

THE TRAGIC COMEDIANS

By

George Meredith

VOL-3

Freeeditorial 

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She ran out to the shade of the garden walls to be by herself and in the air, and she read; and instantly her own letter to the baroness crashed sentence upon sentence, in retort, springing up with the combative instinct of a beast, to make discord of the stuff she read, and deride it. Twice she went over the lines with this defensive accompaniment; then they laid octopus-limbs on her. The writing struck chill as a glacier cave. Oh, what an answer to that letter of fervid respectfulness, of innocent supplication for maternal affection, for some degree of benignant friendship!

The baroness coldly stated, that she had arrived in the city to do her best in assisting to arrange matters which had come to a most unfortunate and impracticable pass. She alluded to her established friendship for Alvan, but it was chiefly in the interests of Clotilde that the latter was requested to perceive the necessity for bringing her relations with Dr. Alvan to an end in the discreetest manner now possible to the circumstances. This, the baroness pursued, could only be done by her intervention, and her friendship for Dr. Alvan had caused her to undertake the little agreeable office. For which purpose, promising her an exemption from anything in the nature of tragedy scenes, the baroness desired Clotilde to call on her the following day between certain specified hours of the afternoon.

That was all.

The girl in her letter to the baroness had constrained herself to write, and therefore to think, in so beautiful a spirit of ignorant innocence, that the vileness of an answer thus brutally throwing off the mask of personal disinterestedness appeared to her both an abominable piece of cynicism on the part of a scandalous old woman, and an insulting rejection of the cover of decency proposed to the creature by a daisy-minded maiden.

She scribbled a single line in receipt of the letter and signed her initials.

'The woman is hateful!' she said to her father; she was ready to agree with him about the woman and Alvan. She was ashamed to have hoped anything of the woman, and stamped down her disappointment under a vehement indignation, that disfigured the man as well. He had put the matter into the hands of this most detestable of women, to settle it as she might think best! He and she!—the miserable old thing with her ancient arts and cajoleries had lured him back! She had him fast again, in spite of—for who could tell? perhaps by reason of her dirty habits: she smoked dragoon cigars! All day she was emitting tobacco-smoke; it was notorious, Clotilde had not to learn it from her father; but now she saw the filthy rag that standard of female independence was—that petticoated Unfeminine, fouler than masculine! Alvan preferred the lichen-draped tree to the sunny flower, it was evident, for never a letter from Alvan had come to her. She thought in wrath, nothing but the thoughts of wrath, and ran her wits through every reasonable reflection like a lighted brand that flings its colour, if not fire, upon surrounding images. Contempt of the square-jawed withered woman was too great for Clotilde to have a sensation of her driving jealousy until painful glimpses of the man made jealousy so sharp that she flew for refuge to contempt of the pair. That beldam had him back: she had him fast. Oh! let her keep him! Was he to be regretted who could make that choice?

Her father did not let the occasion slip to speak insistingly as the world opined of Alvan and his baroness. He forced her to swallow the calumny, and draw away with her family against herself through strong disgust.

Out of a state of fire Clotilde passed into solid frigidity. She had neither a throb nor a passion. Wishing seemed to her senseless as life was. She could hear without a thrill of her frame that Alvan was in the city, without a question whether it was true. He had not written, and he had handed her over to the baroness! She did not ask herself how it was that she had no letter from him, being afraid to think about it, because, if a letter had been withheld by her father, it was a part of her whipping; if none had been written, there was nothing to hope for. Her recent humiliation condemned him by the voice of her sufferings for his failure to be giant, eagle, angel, or any of the prodigious things he had taught her to expect; and as he had thus deceived her, the glorious lover she had imaged in her mind was put aside with some of the angry disdain she bestowed upon the woman by whom she had been wounded. He ceased to be a visioned Alvan, and became an obscurity; her principal sentiment in relation to him was, that he threatened her peace. But for him she would never have been taught to hate her parents; she would have enjoyed the quiet domestic evenings with her people, when Marko sang, and her sisters knitted, and the betrothed sister wore a look very enviable in the abstract; she would be seeing a future instead of a black iron gate! But for him she certainly would never have had, that letter from the baroness!

On the morning after the information of Alvan's return, her father, who deserved credit as a tactician, came to her to say that Alvan had sent to demand his letters and presents. The demand was unlike what her stunned heart recollected of Alvan; but a hint that the baroness was behind it, and that a refusal would bring the baroness down on her with another piece of insolence, was effective. She dealt out the letters, arranged the presents, made up the books, pamphlets, trinkets, amulet coins, lock of black hair, and worn post-marked paper addressed in his hand to Clotilde von Rudiger, carefully; and half as souvenir, half with the forlorn yearning of the look of lovers when they break asunder—or of one of them—she signed inside the packet not 'Clotilde,' but the gentlest title he had bestowed on her, trusting to the pathos of the word 'child' to tell him that she was enforced and still true, if he should be interested in knowing it. Weak souls are much moved by having the pathos on their side. They are consoled too.

Time passed, whole days: the tender reminder had no effect on him! It had been her last appeal: she reflected that she had really felt when he had not been feeling at all: and this marks a division.

She was next requested to write a letter to Alvan, signifying his release by the notification of her engagement to Prince Marko. She was personally to deliver it to a gentleman who was of neither party, and who would give her a letter from Alvan in exchange, which, while assuring the gentleman she was acting with perfect freedom, she was to be under her oath not to read, and dutifully to hand to Marko, her betrothed. Her father assumed the fact of her renewed engagement to the prince, as her whole family did; strangely, she thought: it struck her as a fatality. He said that Alvan was working him great mischief, doing him deadly injury in his position, and for no just reason, inasmuch as he—a bold, bad man striving to ruin the family on a point of pride—had declared that he simply considered himself bound in honour to her, only a little doubtful of her independent action at present; and a release of him, accompanied by her plain statement of her being under no compulsion, voluntarily the betrothed of another, would solve the difficulty. A certain old woman, it seemed, was anxious to have him formally released.

With the usual dose for such a patient, of cajoleries and threats, the General begged her to comply, pulling the hands he squeezed in a way to strongly emphasize his affectionate entreaty.

She went straight to Marko, consenting that he should have Alvan's letter unopened (she cared not to read it, she said), on his promise to give it up to her within a stated period. There was a kind of prohibited pleasure, sweet acid, catching discord, in the idea of this lover's keeping the forbidden thing she could ask for when she was curious about the other, which at present she was not; dead rather; anxious to please her parents, and determined to be no rival of the baroness. Marko promised it readily, adding: 'Only let the storm roll over, that we may have more liberty, and I myself, when we two are free, will lead you to Alvan, and leave it to you to choose between us. Your happiness, beloved, is my sole thought. Submit for the moment.' He spoke sweetly, with his dearest look, touching her luxurious nature with a belief that she could love him; untroubled by another, she could love and be true to him: her maternal inner nature yearned to the frailbodied youth.

She made a comparison in her mind of Alvan's love and Marko's, and of the lives of the two men. There was no grisly baroness attached to the prince's life.

She wrote the letter to Alvan, feeling in the words that said she was plighted to Prince Marko, that she said, and clearly said, the baroness is now relieved of a rival, and may take you! She felt it so acutely as to feel that she said nothing else.

Severances are accomplished within the heart stroke by stroke; within the craven's heart each new step resulting from a blow is temporarily an absolute severance. Her letter to Alvan written, she thought not tenderly of him but of the prince, who had always loved a young woman, and was unhampered by an old one. The composition of the letter, and the sense that the thing was done, made her stony to Alvan.

On the introduction of Colonel von Tresten, whose name she knew, but was dull to it, she delivered him her letter with unaffected composure, received from him Alvan's in exchange, left the room as if to read it, and after giving it unopened to Marko, composedly reappeared before the colonel to state, that the letter could make no difference, and all was to be as she had written it.

The colonel bowed stiffly.

It would have comforted her to have been allowed to say: 'I cease to be the rival of that execrable harridan!'

The delivery of so formidable a cat-screach not being possible, she stood in an attitude of mild resignation, revolving thoughts of her father's praises of his noble daughter, her mother's kiss, the caresses of her sisters, and the dark bright eyes of Marko, the peace of the domestic circle. This was her happiness! And still there was time, still hope for Alvan to descend and cut the knot. She conceived it slowly, with some flush of the brain like a remainder of fever, but no throbs of her pulses. She had been swayed to act against him by tales which in her heart she did not credit exactly, therefore did not take within herself, though she let them influence her by the goad of her fears and angers; and these she could conjure up at will for the defence of her conduct, aware of their shallowness, and all the while trusting him to come in the end and hear her reproaches for his delay. He seemed to her now to have the character of a storm outside a household wrapped in comfortable monotony. Her natural spiritedness detested the monotony, her craven soul fawned for the comfort. After her many recent whippings the comfort was immensely desirable, but a glance at the monotony gave it the look of a burial, and standing in her attitude of resignation under Colonel von Tresten's hard military stare she could have shrieked for Alvan to come, knowing that she would have cowered and trembled at the scene following his appearance. Yet she would have gone to him; without any doubt his presence and the sense of his

greater power declared by his coming would have lifted her over to him. The part of her nature adoring storminess wanted only a present champion to outweigh the other part which cuddled security. Colonel von Tresten, however, was very far from offering himself in such a shape to a girl that had jilted the friend he loved, insulted the woman he esteemed; and he stood there like a figure of soldierly complacency in marble. Her pencilled acknowledgement of the baroness's letter, and her reply to it almost as much, was construed as an intended insult to that lady, whose champion Tresten was. He had departed before Clotilde heard a step.

Immediately thereupon it came: to her mind that Tresten was one of Alvan's bosom friends. How, then, could he be of neither party? And her father spoke of him as an upright rational man, who, although, strangely enough, he entertained, as it appeared, something like a profound reverence for the baroness, could see and confess the downright impossibility of the marriage Alvan proposed. Tresten, her father said, talked of his friend Alvan as wild and eccentric, but now becoming convinced that such a family as hers could never tolerate him—considering his age, his birth, his blood, his habits, his politics, his private entanglements and moral reputation, it was partly hinted.

She shuddered at this false Tresten. He and the professor might be strung together for examples of perfidy! His reverence of the baroness gave his cold blue eyes the iciness of her loathed letter. Alvan, she remembered, used to exalt him among the gallantest of the warriors dedicating their swords to freedom. The dedication of the sword, she felt sure, was an accident: he was a man of blood. And naturally, she must be hated by the man reverencing the baroness. If ever man had executioner stamped on his face, it was he! Like the professor, nay, like Alvan himself, he would not see that she was the victim of tyranny: none of her signs would they see. They judged of her by her inanimate frame in the hands of her torturers breaking her on the wheel. She called to mind a fancy that she had looked at Tresten out of her deadness earnestly for just one instant: more than an instant she could not, beneath her father's vigilant watch and into those repellant cold blue butcher eyes. Tresten might clearly have understood the fleeting look. What were her words! what her deeds!

