

BALTHASAR AND
OTHER WORKS

BY

ANATOLE FRANCE

Balthasar And Other Works 1909

TO THE VICOMTE EUGÈNE MELCHIOR DE VOGUE

I.

In those days Balthasar, whom the Greeks called Saracin, reigned in Ethiopia. He was black, but comely of countenance. He had a simple soul and a generous heart. The third year of his reign, which was the twenty-second of his age, he left his dominions on a visit to Balkis, Queen of Sheba. The mage Sembobitis and the eunuch Menkera accompanied him. He had in his train seventy-five camels bearing cinnamon, myrrh, gold dust, and elephants' tusks.

As they rode, Sembobitis instructed him in the influences of the planets, as well as in the virtues of precious stones, and Menkera sang to him canticles from the sacred mysteries. He paid but little heed to them, but amused himself instead watching the jackals with their ears pricked up, sitting erect on the edge of the desert.

The East commonly held kings versed in magic.

At last, after a march of twelve days, Balthasar became conscious of the fragrance of roses, and very soon they saw the gardens that surround the city of Sheba. On their way they passed young girls dancing under pomegranate trees in full bloom.

"The dance," said Sembobitis the mage, "is a prayer."

"One could sell these women for a great price," said Menkera the eunuch.

As they entered the city they were amazed at the extent of the sheds and warehouses and workshops that lay before them, and also at the immense quantities of merchandise with which these were piled.

For a long time they walked through streets thronged with chariots, street porters, donkeys and donkey-drivers, until all at once the marble walls, the purple awnings and the gold cupolas of the palace of Balkis, lay spread out before them.

The Queen of Sheba received them in a courtyard cooled by jets of perfumed water which fell with a tinkling cadence like a shower of pearls.

Smiling, she stood before them in a jewelled robe.

At sight of her Balthasar was greatly troubled.

She seemed to him lovelier than a dream and more beautiful than desire.

"My lord," and Sembobitis spoke under his breath, "remember to conclude a good commercial treaty with the queen."

"Have a care, my lord," Menkera added. "It is said she employs magic with which to gain the love of men."

Then, having prostrated themselves, the mage and the eunuch retired.

Balthasar, left alone with Balkis, tried to speak; he opened his mouth but he could not utter a word. He said to himself, "The queen will be angered at my silence."

But the queen still smiled and looked not at all angry. She was the first to speak with a voice sweeter than the sweetest music.

"Be welcome, and sit down at my side." And with a slender finger like a ray of white light she pointed to the purple cushions on the ground. Balthasar sat down, gave a great sigh, and grasping a cushion in each hand he cried hastily:

"Madam, I would these two cushions were two giants, your enemies; I would wring their necks."

And as he spoke he clutched the cushions with such violence in his hands that the delicate stuff cracked and out flew a cloud of snow-white down. One of the tiny feathers swayed a moment in the air and then alighted on the bosom of the queen.

"My lord Balthasar," Balkis said, blushing; "why do you wish to kill giants?"

"Because I love you," said Balthasar.

"Tell me," Balkis asked, "is the water good in the wells of your capital?"

"Yes," Balthasar replied in some surprise.

"I am also curious to know," Balkis continued, "how a dry conserve of fruit is made in Ethiopia?"

The king did not know what to answer.

"Now please tell me, please," she urged.

Whereupon with a mighty effort of memory he tried to describe how Ethiopian cooks preserve quinces in honey. But she did not listen. And suddenly, she interrupted him.

"My lord, it is said that you love your neighbour, Queen Candace. Is she more beautiful than I am? Do not deceive me."

"More beautiful than you, madam," Balthasar cried as he fell at the feet of Balkis, "how could that possibly be!"

"Well, then, her eyes? her mouth, her colour? her throat?" the queen continued.

With his arms outstretched towards her, Balthasar cried:

"Give me but the little feather that has fallen on your neck and in return you shall have half my kingdom as well as the wise Sembobitis and Menkera the eunuch."

But she rose and fled with a ripple of dear laughter.

When the mage and the eunuch returned they found their master plunged deep in thought which was not his custom.

"My lord!" asked Sembobitis, "have you concluded a good commercial treaty?"

That day Balthasar supped with the Queen of Sheba and drank the wine of the palm-tree.

"It is true, then," said Balkis as they supped together, "that Queen Guidace is not so beautiful as I?"

"Queen Candace is black," replied Balthasar.

Balkis looked expressively at Balthasar.

"One may be black and yet not ill-looking," she said.

"Balkis!" cried the king.

He said no more, but seized her in his arms, and the head of the queen sank back under the pressure of his lips. But he saw that she was weeping. Thereupon he spoke to her in the low, caressing tones that nurses use to their nurslings. He called her his little blossom and his little star.

"Why do you weep?" he asked. "And what must one do to dry your tears? If you have a desire tell me and it shall be fulfilled."

She ceased weeping, but she was sunk deep in thought. He implored her a long time to tell him her desire. And at last she spoke.

"I wish to know fear."

And as Balthasar did not seem to understand, she explained to him that for a long time past she had greatly longed to face some unknown danger, but she could not, for the men and gods of Sheba watched over her.

"And yet," she added with a sigh, "during the night I long to feel the delicious chill of terror penetrate my flesh. To have my hair stand up on my head with horror. O! it would be such joy to be afraid!"

She twined her arms about the neck of the dusky king, and said with the voice of a pleading child:

"Night has come. Let us go through the town in disguise. Are you willing?"

He agreed. She ran to the window at once and looked through the lattice into the square below.

"A beggar is lying against the palace wall. Give him your garments and ask him in exchange for his camel-hair turban and the coarse cloth girt about his loins. Be quick and I will dress myself."

And she ran out of the banqueting-hall joyfully clapping her hands one against the other.

Balthasar took off his linen tunic embroidered with gold and girded himself with the skirt of the beggar. It gave him the look of a real slave. The queen soon reappeared dressed in the blue seamless garment of the women who work in the fields.

"Come!" she said.

And she dragged Balthasar along the narrow corridors towards a little door which opened on the fields.

II.

The night was dark, and in the darkness of the night Balkis looked very small.

She led Balthasar to one of the taverns where wastrels and street porters foregathered along with prostitutes. The two sat down at a table and saw through the foul air by the light of a fetid lamp, unclean human brutes attack each other with fists and knives for a woman or a cup of fermented liquor, while others with clenched fists snored under the tables. The tavern-keeper, lying on a pile of sacking, watched the drunken brawlers with a prudent eye. Balkis, having seen some salt fish hanging from the rafters of the ceiling, said to her companion:

"I much wish to eat one of these fish with pounded onions."

Balthasar gave the order. When she had eaten he discovered that he had forgotten to bring money. It gave him no concern, for he thought that he could slip out with her without paying the reckoning. But the tavern-keeper barred their way, calling them a vile slave and a worthless she-ass. Balthasar struck him to the ground with a blow of his fist. Whereupon some of the drinkers drew their knives and flung themselves on the two strangers. But the black man, seizing an enormous pestle used to pound Egyptian onions, knocked down two of his assailants and forced the others back. And all the while he was conscious of the warmth of Balkis' body as she cowered close against him; it was this which made him invincible.

The tavern-keeper's friends, not daring to approach again, flung at him from the end of the pot-house jars of oil, pewter vessels, burning lamps, and even the huge bronze cauldron in which a whole sheep was stewing. This cauldron fell with a horrible crash on Balthasar's head and split his skull. For a moment he stood as if dazed, and then summoning all his strength he flung the cauldron back with such force that its weight was increased tenfold. The shock of the hurtling metal was mingled with indescribable roars and death rattles. Profiting by the terror of the survivors, and fearing that Balkis might be injured, he seized her in his arms and fled with her through the silence and darkness of the lonely byways. The stillness of night enveloped the earth, and the fugitives heard the clamour of the women and the carousers, who pursued them at haphazard, die away in the darkness. Soon they heard nothing more than the sound of dripping blood as it fell from the brow of Balthasar on the breast of Balkis.

"I love you," the queen murmured.

And by the light of the moon as it emerged from behind a cloud the king saw the white and liquid radiance of her half-closed eyes. They descended the dry bed of a stream, and suddenly Balthasar's foot slipped on the moss and they fell together locked in each other's embrace. They seemed to sink forever into a delicious void, and the world of the living ceased to exist for them. They were still plunged in the

enchancing forgetfulness of time, space and separate existence, when at daybreak the gazelles came to drink out of the hollows among the stones.

At that moment a passing band of brigands discovered the two lovers lying on the moss.

"They are poor," they said, "but we shall sell them for a great price, for they are so young and beautiful."

Upon which they surrounded them, and having bound them they tied them to the tail of an ass and proceeded on their way.

The black man so bound threatened the brigands with death. But Balkis, who shivered in the cool, fresh air of the morning, only smiled, as if at something unseen.

They tramped through frightful solitudes until the heat of mid-day made itself felt. The sun was already high when the brigands unbound their prisoners, and, letting them sit in the shade of a rock, threw them some mouldy bread which Balthasar disdained to touch but which Balkis ate greedily.

She laughed. And when the brigand chief asked why she laughed, she replied:

"I laugh at the thought that I shall have you all hanged."

"Indeed!" cried the chief, "a curious assertion in the mouth of a scullery wench like you, my love! Doubtless you will hang us all by aid of that blackamoor gallant of yours?"

At this insult Balthasar flew into a fearful rage, and he flung himself on the brigand and clutched his neck with such violence that he nearly strangled him.

But the other drew his knife and plunged it into his body to the very hilt. The poor king rolled to earth, and as he turned on Balkis a dying glance his sight faded.

III

At this moment was heard an uproar of men, horses and weapons, and Balkis recognised her trusty Abner who had come at the head of her guards to rescue his queen, of whose mysterious disappearance he had heard during the night.

Three times he prostrated himself at the feet of Balkis, and ordered the litter to advance which had been prepared to receive her. In the meantime the guards bound the hands of the brigands. The queen turned towards the chief and said gently: "You cannot accuse me of having made you an idle promise, my friend, when I said you would be hanged."

The mage Sembobitis and Menkera the eunuch, who stood beside Abner, gave utterance to terrible cries when they saw their king lying motionless on the ground with a knife in his stomach. They raised him with great care. Sembobitis, who was highly versed in the science of medicine, saw that he still breathed. He applied a temporary bandage while Menkera wiped the foam from the king's lips. Then they bound him to a horse and led him gently to the palace of the queen.

For fifteen days Balthasar lay in the agonies of delirium. He raved without ceasing of the steaming cauldron and the moss in the ravine, and he incessantly cried aloud for Balkis. At last, on the sixteenth day, he opened his eyes and saw at his bedside Sembobitis and Menkera, but he did not see the queen.

"Where is she? What is she doing?"

"My lord," replied Menkera, "she is closeted with the King of Comagena."

"They are doubtless agreeing to an exchange of merchandise," added the sage Sembobitis.

"But be not so disturbed, my lord, or you will redouble your fever."

"I must see her," cried Balthasar. And he flew towards the apartments of the queen, and neither the sage nor the eunuch could restrain him. On nearing the bedchamber he beheld the King of Comagena come forth covered with gold and glittering like the sun. Balkis, smiling and with eyes closed, lay on a purple couch. "My Balkis, my Balkis!" cried Balthasar. She did not even turn her head but seemed to prolong a dream.

Balthasar approached and took her hand which she rudely snatched away.

"What do you want?" she said.

"Do you ask?" the black king answered, and burst into tears.

She turned on him her hard, calm eyes.

