this should be known until a few days after my departure, my poor brother was so worked up by his love for my wife, that I felt I dared not, in justice to him and myself, leave him any longer in ignorance. For that reason, and thus impelled, pitying him most deeply, I revealed to him the truth. Had the witness whose evidence, true as it is, seems to bear fatally against me, waited and listened, he would have been able to testify in my favour. My poor brother for a time was overwhelmed by the revelation. His love for my wife perhaps did not die immediately away; but, high-minded and honourable as he was, he recognised that to persevere in it would be a guilty act. The force of his passion became less; he was no longer violent--he was mournful. He even, in a despairing way, begged my forgiveness, and I, reproachful that I had not earlier confided in him, begged his forgiveness for the unconscious wrong I had done him. Then, after a while, we fell into our old ways of love; tender words were exchanged; we clasped each other's hand; we embraced. Truly you who hear me can scarcely realise what Eric and I had always been to each other. More than brothers--more like lovers. Heartbroken as he was at the conviction that the woman he adored was lost to him, I was scarcely less heartbroken that I had won her. And so, after an hour's loving converse, I left him; and when we parted, with a promise to meet again when his wound was healed, we kissed each other as we had done in the days of our childhood."

END OF VOL. II.