The look was the truth revealed—her soul. It begged for life like an infant; and the man's face was an iron rock in reply! No wonder—he worshipped the baroness! So great was Clotilde's hatred of him that it overflowed the image of Alvan, who called him friend, and deputed him to act as friend. Such blindness, weakness, folly, on the part of one of Alvan's pretensions, incurred a shade of her contempt. She had not ever thought of him coldly: hitherto it would have seemed a sacrilege; but now she said definitely, the friend of Tresten cannot be the man I supposed him! and she ascribed her capacity for saying it, and for perceiving and adding up Alvan's faults of character, to the freezing she had taken from that most antipathetic person. She confessed to sensations of spite which would cause her to reject and spurn even his pleadings for Alvan, if they were imaginable as actual. Their not being imaginable allowed her to indulge her naughtiness harmlessly, for the gratification of the idea of wounding some one, though it were her lover, connected with this Tresten.

The letter of the baroness and the visit of the woman's admirer had vitiated Clotilde's blood. She was not only not mistress of her thoughts, she was undirected either in thinking or wishing by any desires, except that the people about her should caress and warm her, until, with no gaze backward, she could say good-bye to them, full of meaning as a good-bye to the covered grave, as unreluctantly as the swallow quits her eaves-nest in autumn: and they were to learn that they were chargeable with the sequel of the history. There would be a sequel, she was sure, if it came only to punish them for the cruelty which thwarted her timid anticipation of it by pressing on her

natural instinct at all costs to bargain for an escape from pain, and making her simulate contentment to cheat her muffled wound and them.

CHAPTER XIII

His love meantime was the mission and the burden of Alvan, and he was not ashamed to speak of it and plead for it; and the pleading was not done troubadourishly, in soft flute-notes, as for easement of tuneful emotions beseeching sympathy. He was liker to a sturdy beggar demanding his crust, to support life, of corporations that can be talked into admitting the rights of man; and he vollied close logical argumentation, on the basis of the laws, in defence of his most natural hunger, thunder in his breast and bright new heavenly morning alternating or clashing while the electric wires and post smote him with evil tidings of Clotilde, and the success of his efforts caught her back to him. Daily many times he reached to her and lost her, had her in his arms and his arms withered with emptiness. The ground he won quaked under him. All the evidence opposed it, but he was in action, and his reason swore that he had her fast. He had seen and felt his power over her; his reason told him by what had been that it must be. Could he doubt? He battled for his reason. Doubt was an extinguishing wave, and he clung to his book of the Law, besieging Church and State with it, pointing to texts of the law which proved her free to choose her lord and husband for herself, expressing his passionate love by his precise interpretation of the law: and still with the cold sentence gaining on him, against the current of his tumultuous blood and his hurried intelligence, of her being actually what he had named her in moments of playful vision—slippery, a serpent, a winding hare; with the fear that she might slip from him, betray, deny him, deliver him to ridicule, after he had won his way to her over every barrier. During his proudest exaltations in success, when his eyes were sparkling, there was a wry twitch inward upon his heart of hearts.

But if she was a hare, he was a hunter, little inclining to the chase now for mere physical recreation. She had roused the sportsman's passion as well as the man's; he meant to hunt her down, and was not more scrupulous than our ancient hunters, who hunted for a meal and hunted to kill, with none of the later hesitations as to circumventing, trapping, snaring by devices, and the preservation of the animal's coat spotless. Let her be lured from her home, or plucked from her home, and if reluctant, disgraced, that she may be dependent utterly on the man stooping to pick her up! He was equal to the projecting of a scheme socially infamous, with such fanatical intensity did the thought of his losing the woman harass him, and the torrent of his passion burst restraint to get to her to enfold her—this in the same hour of the original wild monster's persistent and sober exposition of the texts of the law with the voice of a cultivated modern gentleman; and, let it be said, with a modern gentleman's design to wed a wife in honour. All means were to be tried. His eye burned on his prize, mindless of what she was dragged through, if there was resistance, or whether by the hair of her head or her skirts, or how she was obtained. His interpretation of the law was for the powers of earth, and other plans were to propitiate the powers under the earth, and certain distempered groanings wrenched from him at intervals he

addressed (after they were out of him, reflectively) to the powers above, so that nothing of him should be lost which might get aid of anything mundane, infernal, or celestial.

Thus it is when Venus bites a veritable ancient male. She puts her venom in a magnificent beast, not a pathetic Phaedra. She does it rarely, for though to be loved by a bitten giant is one of the dreams of woman, the considerate Mother of Love knows how needful it is to protect the sentiment of the passion and save them from an exhibition of the fires of that dragon's breath. Do they not fly shrieking when they behold it? Barely are they able to read of it. Men, too, accustomed to minor doses of the goddess, which moderate, soften, counteract, instead of inflicting the malady, abhor and have no brotherhood with its turbulent victim.

It was justly matter for triumph, due to an extraordinary fervour of pleading upon a plain statement of the case, that Alvan should return from his foray bringing with him an emissary deputed by General von Rudiger's official chief to see that the young lady, so passionately pursued by the foremost of his time in political genius and oratory, was not subjected to parental tyranny, but stood free to exercise her choice. Of the few who would ever have thought of attempting, a diminished number would have equalled that feat. Alvan was no vain boaster; he could gain the ears of grave men as well as mobs and women. The interview with Clotilde was therefore assured to him, and the distracting telegrams and letters forwarded to him by Tresten during his absence were consequently stabs already promising to heal. They were brutal stabs—her packet of his letters and presents on his table made them bleed afresh, and the odd scrawl of the couple of words on the paper set him wondering at the imbecile irony of her calling herself 'The child' in accompaniment to such an act, for it reminded him of his epithet for her, while it dealt him a tremendous blow; it seemed senselessly malign, perhaps flippant, as she could be, he knew. She could be anything weak and shallow when out of his hands; she had recently proved it still, in view of the interview, and on the tide of his labours to come to that wished end, he struck his breast to brave himself with a good hopeful spirit. 'Once mine!' he said.

Moreover, to the better account, Clotilde's English friend had sent him the lines addressed to her, in which the writer dwelt on her love of him with a whimper of the voice of love. That was previous to her perjury by little, by a day-eighteen hours. How lurid a satire was flung on events by the proximity of the dates! But the closeness of the time between this love-crooning and the denying of him pointed to a tyrannous intervention. One could detect it. Full surely the poor craven was being tyrannized and tutored to deny him! though she was a puss of the fields too, as the mounted sportsman was not unwilling to think.

Before visiting his Mentor, Alvan applied for an audience of General von Rudiger, who granted it at once to a man coming so well armed to claim the privilege. Tresten walked part of the way to the General's house with him, and then turned aside to visit the baroness.

Lucie, Baroness von Crefeldt, was one of those persons who, after a probationary term in the character of woman, have become men, but of whom offended man, amazed by the flowering up of that hard rough jaw from the tender blooming promise of a petticoat, finds it impossible to imagine they had once on a sweet Spring time the sex's gentleness and charm of aspect. Mistress Flanders, breeched and hatted like a man, pulling at the man's short pipe and heartily invoking frouzy deities, committing a whole sackful of unfeminine etcaetera, is an impenetrable wall to her maiden past; yet was there an opening day when nothing of us moustached her. She was a clear-faced girl and mother of young blushes before the years were at their work of transformation upon her countenance and behind her bosom. The years were rough artists: perhaps she was combative, and fought them for touching her ungallantly; and that perhaps was

her first manly step. Baroness Lucie was of high birth, a wife openly maltreated, a woman of breeding, but with a man's head, capable of inspiring man-like friendships, and of entertaining them. She was radically-minded, strongly of the Radical profession of faith, and a correspondent of revolutionary chiefs; both the trusted adviser and devoted slave of him whose future glorious career she measured by his abilities. Rumour blew out a candle and left the wick to smoke in relation to their former intercourse. The Philistines revenged themselves on an old aristocratic Radical and a Jew demagogue with the weapon that scandal hands to virtue. They are virtuous or nothing, and they must show that they are so when they can; and best do they show it by publicly dishonouring the friendship of a man and a woman; for to be in error in malice does not hurt them, but they profoundly feel that they are fools if they are duped.

She was aware of the recent course of events; she had as she protested, nothing to accuse herself of, and she could hardly part her lips without a self-exculpation.

'It will fall on me!' she said to Tresten, in her emphatic tone. 'He will have his interview with the girl. He will subdue the girl. He will manacle himself in the chains he makes her wear. She will not miss her chance! I am the object of her detestation. I am the price paid for their reconciliation. She will seize her opportunity to vilipend me, and I shall be condemned by the kind of court-martial which hurries over the forms of a bribe to sign the execution-warrant that makes it feel like justice. You will see. She cannot forgive me for not pretending to enter into her enthusiasm. She will make him believe I conspired against her. Men in love are children with their mistresses—the greatest of them; their heads are under the woman's feet. What have I not done to aid him! At his instance, I went to the archbishop, to implore one of the princes of the Church for succour. I knelt to an ecclesiastic. I did a ludicrous and a shameful thing, knowing it in advance to be a barren farce. I obeyed his wish. The tale will be laughable. I obeyed him. I would not have it on my conscience that the commission of any deed ennomic, however unwonted, was refused by me to serve Alvan. You are my witness, Tresten, that for a young woman of common honesty I was ready to pack and march. Qualities of mind-mind! They were out of the question. He had a taste for a wife. If he had hit on a girl commonly honest, she might not have harmed him—the contrary; cut his talons. What is this girl? Exactly what one might be sure his appreciation, in woman-flesh, would lead him to fix on; a daughter of the Philistines, naturally, and precisely the one of all on earth likely to confound him after marriage as she has played fast and loose with him before it. He has never understood women—cannot read them. Could a girl like that keep a secret? She's a Cressida—a creature of every camp! Not an idea of the cause he is vowed to! not a sentiment in harmony with it! She is viler than any of those Berlin light o' loves on the eve of Jena. Stable as a Viennese dancing slut home from Mariazell! This is the girl-transparent to the whole world! But his heart is on her, and he must have her, I suppose; and I shall have to bear her impertinences, or sign my demission and cease to labour for the cause at least in conjunction with Alvan. And how other wise? He is the life of it, and I am doomed to uselessness.'

Tresten nodded a protesting assent.

'Not quite so bad,' he said, with the encouraging smile which could persuade a friend to put away bilious visions. 'Of the two, if you two are divisible, we could better dispense with him. She'll slip him, she's an eel. I have seen eels twine on a prong of the fork that prods them; but she's an actress, a slippery one through and through, with no real embrace in her, not even a common muscular contraction. Of every camp! as you say. She was not worth carrying off. I consented to try it to quiet him. He sets no bounds to his own devotion to friendship, and we must take pattern by him. It's a mad love.'

'A Titan's love!' the baroness exclaimed, groaning. 'The woman!—no matter how or at what cost! I can admire that primal barbarism of a great man's passion, which counts for nothing the stains and accidents fraught with extinction for it to meaner men. It reads ill, it sounds badly, but there is grand stuff in it. See the royalty of the man, for whom no degradation of the woman can be, so long as it brings her to him! He—that great he—covers all. He burns her to ashes, and takes the flame—the pure spirit of her—to himself. Were men like him!—they would have less to pardon. We must, as I have ever said, be morally on alpine elevations to comprehend Alvan; he is Mont Blanc above his fellows. Do not ask him to be considerate of her. She has planted him in a storm, and the bigger the mountain, the more savage, monstrous, cruel—yes, but she blew up the tourmente! That girl is the author of his madness. It is the snake's nature of the girl which distracts him; she is in his blood. Had she come to me, I would have helped her to cure him; or had you succeeded in carrying her off, I would have stood by their union; or were she a different creature, and not the shifty thing she is, I could desire him to win her. A peasant girl, a workman's daughter, a tradesman's, a professional singer, actress, artist—I would have given my hand to one of these in good faith, thankful to her! As it is, I have acted in obedience to his wishes, without idle remonstrances—I know him too well; and with as much cordiality as I could put into an evil service. She will drag him down, down, Tresten!'