Then he realised that she had forgotten everything, and he reminded her of the night of the stream.

"In truth, my lord," said she, "I do not know to what you refer. The wine of the palm does not agree with you. You must have dreamed."

"What," cried the unhappy king, wringing his hands, "your kisses, and the knife which has left its mark on me, are these dreams?"

She rose; the jewels on her robe made a sound as of hail and flashed forth lightnings.

"My lord," she said, "it is the hour my council assembles. I have not the leisure to interpret the dreams of your suffering brain. Take some repose. Farewell."

Balthasar felt himself sinking, but with a supreme effort not to betray his weakness to this wicked woman, he ran to his room where he fell in a swoon and his wound re-opened.

IV

For three weeks he remained unconscious and as one dead, but having on the twenty-second day recovered his senses, he seized the hand of Sembobitis, who, with Menkera, watched over him, and cried, weeping:

"O, my friends, how happy you are, one to be old and the other the same as old. But no! there is no happiness on earth, everything is bad, for love is an evil and Balkis is wicked."

"Wisdom confers happiness," replied Sembobitis. "I will try it," said Balthasar. "But let us depart at once for Ethiopia." And as he had lost all he loved he resolved to consecrate himself to wisdom and to become a mage. If this decision gave him no especial pleasure it at least restored to him something of tranquillity. Every evening, seated on the terrace of his palace in company with the sage Sembobitis and Menkera the eunuch, he gazed at the palm-trees standing motionless against the horizon, or watched the crocodiles by the light of the moon float down the Nile like trunks of trees.

"One never wearies of admiring the beauties of Nature," said Sembobitis.

"Doubtless," said Balthasar, "but there are other things in Nature more beautiful even than palm-trees and crocodiles."

This he said thinking of Balkis. But Sembobitis, who was old, said:

"There is of course the phenomenon of the rising of the Nile which I have explained. Man is created to understand."

"He is created to love," replied Balthasar sighing. "There are things which cannot be explained."

"And what may those be?" asked Sembobitis.

"A woman's treason," the king replied.

Balthasar, however, having decided to become a mage, had a tower built from the summit of which might be discerned many kingdoms and the infinite spaces of Heaven. The tower was constructed of brick and rose high above all other towers. It took no less than two years to build, and Balthasar expended in its construction the entire treasure of the king, his father. Every night he climbed to the top of this tower and there he studied the heavens under the guidance of the sage Sembobitis.

"The constellations of the heavens disclose our destiny," said Sembobitis.

And he replied:

"It must be admitted nevertheless that these signs are obscure. But while I study them I forget Balkis, and that is a great boon."

And among truths most useful to know, the mage taught that the stars are fixed like nails in the arch of the sky, and that there are five planets, namely: Bel, Merodach, and Nebo, which are male, while Sin and Mylitta are female.

"Silver," he further explained, "corresponds to Sin, which is the moon, iron to Merodach, and tin to Bel."

And the worthy Balthasar answered: "Such is the kind of knowledge I wish to acquire. While I study astronomy I think neither of Balkis nor anything else on earth. The sciences are beneficent; they keep men from thinking. Teach me the knowledge, Sembobitis, which destroys all feeling in men and I will raise you to great honour among my people."

This was the reason that Sembobitis taught the king wisdom.

He taught him the power of incantation, according to the principles of Astrampsychos, Gobryas and Pazatas. And the more Balthasar studied the twelve houses of the sun, the less he thought of Balkis, and Menkera, observing this, was filled with a great joy.

"Acknowledge, my lord, that Queen Balkis under her golden robes has little cloven feet like a goat's."

"Who ever told you such nonsense?" asked the King.

"My lord, it is the common report both in Sheba and Ethiopia," replied the eunuch. "It is universally said that Queen Balkis has a shaggy leg and a foot made of two black horns."

Balthasar shrugged his shoulders. He knew that the legs and feet of Balkis were like the legs and feet of all other women and perfect in their beauty. And yet the mere idea spoiled the remembrance of her whom he had so greatly loved. He felt a grievance against Balkis that her beauty was not without blemish in the imagination of those who knew nothing about it. At the thought that he had possessed a woman who, though in reality perfectly formed, passed as a monstrosity, he was seized with such a sense of repugnance that he had no further desire to see Balkis again. Balthasar had a simple soul, but love is a very complex emotion.

From that day on the king made great progress both in magic and astrology. He studied the conjunction of the stars with extreme care, and he drew horoscopes with an accuracy equal to that of Sembobitis himself.

"Sembobitis," he asked, "are you willing to answer with your head for the truth of my horoscopes?"

And the sage Sembobitis replied:

"My lord, science is infallible, but the learned often err."

Balthasar was endowed with fine natural sense. He said:

"Only that which is true is divine, and what is divine is hidden from us. In vain we search for truth. And yet I have discovered a new star in the sky. It is a beautiful star, and it seems alive; and when it sparkles it looks like a celestial eye that blinks gently. I seem to hear it call to me. Happy, happy, happy is he who is born under this star, See, Sembobitis, how this charming and splendid star looks at us."

But Sembobitis did not see the star because he would not see it. Wise and old, he did not like novelties.

And alone in the silence of night Balthasar repeated: "Happy, happy, happy he who is born under this star."

V.

The rumour spread over all Ethiopia and the neighbouring kingdoms that King Balthasar had ceased to love Balkis.

When the tidings reached the country of Sheba, Balkis was as indignant as if she had been betrayed. She ran to the King of Comagena who was employing his time in forgetting his country in the city of Sheba.

"My friend," she cried, "do you know what I have just heard? Balthasar loves me no longer!"

"What does it matter," said the King of Comagena, "since we love one another?"

"But do you not feel how this blackamoor has insulted me?"

"No," said the King of Comagena, "I do not."

Whereupon she drove him ignominiously out of her presence, and ordered her grand vizier to prepare for a journey into Ethiopia.

"We shall set out this very night. And I shall cut off your head if all is not ready by sundown."

But when she was alone she began to sob.

"I love him! He loves me no longer, and I love him," she sighed in the sincerity of her heart.

And one night, when on his tower watching the miraculous star, Balthasar, casting his eyes towards earth, saw along black line sinuously curving over the distant sands of the desert like an army of ants. Little by little what seemed to be ants grew larger and sufficiently distinct for the king to be able to recognise horses, camels and elephants.

The caravan having approached the city, Balthasar distinguished the glittering scimitars and the black horses of the guards of the Queen of Sheba. He even recognised the queen herself, and he was profoundly disturbed, for he felt that he would again love her. The star shone in the zenith with a marvellous brilliancy. Below, extended on a litter of purple and gold, Balkis looked small and brilliant like the star.

Balthasar was conscious of being drawn towards her by some terrible power. Still he turned his head away with a desperate effort, and lifting his eyes he again saw the star. Thereupon the star spoke and said: "Glory to God in the Heavens and peace on earth to men of good will!"

"Take a measure of myrrh, gentle King Balthasar, and follow me. I will guide thee to the feet of a little child who is about to be born in a stable between an ass and an ox.

"And this little child is the King of Kings. He will comfort all those who need comforting.

"He calls thee to Him, O Balthasar, thou whose soul is as dark as thy face, but whose heart is as guileless as the heart of a child.

"He has chosen thee because thou hast suffered, and He will give thee riches, happiness and love.

"He will say to thee: 'Be poor joyfully, for that is true riches.' He will also say to thee: 'True happiness is in the renunciation of happiness. Love Me and love none other but Me, because I alone am love.'"

At these words a divine peace fell like a flood of light over the dark face of the king.

Balthasar listened with rapture to the star. He felt himself becoming a new man.

Prostrate beside him, Sembobitis and Menkera worshipped, their faces touching the stone.

Queen Balkis watched Balthasar. She realised that never again would there be love for her in that heart filled with a love divine. She turned white with rage and gave orders for the caravan to return at once to the land of Sheba.

As soon as the star had ceased to speak, Balthasar and his companions descended from the tower.

Then, having prepared a measure of myrrh, they formed a caravan and departed in the direction towards which they were guided by the star. They journeyed a long time through unknown countries, the star always journeying in front of them.

One day, finding themselves in a place where three roads met, they saw two kings advance accompanied by a numerous retinue; one was young and fair of face. He greeted Balthasar and said:

"My name is Gaspar. I am a king, and I bear gold as a gift to the child that is about to be born in Bethlehem of Judea."

The second king advanced in turn. He was an old man, and his white beard covered his breast.

"My name is Melchior," he said, "and I am a king, and I bring frankincense to the holy child who is to teach Truth to mankind."

"I am bound whither you are," said Balthasar. "I have conquered my lust, and for that reason the star has spoken to me."

"I," said Melchior, "have conquered my pride, and that is why I have been called."

"I," said Gaspar, "have conquered my cruelty, and for that reason I go with you."

And the three mages proceeded on their journey together. The star which they had seen in the East preceded them until, arriving above the place where the child lay, it stood still. And seeing the star standing still they rejoiced with a great joy.

And, entering the house they found the child with Mary his mother, and prostrating themselves, they worshipped him. And opening their treasures they offered him gold, frankincense and myrrh, as it is written in the Gospel.

THE CURÉ'S MIGNONETTE

TO JULES LEMAÎTRE

In a village of the Bocage I once knew a curé, a holy man who denied himself every indulgence and who cheerfully practised the virtue of renunciation, and knew no joy but that of sacrifice. In his garden he cultivated fruit-trees, vegetables and medicinal plants, but fearing beauty even in flowers, he would have neither roses nor jasmine. He only allowed himself the innocent luxury of a few tufts of mignonette whose twisted stems, so modestly flower-crowned, would not distract his attention as he read his breviary among his cabbage-plots under the sky of our dear Father in Heaven.

The holy man had so little distrust of his mignonette that he would often in passing pick a spray and inhale its fragrance for a long time. All the plant asked was to be permitted to grow. If one spray was cut, four grew in its place. So much so, indeed, that, the devil aiding, the priest's mignonette soon covered a vast extent of his little garden. It overflowed into the paths and pulled at the good priest's cassock as he passed, until, distracted by the foolish plant, he would pause as often as twenty times an hour while he read or said his prayers.

From springtime until autumn the presbytery was redolent of mignonette. Behold what we may come to and how feeble we are! Not without reason do we say that all our natural inclinations lead us towards sin! The man of God had succeeded in guarding his eyes, but he had left his nostrils undefended, and so the devil, as it were, caught him by the nose. This saint now inhaled the fragrance of mignonette with avidity and lust, that is to say, with that sinful instinct which makes us long for the enjoyment of natural pleasures and which leads us into all sorts of temptations.

Henceforth he seemed to take less delight in the odours of Paradise and the perfumes which are our Lady's merits. His holiness dwindled, and he might, perhaps, have sunk into voluptuousness and become little by little like those lukewarm souls which Heaven rejects had not succour come to him in the nick of time.

Once, long ago, in the Thebaid, an angel stole from a hermit a cup of gold which still bound the holy man to the vanities of earth. A similar mercy was vouchsafed to this

priest of the Bocage. A white hen scratched the earth about the mignonette with such good-will that it all died.

We are not informed whence this bird came. As for myself, I am inclined to believe that the angel who in the desert stole the hermit's cup transformed himself into a white hen on purpose to destroy the only obstacle which barred the good priest's path towards perfection.