'They are not joined yet,' said the colonel.

'She has him by the worst half of him. Her correspondence with me—her letter to excuse her insolence, which she does like a prim chit—throws a light on the girl she is. She will set him aiming at power to trick her out in the decorations. She will not keep him to his labours to consolidate the power. She will pervert the aesthetic in him, through her hold on his material nature, his vanity, his luxuriousness. She is one of the young women who begin timidly, and when they see that they enjoy comparative impunity, grow intrepid in dissipation, and that palling, they are ravenously ambitious. She will drive him at his mark before the time is ripe—ruin-him. He is a Titan, not a god, though god-like he seems in comparison with men. He would be fleshly enough in any hands. This girl will drain him of all his nobler fire.'

'She shows mighty little of the inclination,' said the colonel.

'To you. But when they come together? I know his voice!'

The colonel protested his doubts of their coming together.

'Ultimately?' the baroness asked, and brooded. 'But she will have to see him; and then will she resist him? I shall change one view of her if she does.'

'She will shirk the interview,' Tresten remarked. 'Supposing they meet: I don't think much will come of it, unless they meet on a field, and he has an hour's grace to catch her up and be off with her. She's as calm as the face of a clock, and wags her Yes and No about him just as unconcernedly as a clock's pendulum. I've spoken to many a sentinel outpost who wasn't deader on the subject in monosyllables than mademoiselle. She has a military erectness, and answers you and looks you straight at the eyes, perfectly unabashed by your seeing "the girl she is," as you say. She looked at me downright defying me to despise her. Alvan has been tricked by her colour: she's icy. She has no passion. She acts up to him when they're together, and that deceives him. I doubt her having blood—there's no heat in it, if she has.'

'And he cajoled Count Hollinger to send an envoy to see him righted!' the baroness ejaculated. 'Hollinger is not a sentimental person, I assure you, and not likely to have taken a step apparently hostile to the Rudigers, if he had not been extraordinarily shaken by Alvan. What character of man is this Dr. Storchel?'

Tresten described Count Hollinger's envoy, so quaintly deputed to act the part of legal umpire in a family business, as a mild man of law with no ideas or interests outside the law; spectacled, nervous, formal, a stranger to the passions; and the baroness was amused to hear of Storchel and Alvan's placid talk together upon themes of law, succeeded by the little advocate's bewildered fright at one of Alvan's gentler explosions. Tresten sketched it. The baroness realized it, and shut her lips tight for a laugh of essential humour.

CHAPTER XIV

Late in the day Alvan was himself able to inform her that he had overcome Clotilde's father after a struggle of hours. The General had not consented to everything: he had granted enough, evidently in terror of the man who had captured Count Hollinger; and it was arranged that Tresten and Storchel were to wait on Clotilde next morning, and hear from her mouth whether she yielded or not to Alvan's request to speak with her alone before the official interview in the presence of the notary, when she was publicly to state her decision and freedom of choice, according to Count Hollinger's amicable arrangement through his envoy.

'She will see me-and the thing is done!' said Alvan. 'But I have worked for it—I have worked! I have been talking to-day for six hours uninterruptedly at a stretch to her father, who reminds me of a caged bear I saw at a travelling menagerie, and the beast would perform none of his evolutions for the edification of us lads till his keeper touched a particular pole, and the touch of it set him to work like the winding of a key. Hollinger's name was my magic wand with the General. I could get no sense from him, nor any acquiescence in sense, till I called up Hollinger, when the General's alacrity was immediately that of the bear, or a little boy castigated for his share of original sin. They have been hard at her, the whole family! and I shall want the two hours I stipulated for to the full. What do you say?—come, I wager I do it within one hour! They have stockaded her pretty closely, and it will be some time before I shall get her to have a clear view of me behind her defences; but an hour's an age with a woman. Clotilde? I wager I have her on her knees in half an hour! These notions of duty, and station, and her fiddle-de-dee betrothal to that Danube osier with Indian-idol eyes, count for so much mist. She was and is mine. I swear to strike to her heart in ten minutes! But, madam, if not, you may pronounce me incapable of conquering any woman, or of taking an absolute impression of facts. I say I will do it! I am insane if I may not judge from antecedents that my voice, my touch, my face, will draw her to me at one signal—at a look! I am prepared to stake my reason on her running to me before I speak a word:—and I will not beckon. I promise to fold my arms and simply look.'

'Your task of two hours, then, will be accomplished, I compute, in about half a minute—but it is on the assumption that she consents to see you alone,' said the baroness.

Alvan opened his eyes. He perceived in his deep sagaciousness woman at the bottom of her remark, and replied: 'You will know Clotilde in time. She points to me straight; but of course if you agitate the compass the needle's all in a tremble: and the vessel is weak, I admit, but the instinct's positive. To doubt it would upset my understanding. I have had three distinct

experiences of my influence over her, and each time, curiously each time exactly in proportion to my degree of resolve—but, baroness, I tell you it was minutely in proportion to it; weighed down to the grain!—each time did that girl respond to me with a similar degree of earnestness. As I waned, she waned; as I heated, so did she, and from spark-heat to flame and to furnace-heat!

'A refraction of the rays according to the altitude of the orb,' observed the baroness in a tone of assent, and she smiled to herself at the condition of the man who could accept it for that.

He did not protest beyond presently a transient frown as at a bad taste on his tongue, and a rather petulant objection to her use of analogies, which he called the sapping of language. She forbore to remind him in retort of his employment of metaphor when the figure served his purpose.

'Marvellously,' cried Alvan, 'marvellously that girl answered to my lead! and to-morrow—you'll own me right—I must double the attraction. I shall have to hand her back to her people for twenty-four hours, and the dose must be doubled to keep her fast and safe. You see I read her flatly. I read and am charitable. I have a perfect philosophical tolerance. I'm in the mood to-day of Horace hymning one of his fair Greeks.'

'No, no that is a comparison past my endurance,' interposed the baroness. 'Friend Sigismund, you have no philosophy, you never had any; and the small crow and croon of Horace would be the last you could take up. It is the chanted philosophy of comfortable stipendiaries, retired merchants, gouty patients on a restricted allowance of the grape, old men who have given over thinking, and young men who never had feeling—the philosophy of swine grunting their carmen as they turn to fat in the sun. Horace avaunt! You have too much poetry in you to quote that unsanguine sensualist for your case. His love distressed his liver, and gave him a jaundice once or twice, but where his love yields its poor ghost to his philosophy, yours begins its labours. That everlasting Horace! He is the versifier of the cushioned enemy, not of us who march along flinty ways: the piper of the bourgeois in soul, poet of the conforming unbelievers!'

'Pyrrha, Lydia, Lalage, Chloe, Glycera,' Alvan murmured, amorous of the musical names. 'Clotilde is a Greek of one of the Isles, an Ionian. I see her in the Horatian ode as in one of those old round shield-mirrors which give you a speck of the figure on a silver-solar beam, brilliant, not much bigger than a dewdrop. And so should a man's heart reflect her! Take her on the light in it, she is perfection. We won't take her in the shady part or on your flat looking-glasses. There never was necessity for accuracy of line in the portraiture of women. The idea of them is all we want: it's the best of them. You will own she's Greek; she's a Perinthian, Andrian, Olythian, Saurian, Messenian. One of those delicious girls in the New Comedy, I remember, was called THE POSTPONER, THE DEFERRER, or, as we might say, THE TO-MORROWER. There you have Clotilde: she's a TO-MORROWER. You climb the peak of to-morrow, and to see her at all you must see her on the next peak: but she leaves you her promise to hug on every yesterday, and that keeps you going. Ay, so we have patience! Feeding on a young woman's promises of yesterday in one's fortieth year!—it must end to-morrow, though I kill something.'

Kill, he meant, the aerial wild spirit he could admire as her character, when he had the prospect of extinguishing it in his grasp.

'What do you meditate killing?' said the baroness.

'The fool of the years behind me,' he replied, 'and entering on my forty-first a sage.'

'To be the mate and equal of your companion?'

'To prove I have had good training under the wisest to act as her guide and master.'

'If she—' the baroness checked her exclamation, saying: 'She declined to come to me. I would have plumbed her for some solid ground, something to rest one's faith on. Your Pyrrhas, Glyceras, and others of the like, were not stable persons for a man of our days to bind his life to one of them. Harness is harness, and a light yoke-fellow can make a proud career deviate.'

'But I give her a soul!' said Alvan. 'I am the wine, and she the crystal cup. She has avowed it again and again. You read her as she is when away from me. Then she is a reed, a weed, what you will; she is unfit to contend when she stands alone. But when I am beside her, when we are together—the moment I have her at arms' length she will be part of me by the magic I have seen each time we encountered. She knows it well.'

'She may know it too well.'

'For what?' He frowned.

'For the chances of your meeting.'

'You think it possible she will refuse?'

A blackness passing to lividness crossed his face. He fetched a big breath.

'Then finish my history, shut up the book; I am a phantom of a man, and everything written there is imposture! I can account for all that she has done hitherto, but not that she should refuse to see me. Not that she should refuse to see me now when I come armed to demand it! Refuse? But I have done my work, done what I said I would do. I stand in my order of battle, and she refuses? No! I stake my head on it! I have not a clod's perception, I have not a spark of sense to distinguish me from a flat-headed Lapp, if she refuses:—call me a mountebank who has gained his position by clever tumbling; a lucky gamester; whatever plays blind with chance.'

He started up in agitation. 'Lucie! I am a grinning skull without a brain if that girl refuses! She will not.' He took his hat to leave, adding, to seem rational to the cool understanding he addressed: 'She will not refuse; I am bound to think so in common respect for myself; I have done tricks to make me appear a raging ape if she—oh! she cannot, she will not refuse. Never! I have eyes, I have wits, I am not tottering yet on my grave—or it's blindly, if I am. I have my clear judgement, I am not an imbecile. It seems to me a foolish suspicion that she can possibly refuse. Her manners are generally good; freakish, but good in the main. Perhaps she takes a sting... but there is no sting here. It would be bad manners to refuse; to say nothing of... she has a heart! Well, then, good manners and right feeling forbid her to refuse. She is an exceedingly intelligent girl, and I half fear I have helped you to a wrong impression of her. You will really appreciate her wit; you will indeed; believe me, you will. We pardon nonsense in a girl. Married, she will put on the matron with becoming decency, and I am responsible for her then; I stand surety for her then; when I have her with me I warrant her mine and all mine, head and heels, at a whistle, like the Cossack's horse. I fancy that at forty I am about as young as most young men. I promise her another forty manful working years. Are you dubious of that?'

'I nod to you from the palsied summit of ninety,' said the baroness.

Alvan gave a short laugh and stammered excuses for his naked egoism, comparing himself to a forester who has sharpened such an appetite in toiling to slay his roe that he can think of nothing but the fire preparing the feast.

'Hymen and things hymenaeal!' he said, laughing at himself for resuming the offence on the apology for it. 'I could talk with interest of a trousseau. I have debated in my mind with parliamentary acrimony about a choice of wedding-presents. As she is legally free to bestow her hand on me—and only a brute's horns could contest the fact—she may decide to be married the

day after to-morrow, and get the trousseau in Paris. She has a turn for startling. I can imagine that if I proposed a run for it she would be readier to spring to be on the road with me than in acquiescing in a quiet arrangement about a ceremonial day; partly because, in the first case, she would throw herself and the rest of the adventure on me, at no other cost than the enjoyment of one of her impulses; and in the second, because she is a girl who would require a full band of the best Berlin orchestra in perpetual play to keep up her spirits among her people during the preparations for espousing a democrat, demagogue, and Jew, of a presumed inferior station by birth to her own. Give Momus a sister, Clotilde is the lady! I know her. I would undertake to put a spell on her and keep her contented on a frontier—not Russian, any barbarous frontier where there is a sun. She must have sun. One might wrap her in sables, but sun is best. She loves it best, though she looks remarkably well in sables. Never shall I forget... she is frileuse, and shivers into them! There are Frenchmen who could paint it—only Frenchmen. Our artists, no. She is very French. Born in France she would have been a matchless Parisienne. Oh! she's a riddle of course. I don't pretend to spell every letter of her. The returning of my presents is odd. No, I maintain that she is a coward acting under domination, and there's no other way of explaining the puzzle. I was out of sight, they bullied her, and she yielded—bewilderingly, past comprehension it seems—cat!—until you remember what she's made of: she's a reed. Now I reappear armed with powers to give her a free course, and she, that abject whom you beheld recently renouncing me, is, you will see, the young Aurora she was when she came striking at my door on the upper Alp. That was a morning! That morning is Clotilde till my eyes turn over! She is all young heaven and the mountains for me! She's the filmy light above the mountains that weds white snow and sky. By the way, I dreamt last night she was half a woman, half a tree, and her hair was like a dead yewbough, which is as you know of a brown burnt-out colour, suitable to the popular conception of widows. She stood, and whatever turning you took, you struck back on her. Whether my widow, I can't say: she must first be my wife. Oh, for tomorrow!

'What sort of evening is it?' said the baroness.

'A Mont Blanc evening: I saw him as I came along,' Alvan replied, and seized his hat to be out to look on the sovereign mountain again. They touched hands. He promised to call in the forenoon next day.

'Be cool,' she counselled him.

'Oh!' He flung back his head, making light of the crisis. 'After all, it's only a girl. But, you know, what I set myself to win!... The thing's too small—I have been at such pains about it that I should be ridiculous if I allowed myself to be beaten. There is no other reason for the trouble we're at, except that, as I have said a thousand times, she suits me. No man can be cooler than I.'

'Keep so,' said the baroness.

He walked to where the strenuous blue lake, finding outlet, propels a shoulder, like a bright-muscled athlete in action, and makes the Rhone-stream. There he stood for an hour, disfevered by the limpid liquid tumult, inspirited by the glancing volumes of a force that knows no abatement, and is the skiey Alps behind, the great historic cided plains ahead.

His meditation ended with a resolution half in the form of a prayer (to mixed deities undefined) never to ask for a small thing any more if this one were granted him!

He had won it, of course, having brought all his powers to bear on the task; and he rejoiced in winning it: his heart leapt, his imagination spun radiant webs of colour: but he was a little ashamed of his frenzies, though he did not distinctly recall them; he fancied he had made some noise, loud or not, because his intentions were so pure that it was infamous to thwart them. At a

certain age honest men made sacrifice of their liberty to society, and he had been ready to perform the duty of husbanding a woman. A man should have a wife and rear children, not to be forgotten in the land, and to help mankind by transmitting to future times qualities he has proved priceless: he thought of the children, and yearned to the generations of men physically and morally through them.

This was his apology to the world for his distantly-recollected excesses of temper.

Was she so small a thing? Not if she succumbed. She was petty, vexatious, irritating, stinging, while she resisted: she cast an evil beam on his reputation, strength and knowledge of himself, and roused the giants of his nature to discharge missiles at her, justified as they were by his pure intentions and the approbation of society. But he had a broad full heart for the woman who would come to him, forgiving her, uplifting her, richly endowing her. No meanness of heart was in him. He lay down at night thinking of Clotilde in an abandonment of tenderness. 'Tomorrow! you bird of to-morrow!' he let fly his good-night to her.

CHAPTER XV

He slept. Near upon morning he roused with his tender fit strong on him, but speechless in the waking as it had been dreamless in sleep. It was a happy load on his breast, a life about to be born, and he thought that a wife beside him would give it language. She should have, for she would call out, his thousand flitting ideas now dropped on barren ground for want of her fair bosom to inspire, to vivify, to receive. Poetry laid a hand on him: his desire of the wife, the children, the citizen's good name—of these our simple civilized ambitions—was lowly of the earth, throbbing of earth, and at the same time magnified beyond scope of speech in vast images and emblems resembling ranges of Olympian cloud round the blue above earth, all to be decipherable, all utterable, when she was by. What commoner word!—yet wife seemed to him the word most reverberating of the secret sought after by man, fullest at once of fruit and of mystery, or of that light in the heart of mystery which makes it magically fruitful.

He felt the presence of Clotilde behind the word; but in truth the delicate sensations breeding these half-thoughts of his, as he lay between sleeping and waking, shrank from conjuring up the face of the woman who had wounded them, and a certain instinct to preserve and be sure of his present breathing-space of luxurious tranquillity kept her veiled. Soon he would see her as his wife, and then she would be she, unveiled ravishingly, the only she, the only wife! He knew the cloud he clasped for Clotilde enough to be at pains to shun a possible prospect of his execrating it. Oh, the only she, the only wife! the wild man's reclamer! the sweet abundant valley and channel of his river of existence henceforward! Doubting her in the slightest was doubting her human. It is the brain, the satanic brain which will ever be pressing to cast its shadows: the heart is clearer and truer.

He multiplied images, projected visions, nestled in his throbs to drug and dance his brain. He snatched at the beauty of a day that outrolled the whole Alpine hand-in-hand of radiant heaven-climbers for an assurance of predestined celestial beneficence; and again, shadowily thoughtful

of the littleness of the thing he exalted and claimed, he staked his reason on the positive blessing to come to him before nightfall, telling himself calmly that he did so because there would be madness in expecting it otherwise: he asked for so little! Since he asked for so little, to suppose that it would not be granted was irrational. None but a very coward could hesitate to stake his all on the issue.

Singularly small indeed the other aims in life appeared by comparison with this one, but his intellect, in the act of pleading excuses for his impatience, distinguished why it should be so. The crust, which is not much, is everything to the starving beggar; and he was eager for the crust that he might become sound and whole again, able to give their just proportion to things, as at present he acknowledged himself hardly able to do. He could not pursue two thoughts on a political question, or grasp the idea of a salutary energy in the hosts animated by his leadership. There would have to be an end of it speedily, else men might name him worthless dog!

Morning swam on the lake in her beautiful nakedness, a wedding of white and blue, of purest white and bluest blue. Alvan crossed the island bridges when the sun had sprung on his shivering fair prey, to make the young fresh Morning rosy, and was glittering along the smooth lake-waters. Workmen only were abroad, and Alvan was glad to be out with them to feel with them as one of them. Close beside him the vivid genius of the preceding century, whose love of workmen was a salt of heaven in his human corruptness, looked down on the lake in marble. Alvan cherished a worship of him as of one that had first thrilled him with the feeling of our common humanity, with the tenderness for the poor, with the knowledge of our frailty. Him, as well as the great Englishman and a Frenchman, his mind called Father, and his conscience replied to that progenitor's questioning of him, but said 'You know the love of woman: He loved indeed, but he was not an amatory trifler. He too was a worker, a champion worker. He doated on the prospect of plunging into his work; the vision of jolly giant labours told of peace obtained, and there could be no peace without his prize.

He listened to the workmen's foot-falls. The solitary sound and steady motion of their feet were eloquent of early morning in a city, not less than the changes of light in heaven above the roofs. With the golden light came numbers, workmen still. Their tread on the stones roused some of his working thoughts, like an old tune in his head, and he watched the scattered files passing on, disciplined by their daily necessities, easily manageable if their necessities are but justly considered. These numbers are the brute force of earth, which must have the earth in time, as they had it in the dawn of our world, and then they entered into bondage for not knowing how to use it. They will have it again: they have it partially, at times, in the despot, who is only the reflex of their brute force, and can give them only a shadow of their claim. They will have it all, when they have illumination to see and trust to the leadership of a greater force than they—in force of brain, in the spiritual force of ideas; ideas founded on justice; and not the justice of these days of the governing few whose wits are bent to steady our column of civilized humanity by a combination of props and jugglers' arts, but a justice coming of the recognized needs of majorities, which will base the column on a broad plinth for safety-broad as the base of yonder mountain's towering white immensity—and will be the guarantee for the solid uplifting of our civilization at last. 'Right, thou!' he apostrophized—the old Ironer, at a point of his meditation. 'And right, thou! more largely right!' he thought, further advanced in it, of the great Giuseppe, the Genoese. 'And right am I too, between that metal-rail of a politician and the deep dreamer, each of them incomplete for want of an element of the other!' Practically and in vision right was Alvan, for those two opposites met fusing in him: like the former, he counted on the supremacy of might; like the latter, he distinguished where it lay in perpetuity.

During his younger years he had been like neither in the moral curb they could put on themselves—particularly the southern-blooded man. He had resembled the naturally impatient northerner most, though not so supple for business as he. But now he possessed the calmness of the Genoese; he had strong self-command now; he had the principle that life is too short for the indulgence of public fretfulness or of private quarrels; too valuable for fruitless risks; too sacred, one may say, for the shedding of blood on personal grounds. Oh! he had himself well under, fear not.

He could give and take from opposition. And rightly so, seeing that he confessed to his own bent for sarcastically stinging; he was therefore bound to endure a retort. Speech for speech, pamphlet for pamphlet, he could be temperate. Nay, he defied an adversary to produce in him the sensation of intemperateness; so there would not be much danger of his being excited to betray it. Shadowily he thought of the hard words hurled at him by the Rudigers, and of the injury Clotilde's father did him by plotting to rob him of his daughter. But how had an Alvan replied?—with the arts of peaceful fence victoriously. He conceived of no temptation to his repressed irascibility save the political. A day might come for him and the vehement old Ironer to try their mettle in a tussle. On that day he would have to be wary, but, as Alvan felt assured, he would be more master of himself than his antagonist. He was for the young world, in the brain of a new order of things; the other based his unbending system on the visions of a feudal chief, and would win a great step perchance, but there he would stop: he was not with the future!

This immediate prospect of a return to serenity after his recent charioteering, had set him thinking of himself and his days to come, which hung before him in a golden haze that was tranquillizing. He had a name, he had a station: he wanted power and he saw it approaching.