M. PIGEONNEAU

TO GILBERT AUGUSTIN-THIERRY

I have, as everybody knows, devoted my whole life to Egyptian archaeology. I should be very ungrateful to my country, to science, and to my-self, if I regretted the profession to which I was called. In my early youth and which I have followed with honour these forty years. My labours have not been in vain. I may say, without flattering myself, that my article on The Handle of an Egyptian mirror in the Museum of the Louvre may still be consulted with profit, though it dates back to the beginning of my career.

As for the exhaustive studies which I subsequently devoted to one of the bronze weights found in 1851 in the excavations at the Serapeium, it would be ungracious for me not to think well of them, as they opened for me the doors of the Institute.

Encouraged by the flattering reception with which my researches of this nature were received by many of my new colleagues, I was tempted for a moment to treat in one comprehensive work of the weights and measures in use at Alexandria in the reign of Ptolemy Auletes (80-52). I soon recognised, however, that a subject so general could not be dealt with by the really profound student, and that positive science could not approach it without running a risk of incurring all sorts of mischances. I felt that in investigating several subjects at once I was forsaking the fundamental principles of archaeology. If to-day I confess my mistake, if I acknowledge the incredible enthusiasm with which I was inspired by a far too ambitious scheme, I do so for the sake of the young, who will thus learn by my example to conquer their imagination. It is our most cruel foe. The student who has not succeeded in stifling it is lost for ever to erudition. I still tremble to think in what depths I was nearly plunged by my adventurous spirit. I was within an ace of what one calls history. What a downfall! I should have sunk into art. For history is only art, or, at best, a false science. Who to-day does not know that the historians preceded the archaeologists, as astrologers preceded the astronomers, as the alchemists preceded the chemists, and as the monkeys preceded men? Thank Heaven! I escaped with a mere fright.

My third work, I hasten to say, was wisely planned. It was a monograph entitled, On the toilet of an Egyptian lady of the Middle Empire from an unpublished picture. I

treated the subject so as to avoid all side issues, and I did not permit any generalising to intrude itself. I guarded myself against those considerations, comparisons and views with which certain of my colleagues have marred the exposition of their most valuable discoveries. But why should a work planned so sanely have met with so fantastic a fate? By what freak of destiny should it have proved the cause of the monstrous aberration of my mind? But let me not anticipate events nor confuse dates. My dissertation was intended to be read at a public sitting of the five academies, a distinction all the more precious, as it rarely falls to the lot of works of this character. These academic gatherings have for some years past been largely attended by people of fashion.

The day I delivered my lecture the hall was crowded by a distinguished audience. Women were there in great numbers. Lovely faces and brilliant toilettes graced the galleries. My discourse was listened to with respect. It was not interrupted by those thoughtless and noisy demonstrations which naturally follow mere literary productions. No, the public preserved an attitude more in harmony with the nature of the work presented to them. They were serious and grave.

As I paused between the phrases the better to disentangle the different trains of thought, I had leisure to examine behind my spectacles the entire hall. I can truly say that not the faintest smile could be seen on any lips. On the contrary, even the freshest faces wore an expression of austerity. I seemed to have ripened all their intellects as if by magic. Here and there while I read some young people whispered to their neighbours. They were probably debating some special point treated of in my discourse.

More than that, a beautiful young creature of twenty-two or twenty-four, seated in the left corner of the north balcony, was listening with great attention and taking notes. Her face had a delicacy of features and a mobility of expression truly remarkable. The attention with which she listened to my words gave an added charm to her singular face. She was not alone. A big, robust man, who, like the Assyrian kings, wore a long curled beard and long black hair, stood beside her and occasionally spoke to her in a low voice. My attention, which at first was divided amongst my entire audience, concentrated itself little by little on the young woman. She inspired me, I confess, with an interest which certain of my colleagues might consider unworthy of a scientific mind such as mine, though I feel sure that none of them under similar circumstances would have been more indifferent than I. As I proceeded she scribbled in a little note-book; and as she listened to my discourse one could see that she was visibly swayed by the most contradictory emotions; she seemed to pass from satisfaction and joy to surprise and even anxiety. I examined her with increasing curiosity. Would to God I had set eyes on her and her only that day under the cupola!

I had nearly finished; there hardly remained more than twenty-five or thirty pages at most to read when suddenly my eyes encountered those of the man with the Assyrian beard. How can I explain to you what happened then, seeing that I cannot explain it to myself? All I can say is that the glance of this personage put me at once into a state of indescribable agitation. The eye-balls fixed on me were of a greenish colour. I could not turn my own away. I stood there dumb and open-mouthed. As I had stopped speaking the audience began to applaud. Silence being restored, I tried to continue my discourse. But in spite of the most violent efforts, I could not tear my eyes from those two living lights to which they were so mysteriously riveted. That was not all. By a more amazing phenomenon still, and contrary to all the principles of my whole life, I began to improvise. God alone knows if this was the result of my own freewill!

Under the influence of a strange, unknown and irresistible force I delivered with grace and burning eloquence certain philosophical reflections on the toilet of women in the course of the ages; I generalised, I rhapsodised, I grew eloquent-God forgive me-about the eternal feminine, and the passion which glides like a breath about those perfumed veils with which women know how to adorn their beauty.

The man with the Assyrian beard never ceased staring steadily at me. And I still continued to speak. At last he lowered his eyes, and then I stopped. It is humiliating to add that this portion of my address, which was quite as foreign to my own natural impulse as it was contrary to the scientific mind, was rewarded with tumultuous applause. The young woman in the north balcony clapped her hands and smiled.

I was followed at the reading-desk by a member of the Academy who seemed visibly annoyed at having to be heard after me. Perhaps his fears were exaggerated. At any rate he was listened to without too much impatience. I am under the impression that it was verse that he read.

The meeting being over, I left the hall in company with several of my colleagues, who renewed their congratulations with a sincerity in which I try to believe.

Having paused a moment on the quay near the lions of Creuzot to exchange a few greetings, I observed the man with the Assyrian beard and his beautiful companion enter a coupé. I happened accidentally to be standing next to an eloquent philosopher, of whom it is said that he is equally at home in worldly elegance and in cosmic theories. The young lady, putting her delicate head and her little hand out of the carriage door, called him by name and said with a slight English accent:

"My dear friend, you've forgotten me. That's too bad!"

After the carriage had gone I asked my illustrious colleague who this charming person and her companion were.

"What!" he replied, "you do not know Miss Morgan and her physician Daoud, who cures all diseases by means of magnetism, hypnotism, and suggestion? Annie Morgan is the daughter of the richest merchant in Chicago. Two years ago she came to Paris with her mother, and she has had a wonderful house built on the Avenue du Bois-de-Boulogne trice. She is highly educated and remarkably clever."

"You do not surprise me," I replied, "for I have reason to think that this American lady is of a very serious turn of mind."

My brilliant colleague smiled as he shook my hand.

I walked home to the Rue Saint Jacques, where I have lived these last thirty years in a modest lodging from which I can just see the tops of the trees in the garden of the Luxembourg, and I sat down at my writing-table.

For three days I sat there assiduously at work, before me a little statuette representing the goddess Pasht with her cat's head. This little monument bears an inscription imperfectly deciphered by Monsieur Grébault I was at work on an adequate interpretation with comments. The incident at the institute had left a less vivid impression on my mind than might have been feared. I was not unduly disturbed. To tell the truth, I had even forgotten it a little, and it required new occurrences to revive its remembrance.

I had, therefore, leisure during these three days to bring my version of the inscription and my notes to a satisfactory conclusion. I only interrupted my archaeological work to read the newspapers, which were loud in my praise.

Newspapers, absolutely ignorant of all learning, spoke in praise of that "charming passage" which had concluded my discourse. "It was a revelation," they said, "and M. Pigeonneau had prepared a most agreeable surprise for us." I do not know why I refer to such trifles, because, usually I am quite indifferent as to what they say about me in the newspapers.

I had been already closeted in my study for three days when a ring at the door-bell startled me. There was something imperious, fantastic, and strange in the motion communicated to the bell-rope which disturbed me, and it was with real anxiety that I went myself to open the door. And whom did I find on the landing? The young American recently so absorbed at the reading of my treatise. It was Miss Morgan in person.

"Monsieur Pigeonneau?"

"Yes."

"I recognised you at once, though you are not wearing your beautiful coat with the embroidery of green palm-leaves. But, please don't put it on for my sake. I like you much better in your dressing-gown."

I led her into my study. She looked curiously at the papyri, the prints, and odds and ends of all kinds which covered the walls to the ceiling, and then she looked silently for some time at the goddess Pasht who stood on my writing-table. Finally she said:

"She is charming."

"Do you refer to this little monument, Madam? As a matter of fact, it is distinguished by an exceptional inscription of a sufficiently curious nature. But may I ask what has procured for me the honour of your visit?"

"O," she cried, "I don't care a fig for its remarkable inscriptions. There never was a more exquisitely delicate cat-face. Of course you believe that she is a real goddess, don't you, Monsieur Pigeonneau?"

I protested against so unworthy a suspicion.

"To believe that would be fetichism."

Her great green eyes looked at me with surprise.

"Ah, then, you don't believe in fetichism? I did not think one could be an archaeologist and yet not believe in fetichism. How can Pasht interest you if you do not believe that she is a goddess? But never mind! I came to see you on a matter of great importance, Monsieur Pigeonneau."

"Great importance?"

"Yes, about a costume. Look at me."

"With pleasure."

"Don't you find traces of the Cushite race in my profile?"

I was at loss what to say. An interview of this nature was so foreign to me.

"Oh, there's nothing surprising about it," she continued. "I remember when I was an Egyptian. And were you also an Egyptian, Monsieur Pigeonneau? Don't you remember? How very curious. At least, you don't doubt that we pass through a series of successive incarnations?"

"I do not know."

"You surprise me, Monsieur Pigeonneau."

"Will you tell me, Madam, to what I am indebted for this honour?"

"To be sure. I haven't yet told you that I have come to beg you to help me to design an Egyptian costume for the fancy ball at Countess N — — —'s. I want a costume that shall be absolutely accurate and bewilderingly beautiful. I have been hard at work at it already, M. Pigeonneau. I have gone over my recollections, for I remember very

well when I lived in Thebes six thousand years ago. I have had designs sent me from London, Boulak and New York."

"Those would, of course, be more reliable." "No, nothing is so reliable as one's intuition. I have also studied in the Egyptian Museum of the Louvre. It is full of enchanting things. Figures so slender and pure, profiles so delicate and clear cut, women who look like flowers, but, at the same time, with something at once rigid and supple. And a god, Bes, who looks like Sarcey! My goodness, how beautiful it all is!"

"Pardon me, but I do not yet quite understand — —"

"I haven't finished. I went to your lecture on the toilet of a woman of the Middle Empire, and I took notes. It was rather dry, your lecture, but I grubbed away at it. By aid of all these notes I have designed a costume. But it is not quite right yet. So I have come to beg you to correct it. Do come to me to-morrow! Will you? Do me that honour for the love of Egypt! You will, won't you? Till to-morrow, I must hurry off. Mama is in the carriage waiting for me."

She disappeared as she said these last words, and I followed. When I reached the vestibule she was already at the foot of the stairs and from here I heard her clear voice call up:

"Till to-morrow. Avenue du Bois-de-Boulogne, at the corner of the Villa Saïd."

"I shall not go to see this mad creature," I said to myself.

The next afternoon at four o'clock I rang the door-bell. A footman led me into an immense, well-lighted hall crowded with pictures and statues in marble and bronze; sedan chairs in Vernis Martin set with porcelain plaques; Peruvian mummies; a dozen dummy figures of men and horses in full armour, over which, by reason of their great height, towered a Polish cavalier with white wings on his shoulders and a French knight equipped for the tournament, his helmet bearing a crest of a woman's head with pointed coif and flowing veil.