He wanted a wife too. Colonel von Tresten took coffee with him previous to the start with Dr. Storchel to General von Rudiger's house. Alvan consequently was unable any longer to think of a wife in the abstract. He wanted Clotilde. Here was a man going straight to her, going to see her, positively to see her and hear her voice!—almost instantly to hear her voice, and see her eyes and hair, touch her hand. Oh! and rally her, rouse her wit; and be able to tell him the flower she wore for the day, and where she wore it—at her temples, or sliding to the back hair, or in her bosom, or at her waist! She had innumerable tricks of indication in these shifty pretty ways of hers, and was full of varying speech to the cunning reader of her.

'But keep her to seriousness,' Alvan said. 'Our meeting must be early to-day—early in the afternoon. She is not unlikely to pretend to trifle. She has not seen me for some time, and will probably enough play at emancipation and speak of the "singular impatience of the seigneur Alvan." Don't you hear her? I swear to those very words! She "loves her liberty," and she curves her fan and taps her foot. "The seigneur Alvan appears pressed for time:" She has "letters to write to friends to-day." Stop that! I can't join in play: to-morrow, if she likes; not to-day. Or not till I have her by the hand. She shall be elf and fairy, French coquette, whatever she pleases to-morrow, and I'll be satisfied. All I beg is for plain dealing on a business matter. This is a business matter, a business meeting. I thoroughly know the girl's heart, and know that in winning the interview I win her. Only'—he pressed his friend's arm—'but, my dear Tresten, you understand. You're a luckier fellow than I—for the time, at all events. Make it as short as you can. You'll find me here. I shall take a book—one of the Pandects. I don't suppose I shall work. I feel idle. Any book handy; anything will interest me. I should walk or row on the lake, but I would rather be sure of readiness for your return. You meet Storchel at the General's house?'

'The appointment was at the house,' Tresten said.

'I have not seen him this morning. I know of nothing to prepare him for. You see, it was invariable with her: as soon as she met me she had twice her spirit: and that she knows;—she was a new woman, ten times the happier for having some grains of my courage. So she'll be glad to come to terms and have me by to support her. Press it, if necessary; otherwise she might be disappointed, my dear fellow. Storchel looks on, and observes, and that 's about all he can do, or need do. Up Mont Blanc to-day, Tresten! It's the very day for an ascent:—one of the rare crystalline jewels coming in a Swiss August; we should see the kingdoms of the earth—and a Republic! But I could climb with all my heart in a snowstorm to-day. Andes on Himalayas! as high as you like. The Republic by the way, small enough in the ring of empires and monarchies, if you measure it geometrically! You remember the laugh at the exact elevation of Mount Olympus? But Zeus's eagle sat on it, and top me Olympus, after you have imagined the eagle aloft there! after Homer, is the meaning. That will be one of the lessons for our young Republicans—to teach them not to give themselves up to the embrace of dead materialism because, as they fancy, they have had to depend on material weapons for carving their way, and have had no help from other quarters. A suicidal delusion! The spiritual weapon has done most, and always does. They are sons of an idea. They deny their parentage when they scoff at idealism. It's a tendency we shall have to guard against; it leads back to the old order of things, if we do not trim our light. She is waiting for you! Go. You will find me here. And don't forget my instructions. Appoint for the afternoon—not late. Too near night will seem like Orpheus going below, and I hope to meet a living woman, not a ghost—ha! coloured like a lantern in a cavern, good Lord! Covered with lichen! Say three o'clock, not later. The reason is, I want to have it over early and be sure of what I am doing; I'm bothered by it; I shall have to make arrangements ... a thousand little matters... telegraph to Paris, I daresay; she's fond of Paris, and I must learn who's there to meet her. Now start. I'll walk a dozen steps with you. I think of her as if, since we parted, she had been sitting on a throne in Erebus, and must be ghastly. I had a dream of a dead tree that upset me. In fact, you see I must have it over. The whole affair makes me feel too young.'

Tresten advised him to spend an hour with the baroness.

'I can't; she makes me feel too old,' said Alvan. 'She talks. She listens, but I don't want to speak. Dead silence!—let it be a dash of the pen till you return. As for these good people hurrying to their traffic, and tourists and loungers, they have a trick for killing time without hurting him. I wish I had. I try to smother a minute, and up the old fellow jumps quivering all over and threatening me body and soul. They don't appear as if they had news on their faces this morning. I've not seen a newspaper and won't look at one. Here we separate. Be formal in mentioning me to her but be particularly civil. I know you have the right tone: she's a critical puss. Days like these are the days for her to be out. There goes a parasol like one I've seen her carry. Stay—no! Don't forget my instructions. Paris for a time. It may be the Pyrenees. Paris on our way back. She would like the Pyrenees. It's not too late for society at Luchon and Cauterets. She likes mountains, she mounts well: in any case, plenty of mules can be had. Paris to wind up with. Paris will be fuller about the beginning of October.'

He had quitted Tresten, and was talking to himself, cheating' himself, not discordantly at all. The poet of the company within him claimed the word and was allowed by the others to dilate on Clotilde's likings, and the honeymoon or post-honeymoon amusements to be provided for her in Pyrenean valleys, and Parisian theatres and salons. She was friande of chocolates, bon-bons: she enjoyed fine pastry, had a real relish of good wine. She should have the best of everything; he knew the spots of the very best that Paris could supply, in confiseurs and restaurants, and in millinery likewise. A lively recollection of the prattle of Parisian ladies furnished names and

addresses likely to prove invaluable to Clotilde. He knew actors and actresses, and managers of theatres, and mighty men in letters. She should have the cream of Paris. Does she hint at rewarding him for his trouble? The thought of her indebted lips, half closed, asking him how to repay him, sprang his heart to his throat.

CHAPTER XVI

Then he found himself saying: 'At the age I touch!'...

At the age of forty, men that love love rootedly. If the love is plucked from them, the life goes with it.

He backed on his physical pride, a stout bulwark. His forty years—the forty, the fifty, the sixty of Alvan, matched the twenties and thirties of other men.

Still it was true that he had reached an age when the desire to plant his affections in a dear fair bosom fixedly was natural. Fairer, dearer than she was never one on earth! He stood bareheaded for coolness, looking in the direction Tresten had taken, his forehead shining and eyes charged with the electrical activity of the mind, reading intensely all who passed him, without a thought upon any of these objects in their passage. The people were read, penetrated, and flung off as from a whirling of wheels; to cut their place in memory sharp as in steel when imagination shall by and by renew the throbbing of that hour, if the wheels be not stilled. The world created by the furnaces of vitality inside him absorbed his mind; and strangely, while receiving multitudinous vivid impressions, he did not commune with one, was unaware of them. His thick black hair waved and glistened over the fine aquiline of his face. His throat was open to the breeze. His great breast and head were joined by a massive column of throat that gave volume for the coursing of the blood to fire the battery of thought, perchance in a tempest overflow it, extinguish it. His fortieth year was written on his complexion and presence: it was the fortieth of a giant growth that will bend at the past eightieth as little as the rock-pine, should there come no uprooting tempest. It said manhood, and breathed of settled strength of muscle, nerve, and brain.

Of the people passing, many knew him not, but marked him; some knew him by repute, one or two his person. To all of them he was a noticeable figure; even those of sheeplike nature, having an inclination to start upon the second impulse in the flanks of curious sheep when their first had been arrested by the appearance of one not of their kind, acknowledged the eminence of his bearing. There may have been a passenger in the street who could tell the double tale of the stick he swung in his hand, showing a gleam of metal, whereon were engraved names of the lurid historic original owner, and of the donor and the recipient. According to the political sentiments of the narrator would his tale be coloured, and a simple walking-stick would be clothed in Tarquin guilt for striking off heads of the upper ranks of Frenchmen till the blood of them topped the handle, or else wear hues of wonder, seem very memorable; fit at least for a museum. If the Christian aristocrat might shrink from it in terror and loathing, the Paynim Republican of deep dye would be ready to kiss it with veneration. But, assuming them to have a certain bond of

manliness, both agree in pronouncing the deed a right valiant and worthy one, which caused this instrument to be presented to Alvan by a famous doctor, who, hearing of his repudiation of the duel, and of his gallant and triumphant defence of himself against a troop of ruffians, enemies or scum of their city, at night, by the aid of a common stout pedestrian stick, alone in a dark alley of the public park, sent him, duly mounted and engraved, an illustrious fellow to the weapon of defence, as a mode of commemorating his just abhorrence of bloodshed and his peaceful bravery.

Observers of him would probably speculate on his features and the carriage of his person as he went by them; with a result in their minds that can be of no import to us, men's general speculations being directed by their individual aims and their moods, their timidities, prejudices, envies, rivalries; but none could contest that he was a potential figure. If to know him the rising demagogue of the time dressed him in such terrors as to make him appear an impending Attila of the voracious hordes which live from hand to mouth, without intervention of a banker and property to cry truce to the wolf, he would have shone under a different aspect enough to send them to the poets to solve their perplexity, had the knowledge been subjoined that this terrific devastator swinging the sanguinary stick was a slave of love, who staked his all upon his love, loved up to his capacity desperately, loved a girl, and hung upon her voice to hear whether his painful knocking at a door should gain him admittance to the ranks of the orderly citizens of the legitimately-satiated passions, or else—the voice of a girl annihilate him.

He loved like the desert-bred Eastern, as though his blood had never ceased to be steeped in its fountain Orient; loved barbarously, but with a compelling resolve to control his blood and act and be the civilized man, sober by virtue of his lady's gracious aid. In fact, it was the civilized man in him that had originally sought the introduction to her, with a bribe to the untameable. The former had once led, and hoped to lead again. Alvan was a revolutionist in imagination, the workman's friend in rational sympathy, their leader upon mathematical calculation, but a lawyer, a reasoner in law, and therefore of necessity a cousin germane, leaning to become an ally, of the Philistines—the founders and main supporters of his book of the Law. And so, between the nature of his blood, and the inclination of his mind, Alvan set his heart on a damsel of the Philistines, endowed with their trained elegancies and governed by some of their precepts, but suitable to his wildness in her reputation for originality, suiting him in her cultivated liveliness and her turn for luxury. Only the Philistines breed these choice beauties, put forth these delicate fresh young buds of girls; and only here and there among them is there an exquisite, eccentric, yet passably decorous Clotilde. What his brother politicians never discovered in him, and the baroness partly suspected, through her interpretation of things opposing her sentiments, Clotilde uncloaks. Catching and mastering her, his wilder animation may be appeased, but his political life is threatened with a diversion of its current, for he will be uxorious, impassioned to gratify the tastes and whims of a youthful wife; the Republican will be in danger of playing prematurely for power to seat her beside him high: while at the same time, children, perchance, and his hardening lawyer's head are secretly Philistinizing the demagogue, blunting the fine edge of his Radicalism, turning him into a slow-stepping Liberal, otherwise your half-Conservative in his convictions. Can she think it much to have married that drab-coloured unit? Power must be grasped....

His watch told him that Tresten was now beholding her, or just about to. The stillness of the heavens was remarkable. The hour held breath. She delayed her descent from her chamber. He saw how she touched at her hair, more distinctly than he saw the lake before his eyes. He watched her, and the growl of a coming roar from him rebuked her tricky deliberateness.