An entire grove of palm-trees in tubs reared their foliage in this hall, and in their midst was seated a gigantic Buddha in gold. At the foot of the god sat a shabbily dressed old woman reading the Bible.

I was still dazzled by these many marvels when the purple hangings were raised and Miss Morgan appeared in a white peignoir trimmed with swans-down. She was followed by two great, long-muzzled boarhounds.

"I was sure you would come, Monsieur Pigeonneau."

I stammered a compliment.

"How could one possibly refuse anything to so charming a lady?"

"O, it is not because I am pretty that I am never refused anything. I have secrets by which I make myself obeyed."

Then, pointing to the old lady who was reading the Bible, she said to me:

"Pay no attention to her, that is mama. I shall not introduce you. Should you speak she could not reply; she belongs to a religious sect which forbids unnecessary conversation. It is the very latest thing in sects. Its adherents wear sackcloth and eat out of wooden basins. Mama greatly enjoys these little observances. But you can imagine that I did not ask you here to talk to you about mama. I will put on my Egyptian costume. I shan't be long. In the meantime you might look at these little things."

And she made me sit down before a cabinet containing a mummy-case, several statuettes of the Middle Empire, a number of scarabs, and some beautiful fragments of a ritual for the burial of the dead.

Left alone, I examined the papyrus with the more interest, inasmuch as it was inscribed with a name I had already discovered on a seal. It was the name of a scribe of King Seti I. I immediately applied myself to noting the various interesting peculiarities the document exhibited.

I was plunged in this occupation for a longer time than I could accurately measure, when I was warned by a kind of instinct that some one was behind me. I turned and saw a marvellous being, her head surmounted by a gold hawk and the pure and adorable lines of her young body revealed by a clinging white sheath. Over this a transparent rose-coloured tunic, bound at the waist by a girdle of precious stones, fell and separated into symmetrical folds. Arms and feet were bare and loaded with rings.

She stood before me, her head turned towards her right shoulder in a hieratic attitude which gave to her delicious beauty something indescribably divine.

"What! Is that you, Miss Morgan?"

"Unless it is Neferu-Ra in person. You remember the Neferu-Ra of Leconte de Lisle, the Beauty of the Sun?"

"Pallid and pining on her virgin bed,
Swathed in fine lawns from dainty foot to head."

"Voici qu'elle languit sur son lit virginal,
Très pâle, enveloppée avec des fines toiles."

"But of course you don't know. You know nothing of verse. And yet verses are so pretty. Come! Let's go to work."

Having mastered my emotion, I made some remarks to this charming young person about her enchanting costume. I ventured to criticise certain details as departing from archaeological accuracy. I proposed to replace certain gems in the setting of the rings by others more universally in use in the Middle Empire. Finally I decidedly opposed the wearing of a clasp of cloisonné enamel. In fact, this jewel was a most odious anachronism. We at last agreed to replace this by a boss of precious stones deep set in fine gold. She listened with great docility, and seemed so pleased with me that she even asked me to stay to dinner. I excused myself because of my regular habits and the simplicity of my diet and took my leave. I was already in the vestibule when she called after me:

"Well, now, is my costume sufficiently smart? How mad I shall make all the other women at the Countess's ball!"

I was shocked at the remark. But having turned towards her I saw her again, and again I fell under her spell.

She called me back.

"Monsieur Pigeonneau," she said, "you are such a dear man! Write me a little story and I will love you ever and ever and ever so much!"

"I don't know how," I replied.

She shrugged her shoulders and exclaimed:

"What is the use of science if it can't help you to write a story! You must write me a story, Monsieur Pigeonneau."

Thinking it useless to repeat my absolute refusal I took my leave without replying.

At the door I passed the man with the Assyrian beard, Dr. Daoud, whose glance had so strangely affected me under the cupola of the Institute.

He struck me as being of the commonest class, and I found it very disagreeable to meet him again.

The Countess N——'s ball took place about fifteen days after my visit. I was not surprised to read in the newspaper that the beautiful Miss Morgan had created a sensation in the costume of Neferu-Ra.

During the rest of the year 1886 I did not hear her mentioned again. But on the first day of the New Year, as I was writing in my study, a manservant brought me a letter and a basket.

"From Miss Morgan," he explained, and went away. I heard a mewing in the basket which had been placed on my writing table, and when I opened it out sprang a little grey cat.

It was not an Angora. It was a cat of some Oriental breed, much more slender than ours, and with a striking resemblance, so far as I could judge, to those of his race found in great numbers in the subterranean tombs of Thebes, their mummies swathed in coarse mummy-wrappings. He shook himself, gazed about, arched his back, yawned, and then rubbed himself, purring, against the goddess Pasht, who stood on my table in all her purity of form and her delicate, pointed face. Though his colour was dark and his fur short, he was graceful, and he seemed intelligent and quite tame. I could not imagine the reason for such a curious present, nor did Miss Morgan's letter greatly enlighten me. It was as follows:

"Dear Sir,

"I am sending you a little cat which Dr. Daoud brought back from Egypt, and of which I am very fond. Treat him well for my sake, Baudelaire, the greatest French poet after Stéphane Mallarmé, has said:

"The ardent lover and the unbending sage,
Alike companion in their ripe old age,
With the sleek arrogant cat, the household's pride,
Slothful and chilly by the warm fireside.'
"Les amoureux fervents et les savants austères
Aiment également, dans leur mûre saison,
Les chats puissants et doux, orgueil de la maison,
Qui comme eux sont frileux et comme eux sédentaires."

"I need hardly remind you that you must write me a story. Bring it on Twelfth Night. We will dine together.

"Annie Morgan.

"P.S. — Your little cat's name is Porou."

Having read this letter, I looked at Porou who, standing on his hind legs, was licking the black face of Pasht, his divine sister. He looked at me, and I must confess that of the two of us he was the less astonished. I asked myself, "What does this mean?" But I soon gave up trying to understand.

"It is expecting too much of myself to try and discover reason in the follies of this madcap," I thought. "I must get to work again. As for this little animal, Madam Magloire my housekeeper can provide for his needs."

Whereupon I resumed my work on a chronology, all the more interesting as it gave me the opportunity to abuse somewhat my distinguished colleague, Monsieur Maspéro. Porou did not leave my table. Seated on his haunches, his ears pricked, he

watched me write, and strange to say I accomplished no good work that day. My ideas were all in confusion; there came to my mind scraps of songs and odds and ends of fairy-tales, and I went to bed very dissatisfied with myself. The next morning I again found Porou, seated on my writing-table, licking his paws. That day again I worked very badly; Porou and I spent the greater part of the day watching each other. The next morning it was the same, and also the morning after; in short, the whole week. I ought to have been distressed, but I must confess that little by little I began to resign myself to my ill-luck, not only with patience, but even with some amusement. The rapidity with which a virtuous man becomes depraved is something terrible. The morning preceding Twelfth Night, which fell on a Sunday, I rose in high spirits and hurried to my writing-table, where, according to his custom, Porou, had already preceded me. I took a handsome copy-book of white paper and dipped my pen into the ink and wrote in big letters, under the watchful observation of my new friend:

"The Misadventures of a one-eyed Porter?."

Thereupon, without ceasing to look at Porou, I wrote all day long in the most prodigious haste a story of such astonishing adventures, so charming and so varied that I was myself vastly entertained. My one-eyed porter mixed up all his parcels and committed the most absurd mistakes. Lovers in critical situations received from him, and quite without his knowledge, the most unexpected aid. He transported wardrobes in which men were concealed, and he placed them in other houses, frightening old ladies almost to death. But how describe so merry a story! While writing I burst out laughing at least twenty times. If Porou did not laugh, his solemn silence was quite as amusing as the most uproarious hilarity. It was already seven o'clock in the evening when I wrote the final line of this delightful story. During the last hour the room had only been lighted by Porou's phosphorescent eyes. And yet I had written with as much ease in the darkness as by the light of a good lamp. My story finished, I proceeded to dress. I put on my evening clothes and my white tie, and, taking leave of Porou, I hurried downstairs into the street. I had hardly gone twenty steps when I felt some one pull at my sleeve.

"Where are you running to, uncle, just like a somnambulist?"

It was my nephew Marcel who hailed me in this fashion. He is an honest, intelligent young man, and a house-surgeon at the Salpêtrière. People say that he has a successful medical career before him. And indeed he would be clever enough if he would only be more on his guard against his whimsical imagination.

"Why, I am on my way to Miss Morgan, to take her a story I have just written."

"What, uncle! You write stories, and you know Miss Morgan? She is very pretty. And do you also know Dr. Daoud who follows her about everywhere?"

"A quack, a charlatan!"

"Possibly, uncle, and yet, unquestionably a most extraordinary experimentalist. Neither Bernheim nor Liégeois, not even Charcot himself, has obtained the phenomena he produces at will. He induces the hypnotic condition and control by suggestion without contact, and without any direct agency, through the intervention of an animal. He commonly makes use of little short-haired cats for his experiments.

"This is how he goes to work: he suggests an action of some kind to a cat, then he sends the animal in a basket to the subject he wishes to influence. The animal transmits the suggestion he has received, and the patient under the influence of the beast does exactly what the operator desires."

"Is this true?"

"Yes, quite true, uncle."

"And what is Miss Morgan's share in these interesting experiments?"

"Miss Morgan employs Dr. Daoud to work for her, and she makes use of hypnotism and suggestion to induce people to make fools of themselves, as if her beauty was not quite enough."

I did not stop to listen any longer. An irresistible force hurried me on towards Miss Morgan.

THE DAUGHTER OF LILITH TO JEAN PSICHARI

I had left Paris late in the evening, and I spent a long, silent and snowy night in the corner of the railway carriage. I waited six mortal hours at X — — —, and the next afternoon I found nothing better than a farm-waggon to take me to Artigues. The plain whose furrows rose and fell by turns on either side of the road, and which I had seen long ago lying radiant in the sunshine, was now covered with a heavy veil of snow over which straggled the twisted black stems of the vines. My driver gently urged on his old horse, and we proceeded through an infinite silence broken only at intervals by the plaintive cry of a bird, sad even unto death. I murmured this prayer in my heart: "My God, God of Mercy, save me from despair and after so many transgressions, let me not commit the one sin Thou dost not forgive." Then I saw the sun, red and rayless, blood-hued, descending on the horizon, as it were, the sacred Host, and remembering the divine Sacrifice of Calvary, I felt hope enter into my soul. For some time longer the wheels crunched the snow. At last the driver pointed with the end of his whip to the spire of Artigues as it rose like a shadow against the dull red haze.

"I say," said the man, "are you going to stop at the presbytery? You know the curé?"

"I have known him ever since I was a child. He was my master when I was a student."

"Is he learned in books?"

"My friend, M. Safrac, is as learned as he is good."

"So they say. But they also say other things."

"What do they say, my friend?"

"They say what they please, and I let them talk."

"What more do they say?"

"Well, there are those who say he is a sorcerer, and that he can tell fortunes."

"What nonsense!"

"For my part I keep a still tongue! But if M. Safrac is not a sorcerer and fortune-teller, why does he spend his time reading books?"

The waggon stopped in front of the presbytery.

I left the idiot, and followed the cure's servant, who conducted me to her master in a room where the table was already laid. I found M. Safrac greatly changed in the three years since I had last seen him. His tall figure was bent. He was excessively emaciated. Two piercing eyes glowed in his thin face. His nose, which seemed to have grown longer, descended over his shrunken lips. I fell into his arms.

"My father, my father," I cried, sobbing, "I have come to you because I have sinned. My father, my dear old master, whose profound and mysterious knowledge overawed my mind, and who yet reassured it with a revelation of maternal tenderness, save your child from the brink of a precipice. O my only friend, save me; enlighten me, you my only beacon!"

He embraced me, and smiled on me with that exquisite kindness of which he had given so many proofs during my childhood, and then he stepped back, as if to see me better.

"Well, adieu!" he said, greeting me according to the custom of his country, for M. Safrac was born on the banks of the Garonne, in the home of those famous wines which seemed the symbol of his own generous and fragrant soul.

After having taught philosophy with great distinction in Bordeaux, Poitiers and Paris, he asked as his only reward the gift of a poor cure in the country where he had been born and where he wished to die. He had now been priest at Artigues for six years, and in this obscure village he practised the most humble piety and the most enlightened sciences.

"Well, adieu! my child," he repeated. "You wrote me a letter to announce your coming which has moved me deeply. It is true, then, that you have not forgotten your old master?"

I tried to throw myself at his feet

"Save me! save me!" I stammered.

But he stopped me with a gesture at once imperious and gentle.

"You shall tell me to-morrow, Ary, what you have to tell. First, warm yourself. Then we will have supper, for you must be very hungry and very thirsty."

The servant placed on the table the soup-tureen out of which rose a fragrant column of steam. She was an old woman, her hair hidden under a black kerchief, and in her wrinkled face were strongly mingled the beauty of race and the ugliness of decay. I was in profound distress, and yet the peace of this saintly dwelling, the gaiety of the wood fire, the white table-cloth, the wine and the steaming dishes entered, little by little, into my soul. Whilst I ate I nearly forgot that I had come to the fireside of this priest to exchange the soreness of remorse for the fertilising dew of repentance. Monsieur Safrac reminded me of the hours, already long since past, which we had spent together in the college when he had taught philosophy.

"You, Ary," he said to me, "were my best pupil. Your quick intelligence was always in advance of the thought of the teacher. For that reason I at once became attached to you. I like a Christian to be daring. Faith should not be timid when unbelief shows an indomitable audacity. The Church nowadays has lambs only; and it needs lions. Who will give us back those learned fathers and doctors whose erudition embraced all sciences? Truth is like the sun; it requires the eye of an eagle to contemplate it."

"Ah, M. Safrac, you brought to bear on all questions that daring vision which nothing dazzles. I remember that your opinions sometimes even startled those of your colleagues whom the holiness of your life filled with admiration. You did not fear new ideas. Thus, for instance, you were inclined to admit the plurality of inhabited worlds."

His eyes kindled.

"What will the cowards say when they read my book? I have meditated, and I have worked under this beautiful sky, in this land which God has created with a special love. You know that I have some knowledge of Hebrew, Arabic, Persian, and certain of the Indian dialects. You also know that I have brought here a library rich in ancient manuscripts. I have plunged profoundly into the knowledge of the tongues and traditions of the primitive East. This great work, by the help of God, will not have been in vain. I have nearly finished my book on 'Origins,' which re-establishes and upholds that Biblical exegesis of which an impious science already foresaw the

imminent overthrow. God in His mercy has at last permitted science and faith to be reconciled. To effect this reconciliation I have started with the following premises:

"The Bible, inspired by the Holy Ghost, tells only the truth, but it does not tell all the truth. And how could it, seeing that its only object is to inform us of what is needful for our eternal salvation? Apart from this great purpose it has no other. Its design is as simple as it is infinite. It includes the fall and the redemption; it is the sacred history of man; it is complete and restricted. Nothing has been admitted to satisfy profane curiosity. A godless science must not be permitted to triumph any longer over the silence of God. It is time to say, 'No, the Bible has not lied, because it has not revealed all.' That is the truth which I proclaim. By the help of geology, prehistoric archaeology, the Oriental cosmogonies, Hittite and Sumerian monuments, Chaldean and Babylonian traditions preserved in the Talmud, I assert the existence of the pre-Adamites, of whom the inspired writer of Genesis does not speak, for the only reason that their existence did not bear upon the eternal salvation of the children of Adam. Furthermore, a minute study of the first chapters of Genesis has proved to me the existence of two successive creations separated by untold ages, of which the second is only, so to speak, the adaptation of a corner of the earth to the needs of Adam and his posterity."

He paused, then he continued in a low voice and with a solemnity truly religious:

"I, Martial Safrac, unworthy priest, doctor of theology, submissive as an obedient child to the authority of our Holy Mother the Church, I assert with absolute certainty—yielding all due submission to our holy father the Pope and the Councils—that Adam, who was created in the image of God, had two wives, of whom Eve was the second."

These singular words drew me little by little out of myself and filled me with a curious interest. I therefore felt something of disappointment when M. Safrac, planting his elbows on the table, said to me:

"Enough on that subject. Some day, perhaps, you will read my book, which will enlighten you on this point. I was obliged, in obedience to strict duty, to submit the work to Monseigneur, and to beg his Grace's approval. The manuscript is at present in the archbishop's hands, and any minute I may expect a reply which I have every reason to believe will be favourable. My dear child, try those mushrooms out of our own woods, and this native wine of ours, and acknowledge that this is the second promised land, of which the first was only the image and the forecast."

From this time on our conversation, grown more familiar, ranged over our common recollections.

"Yes, my child," said M. Safrac, "you were my favourite pupil, and God permits preferences if they are founded on impartial judgment. So I decided at once that

there was in you the making of a man and a Christian. Not that great imperfections were not in evidence. You were irresolute, uncertain, and easily disconcerted. Passions, so far latent, smouldered in your soul. I loved you because of your great restlessness, as I did another of my pupils for quite opposite qualities. I loved Paul d'Ervy for his unswerving steadfastness of mind and heart."

At this name I blushed and turned pale and with difficulty suppressed a cry, and when I tried to answer I found it impossible to speak. M. Safrac appeared not to notice my distress.

"If I remember aright, he was your best friend," he added. "You have remained intimate ever since, have you not? I know he has started on a diplomatic career, and a great future is predicted for him. I hope that in happier times than the present he may be entrusted with office at the Holy See. In him you have a faithful and devoted friend."

"My father," I replied, with a great effort, "to-morrow I will speak to you of Paul d'Ervy and of another person."

M. Safrac pressed my hand. We separated, and I went to the room which had been prepared for me. In my bed, fragrant with lavender, I dreamed that I was once again a child, and that as I knelt in the college chapel I was admiring the blonde and ecstatic women with which the gallery was filled, when suddenly out of a cloud over my head I seemed to hear a voice say:

"Ary, you believe that you love them in God, but it is God you love in them."

The next morning when I woke I found M. Safrac standing at the side of my bed.

"Come, Ary, and hear the Mass which I am about to celebrate for your intention. After the Holy Sacrifice I shall be ready to listen to what you have to say."

The Church of Artigues was a little sanctuary in the Norman style which still flourished in Aquitaine in the twelfth century. Restored some twenty years ago, it had received the addition of a bell-tower which had not been contemplated in the original plan. At any rate, poverty had safeguarded its pure bareness. I tried to join in the prayers of the celebrant as much as my thoughts would permit, and then I returned with him to the presbytery. Here we breakfasted on a little bread and milk, after which we went to M. Safrac's room.

He drew a chair to the fireplace, over which hung a crucifix, and invited me to be seated, and seating himself beside me he signed to me to speak. Outside the snow fell. I began as follows:

"My father, it is ten years ago since I left your care and entered the world. I have preserved my faith, but, alas, not my purity. But it is unnecessary to remind you of my life; you know it, you my spiritual guide, the only keeper of my conscience.

Moreover, I am in haste to arrive at the event which has convulsed my being. Last year my family had decided that I must marry, and I myself had willingly consented. The young girl destined for me united all the advantages of which parents are usually in search. More than that, she was pretty; she pleased me to such a degree that instead of a marriage of convenience I was about to make a marriage of affection. My offer was accepted, and we were betrothed. The happiness and peace of my life seemed assured when I received a letter from Paul d'Ervy who had returned from Constantinople and announced his arrival in Paris. He expressed a great desire to see me. I hurried to him and announced my marriage. He congratulated me heartily.

"My dear old boy," he said, "I rejoice in your happiness."

"I told him that I counted on him to be my witness and he willingly consented. The date of my wedding was fixed for May 15, and he was not obliged to return to his post until the beginning of June.

"How lucky that is," I said to him. "And you?"

"Oh, I," he replied, with a smile which expressed in turn joy and sorrow, "I—what a change! I am mad—a woman—Ary. I am either very fortunate or very unfortunate! What name can one give to a happiness gained by an evil action? I have betrayed, I have broken the heart of a good friend... I carried off—yonder—in Constantinople—"

M. Safrac interrupted me:

"My son, leave out of your narrative the faults of others and name no one."

I promised to obey, and continued as follows:

"Paul had hardly ceased speaking when a woman entered the room. Evidently it was she; dressed in a long blue peignoir, she seemed to be at home. I will describe to you in one word the terrible impression she produced on me: she did not seem natural. I realise how vague is this expression and how inadequately it explains my meaning. But perhaps it will become more intelligible in the course of my story. But, indeed, in the expression of her golden eyes, that seemed at times to throw out sparks of light, in the curve of her enigmatical mouth, in the substance of her skin, at once brown and yet luminous, in the play of the angular and yet harmonious lines of her body, in the ethereal lightness of her footsteps, even in her bare arms, to which invisible wings seemed attached, and, finally, in her ardent and magnetic personality, I felt an indescribable something foreign to the nature of humanity; an indescribable something inferior and yet superior to the woman God has created in his formidable goodness, so that she should be our companion in this earthly exile. From the moment I saw her one feeling alone overmastered my soul and pervaded it; I felt a profound aversion towards everything that was not this woman.

"Seeing her enter, Paul frowned slightly, but changing his mind, he made an effort to smile.

"Leila, I wish to present to you my best friend."

"Leila replied:

"I know M. Ary."

"These words could not but seem strange as we had certainly never seen each other before; but the voice with which they were uttered was stranger still.

"If crystal could utter thought, so it would speak.

"My friend Ary," continued Paul, "is to be married in six weeks."

"At these words Leila looked at me and I saw distinctly that her golden eyes said 'No!'

"I went away greatly disturbed, nor did my friend show the slightest desire to detain me. All that day I wandered aimlessly through the streets, my heart empty and desolate; then, towards night, finding myself in front of a florist's shop, I remembered my fiancée, and went in to get her a spray of white lilac. I had hardly taken hold of the flowers when a little hand tore them out of my grasp, and I saw Leila, who turned away laughing. She wore a short grey dress and a jacket of the same colour and a small round hat. I must confess that this costume of a Parisian dressed for walking was most unbecoming to her fairy-like beauty and seemed a kind of disguise. And yet, seeing her so, I felt that I loved her with an undying love. I tried to rejoin her, but I lost her among the crowd and the carriages.

"From this time on I seemed to cease to live. I called several times at Paul's without seeing Leila again. He always received me in a friendly manner, but he never spoke of her. We had nothing to say to each other, and I was sad when we parted. At last, one day, the footman said that his master was out. He added 'Perhaps you would like to see Madame?' I replied 'Yes.' O, my father, what tears of blood can ever atone for this little word! I entered. I found her in the drawing-room, half reclining on a couch, in a dress as yellow as gold, under which she had drawn her little feet. I saw her—but, no, I saw nothing. My throat was suddenly parched, I could not utter a word. A fragrance of myrrh and aromatic perfumes which emanated from her seemed to intoxicate me with languor and longing, as if at once all the odours of the mystic East had penetrated my quivering nostrils. No, this was certainly not a natural woman, for nothing human seemed to emanate from her. Her face expressed no emotion, either good or bad, beyond a voluptuousness at once sensual and divine. She doubtless noticed my suffering, for she asked with a voice as clear as the ripple of a mountain brook:

"What ails you?"