Deciding at last, she slips down the stairs like a waterfall, and is in the room, erect, composed—if you do not lay ear against her bosom. Tresten stares at her, owns she is worth a struggle. Love does this, friend Tresten! Love, that stamps out prejudice and bids inequality be smooth. Tresten stares and owns she is worth heavier labours, worse than his friend has endured. Love does it! Love, that hallows a stranger's claim to the flower of a proud garden: Love has won her the freedom to suffer herself to be chosen by the stranger. What matters which of them toiled to bring them to so sweet an end! It was not either of them, but Love. By and by, after acting serenest innocent, suddenly broken, she will be copious of sad confessions. That will be in their secrecy: in the close and boundless together of clasped hands. Deep eyes, that give him in realms of light within light all that he has dreamed of rapturousness and blessedness, you are threatened with a blinding kiss if you look abashed:—if her voice shall dare repeat another of those foolish self-reproaches, it shall be construed as a petition for further kisses. Silence! he said to her, imagining that he had been silent, and enjoying silence with a perfect quietude beyond the trouble of a thought of her kisses and his happiness. His full heart craved for the infinity of silence.

Another moment and he was counting to her the days, hours, minutes, which had been the gulf of torture between then and now—the separation and the reunion: he was voluble, living to speak, and a pause was only for the drawing of most blissful breath.

His watch went slowly. She was beginning to drop her eyelids in front of Tresten. Oh! he knew her so well. He guessed the length of her acting, and the time for her earnestness. She would have to act a coquette at first to give herself a countenance; and who would not pardon the girl for putting on a mask? who would fail to see the mask? But he knew her so well: she would not trifle very long: his life on it, that she will soon falter! her bosom will lift, lift and check: a word from Tresten then, if he is a friend, and she melts to the truth in her. Alvan heard her saying: 'I will see him yes, to-day. Let him appoint. He may come when he likes—come at once!'

'My life on it!' he swore by his unerring knowledge of her, the certainty that she loved him.

He had walked into a quarter of the town strange to him, he thought; he had no recollection of the look of the street. A friend came up and put him in the right way, walking back with him. This was General Leczel, a famous leader of one of the heroic risings whose passage through blood and despair have led to the broader law men ask for when they name freedom devotedly. Alvan stated the position of his case to Leczel with continental frankness regarding a natural theme, and then pursued the talk on public affairs, to the note of: 'What but knocks will ever open the Black-Yellow Head to the fact that we are no longer in the first years of the eighteenth century!'

Leczel left him at his hotel steps, promising to call on him before night. Tresten had not returned, neither he nor the advocate, and he had been absent fully an hour. He was not in sight right or left. Alvan went to his room, looked at his watch, and out of the window, incapable of imagining any event. He began to breathe as if an atmosphere thick as water were pressing round him. Unconsciously he had staked his all on the revelation the moment was to bring. So little a thing! His intellect weighed the littleness of it, but he had become level with it; he magnified it with the greatness of his desire, and such was his nature that the great desire of a thing withheld from him and his own, as he could think, made the world a whirlpool till he had it. He waited, figureable by nothing so much as a wild horse in captivity sniffing the breeze, when the flanks of the quivering beast are like a wind-struck barley-field, and his nerves are cords, and his nostrils trumpet him: he is flame kept under and straining to rise.

CHAPTER XVII

The baroness expected to see Alvan in the morning, for he kept appointments, and he had said he would come. She conceived that she was independent of personal wishes on the subject of Clotilde; the fury of his passion prohibited her forming any of the wishes we send up to destiny when matters interesting us are in suspense, whether we have liberated minds or not. She thought the girl would grant the interview; was sure the creature would yield in his presence; and then there was an end to the shining of Alvan! Supposing the other possibility, he had shown her such fierce illuminations of eye and speech that she foresaw it would be a blazing of the insurrectionary beacon-fires of hell with him. He was a man of angels and devils. The former had long been conquering, but the latter were far from extinct. His passion for this shallow girl had consigned him to the lower host. Let him be thwarted, his desperation would be unlikely to stop at legal barriers. His lawyer's head would be up and armed astoundingly to oppose the law; he would read, argue, and act with hot conviction upon the reverse of every text of law. She beheld him storming the father's house to have out Clotilde, reluctant or conniving; and he harangued the people, he bore off his captive, he held her firmly as he had sworn he would; he defied authority, he was a public rebel—he with his detected little secret aim, which he nursed like a shamed mother of an infant, fond but afraid to be proud of it! She had seen that he aimed at standing well with the world and being one with it honourably: holding to his principles of course: but a disposition that way had been perceived, and the vision of him in open rebellion because of his shy catching at the thread of an alliance with the decorous world, carved an ironic line on her jaw.

Full surely he would not be baffled without smiting the world on the face. And he might suffer for it; the Rudigers would suffer likewise.

She considered them very foolish people. Her survey of the little nobility beneath her station had previously enabled her to account for their disgust of such a suitor as Alvan, and maintain that they would oppose him tooth and nail. Owing to his recent success, the anticipation of a peaceful surrender to him seemed now on the whole to carry most weight. This girl gives Alvan her hand and her family repudiate her. Volatile, flippant, shallow as she is, she must have had some turn for him; a physical spell was on her once, and it will be renewed when they meet. It sometimes inspires a semblance of courage; she may determine; she may be steadfast long enough for him to take his measures to bear her away. And the Brocken witches congratulate him on his prize!

Almost better would it be, she thought, that circumstance should thwart him and kindle his own demon element.

The forenoon, the noon, the afternoon, went round.

Late in the evening her door was flung wide for Colonel von Tresten.

She looked her interrogative 'Well?' His features were not used to betray the course of events.

'How has it gone?' she said.

He replied: 'As I told you. I fancied I gauged the hussy pretty closely.'

'She will not see him?'

'Not she.'

The baroness crossed her arms.

'And Alvan?'

The colonel shrugged. It was not done to tease a tremulous woman, for she was calm. It painted the necessary consequence of the refusal: an explosion of AEtna, and she saw it.

'Where is he now?' said she.

'At his hotel.'

'Alone?'

'Leczel is with him.'

'That looks like war.'

Tresten shrugged again. 'It might have been foreseen by everybody concerned in the affair. The girl does not care for him one corner of an eye! She stood up before us cool as at a dancing-lesson, swore she had never committed herself to an oath to him, sneered at him. She positively sneered. Her manner to me assures me without question that if he had stood in my place she would have insulted him:

'Scarcely. She would do in his absence what she would not do under his eyes,' remarked the baroness. 'It's decided, then?'

'Quite.'

'Will he be here to-night?'

'I think not.'

'Was she really insolent?'

'For a girl in her position, she was.'

'Did you repeat her words to him?'

'Some of them.'

'What description of insolence?'

'She spoke of his vanity....'

'Proceed.'

'It was more her manner to me, as the one of the two appearing as his friend. She was tolerably civil to Storchel: and the difference of behaviour must have been designed, for she not only looked at Storchel in a way to mark the difference, she addressed him rather eagerly before we turned on our heels, to tell him she would write to him, and let him have her reply in a letter. He will get some coquettish rigmarole.'

'That seems monstrous!—if one could be astonished by her,' said the baroness. 'When is she to write?'

'She may write: the letter will find no receiver,' said Tresten, significantly raising his eyebrows. 'The legal gentleman is gone—blown from a gun! He's off home. He informed me that he should write to the General, throwing up his office, and an end to his share in the business.'

'There was no rudeness to the poor man?'

'Dear me, no. But imagine a quiet little advocate, very precise and silky—you've had a hint of him—and all of a sudden the client he has by the ear swells into a tremendous beast—a combination of lion and elephant—bellows and shakes the room, stops and stamps before him, discharging an unintelligible flood of racy vernacular punctuated in thunder. You hear him and see him! Alvan lost his head—some of his hair too. The girl is not worth a lock. But he's past reason.'

'He takes it so,' said the baroness, musing. 'It will be the sooner over. She never cared for him a jot. And there's the sting. He has called up the whole world in an amphitheatre to see a girl laugh him to scorn. Hard for any man to bear!—Alvan of all men! Why does he not come here? He might rage at me for a day and a night, and I would rock him to sleep in the end. However, he has done nothing?'

That was the point. The baroness perceived it to be a serious point, and repeated the question sharply. 'Has he been to the house?—no?—writing?'

Tresten dropped a nod.

'Not to the girl, I suppose. To the father?' said she.

'He has written to the General.'

'You should have stopped it.'

'Tell a vedette to stop cavalry. You're not thinking of the man. He's in a white frenzy.'

'I will go to him.'

'You will do wrong. Leave him to spout the stuff and get rid of his poison. I remember a sister of poor Nuciotti's going to him after he had let his men walk into a trap—and that was through a woman: and he was quieted; and the chief overlooked it; and two days after, Nuciotti blew his brains out. He'd have been alive now if he had been left alone. Furious cursing is a natural relief to some men, like women's weeping. He has written a savage letter to her father, sending the girl to the deuce with the name she deserves, and challenging the General.'

'That letter is despatched?'

'Rudiger has it by this time.'

The baroness fixed her eyes on Tresten: she struck her lap. 'Alvan! Is it he? But the General is old, gouty, out of the lists. There can be no fighting. He apologized to you for his daughter's insolence to me. He will not fight, be sure.'

'Perhaps not,' Tresten said.

'As for the girl, Alvan has the fullest right to revile her: it cannot be too widely known. I could cry: "What wisdom there is in men when they are mad!" We must allow it to counterbalance breaches of ordinary courtesy. "With the name—she deserves," you say?

He pitched the very name at her character plainly?—called her what she is?'

The baroness could have borne to hear it: she had no feminine horror of the staining epithet for that sex. But a sense of the distinction between camps and courts restrained the soldier. He spoke of a discharge of cuttlefish ink at the character of the girl, and added: 'The bath's a black one for her, and they had better keep it private. Regrettable, no doubt, but it 's probably true, and he 's out of his mind. It would be dangerous to check him: he'd force his best friend to fight. Leczel is with him and gives him head. It 's about time for me to go back to him, for there may be business.'

The baroness thought it improbable. She was hoping that with Alvan's eruption the drop-scene would fall.

Tresten spoke of the possibility. He knew the contents of the letter, and knew further that a copy of it, with none of the pregnant syllables expunged, had been forwarded to Prince Marko. He counselled calm waiting for a certain number of hours. The baroness committed herself to a promise to wait. Now that Alvan had broken off from the baleful girl, the worst must have been passed, she thought.