"I threw myself in tears at her feet and cried, 'I love you madly!'"

"She opened her arms; then enfolding me with a lingering glance of her candid and voluptuous eyes:

"'Why have you not told me this before?'"

"Indescribable moment! I held Leila in my arms. It seemed as if we two together had been transported to Heaven and filled all its spaces. I felt myself become the equal of God, and my breast seemed to enfold all the beauty of earth and the harmonies of nature – the stars and the flowers, the forests that sing, the rivers and the deep seas. I had enfolded the infinite in a kiss...."

At these words Monsieur Safrac, who had listened to me for some moments with growing impatience, rose, and standing before the fireplace, lifted his cassock to his knees to warm his legs and said with a severity which came near being disdain:

"You are a wretched blasphemer, and instead of despising your crimes, you only confess them because of your pride and delight in them. I will listen no more."

At these words I burst into tears and begged his forgiveness. Recognising that my humility was sincere, he desired me to continue my confession on condition that I realised my own self-abasement.

I continued my story as follows, determined to make it as brief as possible:

"My father, I was torn by remorse when I left Leila. But, from the following day on, she came to me, and then began a life which tortured me with joy and anguish. I was jealous of Paul, whom I had betrayed, and I suffered cruelly.

"I do not believe that there is a more debasing evil than jealousy, nor one which fills the soul with more degrading thoughts. Even to console me Leila scorned to lie. Besides, her conduct was incomprehensible. I do not forget to whom I am speaking, and I shall be careful not to offend the ears of the most revered of priests. I can only say that Leila seemed ignorant of the love she permitted. But she had enveloped my whole being in the poison of sensuality. I could not exist without her, and I trembled at the thought of losing her.

"Leila seemed absolutely devoid of what we call moral sense. You must not, however, think that she was either wicked or cruel. On the contrary, she was gentle and compassionate. Nor was she without intelligence, but her intelligence was not of the same nature as ours. She said little, and she refused to reply to any questions that were asked her about her past. She was ignorant of all that we know. On the other hand, she knew many things of which we are ignorant.

"Educated in the East, she was familiar with all sorts of Hindoo and Persian legends, which she would repeat with a certain monotonous cadence and with an infinite

grace. Listening to her as she described the charming dawn of the world, one would have said she had lived in the youth of creation. This I once said to her.

"It is true, I am old," she answered smiling.

M. Safrac, still standing in front of the fireplace, had for some time bent towards me in an attitude of keen attention.

"Continue," he said.

"Often, my father, I questioned Leila about her religion. She replied that she had none, and that she had no need of one; that her mother and sisters were the daughters of God, but that they were not bound to Him by any creed. She wore a medallion about her neck filled with a little red earth which she said she had piously gathered because of her love for her mother."

Hardly had I uttered these words when M. Safrac, pale and trembling, sprang forward, and, seizing my arm, shouted:

"She told the truth! I know now. I know who this creature was, Ary! Your instinct did not deceive you. It was not a woman. Continue, continue, I implore."

"My father, I have nearly finished. Alas, for Leila's love, I had broken my solemn plighted troth, I had betrayed my best friend. I had affronted God. Paul, having heard of Leila's faithlessness, became mad with grief. He threatened her with death, but she replied gently:

"Kill me, my friend; I long to die, but I cannot."

"For six months she gave herself to me; then one morning she said that she was about to return to Persia, and that she would never see me again. I wept, I moaned, I raved: 'You have never loved me!'

"No, my friend," she replied gently. 'And yet how many women who have loved you no better have denied you what you received from me! You still owe me some gratitude. Farewell.'

"For two days I was plunged in alternate fury and apathy! Then remembering the salvation of my soul, I hurried to you, my father. Here I am. Purify me, uplift me, strengthen my heart, for I love her still."

I ceased. M. Safrac, his hand raised to his forehead, remained lost in thought. He was the first to break the silence.

"My son, this confirms my great discovery. What you tell me will confound the vainglory of our modern sceptics. Listen to me. We live today in the midst of miracles as did the first-born of men. Listen, listen! Adam, as I have already told you, had a first wife whom the Bible does not make mention of, but of whom the Talmud speaks. Her name was Lilith. Created, not out of one of his ribs, but from

this same red earth out of which he himself had been kneaded, she was not flesh of his flesh. She voluntarily separated from him. He was still living in innocence when she left him to go to those regions where long years afterwards the Persians settled, but which at this time were inhabited by the pre-Adamites, more intelligent and more beautiful than the sons of men. She therefore had no part in the transgression of our first father, and was unsullied by that original sin. Because of this she also escaped from the curse pronounced against Eve and her descendants. She is exempt from sorrow and death; having no soul to be saved, she is incapable of virtue or vice. Whatever she does, she accomplishes neither good nor evil. The daughters that were born to her of some mysterious wedlock are immortal as she is, and free as she is both in their deeds and thoughts, seeing that they can neither gain nor lose in the sight of God. Now, my son, I recognise by indisputable signs that the creature who caused your downfall, this Leila, was a daughter of Lilith. Compose yourself to prayer. To-morrow I will hear you in confession."

He remained silent for a moment, then drawing a paper out of his pocket, he continued:

"Late last night, after having wished you good night, the postman, who had been delayed by the snow, brought me a very distressing letter. The senior vicaire informs me that my book has been a source of grief to Monseigneur, and has already overshadowed the spiritual joy with which he looked forward to the festival of our Lady of Mount Carmel. The work, he adds, is full of foolhardy doctrines and opinions which have already been condemned by the authorities. His Grace could not approve of such unwholesome lucubrations. This, then, is what they write to me. But I will relate your story to Monseigneur. It will prove to him that Lilith exists and that I do not dream."

I implored Monsieur Safrac to listen to me a moment more.

"When she went away, my father, Leila left me a leaf of cypress on which certain characters which I cannot decipher had been traced with the point of a style. It seems to be a kind of amulet."

Monsieur Safrac took the light film which I held out to him and examined it carefully.

"This," he said, "is written in Persian of the best period and can be easily translated thus:

"THE PRAYER OF LEILA, DAUGHTER OF LILITH

"My God, promise me death, so that I may taste of life. My God, give me remorse, so that I may at last find happiness. My God, make me the equal of the daughters of Eve."

LAETA ACILIA
TO ARY RENAN

I.

Laeta Acilia lived in Marseilles during the reign of the Emperor Tiberius. She had been married for several years to a Roman noble named Helvius, but she had no children, though she longed passionately to become a mother. One day as she went to the temple to pray to the gods she found the entrance crowded by a band of men, half naked, emaciated and devoured by leprosy and ulcers. She paused in terror on the lowest step of the temple. Laeta Acilia was not without compassion. She pitied the poor creatures, but she was afraid of them. Nor had she ever seen beggars as wild looking as those who at this moment crowded before her, livid, lifeless, their empty wallets flung at their feet. She grew pale and held her hand to her heart; she could neither advance nor escape, and she felt her limbs giving way under her when a woman of striking beauty detached herself from these unfortunates and came towards her.

"Fear nothing, young woman," and the unknown spoke in a voice both grave and tender, "the men you see here are not cruel. They are the bearers not of falsehood and evil, but of truth and love. We have come from Judaea, where the Son of God has died and risen again. When He ascended to the right hand of His Father those who believed in Him suffered cruel wrongs. Stephen was stoned by the people. As for us, the priests placed us on board a ship without sails or rudder, and we were delivered over to the waters of the sea to the end that we should perish. But the God who loved us in His mortal life mercifully led us to the harbour of this town. Alas! the people of Marseilles are avaricious, idolatrous and cruel. They permit the disciples of Jesus to die of hunger and cold. And had we not taken refuge in this temple, which they deem sacred, they would already have dragged us to their gloomy prisons. And yet it would have been well had they welcomed us, since we bring good tidings."

Having thus spoken the stranger held out her hand towards her companions and pointed to each in turn.

"That old man, lady," she said, "who turns on you his serene gaze, that is Cedon, he whom, though blind from birth, the Master healed. Cedon now sees with equal clearness things both visible and invisible. That other old man, whose beard is as white as the snow on the mountains, is Maximin. This man, still so young, and who yet seems so weary, is my brother. He was possessed of great wealth in Jerusalem. Near him stand Martha my sister and Mantilla, the faithful servant who in happier days gathered olives on the hillsides of Bethany."

"And you," asked Laeta Acilia, "you whose voice is so soft and whose face is so beautiful, what is your name?"

The Jewess replied:

"I am called Mary Magdalen. I divined by the gold embroidery on your raiment, and the unconscious pride of your bearing, that you are the wife of one of the principal citizens of this town. For this reason I have approached you, to the end that you may move the heart of your husband on behalf of the disciples of Jesus Christ. Say to this rich man: 'Lord, they are naked, let us clothe them; they are anhungered and thirsty let us give them bread and wine, and God will restore to us in His Kingdom what was borrowed from us in His name.'"

Laeta Acilia replied:

"Mary, I will do as you ask. My husband is named Helvius; he is of noble rank and one of the richest citizens of the town; never for long does he refuse what I desire, for he loves me. Your companions have now ceased, O Mary, to fill me with fear. I shall even dare to pass close to them, though their limbs are polluted by ulcers, and I shall go to the temple to pray to the immortal gods to grant my wish. Alas! hitherto they have refused."

Mary, with arms outstretched, barred her way.

"Beware, lady," she cried, "of worshipping vain idols. Do not demand of images of stone words of hope and life. There is only one God, and with my hair I have wiped His feet."

At these words the flashing of her eyes, dark as the sky in a storm, mingled with tears, and Laeta Acilia said to herself:

"I am pious, and I faithfully perform the ceremonies religion demands, but in this woman there is a strange feeling of a love divine."

Mary Magdalen continued in ecstasy: "He was the God of Heaven and earth, and He uttered His parables seated on the bench by the threshold, under the shade of the old fig-tree. He was young and beautiful. He would have been glad to be loved. When he came to supper in my sister's house I sat at His feet, and the words flowed from His lips like the waters of a torrent. And when my sister complained of my sloth, saying: 'Master, tell her it is but right that she should aid me to prepare the supper,' He smiled and made excuse for me, and permitted me to remain seated at His feet, and said that I had chosen the good part.

"One would have thought to see Him that He was but a young shepherd from the mountains, and yet His eyes flashed flames like those that issued from the brow of Moses. His gentleness was like the peace of night and His anger was more terrible than a thunderbolt. He loved the humble and the little ones. Along the roadside the

children ran towards Him and clung to His garments. He was the God of Abraham and Jacob, and with the same hands that had created the sun and the stars, He caressed the cheeks of the newly born whom their happy mothers held out to Him from the thresholds of their cottages. He was himself as simple as a child, and He raised the dead to life. Here among my companions you see my brother whom He raised from the dead. Behold, lady! Lazarus bears on his face the pallor of death, and in his eyes is the horror of one who has seen hell."

But for some moments past Laeta Acilia had ceased to listen.

She raised towards the Jewess her candid eyes and her small, smooth forehead.