He had broken with the girl: she reviewed him under the light of that sole fact. So the edge of the cloud obscuring him was lifted, and he would again be the man she prized and hoped much of! How thickly he had been obscured was visible to her through a retreating sensation of scorn of him for his mad excesses, which she had not known herself to entertain while he was writhing in the toils, and very bluntly and dismissingly felt now that his madness was at its climax. An outrageous lunatic fit, that promised to release him from his fatal passion, seemed, on the contrary, respectable in essence if not in the display. Wives he should have by fifties and hundreds if he wanted them, she thought in her great-heartedness, reflecting on the one whose threatened pretensions to be his mate were slain by the title flung at her, and merited. The word (she could guess it) was an impassable gulf, a wound beyond healing. It pronounced in a single breath the girl's right name and his pledge of a return to sanity. For it was the insanest he could do; it uttered anathema on his love of her; it painted his white glow of unreason and fierce ire at the scorn which her behaviour flung upon every part of his character that was tenderest with him. After speaking such things a man comes to his senses or he dies. So thought the baroness, and she was not more than commonly curious to hear how the Rudigers had taken the insult they had brought on themselves, and not unwilling to wait to see Alvan till he was cool. His vanity, when threatening to bleed to the death, would not be civil to the surgeon before the second or third dressing of his wound.

CHAPTER XVIII

In the house of the Rudigers there was commotion. Clotilde sat apart from it, locked in her chamber. She had performed her crowning act of obedience to her father by declining the interview with Alvan, and as a consequence she was full of grovelling revolt.

Two things had helped her to carry out her engagement to submit in this final instance of dutifulness—one was the sight of that hateful rigid face and glacier eye of Tresten; the other was the loophole she left for subsequent insurgency by engaging to write to Count Hollinger's envoy, Dr. Storchel. She had gazed most earnestly at him, that he might not mistake her meaning, and the little man's pair of spectacles had, she fancied, been dim. He was touched. Here was a friend! Here was the friend she required, the external aid, the fresh evasion, the link with Alvan! Now to write to him to bind him to his beautiful human emotion. By contrast with the treacherous Tresten, whose iciness roused her to defiance, the nervous little advocate seemed an emissary of the skies, and she invoked her treasure-stores of the craven's craftiness in revolt to compose a

letter that should move him, melt the good angel to espouse her cause. He was to be taught to understand—nay, angelically he would understand at once—why she had behaved apparently so contradictorily. Fettered, cruelly constrained by threats and wily sermons upon her duty to her family, terrorized, a prisoner 'beside this blue lake, in sight of the sublimest scenery of earth,' and hating his associate—hating him, she repeated and underscored—she had belied herself; she was willing to meet Alvan, she wished to meet him. She could open her heart to Alvan's true friend—his only true friend. He would instantly discern her unhappy plight. In the presence of his associate she could explain nothing, do nothing but what she had done. He had frozen her. She had good reason to know that man for her enemy. She could prove him a traitor to Alvan. Certain though she was from the first moment of Dr. Storchel's integrity and kindness of heart, she had stood petrified before him, as if affected by some wicked spell. She owned she had utterly belied herself; she protested she had been no free agent.

The future labours in her cause were thrown upon Dr. Storchel's shoulders, but with such compliments to him on his mission from above as emissary angels are presumed to be sensibly affected by.

The letter was long, involved, rather eloquent when she forgot herself and wrote herself, and intentionally very feminine, after the manner of supplicatory ladies appealing to lawyers, whom they would sway by the feeble artlessness of a sex that must confide in their possession of a heart, their heads being too awful.

She was directing the letter when Marko Romaris gave his name outside her door. He was her intimate, her trustiest ally; he was aware of her design to communicate with Dr. Storchel, and came to tell her it would be a waste of labour. He stood there singularly pale and grave, unlike the sprightly slave she petted on her search for a tyrant. 'Too late,' he said, pointing to the letter she held. 'Dr. Storchel has gone.'

She could not believe it, for Storchel had informed her that he would remain three days. Her powers of belief were more heavily taxed when Marko said: 'Alvan has challenged your father to fight him.' With that he turned on his heel; he had to assist in the deliberations of the family.

She clasped her temples. The collision of ideas driven together by Alvan and a duel—Alvan challenging her father—Alvan, the contemner of the senseless appeal to arms for the settlement 'of personal disputes!—darkened her mind. She ran about the house plying all whom she met for news and explanations; but her young brother was absent, her sisters were ignorant, and her parents were closeted in consultation with the gentleman. At night Marko sent her word that she might sleep in peace, for things would soon be arranged and her father had left the city.

She went to her solitude to study the hard riddle of her shattered imagination of Alvan. The fragments would not suffer joining, they assailed her in huge heaps; and she did not ask herself whether she had ever known him, but what disruption it was that had unsettled the reason of the strongest man alive. At times he came flashing through the scud of her thoughts magnificently in person, and how to stamp that splendid figure of manhood on a madman's conduct was the task she supposed herself to be attempting while she shrank from it, and worshipped the figure, abhorred the deed. She could not unite them. He was like some great cathedral organ foully handled in the night by demons. He, whose lucent reason was an unclouded sky over every complexity of our sphere, he to crave to fight! to seek the life-blood of the father of his beloved! More unintelligible than this was it to reflect that he must know the challenge to be of itself a bar to his meeting his Clotilde ever again. She led her senses round to weep, and produced a state of mental drowning for a truce to the bitter riddle.

Quiet reigned in the household next day, and for the length of the day. Her father had departed, her mother treated her vixenishly, snubbing her for a word, but the ugly business of yesterday seemed a matter settled and dismissed. Alvan, then, had been appeased. He was not a man of blood: he was the humanest of men. She was able to reconstruct him under the beams of his handsome features and his kingly smile. She could occasionally conjure them up in their vividness; but had she not in truth been silly to yield to spite and send him back the photographs of him with his presents, so that he should have the uttermost remnant of the gifts he asked for? Had he really asked to have anything back? She inclined to doubt all that had been done and said since their separation—if only it were granted her to look on a photograph showing him as he was actually before their misunderstanding! The sun-tracing would not deceive, as her own tricks of imageing might do: seeing him as he was then, the hour would be revived,—she would certainly feel him as he lived and breathed now. Thus she fancied, on the effort to get him to her heart after the shock he had dealt it, for he had become almost a stranger, as a god that has taken human shape and character.

Next to the sight of Alvan her friend Marko was welcome. The youth visited her in the evening, and with the glitter of his large black eyes bent to her, and began talking incomprehensibly of leave-taking and farewell, until she cried aloud that she had riddles enough: one was too much. What had he to say? She gave him her hand to encourage him. She listened, and soon it was her hand that mastered his in the grasp, though she was putting questions incredulously, with an understanding duller than her instinct. Or how if the frightful instinct while she listened shot lightnings in her head, whose revelations were too intelligible to be looked at? We think it devilish when our old nature is incandescent to talk to us in this way, kindled by its vilest in hoping, hungering, and fearing; and we call on the civilized mind to disown it. The tightened grasp of her hand confessed her understanding of the thing she pressed to hear repeated, for the sake of seeming to herself to repudiate it under an accumulating horror, at the same time that the repetition doubly and trebly confirmed it, so as to exonerate her criminal sensations by casting the whole burden on the material fact.

Marko, with her father's consent and the approval of the friends of the family, had taken up Alvan's challenge! That was the tale. She saw him dead in the act of telling it.

'What?' she cried: 'what?' and then: 'You?' and her fingers were bonier in their clutch: 'Let me hear. It can't be!' She snapped at herself for not pitying him more but a sword had flashed to cut her gordian knot: she saw him dead, the obstacle removed, the man whom her parents opposed to Alvan swept away: she saw him as a black gate breaking to a flood of light. She had never invoked it, never wished, never dreamed it, but if it was to be?... 'Oh! impossible. One of us is crazy. You to fight? ... they put it upon you? You fight him? But it is cruel, it is abominable. Incredible! You have accepted the challenge, you say?'

He answered that he had, and gazed into her eyes for love.

She blinked over them, crying out against parents and friends for their heartlessness in permitting him to fight.

'This is positive? This is really true?' she said, burning and dreading to realize the magical change it pointed on, and touching him with her other hand, loathing herself, loathing parents and friends who had brought her to the plight of desiring some terrible event in sheer necessity. Not she, it was the situation they had created which was guilty! By dint of calling out on their heartlessness, and a spur of conscience, she roused the feeling of compassion:

'But, Marko! Marko! poor child! you cannot fight; you have never fired a pistol or a gun in your life. Your health was always too delicate for these habits of men; and you could not pull a trigger taking aim, do you not know?'

'I have been practising for a couple of hours to-day,' he said.

Compassion thrilled her. 'A couple of hours! Unhappy boy! But do you not know that he is a dead shot? He is famous for his aim. He never misses. He can do all the duellist's wonders both with sword and pistol, and that is why he was respected when he refused the duel because he—before these parents of mine drove him... and me! I think we are both mad—he despised duelling. He! He! Alvan! who has challenged my father! I have heard him speak of duelling as cowardly. But what is he? what has he changed to? And it would be cowardly to kill you, Marko.'

'I take my chance,' Marko said.

'You have no chance. His aim is unerring.' She insisted on the deadliness of his aim, and dwelt on it with a gloating delight that her conscience approved, for she was persuading the youth to shun his fatal aim.

If you stood against him he would not spare you—perhaps not; I fear he would not, as far as I know him now. He can be terrible in wrath. I think he would warn you; but two men face to face! and he suspecting that you cross his path! Find some way of avoiding him. Do, I entreat you. By your love of me! Oh! no blood. I do not want to lose you. I could not bear it.'

'Would you regret me?' said he.

Her eyes fell on his, and the beauty of those great dark eyes made her fondness for him legible. He caused her a spasm of anguish, foreknowing him doomed. She thought that haply this devoted heart was predestined to be the sacrifice which should bring her round to Alvan. She murmured phrases of dissuasion until her hollow voice broke; she wept for being speechless, and turned upon Providence and her parents, in railing at whom a voice of no ominous empty sound was given her; and still she felt more warmly than railing expressed, only her voice shrank back from a tone of feeling. She consoled herself with the reflection that utterance was inadequate. Besides, her active good sense echoed Marko ringingly when he cited the usages of their world and the impossibility of his withdrawing or wishing to withdraw from the line of a challenge accepted. It was destiny. She bowed her head lower and lower, oppressed without and within, unwilling to look at him. She did not look when he left her.

The silence of him encouraged her head to rise. She stared about: his phantom seemed present, and for a time she beheld him both upright in life and stretched in death. It could not be her fault that he should die! it was the fatality. How strange it was! Providence, after bitterly misusing her, offered this reparation through the death of Marko.

Possibly she ought to run out and beseech Alvan to spare the innocent youth. She stood up trembling on her legs. She called to Alvan. 'Do not put blood between us. Oh! I love you more than ever. Why did you let that horrible man you take for a friend come here? I hate him, and cannot feel my love of you when I see him. He chills me to the bone. He made me say the reverse of what was in my heart. But spare poor Marko! You have no cause for jealousy. You would be above it, if you had. Do not aim; fire in the air. Do not let me kiss that hand and think...'

She sank to her chair, exclaiming: 'I am a prisoner!' She could not walk two steps; she was imprisoned by the interdict of the house and the paralysis of her limbs. Providence decreed that

she must abide the result. Dread Power! To be dragged to her happiness through a river of blood was indeed dreadful, but the devotional sense of reliance upon hidden wisdom in the direction of human affairs when it appears considerate of our wishes, inspired her to be ready for what Providence was about to do, mysterious in its beneficence that it was! It is the dark goddess Fortune to the craven. The craven with desires will offer up bloody sacrifices to it submissively. The craven, with desires expecting to be blest, is a zealot of the faith which ascribes the direction of events to the outer world. Her soul was in full song to that contriving agency, and she with the paralyzed limbs became practically active, darting here and there over the room, burning letters, packing a portable bundle of clothes, in preparation for the domestic confusion of the morrow when the body of Marko would be driven to their door, and amid the wailing and the hubbub she would escape unnoticed to Alvan, Providence-guided! Out of the house would then signify assuredly to Alvan's arms.