"Mary," she said, "I am a pious woman, attached to the faith of my fathers. Unbelief is evil for our sex. And it does not beseem the wife of a Roman noble to accept new fashions in religions. And yet I must confess that there are some charming gods in the East. Your God, Mary, seems one of these. You have told me that He loves little children, and that He kisses them as they lie in the arms of their young mothers. By that I see that He is a God who is favourable to women, and I regret that He is not held in esteem among the aristocracy and the official classes, or I would gladly bring him offerings of honey-cakes. But, listen, Mary the Jewess, appeal to Him, you whom He loves, and demand of Him for me that which I dare not demand myself, and which my goddesses have refused."

Laeta Acilia uttered these words with hesitation. She paused and blushed.

"What is it," Mary Magdalen asked eagerly, "and what desire, lady, has your unsatisfied soul?"

Gaining courage little by little, Laeta Acilia replied:

"Mary, you are a woman, and though I know you not, I yet may confide to you a woman's secret. During the six years that I have been married I have not had a child, and that is a great sorrow to me; I need a child to love; the love in my heart for the little creature I am awaiting, and who yet may never come, is stifling me. If your God, Mary Magdalen, grants me through your intercession what my goddesses have denied me, I shall say that He is a good God, and I will love Him and I will make my friends love Him. And like us they are young and rich, and they belong to the first families of the town."

Mary Magdalen replied gravely:

"Daughter of the Romans, when you shall have received that for which you ask, may you remember this promise that you have made to the servant of Jesus."

"I shall remember," she replied. "In the meantime take this purse, Mary, and divide the money it contains among your companions. Farewell, I shall return to my house. As soon as I arrive I will send baskets full of bread and meat for you and your

friends. Tell your brother and your sister and your friends that they may without fear leave the sanctuary where they have taken refuge and go to some inn on the outskirts of the town. Helvius, who has great influence in the town, will prevent any one molesting them. May the gods protect you, Mary Magdalen! When it shall please you to see me again ask of the passers-by for the house of Laeta Acilia; any of the citizens will be able to show you the way without trouble."

II.

It was six months later that Laeta Acilia, lying on a purple couch in the courtyard of her house, crooned a little song that had no sense and which her mother had sung before her. The water sang gaily in the fountain out of whose shallow basin rose young Tritons in marble, and the balmy-air gently stirred the murmuring leaves of the old plane-tree. Tired, languid, happy, heavy as a bee leaving the orchard, the young woman crossed her arms over her rounded body, and, having ceased her song, glanced about her and sighed in the fulness of pride.

At her feet her black, white and yellow slaves were busy with needle, shuttle and spindle, vying with each other as they worked at the garments for the expected infant. Laeta stretched out her hand and took a little cap which an old slave laughingly offered her. She placed it on her closed hand and laughed in turn. It was a little cap of purple and gold, silver and pearls, and splendid as the dreams of a poor African slave.

At that moment a stranger entered this interior court. She was clothed in a seamless garment of one piece, in colour like the dust of the roads. Her long hair was covered with ashes, but her face, worn by tears, still shone with glory and beauty.

The slaves, mistaking her for a beggar, were about to drive her away when Laeta Acilia, recognising her at the first glance, rose and ran towards her.

"Mary, Mary," she cried, "it is true that you were the favourite of a god. He whom you loved on earth has heard you in Heaven, and through your intercession He has granted my prayer. See," she added, and she showed her the little cap which she still held in her hand, "how happy I am and how grateful to you."

"I knew it," replied Mary Magdalen "and I have come, Laeta Acilia, to instruct you in the truth of Jesus Christ."

Thereupon the Marseillaise dismissed her slaves, and offered the Jewess an ivory armchair with cushions embroidered in gold. But Mary Magdalen, pushing it back with disgust, seated herself on the ground with feet crossed in the shade of the great plane-tree stirred by the murmuring breeze.

"Daughter of the Gentiles," she said, "you have not despised the disciples of the Lord. For this reason I will teach you to know Jesus as I know Him, to the end that

you shall love Him as I love Him. I was a sinner when I saw for the first time the most beautiful of the sons of men."

Thereupon she told how she had thrown herself at the feet of Jesus in the house of Simon the Leper, and how she had poured over the Master's adored feet all the ointment of spikenard contained in the alabaster vase. She repeated the words the gentle Master had uttered in reply to the murmurs of His rough disciples.

"Why do you reprove this woman?" He had said. "That which she has done is well done. For the poor ye have always with you, but Me ye have not always. She has with forethought anointed My body for My burial. I tell you in truth that in the whole world, wherever the Gospel is preached, shall be told what she has done, and she shall be praised."

She then described how Jesus had cast out the seven devils that had raged within her.

She added:

"Since then, enraptured and consumed by all the joys of faith and love, I have lived in the shadow of the Master as in a new Eden."

She told her of the lilies of the fields upon which they had gazed together, and of that infinite happiness, the happiness born of faith alone. Then she described how He had been betrayed and put to death for the salvation of His people. She recalled the ineffable scenes of the passion, the burial and the resurrection.

"It was I," she cried, "it was I who of all was the first to see Him. I found two angels clad in white seated, one at the head, the other at the feet, where we had laid the body of Jesus. And they said to me: 'Woman, why weepest thou?' 'I weep because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him.'"

"O joy! Jesus came towards me, and at first I thought He was the gardener. But he called me 'Mary' and I recognised His voice. I cried 'Master' and held out my arms, but He replied gently, 'Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to my Father.'"

As she listened to this narrative Laeta Acilia lost little by little her sense of joy and contentment. Recalling the past and examining her own life, it seemed to her very monotonous in comparison to the life of the woman who had loved a god. Young and pious and a patrician, her own red-letter days were those on which she had eaten cakes with her girl friends. Visits to the circus, the love of Helvius and her needle-work also counted in her life. But what were these all in comparison to the scenes with which Mary Magdalen kindled her senses and her soul? She felt her heart stifling with bitter jealousy and vague regrets.

She envied this Jewess, whose radiant beauty still glowed under the ashes of penitence, her divine adventures, and even her sorrows.

"Begone, Jewess!" she cried, forcing back her tears with her hands. "Begone! But a moment since I was so contented, I believed myself so happy. I did not know that there were other joys than those which were mine. I knew of no other love than that of my good Helvius, and I knew of no other holy joy than to celebrate the mysteries of the goddesses in the manner of my mother and of my grandmother. O, now I understand! Wicked woman, you wished to make me discontented with the life I have led. But you have not succeeded! Why have you come to tell me of your love for a visible God? Why do you boast before me of having seen the resurrection of the Master since I shall not see Him? You even hoped to spoil the joy that is mine in bearing a child. It was wicked! I refuse to know your God. You have loved Him too much! To please Him one is obliged to fall prostrate and dishevelled at His feet. That is not an attitude which beseems the wife of a noble! Helvius would be annoyed did I worship in such a way. I will have nothing to do with a religion that disarranges one's hair! No indeed, I will not allow the little child I bear in my bosom to know your Christ! Should this poor little creature be a daughter she shall learn to love the little goddesses of baked clay that are not larger than my finger, and with these she can play without fear. These are the proper divinities for mothers and children. You are very audacious to boast of your love affairs and to ask me to share them. How could your God be mine? I have not led the life of a sinner, I have not been possessed of seven devils, nor have I frequented the highways. I am a respectable woman. Begone!"

And Mary Magdalen, perceiving that proselytising was not her vocation, retired to a wild cavern since called the Holy Grotto. The sacred historians believe unanimously that Laeta Acilia was not converted to the faith of Christ until many years after this interview which I have faithfully recorded.

A NOTE ON A POINT OF EXEGESIS

I have been reproached for having in this story confused Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha, and Mary Magdalen. I must confess at once that the Gospel seems to make of Mary who poured the perfume of spikenard over the feet of Jesus and of Mary to whom the Master said: "Noli me tangere?," two women absolutely distinct. Upon this point I am willing to make amends to those who have done me the honour to blame me.

Among the number is a princess who belongs to the Orthodox Greek Church. This does not in the least surprise me. The Greeks have always distinguished between the two Marys. It was not the same in the Western Church. On the contrary, the identity of the sister of Martha and Magdalen the sinner was early acknowledged.

The texts lend themselves but ill to this interpretation, but texts never present difficulties to any one but the pundits; the poetry of the people is more subtle than science: it can never be held in check, and it overcomes the obstacles which prove a

stumbling-block to criticism. By a happy turn of the imagination popular fancy has welded the two Marys together and thus created the marvellous type of Mary Magdalen. It has been made sacred by legend, and it is the legend which has inspired my little story. In this I consider myself above reproach. Nor is that all! I am able, even, to invoke the authority of the learned, and I may, without vanity, say that the Sorbonne is on my side. The Sorbonne declared on December 1, 1521, that there is but one Mary.

THE RED EGG TO SAMUEL POZZI

Dr. N — — — placed his coffee-cup on the mantelpiece, threw his cigar into the fire, and said to me: "My dear friend, you recently told me of the strange suicide of a woman tortured by terror and remorse. Her nature was fine and she was exquisitely cultivated. Being suspected of complicity in a crime of which she had been the silent witness, in despair at her own irreparable cowardice, she was haunted by a perpetual nightmare in which her husband appeared to her dead and decomposing and pointing her out with his finger to the inquisitive magistrates. She was the victim of her own morbid imagination. In this condition an insignificant and casual circumstance decided her fate.

"Her nephew, a child, lived with her. One morning he was, as usual, studying his lessons in the dining-room where she happened to be. The child began to translate word by word a verse of Sophocles, and as he wrote he pronounced aloud both the Greek and the translation:

The head divine; of Jocasta; is dead.... tearing her hair; she calls; Laios dead... we see; the woman hung. He added a flourish which tore the paper, stuck out his ink-stained tongue, and repeated in sing-song, 'Hung, hung, hung!'

"The wretched woman, whose will-power had been destroyed, passively obeyed the suggestion in the word, repeated three times. She rose, and without a word or look went straight to her room. Some hours later the police-inspector, called to verify a violent death, made this reflection: 'I have seen many women who have committed suicide, but this is the first time I have seen one who has hanged herself.'

"We speak of suggestion. Here is an instance which is at once natural and credible. I am a little doubtful, in spite of everything, of those which are arranged in the medical schools.

"But that a being in whom the will-power is dead obeys every external impulse is a truth which reason admits and which experience proves. The example which you cited reminds me of another one somewhat similar. It is that of my unfortunate comrade, Alexandre Le Mansel. A verse of Sophocles killed your heroine. A phrase of Lampridius destroyed the friend of whom I will tell you.

"Le Mansel, with whom I studied at the high school of Avranches, was unlike all his comrades. He seemed at once younger and older than he really was. Small and fragile, he was at fifteen years of age afraid of everything that alarms little children. Darkness caused him an overpowering terror, and he could never meet one of the servants of the school, who happened to have a big lump on the top of his head, without bursting into tears. And yet at times, when we saw him close at hand, he looked quite old. His parched skin, glued to his temples, nourished his thin hair very inadequately. His forehead was polished like that of a middle-aged man. As for his eyes, they had no expression, and strangers often thought he was blind. His mouth alone gave character to his face. His sensitive lips expressed in turn a child-like joy and strange sufferings. The sound of his voice was clear and charming. When he recited his lessons he gave the verses their full harmony and rhythm, which made us laugh very much. During recreation he willingly joined our games, and he was not awkward, but he played with such feverish enthusiasm, and yet he was so absent-minded, that some of us felt an insurmountable aversion towards him.