The prospect might have seemed too heavenly to be realizable had she not been sensible of paying heavily for it; and thus, as he would wish to be, was Marko of double service to her; for she was truly fond of the beautiful and chivalrous youth, and far from wishing to lose him. His blood was on the heads of those who permitted him to face the danger! She would have felt for him still more tenderly if it were permitted to a woman's heart to enfold two men at a time. This, it would seem, she cannot do: she is compelled by the painful restriction sadly to consent that one of them should be swept away.

Night passed dragging and galloping. In the very early light she thought of adding some ornaments to her bundle of necessities. She learnt of the object of her present faith to be provident on her own behalf, and dressed in two of certain garments which would have swollen her bundle too much.

This was the day of Providence: she had strung herself to do her part in it and gone through the pathos of her fatalism above stairs in her bedroom before Marko took his final farewell of her, so she could speak her 'Heaven be with you!' unshaken, though sadly. Her father had returned. To be away from him, and close to her bundle, she hurried to her chamber and awaited the catastrophe, like one expecting to be raised from the vaults. Carriage, wheels would give her the first intimation of it. Slow, very slow, would imply badly wounded, she thought: dead, if the carriage stopped some steps from the house and one of the seconds of the poor boy descended to make the melancholy announcement. She could not but apprehend the remorselessness of the decree. Death, it would probably be! Alvan had resolved to sweep him off the earth. She could not blame Alvan for his desperate passion, though pitying the victim of it. In any case the instant of the arrival of the carriage was her opportunity marked by the finger of Providence rendered visible, and she sat rocking her parcel on her lap. Her love of Alvan now was mixed with an alluring terror of him as an immediate death-dealer who stood against red-streaked heavens, more grandly satanic in his angry mightiness than she had ever realized that figure, and she, trembled and shuddered, fearing to meet him, yearning to be taken to him, to close her eyes on his breast in blindest happiness. She gave the very sob for the occasion.

A carriage drove at full speed to the door. Full speed could not be the pace for a funeral load. That was a visitor to her father on business. She waited for fresh wheels, telling herself she would be patient and must be ready.

Her pathos ways ready and scarcely controllable. The tear thickened on her eyelid as she projected her mind on the grief she would soon be undergoing for Marko: or at least she would undergo it subsequently; she would certainly mourn for him. She dared not proceed to an

accumulated enumeration of his merits, as her knowledge of the secret of pathos knew to be most moving, in an extreme fear that she might weaken her required energies for action at the approaching signal.

Feet came rushing up the stairs: her door was thrown open, and the living Marko, stranger than a dead, stood present. He had in his look an expectation that she would be glad to behold him, and he asked her, and she said: 'Oh, yes, she was glad, of course.' She was glad that Alvan had pardoned him for his rashness; she was vexed that her projected confusion of the household had been thwarted: vexed, petrified with astonishment.

'But how if I tell you that Alvan is wounded?' he almost wept to say.

Clotilde informs the world that she laughed on hearing this. She was unaware of her ground for laughing: It was the laugh of the tragic comedian.

Could one believe in a Providence capable of letting such a sapling and weakling strike down the most magnificent stature upon earth?

'You—him!' she said, in the tremendous compression of her contempt.

She laughed. The world is upside down—a world without light, or pointing finger, or affection for special favourites, and therefore bereft of all mysterious and attractive wisdom, a crazy world, a corpse of a world—if this be true!

But it can still be disbelieved.

He stood by her dejectedly, and she sent him flying with a repulsive, 'Leave me!' The youth had too much on his conscience to let him linger. His manner of going smote her brain.

Was it credible? Was it possible to think of Alvan wounded?—the giant laid on his back and in the hands of the leech? Assuredly it was a mockery of all calculations. She could not conjure up the picture of him, and her emotions were merely struck and stunned. If this be true!

But it can be resolutely disbelieved.

We can put it before Providence to cleanse itself of this thing, or suffer the consequence that we now and for ever quit our worship, lose our faith in it and our secret respect. She heard Marko's tale confirmed, whispers of leaden import, physicians' rumours, and she doubted. She clung insanely to her incredulity. Laughter had been slain, but not her belief in the invincibility of Alvan; she could not imagine him overthrown in a conflict—and by a hand that she had taken and twisted in her woman's hand subduingly! He, the unerring shot, laid low by one who had never burnt powder till the day before the duel! It was easier to remain incredulous notwithstanding the gradational distinctness of the whispers. She dashed her 'Impossible!' at Providence, conceived the tale in wilful and almost buoyant self-deception to be a conspiracy in the family to hide from her Alvan's magnanimous dismissal of poor Marko from the field of strife. That was the most evident fact. She ran through delusion and delusion, exhausting each and hugging it after the false life was out.

So violent was the opposition to reason in the idea of Alvans descending to the duel and falling by the hand of Marko, that it cried to be rebutted by laughter: and she could not, she could laugh no more, nor imagine laughing, though she could say of the people of the house, 'They act it well!' and hate them for the serious whispering air, and the dropping of medical terms and weights of drugs, which robbed her of what her instinct told her was the surest weapon for combating deception. Them, however, and their acting she could have with stood enough to silently discredit them through sheer virulence of a hatred that proved them to be duly credited. But her savage wilfulness could not resist the look of Marko. She had to yield up her breast to

the truth, and stimulate further unbelief lest her loaded heart should force her to run to the wounded lion's bedside, and hear his reproaches. She had to cheat her heart, and the weak thing consented to it, loathing her for the imposture. Seeing Marko too, assured of it by his broken look, the terrible mournfulness less than the horrible irony of the truth gnawed within her. It spoke to her in metal, not in flesh. It haunted her feelings and her faint imaginations alienly. It discoloured, it scorned the earth, and earth's teachings, and the understanding of life. Rational clearness at all avenues was blurred by it. The thought that Alvan lay wounded and in danger, was one thought: that Marko had stretched him there, was quite another, and was a livid eclipsing thought through which her grief had to work its way to get to heat and a state of burning. She knew not in truth what to feel: the craven's dilemma when yet feeling much. Anger at Providence—rose uppermost. She had so shifted and wound about, and so pulled her heart to pieces, that she could no longer sanely and with wholeness encounter a shock: she had no sensation firm enough to be stamped by a signet.

Even on the fatal third day, when Marko, white as his shrouded antagonist, led her to the garden of the house, and there said the word of death, an execrating amazement, framing the thought 'Why is it not Alvan who speaks?' rose beside her gaping conception of her loss. She framed it as an earnest interrogation for the half minute before misery had possession of her, coming down like a cloud. Providence then was too shadowy a thing to upbraid. She could not blame herself, for the intensity of her suffering testified to the bitter realness of her love of the dead man. Her craven's instinct to make a sacrifice of others flew with claws of hatred at her parents. These she offered up, and the spirit presiding in her appears to have accepted them as proper substitutes for her conscience.

CHAPTER XIX

Alvan was dead. The shot of his adversary, accidentally well-directed, had struck him mortally. He died on the morning of the third day after the duel. There had been no hope that he could survive, and his agonies made a speedy dissolution desirable by those most wishing him to live.

The baroness had her summons to hurry to him after his first swoon. She was his nurse and late confidante a tearless woman, rigid in service. Death relaxed his hold in her hand. He met his fate like the valiant soul he was. Haply if he had lingered without the sweats of bodily tortures to stay reflectiveness, he, also, in the strangeness of his prostration, might have cast a thought on the irony of the fates felling a man like him by a youngster's hand and for a shallow girl! He might have fathered some jest at life, with rueful relish of the flavour: for such is our manner of commenting on ourselves when we come to shipwreck through unseaworthy pretensions. There was no interval on his passage from anguish to immobility.

Silent was that house of many chambers. That mass of humanity profusely mixed of good and evil, of generous ire and mutinous, of the passion for the future of mankind and vanity of person,

magnanimity and sensualism, high judgement, reckless indiscipline, chivalry, savagery, solidity, fragmentariness, was dust.

The two men composing it, the untamed and the candidate for citizenship, in mutual dissension pulled it down. He perished of his weakness, but it was a strong man that fell. If his end was unheroic, the blot does not overshadow his life. His end was a derision because the animal in him ran him unchained and bounding to it. A stormy blood made wreck of a splendid intelligence. Yet they that pronounce over him the ordinary fatalistic epitaph of the foregone and done, which is the wisdom of men measuring the dead by the last word of a lamentable history, should pause to think whether fool or madman is the title for one who was a zealous worker, respected by great heads of his time, acknowledged the head of the voluminous coil of the working people, and who, as we have seen, insensibly though these wrought within him, was getting to purer fires through his coarser when the final intemperateness drove him to ruin. As little was he the vanished God whom his working people hailed deplorably on the long procession of his remains from city to city under charge of the baroness. That last word of his history ridicules the eulogy of partisan and devotee, and to commit the excess of worshipping is to conjure up by contrast a vulgar giant: for truth will have her just proportions, and vindicates herself upon a figure over-idealized by bidding it grimace, leaving appraisers to get the balance of the two extremes. He was neither fool nor madman, nor man to be adored: his last temptation caught him in the season before he had subdued his blood, and amid the multitudinously simple of this world, stamped him a tragic comedian: that is, a grand pretender, a self-deceiver, one of the vividly ludicrous, whom we cannot laugh at, but must contemplate, to distinguish where their character strikes the note of discord with life; for otherwise, in the reflection of their history, life will seem a thing demoniacally inclined by fits to antic and dive into gulfs. The characters of the hosts of men are of the simple order of the comic; not many are of a stature and a complexity calling for the junction of the two Muses to name them.

While for his devotees he lay still warm in the earth, that other, the woman, poor Clotilde, astonished her compatriots by passing comedy and tragic comedy with the gift of her hand to the hand which had slain Alvan. In sooth, the explanation is not so hard when we recollect our knowledge of her. It was a gentle youth; her parents urged her to it: a particular letter, the letter of the challenge to her father, besliming her, was shown;—a hideous provocation pushed to the foulest. Who can blame Prince Marko? who had ever given sign of more noble bravery than he? He had stood to defend her name and fame. He was very love, the never extinguished torch of love. And he hung on her for the little of life appearing to remain to him. Before heaven he was guiltless. He was good. Her misery had shrunk her into nothingness, and she rose out of nothingness cold and bloodless, bearing a thought that she might make a good youth happy, or nurse him sinking—be of that use. Besides he was a refuge from the roof of her parents. She shut her eyes on the past, sure of his goodness; goodness, on her return to some sense of being, she prized above other virtues, and perhaps she had a fancy that to be allied to it was to be doing good. After a few months she buried him. From that day, or it may be, on her marriage day, her heart was Alvan's. Years later she wrote her version of the story, not sparing herself so much as she supposed. Providence and her parents were not forgiven. But as we are in her debt for some instruction, she may now be suffered to go.

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