"He was not popular, and we would have made him our butt had he not rather overawed us by something of savage pride and by his reputation as a clever scholar, for though he was unequal in his work he was often at the head of his class. It was said that he would often talk in his sleep and that he would leave his bed in the dormitory while sound asleep. This, however, we had not observed for ourselves as we were at the age of sound sleep.

"For a long time he inspired me with more surprise than sympathy. Then of a sudden we became friends during a walk which the whole class took to the Abbey of Mont St. Michel. We tramped barefooted along the beach, carrying our shoes and our bread at the end of a stick and singing at the top of our voices. We passed the postern, and having thrown our bundles at the foot of the 'Michelettes,' we sat down side by side on one of those ancient iron cannons corroded by five centuries of rain and fog.

"Looking dreamily from the ancient stones to the sky, and swinging his bare feet, he said to me: 'Had I but lived in the time of those wars and been a knight, I would have captured these two old cannons; I would have captured twenty, I would have captured a hundred! I would have captured all the cannons of the English. I would have fought single-handed in front of this gate. And the Archangel Michel would have stood guard over my head like a white cloud.'

"These words and the slow chant in which he uttered them thrilled me. I said to him, 'I would have been your squire. I like you, Le Mansel; will you be my friend?' And I held my hand out to him and he took it solemnly.

"At the master's command we put on our shoes, and our little band climbed the steep ascent that leads to the abbey. Midway, near a spreading fig-tree, we saw the

cottage where Tiphaine Raguel, widow of Bertrand du Guesdin, lived in peril of the sea.

"This dwelling is so small that it is a wonder that it was ever inhabited. To have lived there the worthy Tiphaine must have been a queer old body, or, rather, a saint living only the spiritual life. Le Mansel opened his arms as if to embrace this sacred hut; then, falling on his knees, he kissed the stones, heedless of the laughter of his comrades who, in their merriment, began to pelt him with pebbles. I will not describe our walk among the dungeons, the cloisters, the halls and the chapel. Le Mansel seemed oblivious to everything. Indeed, I should not have recalled this incident except to show how our friendship began.

"In the dormitory the next morning I was awakened by a voice at my ear which said:

"'Tiphaine is not dead,' I rubbed my eyes as I saw Le Mansel in his shirt at my side. I requested him rather rudely to let me sleep, and I thought no more of this singular communication.

"From that day on I understood the character of our fellow pupil much better than before, and I discovered an inordinate pride which I had never before suspected. It will not surprise you if I acknowledge that at the age of fifteen I was but a poor psychologist. But Le Mansel's pride was too subtle to strike one at once. It had no concrete shape, but seemed to embrace remote phantasms. And yet it influenced all his feelings and gave to his ideas, uncouth and incoherent though they were, something of unity.

"During the holidays that followed our walk to the Mont St. Michel, Le Mansel invited me to spend a day at the home of his parents, who were farmers and landowners at Saint Julien.

"My mother consented with some repugnance. Saint Julien is six kilometres from the town. Having put on a white waistcoat and a smart blue tie I started on my way there early one Sunday morning.

"Alexandre stood at the door waiting for me and smiling like a little child. He took me by the hand and led me into the 'parlour.' The house, half country, half town-like, was neither poor nor ill furnished. And yet my heart was deeply oppressed when I entered, so great was the silence and sadness that reigned.

"Near the window, whose curtains were slightly raised as if to satisfy some timid curiosity, I saw a woman who seemed old, though I cannot be sure that she was as old as she appeared to be. She was thin and yellow, and her eyes, under their red lids glowed in their black sockets. Though it was summer her body and her head were shrouded in some black woollen material. But that which made her look most ghastly was a band of metal which encircled her forehead like a diadem.

"'This is mama,' Le Mansel said to me, 'she has a headache.'

"Madam Le Mansel greeted me in a plaintive voice, and doubtless observing my astonished glance at her forehead, said, smiling:

"'What I wear on my forehead, young sir, is not a crown; it is a magnetic band to cure my headache.' I did my best to reply when Le Mansel dragged me away to the garden, where we found a bald little man who flitted along the paths like a ghost. He was so thin and so light that there seemed some danger of his being blown away by the wind. His timid manner and his long and lean neck, when he bent forward, and his head, no larger than a man's fist, his shy side-glances and his skipping gait, his short arms uplifted like a pair of flippers, gave him undeniably a great resemblance to a plucked chicken.

"My friend, Le Mansel, explained that this was his father, but that they were obliged to let him stay in the yard as he really only lived in the company of his chickens, and he had in their society quite forgotten to talk to human beings. As he spoke his father suddenly disappeared, and very soon an ecstatic clucking filled the air. He was with his chickens.

"Le Mansel and I strolled several times around the garden and he told me that at dinner, presently, I should see his grandmother, but that I was to take no notice of what she said, as she was sometimes a little out of her mind. Then he drew me aside into a pretty arbour and whispered, blushing:

"'I have written some verses about Tiphaine Raguel. I'll repeat them to you some other time. You'll see, you'll see.'

"The dinner-bell rang and we went into the dining-room. M. Le Mansel came in with a basket full of eggs.

"'Eighteen this morning,' he said, and his voice sounded like a cluck.

"A most delicious omelette was served. I was seated between Madame Le Mansel, who was moaning under her crown, and her mother, an old Normandy woman with round cheeks, who, having lost all her teeth, smiled with her eyes. She seemed very attractive to me. While we were eating roast-duck and chicken à la crème the good lady told us some very amusing stories, and, in spite of what her grandson had said, I did not observe that her mind was in the slightest degree affected. On the contrary, she seemed to be the life of the house.

"After dinner we adjourned to a little sitting-room whose walnut furniture was covered with yellow Utrecht velvet. An ornamental clock between two candelabra decorated the mantelpiece, and on the top of its black plinth, and protected and covered by a glass globe, was a red egg. I do not know why, once having observed it, I should have examined it so attentively. Children have such unaccountable

curiosity. However, I must say that the egg was of a most wonderful and magnificent colour. It had no resemblance whatever to those Easter eggs dyed in the juice of the beetroot, so much admired by the urchins who stare in at the fruit-shops. It was of the colour of royal purple. And with the indiscretion of my age I could not resist saying as much.

"M. Le Mansel's reply was a kind of crow which expressed his admiration.

"That egg, young sir,' he added, 'has not been dyed as you seem to think. It was laid by a Cingalese hen in my poultry-yard just as you see it there. It is a phenomenal egg.'

"You must not forget to say,' Madame Le Mansel added in a plaintive voice, 'that this egg was laid the very day our Alexandre was born.'

"That's a fact,' M. Le Mansel assented.

"In the meantime the old grandmother looked at me with sarcastic eyes, and pressed her loose lips together and made a sign that I was not to believe what I heard.

"Humph!' she whispered, 'chickens often sit on what they don't lay, and if some malicious neighbour slips into their nest a — —'

"Her grandson interrupted her fiercely. He was pale, and his hands shook.

"Don't listen to her,' he cried to me. 'You know what I told you. Don't listen!'

"It's a fact!' M. Le Mansel repeated, his round eye fixed in a side glance at the red egg.

"My further connection with Alexandre Le Mansel contains nothing worth relating. My friend often spoke of his verses to Tiphaine, but he never showed them to me. Indeed, I very soon lost sight of him. My mother sent me to Paris to finish my studies. I took my degree in two faculties, and then I studied medicine. During the time that I was preparing my doctor's thesis I received a letter from my mother, who told me that poor Alexandre had been very ailing, and that after a serious attack he had become timid and excessively suspicious; that, however, he was quite harmless, and in spite of the disordered state of his health and reason he showed an extraordinary aptitude for mathematics. There was nothing in these tidings to surprise me. Often, as I studied the diseases of the nervous centres, my mind reverted to my poor friend at Saint Julien, and in spite of myself I foresaw for him the general paralysis which inevitably threatened the offspring of a mother racked by chronic nervous headaches and a rheumatic, addle-brained father.

"The sequel, however, did not, apparently, prove me to be in the right. Alexandre Le Mansel, as I heard from Avranches, regained his normal health, and as he grew towards manhood gave active proof of the brilliancy of his intellect. He worked with

ardour at his mathematical studies, and he even sent to the Academy of Sciences solutions of several problems hitherto unsolved, which were found to be as elegant as they were accurate. Absorbed in his work, he rarely found time to write to me. His letters were affectionate, clear, and to the point, and nothing could be found in them to arouse the mistrust of the most suspicious neurologist. However, very soon after this our correspondence ceased, and I heard nothing more of him for the next ten years.

"Last year I was greatly surprised when my servant brought me the card of Alexandre Le Mansel, and said that the gentleman was waiting for me in the ante-room.

"I was in my study consulting with a colleague on a matter of some importance. However, I begged him to excuse me for a moment while I hurried to greet my old friend. I found he had grown very old, bald, haggard, and terribly emaciated. I took him by the arm and led him into the salon.

"I am glad to see you again,' he said, 'and I have much to tell you. I am exposed to the most unheard-of persecutions. But I have courage, and I shall struggle bravely, and I shall triumph over my enemies.'

"These words disquieted me, as they would have disquieted in my place any other nerve specialist. I recognised a symptom of the disease which, by the fatal laws of heredity, menaced my friend, and which had appeared to be checked.

"My dear friend,' I said, 'we will talk about that presently. Wait here a moment. I just want to finish something. In the meantime take a book and amuse yourself.'

"You know I have a great number of books, and my drawing-room contains about six thousand volumes in three mahogany book-cases. Why, then, should my unfortunate friend choose the very one likely to do him harm, and open it at that fatal page? I conferred some twenty minutes longer with my colleague, and having taken leave of him I returned to the room where I had left Le Mansel. I found the unfortunate man in the most fearful condition. He struck a book that lay open before him and, which I at once recognised as a translation of the *Historia Augusta*. He recited at the top of his voice this sentence of Lampridius:

"On the day of the birth of Alexander Severus, a chicken, belonging to the father of the newly-born, laid a red egg—augury of the imperial purple to which the child was destined.'

"His excitement increased to fury. He foamed at the mouth. He cried: 'The egg, the egg of the day of my birth. I am an Emperor. I know that you want to kill me. Keep away, you wretch!' He strode down the room, then, returning, came towards me with open arms. 'My friend,' he said, 'my old comrade, what do you wish me to bestow on you? An Emperor—an Emperor.... My father was right.... the red egg. I

must be an Emperor! Scoundrel, why did you hide this book from me? This is a crime of high treason; it shall be punished! 'I shall be Emperor! Emperor! Yes, it is my duty.... Forward.... forward!'"

"He was gone. In vain I tried to detain him. He escaped me. You know the rest. All the newspapers have described how, after leaving me, he bought a revolver and blew out the brains of the sentry who tried to prevent his forcing his way into the Elysée.

"And thus it happens that a sentence written by a Latin historian of the fourth century was the cause, fifteen hundred years after, of the death in our country of a wretched private soldier. Who will ever disentangle the web of cause and effect?

"Who can venture to say, as he accomplishes some simple act: 'I know what I am doing.' My dear friend, this is all I have to tell. The rest is of no interest except in medical statistics. Le Mansel, shut up in an insane asylum, remained for fifteen days a prey to the most violent mania. Whereupon he fell into a state of complete imbecility, during which he became so greedy that he even devoured the wax with which they polished the floor. Three months later he was suffocated while trying to swallow a sponge."

The doctor ceased and lighted a cigarette. After a moment of silence, I said to him, "You have told me a terrible story, doctor."

"It is terrible," he replied, "but it is true. I should be glad of a little brandy."